

# Beyond Bars: How Print and Visual Media Contributed to the Exploitation of the Dionne Quintuplets and the Gosselin Sextuplets

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In November 1997, a couple named Bobbi and Kenny McCaughey from Carlisle, Iowa gave birth to the first surviving septuplets in recorded history: seven babies born at once. The world was captivated, and a media firestorm ignited during the first months of the children's lives. Then, in the midst of the coverage, *Time* featured an open letter written by three elderly women—surviving members of the same set of quintuplets—to the McCaughey family, pleading with these new parents not to subject their septuplets to the exploitive powers of the media. The following is an excerpt from their letter:

Dear Bobbi and Kenny,

If we emerge momentarily from the privacy we have sought all our adult lives, it is only to send a message to the McCaughey family. . . Multiple births should not be confused with entertainment, nor should they be an opportunity to sell products . . . Our lives have been ruined by the exploitation we suffered at the hands of the government of Ontario, our place of birth. We were displayed as a curiosity three times a day for millions of tourists. To this day we receive letters from all over

## Abstract

This paper explores the depiction of the historic Dionne Quintuplets and the modern-day Gosselin Sextuplets in order to demonstrate how the emergence of mass media (e.g., television, photography, and print) made these children's likeness into commodities. The author also focuses on consent and freakification of aspects related to the nuclear family and gender roles.

the world. To all those who have expressed their support in light of the abuse we have endured, we say thank you. And to those who would seek to exploit the growing fame of these children, we say beware.

We sincerely hope a lesson will be learned from examining how our lives were forever altered by our childhood experience. If this letter changes the course of events for these newborns, then perhaps our lives will have served a higher purpose.

Sincerely,

Annette, Cécile and Yvonne Dionne

(“Advice from the Dionne Quintuplets”)

This firm, yet passionate letter was written by the then-surviving Dionne quintuplets (sister Yvonne died in 2001), who became world-famous in the 1930s and '40s for being members of a successful multiple birth consisting of five babies. For nine years, they lived in a zoo-like amusement park known as Quintland, their images and names splashed across print, film, and merchandise. Now, despite approximately seventy years since the Dionnes' release, it is apparent that our society still remains transfixed by the idea of large families, especially multiples.

While advances in technology have brought countless advantages to the modern world, mass media production has also become a new mode of othering humans who challenge our assumptions about the world. It has been approximately nineteen years since the Dionnes sent their letter, and yet other multiples, such as the Gosselin sextuplets of *Jon and Kate Plus 8* and Nadya “Octomom” Suleman’s octuplets, have not escaped the media’s eye. The overwhelming primary purpose of this coverage is to entertain, not inform, an audience. While people were once displayed at crowded carnival sideshows and in museums, the more distanced portrayal of human difference in print and film (including television and newsreels) triggers much more distant and less empathetic connections with these subjects, forcing contemporary “human oddities” to become commodities. Media-coined terms such as “Octomom” reflect how much these children are romanticized but ultimately dehumanized.

What attracts audiences to families with multiples? This reason is closely tied to the freak show: an exaggeration of or juxtaposition with

the ordinary. Just as the display of giants or little people found at circuses exaggerates size or shows featuring bearded women challenge what it means to be feminine, the Dionne quintuplets and Gosselin sextuplets ask us to reconsider our perception of the nuclear family, defined as a self-sufficient unit comprised of both a maternal and paternal caregiver and their progeny. No other families of multiples have had their personas so widely distributed in the media as these two families. At the height of their popularity, these children—despite the wide generation gap—were so easily exploited because their depiction in both print and visual forms made them into commodities that simultaneously challenged and reaffirmed the values of the nuclear family.

This paper will analyze four depictions of the two families' "everyday" lives: two textual (one from *The New York Times* and another from *People Magazine*) and two filmed (scenes from the 1938 movie *Five of a Kind* and episodes from Seasons Three and Four of *Jon and Kate Plus 8*). I will draw upon media theory, psychology, and rhetorical theory in order to analyze and demonstrate how the media continues to encourage the ideals of the Western nuclear family by using the likenesses of vulnerable children. However, before one analyzes these media representations, it is crucial that one first understand the real stories of the children whose likenesses were used to sell an extreme and often idealized depiction of family life.

