

# Kinderbrutanstalt and Kindchenschema: The Child Hatchery and the Psychology of Cute

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**T**raditionally, Brooklyn's Coney Island has been thought of as a family-oriented fun park featuring rollercoasters, sweets, and more. However, over the course of its history, Coney Island has been home to freak shows and human exhibits of all kinds. Historically, freak shows have displayed humans with disabilities for financial gain and nothing more. Today, these sort of freak shows are condemned by modern society. But what is to be made of a freak show display responsible for saving human lives? From 1903 until the late 1940s, Dr. Martin Couney exhibited premature infants in incubators and charged admission to gaze upon these so-called "incubator babies" (Brangham). The work that Martin Couney did with the incubator babies may have been questionable, but one cannot deny that several lives were saved in the process. Although it is true that "The Incubator Doctor" saved thousands of lives while his exhibit was at Coney Island, there are certain questionable elements present in the exhibition, such as using the psychology of cute to manipulate spectators and perpetuating the guilt of a society that exploits its young even to save their lives.

## Abstract

Today, Coney Island is known for family fun and entertainment. But few people realize that at one time it was home to the first infant incubators in the nation. By examining the history of these incubators, putting children on display without their direct consent, and the psychology of cute, the authors delve into the darker side of Coney Island's history.

## THE EXHIBIT IN CONTEXT

The year is 1903. Theodore Roosevelt is president, Henry Ford's automobile factory is well on its way, and escape artist Harry Houdini is

stunning crowds everywhere with his seemingly magical tricks. Meanwhile, Couney has just worked a little magic of his own by opening his exhibit displaying premature babies in Coney Island, New York (Brangham). In order to fund his research on the care of premature infants, Couney charged 25 cents per person to come and gaze upon the tiny babies in their astonishing glass incubators (Green). The exhibit stood alongside bars, racetracks, and seedy hotels in “The Gut,” which has been described as a “latter-day Sodom” (Stanton). Its tenure would span the course of forty years, witnessing impactful world events such as the sinking of the *Titanic*, Lindbergh’s flight across the Atlantic, and two World Wars.

It all began in the 1890s when Couney gained his medical degree in Leipzig, Germany. Then, he travelled to Paris in order to study under renowned physician Dr. Pierre Constant Budin, who helped to improve the primitive incubators being implemented at the time by adding an electric bell that would sound if the infant was in danger of overheating (Silverman). Couney took great interest in Budin’s achievements and was eager to be his pupil. In 1896, Budin charged Couney with the task of displaying the incubators at the World Exposition in Berlin. However, in order to do so successfully, they would need to present these new machines in action. The premature babies necessary for the exhibit were obtained from local Berlin’s Charity Hospital. Because they were so small and underdeveloped, these infants were thought to have little to no chance of survival. The display was dubbed “Kinderbrutanstalt,” or “Child Hatchery.” Berlin’s “Child Hatchery” was always crammed with onlookers, eager to see the tiny babies who had a chance to live because of the incubators (Silverman).

British event promoter Samuel Schenkein was amazed by the exhibit and invited Couney to recreate it at the Victorian Era Exhibition the following year; Couney agreed. In Berlin, the exhibit attracted crowds of people and was wildly popular. By 1898, the display had come to America at Nebraska’s Trans-Mississippi Exposition, a world’s fair whose intent was to show Western technological innovations. From 1900 until 1902, Couney continued to display the premature babies in incubators at various other expositions in order to demonstrate the new advancements in neonatology. Then, in 1903, amongst the carousels, restaurants, and hotels, the famous Coney Island exhibit debuted.

