The *Cuties* Controversy: Prefiguration, 'Sexualisation', and the New Conspiracism

Richard McCulloch
Independent Researcher

William Proctor
Bournemouth University, UK

Abstract

In this article, we draw on Martin Barker's extensive body of work on film audiences and controversial media to explore the media furore around Maïmouna Doucouré's *Cuties* (2020). When streamed on Netflix, several conservative groupings, including US Republican politicians, right-wing news outlets and Christian bloggers, led an intensely moralising campaign, largely shaped by outrage at *Cuties'* representation of pre-adolescent girlhood. Deploying Barker's techniques of examination of the implicit assumptions and 'evidence' that underpin responses to controversial media, our analysis draws out the working 'figures of the audience' to tell the story of the *Cuties* controversy. In particular, we highlight the different ways that arguments and debates about the film turned on these imagined and imaginary audience figurations that were deployed in the service of specific ideological positions.

The article is comprised of four sections. It begins by exploring how *Cuties* became a *cause célèbre* before the film was even released, with discourses of 'pornography' and 'paedophilia' initially being established and structured through criticism of *prefigurative materials* rather than interpretations of the film itself. The two sections that follow examine claims made by Republican politicians and right-wing commentators about *Cuties*' alleged potential to 'sexualise' young girls and to normalise or even instigate paedophilia. We place these ideologically-charged arguments around childhood protection into historical context, locating the emotional and rhetorical core of the controversy in 'common-sense' beliefs and 'figures of the child' that emerged in the nineteenth century and were developed further in the latter half of the twentieth century; beliefs that continue to dominate debates about girlhood sexualities and the perils they face today. The final section then explores the ways in which opposition to *Cuties* overlapped with conspiracy theories like those articulated by

QAnon, placing the discourse in the context of what Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019) term 'the new conspiracism'. Ultimately, we use the controversy to draw attention to the propagandising activities of political entrepreneurs, who were not simply reacting to a film they disliked but were instead seizing upon *Cuties* as a way of furthering their own (conservative) ideological agendas.

Keywords: *Cuties*, figures of the audience, sexualisation, child pornography, sex trafficking, paedophilia, media effects, conspiracy theory, conspiracism, QAnon, *Sound of Freedom.*

Introduction

To describe Maïmouna Doucouré's *Cuties* as 'divisive' would be an understatement. Its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2020 led to widespread critical acclaim and a Directing Award for Doucouré. American reviews spoke of a 'thematically bold yet nuanced study of displacement and duty that deserves to be seen as an auspicious and astute debut' (Webb, 2020), 'a sensitive portrait of growing pains' (Fear, 2020), and 'a searing critique of premature sexualisation' (Levine, 2020).[1] At the time of writing, the film sits on a very respectable Rotten Tomatoes score of 86% 'fresh' from professional critics (Figure 1).

Yet, *Cuties*' release on Netflix in September 2020 was met by a very different kind of response. Its corresponding *audience* score on Rotten Tomatoes — currently 16%, and at one point as low as 3% — gives a sense of the vast gulf that would emerge between different groups of audiences.[2] Spearheaded by numerous conservative groupings — Republican politicians, right-wing news outlets, Christian bloggers, etc. — an intensely moralising discourse took form, one that was largely shaped by outrage at *Cuties'* representation of pre-adolescent girlhood. Doucouré received 'numerous death threats' (Grater, 2020), and the backlash was fierce enough to trigger widespread reports of people cancelling their subscriptions to Netflix, deploying the hashtag #CancelNetflix to encourage others to follow

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[1] For the sake of stylistic consistency, we have used British spellings of 'sexualisation' and its variations throughout, including instances when the American -ize or -ization suffixes were originally used in cited materials. We have taken the same approach to the words 'paedophile,' 'paedophilia' and their variations. Any American spellings of these words have been preserved in the list of references, however.

[2] Rotten Tomatoes has often been criticised for its simplistic binary, or 'dichotomic classification' (Nishijima, Rodrigues Jr and Donega, 2022), between 'fresh' ('positive') and 'rotten' ('negative'), which allows little room for qualitative nuance. We agree with those arguments, and present the critics' and audiences' scores for *Cuties* here merely to illustrate the gulf between the two groups (especially as it mirrored the broader discursive universe surrounding the film). The audience score of 16% quoted here is correct as of August 1ˢᵗ, 2022. The figure of 3% was correct as of September 15ᵗʰ, 2020, roughly a week after its Netflix release. The film received a similarly polarising set of scores on review aggregation site Metacritic—67% ('generally favourable') based on 16 professional critic reviews, but 1.0 out of 10 from users ('overwhelming dislike').
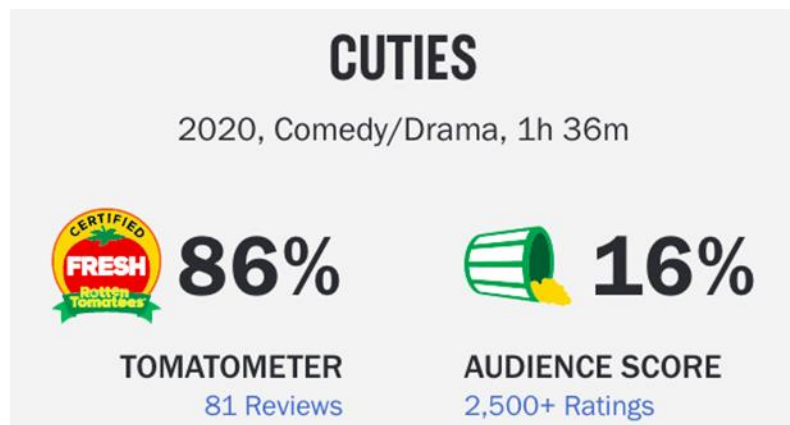
Figure 1: Rotten Tomatoes scores for *Cuties*, as of July 15th, 2022

suit. Hundreds of thousands of people signed online petitions calling for the film to be removed, with *The Verge* describing the controversy as the platform's 'most significant PR scandal to date' (Schiffer, 2021). The grievances coalesced around several highly charged and emotive debates, situating the film within America's ongoing (and so-called) new culture wars: debates around child pornography, the 'sexualisation' of young girls and, more bizarrely, the evils of sex trafficking.

Short-lived though the controversy may have been, 'discursive events' (Rambukkana, 2015) like this have much to teach us; not only about film reception *per se*, but also about the ways in which films, and other cultural commodities, can be summoned for political gain.[3] As we shall see, the emotional and rhetorical core of the *Cuties* controversy can be located in pre-existing discourses and debates relating to the 'sexualisation' of young girls, as well as building upon broader discourses (again, with considerable historic vintage) that constructed 'figures of the child' as a metaphor with which to service particular ideological projects.

Throughout this article, we draw particularly on Martin Barker's extensive body of work on film audiences and controversial media, which provides a methodological toolkit for examining and evaluating claims about media texts and their supposed 'effects' on audiences. In *From Antz to Titanic: Reinventing Film Analysis,* for instance, Barker (with Thomas Austin) shows that film analysis — whether sophisticated and scholarly, or informal and polemical — has historically been prone to making unsubstantiated claims about 'how films work to make meanings … how they work on their audiences, and thus … what an implied audience is doing with the film' (Barker with Austin, 2000: 7). These arguments present themselves as being about *films* and how they work, but popular film analysis often takes the form of identifying 'messages' and then invoking 'figures of the audience' for whom those messages become meaningful. These figures 'warrant moves to judgement' through 'presumptive accounts of what a film might do or must do to its audience (or a particular segment of it)' (Barker, 2009: 58).