## THE FAMILIES

The Dionne Quintuplets—Yvonne, Annette, Cécile, Émilie, and Marie—were taken from their impoverished biological parents mere months after their 1934 birth and remained separated from them for the first decade of their lives. Their parents were deemed unfit after they were caught putting the children on display in a Chicago-based exhibit to earn enough money to care for them. The children became wards of the Canadian government and were housed in a specialized hospital. Unfortunately, their new home became less like a hospital and more like an amusement park, and it was eventually dubbed "Quintland." For the next nine years, the government encouraged an eager audience to pay admission at the gates in order to catch a glimpse of these child oddities playing behind one-way glass. The girls were, for the most part, unaware that they were being watched and were only allowed outside at certain times of the

day (Royal 442). Despite its initial attempts to avoid exploiting the young girls for profit by “saving” them from their parents, Canada had ironically put the children on display according to their own terms. The Canadian government abused its powers in order to profit from children who could give no consent when they were infants.

The Gosselins were born seventy years later in 2004. It was Jon and Kate Gosselin’s second pregnancy after years of infertility treatments. As with the McCaughey family, there was a media storm after their birth, and, several months later, a television special from the Discovery Channel was released. After another successful special appeared on TLC, that network debuted *Jon and Kate Plus 8* in 2007. The show featured all ten Gosselins: Jon, Kate, the twins (Cara and Maddy) and the sextuplets (Alexis, Hannah, Aaden, Collin, Leah, and Joel). The show was a commercial success and spawned a book series written by Kate Gosselin as well as tabloid media coverage. After it was revealed that husband Jon Gosselin was involved in an extramarital scandal, the parents divorced. Even after an executive decision to continue the series with the twist that Kate would now live as a single mom, the reality show was canceled in 2011 (Royal 2-3). Their show may have been founded on the idea of an unconventional family when it first aired, but it collapsed when the father figure was out of the picture.

*Jon and Kate Plus 8* had a five-season run from 2007 to 2011, and the Dionnes’ history seemed to repeat itself. Jon and Kate Gosselin consented to their children’s appearance in a reality TV show and permitted their children’s faces to appear in magazines and promotional material for the program. The sextuplets were never physically trapped behind glass or steel bars; the evidence of their exploitation is more subtle due to the affordances and constraints associated with print and visual media. In the end, through editing and other persuasive techniques, the directors and writers were handed control of the children’s representation.

## **FREAK SHOWS, MASS MEDIA, AND COMMODIFICATION**

Humans have been put on display in forms of freak shows and human zoos for centuries. Yet what is important to note about the Dionnes is that they were born at a time when technology was making monumental strides, particularly in visual mediums such as film. Although it may seem unlikely to place news coverage, film, tabloids, and reality television shows in the

same category as freak shows, there are many connections between these examples of humans being exploited for capital gain. How that subject is perceived by an audience can be manipulated by whatever media is used to distribute their image. Much like a carnival barker's stories about individual exhibits, the tale becomes a romanticized version of the truth that draws a crowd. When film was introduced in the early twentieth century, the freak show was brought to an audience who was not limited to the physical fair ground, where a traveling human exhibit would normally be displayed. In fact, some of the first films depicted freak shows and other human exhibits on screen (Thomson 56).

Once this technology became more commonplace, the freak show had been transferred to a new medium that continued to encourage the idea that anyone who is not a normate is a source of intrigue and, therefore, entertainment. According to scholar Guy Debord's "Mass Media and Commodity Fetishism," "all that was once directly lived has become mere representation" (5). Any representation then becomes an object to be bought and sold by distributors. Once this happens, the audience's empathy subsides, unlike if they were to see an exhibit in person at a traveling freak show. Disability scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson attributes this concept to what she deems to be an "ocularcentric era." She writes that "the rapid flourishing of photography after 1839 provided a new way to stare at disability, [and in] our ocularcentric era, images mediate our desires and the ways we imagine ourselves" (57). The image permits staring more easily and, therefore, enables mass consumption of representations of human subjects like the Dionne or the Gosselin families.