Shortly after this shift in venue, Couney married a nurse who was an

expert in premature infant care, Annabelle May, and had a premature baby daughter of his own, whom he named Hildegard. She was displayed with the other preemies at Coney Island for the first three months of her life, until she was well enough to live outside of the glass box. As an adult, she became a nurse and helped her father with his work. Over the years, the display had gone quite well and often boasted of its low infant mortality rates (Silverman). It seemed that newborns who had been denied a chance at life were finally going to live, thanks to this freakshow exhibit that doubled as a medical experiment<sup>1</sup>. However, although numerous infant lives were saved by Dr. Couney's experiment, it cannot be ignored that human beings were put on display without their explicit consent. The juxtaposition of these two truths makes the case difficult to critique, especially when children instead of consenting adults become involved.

## THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CUTE

In any human exhibit, the showman capitalizes on some aspect of the individual's physicality or abilities in order to draw a crowd. For the incubator babies, it was their size that interested the public. Because premature infants are inherently smaller than the average human newborn, the subjects of this exhibit occupy the position of the freak due to a quality not normally codified as freakish: more than anything else, they were cute. It is important to examine this element of the exhibit because of the way that it capitalizes on an inherent human instinctual preference for the cute.

Before discussing the ways that cuteness pervades this exhibit, it is important to establish what this term entails. According to Lori Merish in her article "Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics,"

[C]uteness is a highly conventionalized aesthetic, distinguishable both by its formal aesthetic features and the formalized emotional response it engenders. It is generally associated with the child... in terms of the formal property of smallness or 'miniatureness.' (187)

Merish goes on to describe various features that people usually associate with this type of aesthetic, such as round, thick limbs; large head-to-body ratio; and other features that are easily observable in the human infant.

In 1943, Austrian ethologist Konrad Lorenz introduced the term "Kindchenschema," or "baby schema," to talk about the specific set of

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<sup>1</sup> For more history on Couney, his Coney Island exhibit, and the history of the incubator, see Baker 654-662

features that create a positive emotional response in human beings. According to Lorenz, these features were almost entirely within the realm of infantile characteristics, such as a large head, high and protruding forehead, large eyes, chubby cheeks, small nose and mouth, short and thick extremities, and plump body shape. Together, these features cause people to experience feelings of affection and a desire for caregiving (Glocker et al. 257). These findings have been verified by several studies, which reveal that “the baby schema affects cuteness perception and motivation for caretaking in adults, also suggesting a neurophysiologic mechanism by which baby schema could promote human nurturing behavior” (Borgi et al. 8).

Inherent in the term “baby” schema is the relation of this theory to this exhibit: because the objects of exhibition were all infants in this situation, they all occupied the position of the cute. The fact that they were premature only adds to this factor: even though they would not have had the chubby cheeks or the plump and thick body parts, they would have been even smaller than usual with an even more extreme head-to-body ratio. In fact, a premature infant resource site, “Perfectly Preemie,” lists four different categories for classifying baby size: micro (1-2.5lbs, 11-15”), tiny (2-4lbs, 14.5-16.5”), preemie (3-6lbs, 15-18.5”), and newborn (5-8lbs, 17.5-21”). While these distinctions are not medically relevant, they serve to provide a visual for the wide range of sizes infants can be and still be viable. Even though a premature infant as small as one pound would not have likely been viable at the time of this particular exhibit, the fact that a baby can be so small and survive demonstrates the extreme nature of the cuteness factor at work. This would have made them seem both adorable and unusual since, aside from medical professionals, this would have been the first time most members of the public saw a preemie. Additionally, as demonstrated in Appendix B, the babies were portrayed in such a way as to exaggerate their diminutive size, thus increasing the cute factor based on their position as miniatures—not only miniature humans, but also miniature when compared to other newborns who came to full term.