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[3] This is, of course, not a new phenomenon, but one with a lengthy history that goes back (at least) to the industrial era and the emergence of popular culture (see, for example, Springhall, 1999).

Barker notes that these 'abstract entities', these 'figures of the audience', are usually 'fragmentary, hints, [and] allusions' that 'become more elaborated, constructed as "coherent" discourses … when critics mount attacks on films or when censors seek to justify cuts or restrictions' (Ibid). In order to persuasively claim that a media text is 'harmful,' for example, it is necessary to construct these imaginary 'figures' who may be 'harmed' by coming into contact with it. Arguments about dangerous or problematic films are thus not strictly about the films themselves, as they often claim to be, but more about the relationship between the cinematic and the extra-cinematic, between representational space and the real world (Barker and Austin, 2000: 3, 10). For Barker, this is a serious and routinely overlooked problem, analogous to a doctor making claims about the efficacy of a particular drug (what it can cure, how it might damage, what side-effects it might have, etc.) without having conducted any clinical trials, and instead basing their arguments entirely on laboratory analysis of the drug's chemistry (Barker and Austin, 2000: 7). Put more simply, 'these debates are not *about* evidence' (Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath, 2001: 9, emphasis in original).

It is quite remarkable how much the *Cuties* controversy, in discursive terms, replicates the findings of Barker et al.'s research into David Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996), a film that provoked an extraordinarily hostile reaction from conservative media outlets and politicians (albeit in the UK). Journalists and audiences 'incorporate[d] into their accounts of the film a shadowy "figure" of an audience who might see the film and get the message of the film that each writer finds there' (Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath, 2001: 4). Consider the following excerpt from *The Crash Controversy: Censorship Campaigns and Film Reception*, in which the authors describe the narrative arc of the discourse surrounding Cronenberg's film:

> First, an item of behaviour shown in a film is abstracted from its context there, and 'named' ('lethally reckless driving') as a thing in its own right. It is then linked to a piece of real behaviour which at best is loosely similar, and is feared. It does not matter if several pretty unrelated behaviours are lumped together here (ram-raiding and reckless driving do not obviously belong in the same register). The film, with its named behaviour, can then be treated as a potential cause of the real, feared behaviour. To complete the picture, it is necessary to paint a portrait of a possible audience who might see the film, an audience which is somewhere between immature, bad and mad ('some lunatic West thrill-seekers'). The resulting argument can be made all the stronger if those making it can call on a shared assumption that the sheer act of showing the behaviour, that it will be seen, is itself dangerous. And indeed it is the case that a widespread unspoken premise in British cultural thinking is that to show something is *per se* to encourage it. This is the most widespread, 'common-sense' claim about how films might work on audiences. (Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath, 2001: 7)

In writing about and condemning *Crash*, conservative journalists and politicians collectively constructed an imagined, vulnerable and, more specifically, *demented* audience who would see the film and be inspired to reckless driving and ram-raiding. But the brouhaha surrounding *Cuties* pivoted on the belief that the film, by 'sexualising' young girls, enables and encourages paedophilia (Nelson, 2020), that it is 'a mind trap designed to make people believe that paedophilia is OK and should be accepted, even celebrated' (Sanghamitra, 2020); or, as Democrat Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard put it on Twitter, that the film 'will certainly whet the appetite of pedophiles and help fuel the sex-trafficking trade'[4]. And so, as *The Guardian's* Peter Bradshaw put it (2020), *Cuties* found itself 'at the centre of the nastiest obscenity row since David Cronenberg's *Crash* in 1996'.

Returning to the longer quote about *Crash* above*,* we could replace the bracketed items with terms related to the *Cuties* controversy, and the passage would still work as a broad description of the discursive universe: 'lethally reckless driving' converted into 'sexualised dancing' (and especially 'twerking'); 'ram-raiding and reckless driving' becomes 'paedophilia and child sex trafficking' (which also do not necessarily 'belong in the same register'); and 'some lunatic West thrill-seekers' is exchanged with 'hungry pedophiles'. Although the two controversies unfolded in different national contexts, their discursive similarities indicate that 'to show something is *per se* to encourage it' is just as much a 'widespread unspoken premise' in American cultural thinking as it is for the British.[5]

As a passionate advocate for the empirical, one of Barker's most effective techniques for critiquing claims about controversial media is to examine the implicit assumptions and 'evidence' that underpin the commentary in question. He speaks of 'the need to draw out the working "figures of the audience" in circulation … and to examine critically (and even suspiciously) the work that they do in permitting conclusions about films' cultural meanings and significance' (Barker, 2009: 58). In what follows, we draw and build upon Barker's work to tell the story of the *Cuties* controversy, highlighting the different ways that arguments about the film turned on these imagined, imaginary, and politically-charged audience figurations. In this way, the 'messages' directly attributed to *Cuties* functioned less as a legitimate exegesis of cinematic 'meaning,' and more as a moralising, ideological weapon that placed the topic of girlhood sexuality directly within its sights, a topic that has been a key battleground in the US culture wars since the 1980s (Jeffries, 2022).

Although our approach in this article is discursive, it could also be defined as 'Barkeresque', in that we borrow key research questions from the *Crash* project (and to a lesser extent, elsewhere), exploring patterns of similarity and divergence between the two:

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[4] @TulsiGabbard, '.@netflix child porn "Cuties" will certainly whet the appetite of pedophiles & help fuel the child sex trafficking trade. 1 in 4 victims of trafficking are children. It happened to my friend's 13 year old daughter. Netflix, you are now complicit. #CancelNetflix', *Twitter*, September 12, 2020, https://twitter.com/TulsiGabbard/status/1304587833584226305.
[5] The idea that representation equals endorsement is a common-sense belief across the Western cultural imaginary, not specifically related to either the US or the UK.

> In what terms and drawing on what wider ways of talking and thinking
> (discourses, as they are often termed) did both attackers and defenders of the
> film articulate their views? What discursive repertoires were used? What
> language was used, what assumptions were made, and what broader
> ideological positions were being invoked? Is there a hierarchy of responses,
> such that one, perhaps, sets the terms of reference which the others, in being
> formulated into words, have to take account of (by agreement, qualification,
> circumvention, or direct disagreement, for instance)? (Barker, Arthurs and
> Harindranath, 2001: 9)

While this article pushes back against the claims made by *Cuties'* most fervent opponents, we are not aiming to set the record straight by offering an 'alternative' account of what the film 'really means'. As with Barker et al. on the *Crash* project, we want to explore how different groups of people 'understood, analysed or responded to it, whether implicitly or explicitly' (2001: 4). That being said, we do not pretend to be completely neutral. As researchers, we are definitely (and defiantly) opposed to the media effects tradition (or, as it is often termed, the hypodermic needle model), so we stand on critical ground fortified by media and cultural studies research that has debunked that tradition many times over (Barker and Petley, 2001; Gauntlett, 2001). More pertinently, we are both white, heterosexual men who, in this article, map and explore a discursive 'terrain of debate' (Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath, 2001) undergirded by concepts and concerns that do not reflect our own gendered or racialised experiences. As such, we have been careful to channel the voices of female, queer and Black academics, especially on matters such as 'objectification', the alleged 'sexualisation' of young girls, and structural whiteness. Drawing on that rich extant literature enables us to illustrate the various ways the 'figure' of the 'child' has been historically constructed through discourse: as 'pure', 'innocent', and, most pointedly, 'white'.