The contrast between Quintland and the films in which the Dionnes were depicted echoes the evolution of the physical, staged freak show to the big screen. Audiences were able to travel to Quintland to observe the girls playing in their nursery behind glass as if the children were in a zoo. Yet, when they were filmed, their activities eating and playing in the nursery were captured by the camera as it was rolling, edited at a later time, and placed in cinemas across the world. As with their feature film *Five of a Kind*—which I will soon discuss and analyze—sometimes the scripted scenes were intercut between scenes in which the children sang, danced, and (often) reinforced traditional gender roles by playing house with their dolls. While these are typical activities in which many children participate, it

is important to remember that the editors made conscious decisions about which shots from the hours and days of footage would be used to construct their version of typical childhood. The mass distribution of the Dionnes' images led to movie ticket sales.

Unlike feature films that have scripts, reality TV enables its subjects to—at least to some degree—interact with the camera by addressing the audience. They can, as *Jon and Kate Plus 8* did, reflect on a previous event captured on camera and discuss their feelings about that incident. However, just how real are reality shows? If the genre's purpose is to show what daily life is like for its subjects who are interacting in an environment they are accustomed to, how could this be harmful for child subjects? The reality television genre is no less exploitive than any other type of visual media. As scholar Lucia Palmer explains, “reality television is fabricated and packaged as much as any scripted program; its truthfulness is an artifice created to sell its products . . . [I]t is designed for a specific audience with a specific goal motivated by commercial factors” (124).

Palmer gives examples of some of the ways in which reality television is harmful for teenage and child viewers, including the dangers of mainstream heteronormativity and adult perceptions of beauty (128-9). However, Palmer also cites a major problem with the way such shows challenge, but ultimately sustain, the cultural perception that large, nuclear families are ideal for Western life (125). For viewers of the Gosselins' show, *Jon and Kate Plus 8*, it may seem at first that reality television provides a means to show the world not simply how hectic life can be with sextuplets but also how many aspects of their life are average. Yet, as I will discuss in the next section of this paper, the situations being captured in the early seasons are manipulated by editors to show a slice of life that is entertaining and appeals to the general public's views on the nuclear family. Thus, although the draw for an audience is their one unusual trait (having eight children), to keep an audience invested, the show is built around traditional family values.

## **REPRESENTATIONS OF THE DIONNES AND GOSSELINS: AN ANALYSIS**

In this section, I examine the ways print and visual communication mediums—including film, television episodes, tabloids, and newspapers—have been used to sell the Dionnes and Gosselins to the public. Although

these four different types are all able to capture the multiples' "everyday lives," text and film/modern television convey messages differently and, therefore, display these children in different ways.

### Print Mediums

As some rhetoricians and media specialists, such as Neil Postman, assert, print forms of representation in the age of television and film are no more virtuous than others; they simply allow for different types of misuse. According to Postman's renowned 1985 work, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, textual modes of communication before the age of television were "serious, inclined toward rational argument and presentation, and, therefore, made up of meaningful content" (52). In other words, print before the twentieth century allowed a media consumer to think more critically about what they read. Now the most popular print forms mimic television and film's tendency to entertain rather than inform. While Postman never speaks on human exhibits in his work, his piece, "The Typographic Mind," explains why the tabloids that cover the Dionnes and Gosselins read more like vivid scripts about domestic life than journalism.

Both the print articles recount special occasions in these children's lives, and both occur within a setting similar to a nuclear family's home. Both pieces feature vivid language and primarily happy details meant to entertain rather than inform. However, the children's own words are absent, leaving the writers or their guardians to speak for them. The first article is one from *The New York Times*, entitled "Dionne Girls Rouse Nursery 3 Hours Early to Investigate Pere Noel's Bounty," which is about the quintuplets waking up to a Christmas morning. The second article is a publicity article from *People*, detailing the sextuplets' circus-themed birthday party. Both articles begin the same way: with a lighthearted opening, as in this example from the Gosselin article: "Raising eight children can be a circus – a comparison Kate Gosselin took to heart to celebrate her sextuplets' birthday" (Corrison) and this one from the Dionnes': "The Dionne Quintuplets awoke at 4:30 A.M. today and aroused the nursery to find out what Pere Noel had left for them. Thus began an exciting day of hijinks" ("Quintuplets Slide All Over the Place"). What is important to realize here is that the writers' word choices themselves do not particularly exploit the children; rather, it is the way the articles are clearly meant to

be light entertainment. It disguises the fact that these children have little say regarding whether or not they want to be featured in the articles. Their guardians (The Canadian government and Jon and Kate Gosselin) allow the writers to speak for them. In fact, in *People*, only Kate Gosselin speaks: “All nine of us came together – dreamed together, planned together, set up together and enjoyed a huge milestone with tons of our friends” (Corrison). Their individual voices are lost in this collective “us.”