In addition to being a factor of nature, the cute is inherently reflective of the culture in which it is being perceived. This exhibit demonstrates this connection by the way that it focused on the salvation—and exhibition—of white infants over those of other races. Evident in Appendix B is a more subtle aspect of the way that the Incubator Institute pulled on the cuteness

thread within the minds of those who attended: based on all photographic evidence, the infants exhibited were all Caucasian. According to Merish, race plays an important part in the way that people perceive the cute because “appreciating the cute—loving the ‘adorable’ as culturally defined—entails a structure of identification, wanting to be *like* the cute—or, more exactly, wanting the cute to be just like the self” (186). By including only white babies, Couney not only created an element of exclusion to those infants benefited by this medical advancement, but he also excluded non-whites from his target audience. This exclusion implicitly presents whiteness as a culturally desired and valued trait for the infants because it is only by their membership in this segment of the population that they merited consideration and acceptance into this life-saving experience. Additionally, because there would have been a racial divide between individuals of any other race than those babies, they would not have been drawn to it to the same degree. Thus, Couney others all but the white consumer from his exhibit by presenting subjects who can only be linked to the self if the self happens to be white too. This also plays into the potential racism in the audience since the majority would have likely rejected the exhibit if it had contained minority babies.

Even though this kind of exclusion limited his target audience, the individuals included in this population were still in the majority, so the exhibit still saw a phenomenal amount of foot traffic. The way that the exhibit pulls on various aspects of the human psyche explains the reason why so many people attended this exhibit and why it was so long-lasting. Additionally, the feelings of wanting to care for the cute that these researchers describe would have only been intensified by the pitiable state of these individuals in particular: these incubator babies were tiny, vulnerable, and teetering on the liminal space between life and death. Even though the incubators in which they were placed were providing for the role of medical caregiver, they would nonetheless emotionally affect the people who viewed them because of their cuteness registers.

As the patrons looked at the babies in these mechanical caregivers, the gaze merits consideration. In terms of this gaze, using infants in an exhibit context makes sense due to the fact that “adults tend to look longer at infant than at adult faces and at cuter than at less cute infants” (Borgie et al. 2). This could be a result of the fact that the face of a human child is



more biologically relevant to the brain's attention system, as discussed in "That Baby Caught My Eye... Attention Capture by Infant Faces" by Tobias Brosch, David Sander, and Klaus R. Scherer of the University of Geneva. In their study, they found that just as threat-related stimuli registers faster, so too does "all classes of stimuli that have high biological significance" and that "[n]ewborns are a prototypical example of a highly biologically relevant stimulus for members of a species" (685). In other words, one of the reasons adults are drawn to the young of their same species has its roots in biology and survival instincts.

The fact that adults usually gaze upon the faces of babies for longer than any other kind of face, coupled with this inherent biological significance, increases the impact potential for this kind of exhibit.

According to Borgi et. al.,

[t]he concept of cuteness not only encompasses the evaluation of specific morphological traits (i.e., cuteness ratings, preference, attractiveness), but also involves a positive/affectionate behavior response (cute response), which appears to be anticipated by a visual prioritization of—and an intentional bias to—infantile stimuli. (9)

Because the subjects of this particular exhibit were all infants themselves, Couney capitalized on this visual prioritization. According to Merish, the cuteness of an infant "*demand*s a maternal response and interpellates its viewers/consumers as 'maternal'" (186).

Even though the majority of people who attended the exhibit would not have had familial ties to the babies in the incubators, the cuteness/caregiving response would still have been intense because these instincts transcend blood ties. According to a study performed by Glocker et. al., which provided "the first experimental proof that baby schema in infant faces is perceived as cute and induces motivation for caretaking in adults," these features "motivate caretaking behaviors towards any infant, from any potential caregiver in a group, regardless of kinship" (262). This study explains why people still experience maternal/paternal responses to babies, regardless of whether they know the child personally, and, by extension, explains why these incubator babies were so appealing to the general public.