The article is comprised of four sections. We begin by exploring how *Cuties* became a *cause célèbre* before the film was even released, showing that the discourse was established, and eventually organised, through criticism of prefigurative materials rather than interpretations of the film itself. This leads into a section on the 'sexualisation' thesis, in which we first analyse a sequence of claims evoked by Republican politicians who sought to use *Cuties* to further establish ideological goals centred on childhood protection. This leads into the third section, which places those debates around alleged 'sexualisation' into historical contexts. We demonstrate that the *Cuties* controversy relied upon common-sense beliefs that emerged in the nineteenth century and were developed further in the latter half of the twentieth century; beliefs that continue to dominate debates about girlhood sexualities and the perils they face today. The final section then explores the ways in which opposition to *Cuties* overlapped with conspiracy theories, like those articulated by QAnon, placing the discourse in the context of what Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019) term 'the new conspiracism'. More specifically, we use the controversy to draw attention to the propagandising activities of political entrepreneurs, who were not simply reacting to a film

they disliked, but were instead seizing upon *Cuties* as a way of furthering their own (conservative) ideological agendas.

'They Know It When They *Don't* See It': Prefiguration and Paedophilia

Although *Cuties*' theatrical debut at Sundance received widespread acclaim, the film did not pass by entirely without criticism. For instance, several positive reviews commented on its 'uneven' structure or called it 'structurally shaky' and 'dramatically contrived' (Bundy, 2020; Rooney, 2020; Halligan, 2020). Others lamented its loss of 'plot momentum', or felt that it leaned too far into 'magical realism' (Rooney, 2020; IndieWire Staff, 2020). Broadly speaking, however, the premiere was a critical success, and its reception at that point certainly provided no hint that a burgeoning controversy was afoot, nor that some audiences might be offended (or 'harmed') by the film.[6] In fact, one month after its positive reviews and Directing Award at Sundance, *Cuties* went on to receive a 'Special Mention' in the Best Film category at Berlinale (Berlin International Film Festival) from the International Jury Generation Kplus; an accolade voted for by a young jury, with all members aged between 11 and 14-years-old. Widely viewed as a piece of insightful social commentary from a promising young director, the discourse surrounding the film was mainly positive, but otherwise unremarkable, similar to hundreds, if not thousands, of low-budget films that have performed well at major festivals around the world.

As part of the platform's 'Coming Soon' section, Netflix released a promotional trailer and poster for the film on August 20th, 2020 (Figure 2).[7] They were accompanied by a synopsis, which read: 'Amy, 11, becomes fascinated with a twerking dance crew. Hoping to join them, she starts to explore her femininity, defying her family's traditions'. Almost immediately, these materials provided tinder and spark for backlash on social media platforms, and the situation began to change. News outlets and Doucouré herself would later claim that the poster was the main culprit in defining the terrain of debate (see Grater, 2020; Keslassy, 2020), but our excavation of the discourse shows that the online trailer was just as important.

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[6] The handful of critics who made predictions about the film's future impact had only positive words to offer, arguing, for instance, that '*Cuties* will certainly garner mainstream media attention, but it's [Netflix], and its giant young audience, which should propel Doucouré's debut into the YA [Young Adult] hit zone of *13 Reasons Why* or *The End of the F***ing World*' (Halligan, 2020). *Variety* had reported news of Netflix's deal to secure global distribution rights for *Cuties*, but the article had nothing to say about its potential significance, beyond briefly summarising the credits of the director, producer and production company behind it (Dale, 2020).

[7] Much of the news coverage of Netflix's apology (and later, more in-depth journalistic coverage of the controversy) would present the two posters exactly as we have done here—side-by-side, presumably encouraging readers to directly compare, contrast and interpret the two versions.

Figure 2: Netflix's controversial promotional artwork for *Cuties* (left), compared with the French poster (right).

Indeed, within a matter of hours, a clear pattern began to emerge across the trailer's most 'liked' comments on YouTube:

> Netflix has that [Jeffrey] Epstein type beat (15,355 likes).[8]

> We really needed a new show sexualising children. Right, Netflix? Not happy with this (10,236 likes).
> What the hell! My daughter won't be watching this. They look like their 10 and 12 years old. At 0.25 mark I cringed.[9] Usually when they make movies like this the girls are 16 maybe 17. This is disturbing. (28,035 likes).

> Call me triggered or whatever but this trailer's f'ed up in all sorts of ways. Ya know what I mean? (9,053 likes)

As shown here, the film was swiftly identified as 'f'ed up', 'disturbing', and guilty of 'sexualising children'. Note also that Netflix is directly cited, a sentiment that, as we discuss in more detail below, would be elevated considerably as the terrain of debate expanded in significant ways (and became more structured and organised in the process). Though these

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[8] All quoted materials from social media users have been anonymised in line with established ethical practices for Internet-based research (see Bruckman, 2002 for more on 'light disguise'), except where public figures are concerned (i.e., politicians, journalists). All quotations from social media sources are presented as written, with spelling and grammatical errors intact. Numbers of 'likes' are correct as of July 15th, 2022.

[9] This timestamp appears to refer to a brief shot in the trailer of one of the eponymous 'Cuties' suggestively putting her finger in her mouth.

comments do not *directly* describe *Cuties* as child pornography, there are certainly intimations of this ('that Epstein type beat', 'a new show sexualising children', 'they look like their 10 and 12 years old'). There is a prevailing sense among the most-liked comments that there is something 'wrong' with the trailer, specifically in its depictions of young girls.

Naturally, we should be extremely cautious about using quantitative data to make qualitative inferences — in this case, using numbers of 'likes' to gauge audience reception. 'Liking' a given comment *may* be a way for users to indicate their agreement, but as researchers, we cannot always be certain how to interpret this. In many cases, a 'like' will indicate only *partial* agreement, and we would have no way of knowing *which part(s)* they agree or disagree with. Equally, a 'like' might indicate something *other* than agreement, such as amusement, interest, or an assumption that the original commenter shares their worldview. It may also be a performative gesture, not an illustration of what people 'really' think. As Tamara Peyton argues, the 'like' button is 'a chimera meaning multiple things to many people and acting within the sociotechnical lifeworld in a variety of ways' (2014: 116). However, it is also an 'intuitive assumption' that

> the number of likes implies exposure, attention, and some sort of affirmation, ratification, or endorsement of what is posted. Essentially, a post with many interactions has evidently grabbed more attention and spread more widely, whereas a post with fewer interactions has not been deemed worthy or interesting to engage with. (Gerodimos and Justinussen, 2015: 117)

In this context, the ability to 'like' other users' comments on YouTube is an important affordance of the platform, one that impacts directly on user experience. This matters for our understanding of the *Cuties* controversy because 'likes' (and 'dislikes') are viewed as key metrics of 'consumer engagement' (Oh et al., 2016), the *quantity* of which determine which posts remain near the top of a video's comment feed. In that sense, they operate, in part, like voting, granting the illusion of approval or legitimacy to certain views over others, and structuring their relative visibility (or, as the case may be, invisibility).