### Visual Mediums

Print mediums may leave a consumer with a picture of the everyday lives of the Gosselin and Dionne multiples in their minds, but visual mediums like television and film are more harmful due to the notion that “seeing is believing.” In other words, television is highly selective, controlled by editors and directors to produce the most entertaining viewing experience for the audience as possible. In doing so, an audience may not consider what is occurring off-screen. The children are surrounded by concepts that both reinforce and challenge some of the major constructs of a nuclear family: compliance with traditional gender roles and male/female parental figures. However, I will provide context for these media depictions so that we may better analyze them.

Both visual mediums starring these families of multiples feature parental figures—but these parental figures do not comply with the traditional mold of a mother or father. We begin with the Dionne sisters’ film, *Five of a Kind* (1938), a comedy starring the Dionne quintuplets as the fictitious “Wyatt” quintuplets—yet the characters still bear the real girls’ names: Yvonne, Annette, Cécile, Émilie, and Marie. The girls were only four-and-a-half at the time of the film’s release. The little girls portrayed as characters in the film are kept in a Canadian institution guarded by “kindly” white-uniformed nurses and their “kindly,” fatherly caretaker named Dr. John Lock (who is based on Quintland’s real-life Dr. Defoe). The plot centers around the competition between two radio journalists (portrayed by Cesar Romero and Claire Trevor) to be the first to put the quints’ voices on the radio. Intercut between the plot points, the film features long scenes depicting the tiny girls playing with dolls behind glass in a room similar to the one at Quintland, meeting puppies, and singing songs in matching dresses and bows (*Five of a Kind* 15:00, 17:00, and 41:49). Upon its release,



culture critic Frank S. Nugent of *The New York Times* condemned the film, proclaiming that the girls have “become victims of mass production” and deeming the Twentieth Century Fox film as a “factory-made product with a superimposed plot” (qtd. in “Five of a Kind”). However, in the same article, Nugent ironically laments that this film is not as entertaining as the two previous films in which the Dionnes starred.

In the season three premiere of *Jon and Kate Plus 8* entitled “A Day in the Life,” the episode’s goal is to show the audience what a normal day in the Gosselin house typically looks like. The entire twenty-one minutes takes place at the Gosselin residence in the fall of 2008 and details what it is like getting the twins out the door to school as well as the antics of the sextuplets’ naptime and playtimes. Much like the Dionne film’s reels and the scenes from *Five of a Kind*, the toddler-aged children are filmed as they play outside, eat snacks, and occasionally smack each other. The Gosselins fit the mold of the nuclear family better than the Dionnes, who were taken from their biological parents as infants, because the Gosselins do have a mother and father present. However, the show is still compliant with the major appeal of human exhibits: it is a nuclear family but taken to the extreme. Jon, the father, still leaves for work while Kate, the frazzled mother, stays home to send the older kids off to school and then take care of six toddlers. In both instances, the Dionnes’ and Gosselins’ situation is simultaneously familiar—yet unfamiliar, which is where the intrigue and “entertainment” value comes into play.

While it is true that the depiction of the Gosselins does not seem to try to be perfect, both representations feature scenes where the female children adopt the roles often associated with their gender: taking care of other children or their toys. Here, the filmmakers and television producers have—much like freakshow owners—chosen to include these scenes without much preamble.

In *Jon and Kate Plus 8*’s episode “Day in a Life,” one of the seven-year-old twins is shown keeping the younger children under control, ordering them around the house to play games upstairs just as her mother, Kate, does earlier in the episode (17:00). There is a similar and—rather haunting—scene in the Depression-era film *Five of a Kind*; in an extended scene, each of the little girls in their matching outfits simultaneously washes her own identical baby doll, then feeds it a plastic toy bottle, scolds it in French, and

tucks it into bed. All lined up, an image of an assembly line comes to mind: little girls behind glass learning to obey cultural norms with their imaginary children. These two scenes may seem innocent to an unassuming audience, but it nonetheless remains a conscious choice by the producers to include these particular scenes in order to emphasize the need for traditional roles in nontraditional families.