Additionally, within a discussion about the lack of familial ties the subjects would have had with their patrons, it is important to note the

way that these babies are displayed as distinctly removed from their parents. According to Merish, “the cute always in some sense designates a commodity in search of its mother, and is constructed to generate maternal desire; the consumer (or potential consumer) of the cute is expected... to pretend she or he is the cute’s mother” (186). This type of evaluation of the cute factor is extremely relevant to a discussion of this exhibit because there was an admission fee, so the patrons of the incubator babies occupy the position as consumer of the babies as commodities; in other words, Couney was selling their cuteness for a profit. This situation points to the way that the powerless, cute subject is vulnerable to exploitation since

cuteness enacts the fundamental ambivalence of the child in a liberal-capitalist order: as at once consenting ‘subject,’ and property ‘object.’ Evoking an ideal of maternal or benevolent ownership, cuteness stages a problematic of identification that centers on the child’s body. (Merish 187)

In this way, even though it may have seemed to be for humanitarian purposes, by creating a power dynamic of consumer-commodity, this exhibit is exploiting the cute in a very freakshow-esque manner. Although it is unclear how much of the money the exhibit earned went back into the research and their care, this commodification points to a problematic aspect of the infants’ reality: in order to receive the medical care they required to survive, their parents had to allow them to be displayed. Even though they were too young to understand their situation—much less consent to it—they nonetheless were submitted to the eyes of society and occupied the position of a commodity in order to have that society fund their survival.

In addition to this commodification, displaying the babies sans parents pulls on a theme of displaying children as orphans in order to get a faux-familial reaction out of audience members. This theme is readily apparent within an examination of the popularity of the Shirley Temple films. In her article, Merish examines the fact that Temple was often portrayed as family-less because of the way this invites a type of parental voyeurism from audience members: “since within the film’s diegesis the space of the mother is empty, the viewer is invited to ‘occupy’ that space” (197). In the same way, adults attending the incubator baby exhibit see these babies in a much cuter, more appealing light because of the fact that they are visually parentless—the viewer’s desire to nurture and care for the infant

is heightened and so, too, is their desire to fill that parental void, even if only subconsciously because of the way that “[w]hat the cute stages is, in part, a need for adult care” (Merish 187); these babies were probably more in need of that care than any infant the audience had ever seen.

The fact that these babies are in need of care also places them in a nuanced position within the rhetoric of cute. When the patrons of this exhibit witness its subjects in the incubators, they are aware of the fact that Couney has rescued them, which fulfills what Merish calls “an erotics of maternal longing.” She states that having cuteness on display creates a situation where “‘exposure’ in the public sphere generates an appropriative desire to ‘rescue’ the cute object by resituating it within a properly loving and appreciative (i.e., affectionally normative) familial context” (188). Even though the people visiting these babies were not directly providing this family structure, the way that the gaze dynamic allows them the vicarious position of maternal figure helps them fulfill this desire for rescue. Adults looking at infants who are presented visually lacking parental figures would find themselves drawn to filling that void; even though this dynamic would only be on the subconscious level, it is nonetheless an integral factor in understanding this gaze. They can stare at these helpless infants with the knowledge that they supposedly already have been rescued by the caring, good-natured Couney, who was portrayed as a father/savior figure to the babies (see Appendix A). However, this prevented them from seeing this exhibit as the freak show that it was, playing into science’s history of walking the line between advancement for the betterment of human beings and exploitative exhibition for gratification and profit.

This liminal space between medical care and freakification of the human subjects is strikingly familiar when one considers another exhibit that was prominent during this time period: from the 1840s to the 1930s, the American entertainment and medical fields combined to give genesis to the anatomical museums. Like the child hatchery, these exhibits presented human subjects for display for a fee; however, these were more sinister because their subjects were all already dead. Michael Sappol, who critiques these exhibits in his article “‘Morbid Curiosity’: The Decline and Fall of the Popular Anatomical Museum,” observes that “[t]he museum claimed to serve the cause of moral reformation, but it really worked on base emotions and bodily appetites.” Similarly, the child hatchery utilized the “base emotions”



of maternal/paternal care and the “bodily appetites” of visual consumption of the cute to draw people into the exhibit.