At the time of the controversy, another important feature on YouTube (since removed) was the ability to see how many *dislikes* a video had received.[10] Perhaps unsurprisingly, this became an important metric for *Cuties*' biggest critics, with the trailer's dislike count being gleefully followed and reported on by Twitter users, some of whom actively encouraged others to add to the count. This is an example of 'review bombing', a form of 'online misinformation' wherein large groups of people attempt to sabotage various

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[10] On November 10th, 2021, YouTube announced that the dislike button would remain in use, but the 'count' would be henceforth removed to address campaigns that explicitly targeted YouTube content, the aim being to 'protect our creators from harassment, and reduce dislike attacks—where people work to drive up the number of dislikes on a creator's videos' (for more on this, see The YouTube Team, 2021).

measurements of a product's popularity or quality. By organising a mass submission of (usually negative) reviews, the 'bombing' aims to alter the item's rating, score, or rank, in order to affect its reputation and/or commercial performance (Tomaselli et al., 2021).

The point here is that within a few hours of the trailer and poster's release, *Cuties* found itself encircled by several highly visible proxies for what 'other people' thought about the film, and thus it would have been difficult to read or hear anything about it without also encountering markers of audiences' dislike, hatred, and concern. Crucially, these markers included the construction of 'figures' of an audience for whom *Cuties* would purportedly appeal to (and who, it is implied, we should all be concerned about):

> I think they're too young for this type of movie, especially to be dressing like that. Just think about all the pedophiles out there! (August 18th 2020, 3:17.42pm)[11]

> Well this movie is targeting pedophiles (August 18th 2020, 3:27.02pm)

> Everyone who watches this film is a pedo and the pedos who films and made this movie should all be jailed. You people are so sick. (August 18th 2020, 3:27.26pm).

The following day, similar commentaries about the film's association with paedophiles began to surface on high-profile accounts on other social media platforms. On Twitter, for example, several patterns of concern emerged: that *Cuties* is guilty of 'literally enticing child predators', or as alt-right personality and *InfoWars* host Mike Cernovich put it, 'paedophile grooming'; that 'it's no shock they [Netflix] are promoting paedophilia' as Democrats 'run @Netflix'; and that this is all because 'Hollywood is full of perverts, pedophiles and sexual predators'.

These comments coalesced into a recognisable backlash against *Cuties* so swiftly that two strands of *counter-discourse* also developed in response. The first of these involved granting the benefit of the doubt to the filmmakers — broadly agreeing with the criticism the poster and trailer were receiving but looking to other paratexts, especially professional reviews and interviews with Doucouré, to suggest the film might more accurately be seen as a victim of poor marketing decisions. As one Reddit user put it,

> The movie is made by a French female of colour who also immigrated to France and did extensive research to understand the real culture of the underage 'cuties' portrayed in this film so hopefully the full film will be more nuanced but yeah … that trailer is a no from me.

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[11] All time stamps are in BST (British Summer Time). The trailer was released at exactly 3:00pm BST on August 18th.

The second strand of counter-discourse came from sceptical social media users across different platforms, who pushed back against the nascent controversy by suggesting that anyone interpreting the poster and trailer as paedophilic must have serious problems themselves. For example, one Twitter user rhetorically asked, 'Are you a pedophile? What thoughts in your head do you form when you see an image like this?? I hope you seek help. There is nothing sexual about this'. This line of argument was also present in several YouTube comments on the first day of the trailer's release, as well as on Reddit, in a thread entitled 'Blatantly paedophilic content of French Netflix'. There, a handful of commenters (albeit a minority) labelled those who identified child pornography in prefigurative materials as paedophiles themselves:

> I didn't see any child pornography … I am legitimately worried that some of you are getting boners from clothed children and it's making me scared.

> the problem is not the video. the problem is that your mind went straight to paedophilia. That is where your mind exists. I just watched a trailer for a bunch of tweens who want to be in a dance group. Your mind is the problem here, not the video. Stop thinking of the actresses in this trailer in a sexual manner and it won't seem like paedophilia. Most people can watch that without thinking sexual thoughts. Clearly you can't.

> it's not pedophilia you're a pedophile for thinking it's pedophilia!

Interestingly, this type of thinking has precedence in academic work. Though not as extreme as the idea that identifying child pornography means that one shares the same orientation, legal scholar Amy Adler argues that 'in order to root out pictures of children that harbor secret paedophilic appeal', one must 'take on the gaze of the paedophile' (2001: 213). To 'study pictures of children to uncover their potential sexual meanings', Adler suggests, means thinking 'as pedophiles do' (Adler, 2001: 256). This is an important argument, not only regarding the way that images of children might be policed and scrutinised by non-paedophiles in the hunt for 'potential sexual meanings', but also indicating that processes of so-called 'sexualisation' are not strictly 'embedded' within texts themselves; that is, texts need 'to be *read as sexual* to become sexualised' (Simpson, 2011: 291, our emphasis).

These YouTube comments, tweets and Reddit threads illustrate that, within just 24 hours of *Cuties* being marketed on Netflix, a coherent terrain of debate had already emerged, broadly organised by users either attacking or defending the film's depiction of young girls. Yet because *Cuties* was not due to be released on Netflix until September 9th, 2020 — still three weeks away at this point — it would be more accurate to say that audiences were not actually responding to *the film itself*. Indeed, how could they be? Instead, the nascent discourses of attack and defence centred on prefigurative materials that were attempting to

promote a 'coming attraction.' Several journalists criticised the prefigurative backlash as one founded in ignorance, such as *Slate*'s Sam Adams, who wrote:

> Considering how few of *Cuties*' attackers have actually seen the film … Those labelling it child pornography seem to have adopted a modified version of Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's adage: They know it when they *don't* see it. (Adams, 2020)[12]

Jonathan Gray's distinction between different *kinds* of prefigurative material, or paratexts, is helpful in this regard. In *Show Sold Separately*, Gray explores the ways that trailers, posters and other forms of promotional hype, 'act as "airlocks" to texts' (2010: 30), providing discursive frames that 'position, define and create meaning for film' before they are viewed (2010: 3). In this sense, 'entryway paratexts' aim 'to control the viewer's *entrance* to the text' (Gray, 2010: 23, our emphasis), shaping 'in advance the conditions under which interpretations of films are formed' (Barker, 2004a). The fact that audiences and, to a lesser extent, journalists were responding to *Cuties'* entryway paratexts demonstrates that interpretative work had already begun well in advance of the film's release on Netflix, lending weight to Gray's argument that prefigurative materials do not 'simply serve as *extensions* of a text', but 'are filters through which we must pass on our way to the film or program', effectively becoming part of 'the text' itself (Gray, 2010: 3). Of course, in the context of a film that had not yet been released, these *responses to entryway paratexts* would then become entryway paratexts themselves. Whatever term scholars choose to employ — paratexts, ancillary materials (Barker, 2004a), epiphenomena (Johnston, 2019), satellite texts (Austin, 2000), and so forth — the central principle remains consistent: that 'by the time we actually encounter "the show itself," we have already begun to decode it and preview its meanings and effects' (Gray, 2010: 3). This should not be taken to mean that audiences are passively in thrall to the paratext; only that prefigurative materials are an intrinsic part of the media environment, and therefore difficult to avoid entirely.