These examples are quite subtle. One particular instance, however, occurs during the first and second episodes of Season 4, in which the Gosselin family has a “boys’ day out” and a “girls’ day out.” Jon takes the four-year-old boys to a golf course and a fitness center, while Kate takes the five girls shopping at the grocery store and then to paint pottery (“Boys Day Out,” “Girls Day Out”). In this two-part episode, one of the boys even tries to get in the van with the girls and is carried away kicking and screaming by his father (“Girls Day Out” 10:00). This further highlights the underlying assumption that, even though Jon and Kate are raising so many children, they will still be raised to comply with dominant gender norms.

One question remains, however: Given how popular the quintz were at the time, why did the filmmakers feel compelled to make a fictionalized film? As popular culture historian Paul Talbot suggests, *Quintland* could only sustain the public’s attention for so long. As he explains, “When one looked at them for a minute or two, he had seen all there was to see” (Talbot 81). Film, meanwhile, has the ability to manipulate its subjects to make them more interesting. It can place the girls in situations that they would not ordinarily encounter in the nursery. For instance, one scene shows the doctor presenting the five children with puppies. Then the camera rolls and captures the children’s expressions and, in some cases, screams of terror. Here, the scene’s entertainment value stems from the audience watching the girls to see how they will react and what cute things they will do, such as hugging a puppy or—as several of them do—running away in fear. Except for the scenes in which the Dionnes sing and dance, they do not have lines. In this way, it is strikingly similar to modern-day reality shows’ way of placing participants in a situation and letting the cameras roll. Then, before releasing this footage to the public, the editors manipulate and rearrange what is captured on film and shrink down the course of a day into an hour or half-an-hour. However, what is particularly significant about this film is that not only does the movie fictionalize the little girls’ lives,

but it simultaneously appeals to and challenges early twentieth-century assumptions about domestic life.

## JUSTICE FOR EXPLOITED MULTIPLES

Of course, despite all the injustice these children have faced, not everyone in the public is entranced by the romanticization of multiples. There have, in fact, been questions and controversy regarding whether or not the Gosselin parents have violated child labor laws. However, according to one study conducted by *The Akron Law Review*, the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) does not protect children depicted on reality shows because “though the FLSA governs child labor, it expressly exempts from coverage of children employed as ‘actor or performer’” [sic ] (Royal 456). Not only does this allow Kate’s children to be filmed using her parental consent, but the children do not qualify for protection from the law if any of them should sue their guardians, as the Dionnes did in 1998, approximately one year after the McCaughey septuplets were born.

Fortunately, Cécile, Annette, and Yvonne, the last living Dionne sisters, asked that they be compensated for their years in captivity and that they be given what share of the profits they were owed from the Canadian trust fund promised to them after they became wards of the state. In the end, they were given a settlement equivalent to 2.8 million dollars (DePalma). The women, along with their deceased sisters who never received justice when they were alive, were granted an apology and escaped the public life as best they could, but the Gosselins continue to periodically appear in TLC specials and tabloid-publicity magazines.

Unlike the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the general public now condemns the display of human subjects at carnivals or museums. However, this certainly does not mean that the livelihoods of vulnerable populations like children are not distributed for entertainment. They are watched as they grow up into future spouses and parents, completing the cycle of the nuclear family. We are still drawn to individuals who exaggerate, and therefore challenge, our culture’s perceived notions of normal. It is crucial to study all reincarnated forms of the freak show—everything from reality television and film to newspaper and magazine articles—because, in an age when entertainment dominates most forms of communication, it is more difficult to connect “past consequences” with the future (Rich 371). The

merchandising of the Gosselins' images after the Dionnes' self-proclaimed hellish childhood in the public eye proves this, as laws allow their guardians to continue to speak for the sextuplets.

Still, there is a silver lining. Annette, Cécile, and Yvonne Dionne were granted their wish back in 1997: the McCaughey septuplets were never subjected to the degree of in-person attention or mass media distribution which the Dionnes had once endured. Now, at nearly nineteen years old, they have escaped a life filled with publicity photographs and merchandising—aside from an occasional interview marking a birthday or milestone. The question remains as to how the Gosselins (and any other famous multiples in the future) will fair in a world that still considers them oddities.

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