This exhibit draws on a desire for the aesthetic of cuteness that was particularly culturally significant to the time period because of the way that the late nineteenth century introduced the “‘feminization’ of commercial amusements, especially vaudeville and, later, cinema,” observes Merish. She points to the way that forms of exhibition during this time faced alterations in order to cater to “a more ‘respectable’ and female clientele” as “the emergence of cuteness as a commercial style in the second half of the nineteenth century activated a structure of feminine spectatorship and identification and helped constitute a feminine consumer public” (Merish 195, 188). Indeed, this phenomenon was not limited to the incubator baby exhibit as other cultural events promoted the commercialization and adoration of the cute (see Appendix C). These kinds of cultural moves within the context of human exhibitions reveal that the culture of consumption was conducive to the creation and success of an exhibit built on traditionally feminine desires for nurturing and childcare.

Based on several psychological studies, “women tend to be more interested in infants and caretaking activities than men” due to women’s cultural roles (Glocker et al. 258). This could possibly explain why women in particular would have been more interested in this exhibit and why Couney utilized women nurses within the exhibit to not only care for his subjects but also to participate in the display. While demographic information about the exact ratio of women to men who participated in this exhibit is yet to be discovered, one can postulate based on this kind of cultural and psychological information that the majority of them would have been female.

Even though this kind of all-infant display is unique, the world of the freak show is no stranger to exhibiting people because of their size. Indeed, some of the most famous “freaks” were put on display due to being larger, smaller, taller, or shorter than the average person. One of the more prominent examples of the cute factor specifically playing into freak shows is with the exhibition of individuals of short stature. Famous little people include Charles Sherwood Stratton, stage name “General Tom Thumb,” and his wife, Lavinia Warren.

The cuteness factor creates a distinction between little people and

others who were exhibited as “human oddities” because “[a]lthough they, like all ‘freaks,’ were known as ‘curiosities,’ the curiosity engendered by midgets was tempered by sympathy” (Merish 192). According to Merish, this type of sentimental gaze creates a situation where “the powerless were sympathized with and pitied.... Because of its association with childhood, cuteness always to some extent anesthetizes powerlessness” (191, 187). Similarly, the way that people looked at the incubator babies would have also held this element of sympathy, especially with parents who would have logically thought about what it would have been like if one of their children had faced this tenuous fate. There are very few individuals who hold a position as powerless as that of an infant, much less one born prematurely. Thus, although Merish does not make this connection to the child hatchery herself, her analysis of the cuteness factor is even more applicable when discussing exhibits like Couney’s.

While freaks in this category are often likened to infants, this exhibit goes straight to the source of this type of freakification by focusing on freakifying the infants themselves. Thus, even though the infants are not freaks in the conventional sense of the word, they nonetheless are occupying that cultural position, something that Merish would not find surprising as she observes that “cuteness is... intimately bound up with the history of the ‘freak.’ There are obvious parallels between child and freak: both are liminal figures, residing on the boundaries that separate the ‘fully human’ from the ‘less-than-human’” (189).

## **A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE INCUBATOR INSTITUTE**

Despite citing his accreditations wherever possible and claiming that this was his moral duty (see Appendix A), Couney was exploiting these children’s cuteness for the purpose of medical fundraising. Although Couney insisted that displaying the babies and advertising his Coney Island establishment was “extremely ethical” and that he was not a showman (Liebling), he used a variety of persuasive strategies often employed by human exhibits of the time until the day the exhibit closed in the 1940s. Despite this, only a small number of critics (modern-day and from the early twentieth century) have spoken out against his practices.