In a production context, paratexts are sales tools that media corporations employ to build awareness and generate positive buzz, or 'network-enhanced word of mouth' (Jurvetson and Draper, 1998). Commonly described as viral marketing today, word-of-mouth (WOM) communication on the Internet has been viewed as 'a far more effective, penetrating and faster medium compared to traditional word of mouth communication', primarily due to the possibility that 'consumers communicate their views in their social sphere (friends, colleagues etc.) where their influence is more critical' (Woerndl et al., 2008: 34). As John

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[12] In relation to an obscenity case in the US Supreme Court (*Jacobellis v. Ohio*), Stewart famously claimed in 1964: 'I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description ["hardcore pornography"], and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But *I know it when I see it*, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that' (see Gewirtz, 1996).

Caldwell explains, audiences were once 'derisibly dismissed as a mob', but in the era of social media, they are 'welcomed by film/ TV corporations in their efforts to harvest productive work from audiences' (2008: 334). For Caldwell, these shifts have spurred corporations 'to go with the flow of the audience, rather than to fight it; to tap into the audience hive as source for production not just consumption' (Ibid). There are, however, risks associated with viral marketing strategies, the largest being that 'organisations have no means of controlling the spread of the message and the content of the transmission' (Woerndl et al., 2008: 34). The Internet, and social media in particular, may indeed have expanded the potential for positive viral marketing to occur through online WOM, but the lack of corporate control also carries the potential for *negative* impact 'through backlash and unfavourable word-of-mouth, and may result in a negative brand image, product or service boycott, unfavourable attributes associated with the organisation and its products and services, hate sites etc.' (Woerndl et al., 2008: 36; also see Helm, 2000: 161).

Evidently, Netflix's marketing of *Cuties* had failed enormously, the trailer and poster having generated a tsunami of toxic publicity for the film. What is interesting is that Netflix found, through consumer research studies conducted in 2014, that 'artwork was not only the biggest influencer to member's decisions to watch content, but it also constituted over 82% of their focus while browsing Netflix', as explained by Nick Nelson on the *Netflix Innovation* blog (2016). 'We were surprised', continues Nelson, 'by how much impact an image had on a member finding great content, and how little time we had to capture their interest' (Ibid). In 2015, Netflix decided to move wholesale towards creating 'personalised artwork' that they believed would work better for engaging subscribers than reproducing officially sanctioned images (Brincker, 2021: 87-92). Rather than use the existing artwork for *Cuties*, then, Netflix 'created its own poster, as it often does for licensed films' (see Figure 2).

In hindsight, Netflix could perhaps have done more to anticipate the backlash, but as Schiffer explains, the company's editorial team, 'responsible for reviewing films prior to release', evaluated *Cuties* and determined that the film 'did not meet the bar for additional oversight' (Schiffer, 2021).[13] There is, of course, no way to assess whether the controversy would have occurred if Netflix went with the original French poster, but the fact remains that condemnation of the *Cuties* poster was almost universal, even among the film's most ardent supporters. Whether or not the paratexts 'failed' to promote the film positively, it is likely that the poster and trailer will have generated *more* publicity for *Cuties* given the sheer *quantity* of talk around the film, especially considering that foreign-language films tend to attract different audiences than mainstream blockbusters.[14] Although these audiences at

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[13] Intriguingly, in France, the film's country of origin, *Cuties* was certified *Tous Publics*, meaning suitable for all audiences, while in the US, it received a TV-MA rating, suitable for mature audiences only.

[14] Whether this heightened publicity translated into more *viewings* on the platform is impossible to ascertain given Netflix's famously guarded and selective attitude towards the sharing of viewing figures.

times overlap and intersect, it seems as though the marketing of *Cuties* shifted the film out of a European art-house context into the dominion of popular culture. The dramatic shift in reception discourse from Sundance premiere to Netflix previews tells us as much and can be explained through the phenomenon of 'context collapse', which, according to Alice Marwick and Danah Boyd, refers to the way that social media platforms 'flatten multiple audiences into one' (2010: 122). For *Cuties*, all the prior markers of its original reception came from the festival circuit and professional critics; it was only when the film was catapulted into a more mainstream space that it became subjected to a broader range of audiences and stakeholders with very different tastes and expectations about film as either an art-form or as popular entertainment (and, as we will see later in the article, very different political views). The outrage over Netflix's marketing campaign thus appears to have contributed to a collapse of contexts where 'people, information, and norms from one context seep into another' (Davis and Jurgenson, 2014: 477).[15]

As we have shown so far, the first pot-shots at *Cuties* came from user-generated content, both through social media comments and through patterned practices of 'disliking' and review bombing. But it only took one day for journalists to join the fray, with articles criticising the film and discussing the backlash appearing from August 19th onwards. The first came from right-wing outlet *The Daily Caller*, a news site founded by ex-*Fox News* anchor Tucker Carlson. Shared on Twitter as part of a post that read, 'This is disgusting! How is this in anyway okay @netflix?', the article highlighted one single user's tweet as an exemplar of the 'consensus' that was swiftly emerging on social media: '[t]he pedophiles at Netflix are releasing a movie sexualising children called *Cuties*' (Olohan, 2020). As we will discuss in more depth below, the accusation that Netflix is a haven for paedophiles would gain traction over the coming days, along with claims that the streaming platform's executives are seeking to 'normalise' paedophilia.

Later that day, an article emerged on pop culture website *Distractify*, arguing that the 'conversation around how ethical the film is, is totally warranted' (Vaynshteyn, 2020). To evidence this emerging 'conversation', the author referred to a Change.org petition that called on Netflix to jettison their release plans, amassing 5,000 signatories in less than 24 hours. The petition's description read:

> This movie/ show is disgusting as it sexualises an ELEVEN year old for the viewing pleasure of pedophiles and also negatively influences our children! There is no need for this kind of content in that age group, especially when sex trafficking and pedophilia are so rampant!

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[15] Davis and Jurgenson (2014) differentiate between 'context collusion' and 'context collision', the former being intentional and the latter occurring accidentally.

The logic and rhetoric of media effects comes through very clearly here, allowing the user to draw a very neat, causal link between 'sexualising' behaviour in the film, paedophilic audiences, and vulnerable children who might be 'negatively influenced' by it.

Remember, none of these commentators, be they social media users or journalists covering the controversy, had actually seen the film. Note, for instance, the uncertainty about whether *Cuties* is a movie or TV series in the quote from the petition.[16] As such, their inferences and moral judgements about what the film *would* be like, the people and organisations who made it, the audiences it would appeal to, what the film would 'do' to those audiences, were based solely on prefigurative materials. 'Pre-viewing' in this way is extremely common, and many paratexts are created with the intention of shaping audience expectations and generating word of mouth well before the advertised text is actually available to the public, as discussed above (Gray, 2010). Unlike the *Crash* controversy, however, *Cuties*' emergent discursive repertoires were not only 'a creature of the press', but creatures of social media too — amplified and formalised by reporters and critics but *originating from audiences themselves*.