One of the first-known published criticisms came from an 1898 editorial in *The Lancet*. The author wrote, “[The exhibit] attracted the

attention and cupidity of public showmen. . . who had no knowledge of the intricate scientific problem involved, [and] started to organise [*sic*] baby incubator shows just as they might have exhibited marionettes, fat women, or any sort of catch-penny monstrosity” (Silverman). In the twenty-first century, a set of scholars and medical practitioners, Mazurak and Czyżewska, refer to Couney’s exhibit as “mixed with an experimental method of treatment that eventually became a universally accepted method of the neonatal care” (316), which demonstrates that Couney’s efforts to save these children have since gone on to save others in the generations to follow. However, none of these critics have broken down the exhibit and examined the persuasive elements of Couney’s exhibit. Among them, freak show staples such as carnival barkers, banners, and visual trickery were used to appeal to an audience’s attraction to the “cute.”

The Coney Island boardwalk in those days had a wide variety of human exhibits which audiences paid to see. In order to stand out from the competition, carnival barkers (often referred to as “talkers” or “outside lecturers”) were hired by freakshow owners to sell tickets to curious passersby (Bogdan 27). As a medical practitioner, Couney had the space and equipment so his patients could live and grow inside the incubators. Unfortunately for him, his role as a doctor-turned-salesman required him to attract an audience that would pay to keep the machines running to keep the babies alive.

Thus, Couney hired a barker for the season and placed signs and banners outside the main structure, using language designed to target the audience’s emotions. These barkers would cry out messages such as “Don’t pass the babies by,” while a sign at the entrance read, “All the World Loves a Baby” (Silverman). Apart from the barker and signs, emotional appeals were also a staple in human exhibits when the owners did not wish to be identified as such. Instead, Couney must have wanted his incubator baby show to be deemed “morally uplifting and educational, not merely as frivolous amusement” (Bogdan 27). Here, the phrase “Don’t pass the babies by” implies the following: that one cannot possibly pass the incubator babies or they might die.

In addition to the show’s language, Couney’s nurses were told to bulk up if they were to keep their jobs. They were ordered to “add more clothes as the babies grew larger to heighten the illusion of smallness of each of

the infants on display,” and former exhibit nurse Madame Recht wore an oversized diamond ring on her finger; she slipped this huge “sparkler” over the babies’ wrists periodically to demonstrate how tiny the hands were (Silverman). Although it would not seem like a persuasive rhetorical move, this is also a strategy commonplace in the freak show. For instance, fat people in freak shows could often be found wearing clothes that exaggerated their size or appeared with props that made them appear larger. In other instances, fat people were often displayed with or married to “living skeletons,” or those who have muscle atrophy diseases. In this instance, it is true that the nurses and not the babies whose bodies are being modified. However, the juxtaposition of tiny against the large is still present.

It is clear that Couney had faith in his exhibit due to the fact that he chose to display his own premature daughter, Hildegarde. Others also believe that Couney’s exhibit was successful due to the many fragile infant lives that he managed to save. Lucille Horn, one of the premature newborns displayed at Coney Island, speaks positively about Couney’s experiment. She was born in 1920 along with a twin who died at birth. The hospital where she was born told her father that there was little they could do for the newborn baby girl, who weighed little more than two pounds (Green). Lucky for Lucille, her father refused to accept the hospital’s answer. Aware of the incubator babies on Coney Island, Lucille’s father wrapped her in a blanket, hailed a cab, and took her to see Martin Couney. He accepted the little girl and displayed her in the incubator along with the other premature babies. When asked how she felt about people paying to see her, Lucille replied, “It’s strange, but as long as they saw me and I was alive, it was all right. I think it was definitely more of a freak show. Something that they ordinarily did not see” (Green). Lucille is correct—at the time, the thought of seeing premature newborns in glass boxes was something out of a science fiction film. Although incubators are commonplace items in neonatal units today, at one time they were so out of the ordinary that they were featured in a sideshow attraction near the four-legged woman and the sword swallows (Brangham).