Prior to the inception and influx of social media affordances, audiences played a relatively minor role in media controversies. Since the theatrical release of *Crash* in 1996, the discursive, digital affordances provided by the internet have evolved and accelerated considerably, most notably with the shift to Web 2.0 in the early 2000s. As Ulrike Klinger and Jacob Svensson explain, this 'comprises online user participation architecture and encompasses social software that enables many-to-many publication' (2015: 1245). It would not be until the arrival of social media platforms that audience participation took a quantum leap into mainstream spaces, enabling 'immediate, more horizontal and interactive, highly personalised communication generated by laypeople instead of professionals (journalists)' (Klinger and Svensson, 2015: 1246-7). For Klinger and Svensson, social media platforms have irrevocably 'changed the way news and information are produced', introducing new production logics, or 'network media logic', that is based in user-generated activities (amateur production), which is differentiated from traditional mass media logic (professional content production). Rather than mutually exclusive dominions, the relationship between these spheres — between professional/legacy media and amateur/new media logics — are dialectically enmeshed, overlapping forces of interdependence as opposed to distinct processes (Ibid).

The *Cuties* controversy thus demonstrates an interplay between media logics, between what Ramon Lobato and Julian Thomas (2015) define as 'formal' (industrially regulated) and 'informal' (zero/partial regulatory oversight) media economies. As they describe it, this 'tango of mutual influence' (2015: 36) is analogous to a Rubik's Cube, in that 'changes in one area of the media landscape produce realignments in unexpected places' (2015: 20). So, while significant techno-cultural shifts in the twenty-first century have undoubtedly made it easier

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[16] This was a common pattern across criticism of the film, with many, many opponents erroneously using words like 'programme', 'show', 'series' and 'documentary' to describe *Cuties*.

for audiences to share their opinions and user-generated content more widely (and, crucially, more visibly), established journalistic logics have also been transformed. Alfred Hermida argues that social media platforms play a significant role in the 'collaborative co-creation of news through hybrid streams of information that blend fact, opinion, emotion, and experience, circulating outside of the structures of the news industry' (2017: 407). This is particularly true of Twitter, which has become an enormously valuable newsgathering tool for journalists, a wellspring of eyewitness accounts, photos and information relating to breaking news events, and a seemingly endless source of public opinion for topical issues (Hermida, 2017: 409; also see Beckers and Harder, 2016; Ross and Dumitrescu, 2019; McGregor, 2019).

The response to *Cuties*' prefigurative materials was largely embryonic at this juncture, but the controversy accelerated rapidly on August 20th 2020, two days after the trailer and poster had been released. Recognising a public relations disaster in the making, Netflix decided *not* to 'go with the flow of the audience', to borrow Caldwell's words, and instead, issued an apology on Twitter: 'We're deeply sorry for the inappropriate artwork that we used for *Mignonnes*/*Cuties*. It was not OK, nor was it representative of this French film which won an award at Sundance. We've now updated the pictures and description' (Figure 3).

The apology and accompanying revision of the film's synopsis (now describing a 'free-spirited dance crew' rather than a 'twerking' one) were clear attempts by Netflix to manage the nascent controversy and placate audience concerns; a *mea culpa* designed to redirect criticism *away* from the film and its director Maïmouna Doucouré, and *towards itself* for having mishandled the marketing. Effectively, this 38-word apology operated as a new paratext, one that aimed to promote the film anew by ensuring that audiences understood that the trailer and artwork were not representative of the film itself, and by pointing towards *Cuties'* success at the Sundance film festival. Unfortunately for Netflix, the apology had the opposite effect, activating a more structured and coherent discursive repertoire, and shifting the terrain of debate in significant ways. In the hours and days that followed, the controversy spilled beyond the boundaries of social media and approached fever pitch in the US. *Variety*, *Vanity Fair*, *Forbes*, *CBS*, *Fox News*, *People Magazine*, *the New York Post*, *Entertainment*

Figure 3: Netflix's Twitter apology, which prompted widespread media coverage of the *Cuties* controversy. August 20th, 2020.

Weekly, *USA Today*, and many more mainstream media outlets, swiftly published articles and opinion pieces about the controversy, all of whom used the apology as their starting point.

Most of these reports abstained from passing judgement on whether the backlash was justified, choosing instead to repeat and implicitly endorse Netflix's own framing (i.e., that the controversy stemmed from the streamer's botched marketing attempts rather than anything being 'wrong' with the film itself). Within this flurry of activity, however, there was Tucker Carlson for *Fox News*, who, true to form, lashed out with a rhetorical feast of unsupported claims and assumptions. Following a short segment where Carlson lambasts Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion's music video for WAP/ 'Wet Ass Pussy' ('What is this doing to our kids? The people who are pushing this are clearly trying to hurt your kids'),[17] he turns his attention to the Netflix apology, spotlighting the poster as particularly insidious: 'Take a look at the poster', demands Carlson, with unfiltered repugnance. 'What's the first thing you think of? It's sexualising young girls. REALLY young girls! Not sixteen-year-old girls, *eleven*-year-old girls. Some parents are offended by this — you SHOULD be offended by this'. To support his tirade, Carlson interviewed *National Review* film critic, Armond White,[18] who argued that *Cuties* is not a new phenomenon:

> Since Madonna … the media has found a way to influence and ruin young generations. I mean MTV is based on the pernicious indoctrination of young people into sex and alcohol and drugs. This is what our mainstream media, our democratically-based media is based on.

Carlson equates the film with handing out Marlboro cigarettes to children, arguing that anyone who did such a thing would automatically be seen as villains. But *Cuties* is purportedly much worse 'because it corrodes people inside, it helps shape the course of their lives in a really bad direction, and yet we don't even know the names of the people who are pushing this crap. Why don't the rest of us say something?' White responds:

> People think that Hollywood is their friend. It's *not* their friend! One of Trump's great phrases is 'the enemies of the people', and the mainstream media has become enemies of the people. This is why they use sex to lure young people's imaginations and to get them concentrated on self-abasement, self-abuse, and self-exploitation, because MTV tells them and Hollywood tells them this is the route to fame.

'Do you have any idea why they would want to destroy young girls?' asks Carlson, to which White explains that Hollywood lacks creativity and imagination, and resorts to sex and

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[17] For more on the WAP controversy, see Attwood et al., 2021.

[18] Armond White has long been viewed as a 'troll' in the field of film criticism—well-known for his moralising and 'contrarian' reviews, and for being a conservative critic in a largely liberal industry (Ebert, 2009; Jacobson, 2009; Randall, 2012).

violence simply because it 'sells'. This perspective is of course a 'common-sense' argument that is routinely trotted out, 'mantra-like' (Barker, 2004b: 57), by conservative critics; a smorgasbord of conspiratorial nonsense underpinned by the media 'effects' tradition, by the idea that the media, regardless of form, knowingly (intentionally!) transmits dangerous and harmful 'messages' into the minds of its audiences. There are numerous wild imaginative leaps deployed in the *Fox News* broadcast that do not cohere as an argumentative package, not least the way in which a poster for a subtitled French film is collapsed into rhetorical claims about American popular culture, Hollywood and MTV! As we shall see in the next section, the moralising, infantilising position prescribed by Carlson and White is what overwhelmingly shaped the *Cuties* controversy.

The dramatic proliferation of media coverage at this point in time suggests that *it was the apology that served as flashpoint, not the promotional materials themselves*. Although there were certainly indications of the direction of travel within social media comments and commentaries on August 18th and 19th, it was Netflix's apology the following day that rendered the controversy immediately more newsworthy. What had been a predominantly informal, user-generated affair, restricted to social media platforms and a handful of relatively obscure media outlets, was suddenly catapulted into more formal sections of the media economy, gathering momentum and legitimacy in the process. Even while abstaining from moral judgements, most of these formal news sites and publications unwittingly fanned the flames in several ways: first, by reproducing and re-circulating the poster that Netflix apologised for (thus, pushing it further into public visibility); second, by summarising and reiterating the architecture of the fledgling controversy, often by employing the same critical terms (the 'sexualisation' of young girls being the most common); and thirdly, by cherry-picking social media comments to illustrate the kinds of 'talk' circulating around the film ('I cannot support allowing children to be portrayed in a way that is overly sexualised'). The wave of news articles and opinion pieces focused their attention primarily on the apology and the poster.

Due to this upsurge in mainstream media attention, the controversy accelerated enormously from August 20th onwards. It was certainly the involvement of formal news economies that amplified the discourse off the back of the Netflix apology, providing valuable oxygen that saw the controversy rapidly evolve from nascency into mainstream visibility. Consequently, this marked upsurge in professional news content functioned as 'an amplification station' (Binder et al., 2015), resulting in a more structured and more organised terrain of debate characterised mainly by the social 'risks' associated with *Cuties* — risks that the film's purported 'sexualisation' of young girls would have serious implications in the real world. It is precisely these 'risks' that we now turn our attention to.

Regimes of Truth and the 'Sexualisation' of Young Girls

When *Cuties* was finally released on Netflix on September 9th, 2020, several US politicians intensified their attacks on the film by seeking, unsuccessfully, to embroil the streaming company in legal scandal. In each of these cases, 'common-sense' applications of the 'sexualisation' thesis were utilised to shore up a range of provocative and dubious claims about *Cuties*. In their view, the film:

1. 'sexualises' young girls by transmitting dangerous and harmful messages directly into their brains;
2. contaminates their natural, healthy development as sexual beings;
3. is child pornography, and Netflix should therefore be investigated as distributors;
4. contributes to the child sex trafficking trade;
5. 'normalises' paedophilia.

It is our contention that these claims function as synecdoche—a part that represents the whole—in that they collectively, and rather neatly, reflect the ways that *Cuties* was spoken about by its attackers, by the 'discursive repertoires' that structured the controversy. This section of the article begins with a survey of the legal proceedings and accusations that were raised against the film. We then examine the 'sexualisation of children' thesis more deeply, arguing that the *Cuties* controversy has contributed to a particular 'regime of truth', a set of ideas and beliefs that society 'harbours and causes *to function as true*' (Foucault, 1977: 13, our emphasis). We aim to show that the 'figurations' surrounding *Cuties* long preceded the existence of the film itself (in some cases, by several centuries). We therefore need to consider the way the film entered a broader matrix, a relatively 'stable field of value' (Faulkner, 2011: 12) undergirded by the primary motifs of 'sexualisation' discourses, including puritanical ideals of childhood innocence, fears about precocious female sexuality, and the perpetual threat of paedophilia.

Among the most high-profile of detractors in the post-release window was Republican senator, Ted Cruz. Two days after the film's release, Cruz wrote to William P. Barr, Attorney General of the United States, calling for a federal investigation into Netflix and the people directly involved in its production. *Cuties*, wrote Cruz, 'routinely fetishises and sexualises these pre-adolescent girls as they perform dances simulating sexual conduct in revealing clothing, including at least one scene with partial child nudity.[19] These scenes in and of

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[19] While it is unclear exactly what 'partial child nudity' refers to here, the most likely candidate is a scene in which one character—a member of an older, rival dance group—briefly flashes her breast. This actor was widely assumed by opponents of the film to be a minor, despite there being no evidence to support this claim. Netflix has confirmed in formal legal documentation that the actor in question was over the age of eighteen when the scene was filmed (Netflix v. Babin, 2022, points 14, 20, 34-36, 66).

themselves are harmful' (Cruz, 2020). Which 'dance scenes' is Cruz referring to that 'simulate sexual activities'? How might these scenes, 'in and of themselves', be considered 'harmful', and to whom? Cruz did not elaborate, but his concerns were echoed by other Republicans.

When Arkansas senator Tom Cotton (2020) wrote a letter of his own to the Department of Justice, he described *Cuties* as 'child pornography hiding in plain sight', arguing that 'the movie depicts children performing extended, pornographic dance routines'. As with Cruz, there is no detailed elaboration, implying that his description alone of 'extended pornographic dance scenes' is sufficient grounds for the Department of Justice to 'investigate the film to determine whether it can bring charges against Netflix for distributing child pornography' (Ibid). Likewise, Congressmen Ken Buck of Colorado and Andy Biggs of Arizona jointly wrote to the US Attorney General on September 14th to 'urge the Department of Justice (DOJ) to open an investigation to ensure the film and its production uphold federal laws protecting children from exploitation' (Buck, 2020). Perhaps the most absurd claim in Buck and Biggs' letter is their justification for why *Cuties* should, in their view, be defined as child pornography: 'In *Jacobellis v Ohio*, Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart recognised the challenge of establishing a definition of pornography, but as he famously said, "I know it when I see it"'. For Buck and Biggs, this means that *Cuties* 'meets Stewart's definition', and by extension, satisfies the legislative requirements to prosecute Netflix for distributing child pornography! It should go without saying, but 'I know it when I see it' is not a 'definition', by any stretch of the imagination.

Dance performances also appear in Buck and Biggs' letter — 'sexually provocative dances' — as it does in another legal document, written by Jim Banks of Indiana, in which he wrote: 'According to IMDB's parents' guide, *Cuties* contains "a scene where an 11-year-old dressed in a tank and panties is splashed with water and begins twerking in a frenzied kind of way"' (Banks, 2020).[20] Although Cruz, Cotton, Buck and Biggs do not specifically describe the dance performances in *Cuties* as 'twerking', this is likely what they meant by, respectively, 'dances simulating sexual conduct', 'extended pornographic dance scenes', and 'sexually provocative dances', given how frequently the term was employed to condemn *Cuties* in prefigurative discourses (remember, too, that Netflix used the phrase 'twerking dance crew' in their original synopsis of the film, before revising it to 'free-spirited' in their unsuccessful attempt to pacify the backlash).

As a form of erotic dance, twerking has become discursively threaded within 'sexualisation' discourses as a 'bad' object. Originating as a black social dance in New Orleans in the 1990s, although also 'linked to a centuries-old "dance-drum" continuum rooted in African cultures' as Kyra D. Gaunt explains (2015: 245), 'twerking' ascended from the margins and into the white American mainstream following Miley Cyrus' controversial performance at the MTV Video Music Awards (VMAs) in 2013. Cyrus' performance was interpreted by some as a form of cultural appropriation that 'masked the black communal roots of the social dance

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[20] The IMDB Parental Guide was not created by IMDB themselves, but by contributors (à la Wikipedia). This important point was never mentioned by *Cuties*' attackers.

from New Orleans' (Gaunt, 2015: 244), and 'perpetuat[ed] harmful stereotypes about black women' (Zink, 2016: 15). For others, Cyrus' twerking represented the apotheosis of 'sexualisation', evoking 'scrutiny, chastisement and, sometimes, affectively charged expressions of outrage and disgust' that unified

> concerns about the effect of Cyrus' hypersexualised performances on the young girls who have long comprised her main audience. Cyrus' performances dip into a deep well of abiding societal anxiety about possibilities of precocious, premature sexuality among pre-teen girls … that is visibly seen in claims of the harmful effects she may have, from damaging their self-esteem to 'sexualising' them … Problematically, this emphasis on harmful effects in the media always speaks for and on behalf of girls. (Jackson, Goddard and Cossens, 2016: 548)

As President and CEO of Concerned Mothers of America, Penny Young Nance, put it on the *Fox News* website, Cyrus' VMAs performance 'was absolutely classless and self-degrading', directly instructing 'our young women that they are nothing more than walking private parts' (Nance, 2015). Within 'sexualisation' discourses, Cyrus has been continually positioned as 'an abject subject', buttressed by 'pejorative evaluations [that] inhabit her widespread positioning in public and media discourses as a "bad role model" who is a contaminating influence on girls' (Jackson, Goddard and Cossens, 2016: 549–550).