### **MODERN CONNECTION: TELETHONS AND EXPLOITATION**

While today people cannot go to gawk at preemies in incubators at Coney Island, there are still many modern forms of entertainment

that demonstrate that these tendencies were not left behind in the early-twentieth century. One of these modern examples is the telethon, that is a TV show which seeks to acquire funds from donors based on a live show, often featuring individuals personally impacted by the issue at hand. Some of the most well-known telethons are the PBS pledge week and Britain's Comic Relief and Children in Need. The most famous telethon, though, is Jerry Lewis's Muscular Dystrophy telethon.

Many are familiar with the annual telethon that entertainer Jerry Lewis hosted in order to raise funds for those with muscular dystrophy, often abbreviated to "MD." While the Jerry Lewis Muscular Dystrophy Telethons were successful in raising millions of dollars for the families affected by this disease, they were also subject to criticism from disability rights organizations. The main criticism was that the telethons were demeaning because they "infantilized the disabled public, and made them appear intrinsically dependent on ablebodied [*sic*] society" (Smith 688). In other words, the telethons made it appear that the disabled were incapable of helping themselves—if the able bodied would not help them, then no one would.

The children sponsored on the telethon were known as "Jerry's Kids," furthering the stigma that people with disabilities are not capable of taking care of themselves. By using the term, "Jerry's Kids," the telethon inadvertently depicts Lewis as a paternal figure whose duty it is to look after these seemingly helpless children. While the intention was to raise funds for those afflicted with MD, it does not change the fact that images of "Jerry's Kids" were being used. While it is true that the money went to the benefit of the patients themselves, they were forced to demean themselves before society would donate the money for a cure. In his article, "Please Call Now, Before It's Too Late': Spectacle Discourse in the Jerry Lewis Muscular Dystrophy Telethon," Christopher R. Smith compares Jerry Lewis's telethon to the historical freak show. He states that "both events attempt to generate capital via the exhibition of different bodies" (Smith). More than likely, Smith would also place Couney's exhibits in this category. While it is true that admission charged to see the newborns was used for their care, it does not change the fact that people were willing to pay money to gaze upon medical curiosities, just like in the telethons. Spectators of both events had no problem with paying to stare because they felt like they were helping. It



is arguable to say that voyeurism is acceptable, as long as it is paid for. This says a great deal about a culture that demands a spectacle before it will help a fellow human being in need.

## CONCLUSION

Although Martin Couney's incubators appeared to be nothing short of innovative and spectacular, when viewed through a critical lens, it is easy to take issue with the way they were funded. By having humans on display and charging admission for the public to come and see, Couney was recreating a freak show comparable to those of the early twentieth century. But how could the spectators resist? The psychology of cute dictates that the audience members would feel obligated to help these seemingly helpless creatures and would feel an intense desire to see them with their own eyes. Audience members may have thought that they were helping by paying the admission fee, and Couney could indeed have been genuine in his desires to aid these babies beyond hope, but they were participating in the display of human beings nonetheless.

## PRIMARY SOURCES

### Appendix A:

Article/Profile: "A Patron of the Preemies." *The New Yorker*. June 3, 1939

One profile for *The New Yorker*, in particular, demonstrates how the doctor's role in saving these babies' lives blurred the lines between medical professional and showman. Dr. Couney was interviewed many times about the exhibit at Luna Park in the years before his death. Staff reporter A.J. Liebling goes to great lengths to portray the doctor as a man of good ethos who would never exploit children:

"The Doctor has no financial backer; the \$35,000 building at Flushing was, he says, a considerable strain on his resources. Other long-time residents of Coney Island rate him 'a solid man' (3). Here, he comes across to the casual 1930s reader as a father-figure—even savior—to his charges. Rather than a hard-hitting journalistic piece, the profile asks Dr. Couney to talk about his former charges:

Responsibility for the existence of so many additional human beings might crush a misanthrope, but the Doctor bears the burden lightly. “They are good, normal, respectable people, all of them, I bet,” he says with conviction. “I get letters every year from people who their parents told them they were raised in my incubators. I never yet got a letter from a jail.” (3)

This passage indicates that Couney is encouraging the public to come invest in these children’s futures because these babies are guaranteed to grow up to be upright citizens who are bound to contribute to society.

Of course, saving human lives is not nefarious by itself. However, what is ethically ambiguous is the manner in which Dr. Couney, a medical professional, used methods of advertising and showmanship commonplace in human exhibits at the time to persuade visitors to offer more money by using emotionally persuasive techniques.

#### Appendix B:

Photograph Collection: “Infant Incubator - Hildegarde Couney With Other Nurses Holding Three Sets of Twins” New York World’s Fair Collection (1939-1940)

Thousands of photographs were taken at the 1939 New York World’s Fair, including several of premature babies from Couney’s Luna Park exhibit at Coney Island. This photograph depicts Couney’s daughter, Hildegarde (a former preemie herself) and another nurse holding up four babies to the camera. As the authors discuss in this paper, Couney’s nurses were expected to wear certain uniforms and jewelry which would exaggerate the size of their own features in juxtaposition with the babies’. The nurses also frequently held their tiny charges rather than having them remain in the incubators. As this photo demonstrates, the babies—although indeed small—were being depicted as smaller than they truly were.

#### **Appendix C:**

News article: “Baby Show Draws 200,000 to Coney: 500 Infants Entered, 250 Prizes Awarded— Girl Is Adjudged the Most Beautiful. 500,000 Attend at Night Resort Crowded With Visitors. Who Make Merry Till Dawn, When Carnival Closes.” *New York Times*. 21 Sep 1924: 23

This excerpt from a 1924 *The New York Times* article is another example of how people from late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries valued a baby's cuteness factor. In this article, thousands flocked to Coney Island to see babies who were not even members of Dr. Couney's exhibit. Several of the

"The annual baby show was a feature of Coney Island's Mardi Gras yesterday afternoon, and a crowd of 200,000 visitors cheered the baby parade. About 230 prizes and blue ribbons were awarded for various qualities in babies. Last night the crowd passed up to the half million mark in numbers and the resort was swamped with merrymakers . . . Of the 500 infants entered in the baby show, a 7-month-old child, Dorothy Bonadonna, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Bonadonna of 255 Sumpter Street, Brooklyn, was adjudged the prettiest, and received the William Randolph Hearst gold cup . . . The most original costume was adjudged to be that worn by Myrtle Lightell, aged 7 of 103 131st Street, Richmond Hill. LI., who was attired as a bride" (23).

five hundred babies entered into the contest by their parents walked away with prizes with titles such as "Most Beautiful." This indicates that society's fascination with Couney's preemies was not its own phenomenon. Many little children throughout the years— entered in these baby shows—were freakified because of their cuteness and were deemed cuter than others

in the process. Such contests still exist today.

"Man-made machines have again triumphed over the seemingly unconquerable forces of Nature with the invention of the mechanical mother. . . Before Dr. Couney's humanitarian and life-saving machine was perfected to the advance [*sic*] state in which one now finds it, the word 'incubator' was generally associated with the raising of chicks. A visit to his Incubator Institute, either at Coney Island boardwalk or the Atlantic City boardwalk, will reveal the precious invention of Dr. Couney in operation. So indispensable are these mechanical mothers to prematurely born babies that life would vanish instantly from their bodies without them. Nothing else in the world of science or nature could save them."

**Appendix D:**  
 "'Mechanical Mother' Saves Lives of Infants."  
*Modern Mechanix*.  
 March 1931

This final primary source is a 1931 article from the newsletter, *Modern Mechanix*. This source is particularly

significant because many of the publications about incubator babies at the time were news pieces about particular events that took place at Luna Park or about Couney himself. Even though *Modern Mechanix* was a publication distributed with scientific intentions, it still portrays Couney and his modified incubator as a nurturing mother substitute. It reflects several attitudes from the time period: that Couney's medical expertise and raising money to fund these machines (and scientific discovery in the process) was absolutely necessary for the survival of premature children.

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