According to *Cuties'* attackers, representations of erotically-charged choreography and twerking 'sexualise' the tweenage actors — first within the diegetic frame, but then threatening to spill over into the real world when similarly aged girls imitate what they see on screen (and thus become 'sexualised' themselves). This subsequently has devastating consequences. 'It's visual fodder for paedophiles', complained Banks (2020), while Cruz (2020) stated, 'it is likely that the filming of this movie created even more explicit and abusive scenes, and that paedophiles across the world in the future will manipulate and imitate this film in abusive ways'. Singing from the same hymn sheet, Buck and Biggs proclaim that *Cuties*

> creates an environment where the sexual abuse and exploitation of children by paedophiles is normalised … It is fair to say that the provocative dances portrayed throughout *Cuties* is an affront to the children's dignity and stimulates the child sex trafficking trade […] The sexualisation and gross objectification of these girls on screen creates an environment that is ripe for individuals to take advantage of these innocent children (Buck, 2020).

Is it really 'fair' to make those claims? How will paedophiles — 'across the world' no less — 'manipulate and imitate this film in abusive ways'? Does that statement not suggest that paedophiles, in imitating *Cuties*, might be encouraged to twerk themselves? How might paedophiles 'manipulate' the film 'in abusive ways'? By re-editing it? By screening it to young

girls? By what logic might cinematic portrayals of twerking stimulate the child trafficking trade? What does one thing have to do with the other? And how might we follow this line of thinking through in order to make sense of it?

It is astonishing that the supposed links between 'sexualisation' and child sex trafficking appear so regularly across this 'regime of truth'. Danielle Egan and Gail Hawkes explain that 'sexualisation' has been blamed for 'propagat[ing] the sexual abuse of up to 15-25% of women and children', and for 'promot[ing] child sex trafficking, child prostitution, and the international sex trafficking of children and youth' (2008a: 296-297). As written on the *Focus for Health Foundation* website, in an article titled 'Child Sex Trafficking and the Hyper-Sexualisation of Our Youth' (2020), sex traffickers

> know that if children are dressed as provocative sexual objects, it is easier to assume they are willing participants. Most men who purchase sex from minors do not consider themselves rapists. But the idea of a precocious seducing Lolita is such an archetype burned into our collective culture that it becomes easy for some adults to justify their actions.

With the *Cuties* controversy, then, the line of argument went something like this: *Cuties* 'sexualises' the young female actors in the film, negatively impacting tweenagers in the real world who might watch the film and imitate what they see. In 'copy-catting' the film's dance performances — those 'extended pornographic dance routines' — the afflicted tweens, 'corrupted by the imprint of sexualising media' (Egan, 2013: 28), will then twerk themselves out of their innocent cocoons and precociously develop into unhealthy sex objects. In doing so, the film is seen to be ineluctably triggering 'a change whereby once-innocent girls become self-involved, sexually salacious, cognitively delayed, and depressed' (Egan, 2013: 29). Consequently, the now-sexualised tween becomes an object of desire for older men and, more concernedly, paedophiles. Having thus been 'trained by popular western culture, girls learn to present a hypersexualised, prostitution-like version of themselves to the world' (Farley, 2009: 254). Their transformation from innocent child to damaged sexual object is now complete, a pathological outcome of media contamination and corruption (Egan and Hawkes, 2013: 640). Having been corrupted, and hence pathologised, female tweens inadvertently become human billboards advertising their availability to child sex traffickers 'across the world' (Cruz, 2020). In this framing, the sexualised tween, or 'girl-child', functions symbolically as 'the antithesis of dominant constructions of girlhood innocence — seduced by the media, she has become seductive and transgressive' (Egan and Hawkes, 2008a: 305).

What is wrong, particularly, with this picture? Plenty of things, to be sure, but most notably, it is built entirely on supposition, conjecture, and hypothesis, rather than being grounded in empirical evidence. In media 'effects' arguments of this type, an array of social problems tends to be grouped together beneath an umbrella category, such as 'violence' or 'sexualisation'. In these cases, arguments rely mainly on 'hyperbole and emotional talk' (Barker, 2001: 44), on unsubstantiated claims, rhetorical manoeuvres and 'inferential

causality' (Egan and Hawkes, 2008a: 296). A lot of this has to do with the *kind* of research that is consistently summoned to shore up these claims. As Susanna Paasonen et al. explain,

> psychology (along with economics) is one of the most commonly cited academic disciplines in public debate. It is rare for journalists or politicians to quote what a literary theorist has written; it is common for psychologists to be cited. This is partly because while some humanities disciplines always seek out more complexity, social psychology seeks reliable, measurable effects and simple causality, often presenting its findings using language and with a certainty that assures it a significant presence in public debates — it is an "ology", claiming status for itself as a science. When asked about the effects of pornography, a media studies theorist might say "It's not that simple", while a social psychologist might well say "It's very simple" […] And it is also true that psychology fits well into wider public debates because it tends to align with broader, common sense public discourses rather than (as is the case in some other academic disciplines) challenge them. (Paasonen et al., 2021: 74-75)[21]

Crucially, social psychology research often confuses *causation* with *correlation*, the first being related to direct 'effects' whereas the latter refers to 'two factors that happen at the same time and may be related but which do not demonstrate an effect' (Paasonen et al., 2021: 78). This is what ordinarily underpins the effects tradition in general, and the 'sexualisation' thesis in particular. Consider the following excerpt from M. Gigi Durham's book, *The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexualisation of Young Girls and What We Can Do About It* (2008):

> In today's media-saturated environment, children are bombarded with images and messages about sex and sexuality at very early ages. Unfortunately, there's lots of evidence that the messages they're getting about sex are harmful rather than helpful. Because children are engaging in sexual activity at earlier ages, rates of teen pregnancy are rising in the United States and elsewhere, and the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases among teenagers is extremely high. And child sexual abuse is too common — the World Health Organisation estimates that 25 percent of all girls and 8 percent of boys have been subjected to some form of sexual abuse; in the United

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[21] By chance, Proctor was reading a book by Tim Clare about anxiety disorders, wherein the author expresses concern about methodological challenges in psychology, especially in US-type behavioural studies: 'Psychology's most common sampling method is known by the appropriate acronym SUCS: the Standard University Convenience Sample. That's when researchers recruit students on campus for their experiments—a cheap, convenient source of participants, but not representative of the world at large' (Clare, 2022: 380).

States, an estimated 20 percent of boys and 25 percent of girls have been sexually molested. (Durham, 2008: 7-8)

Clearly, Durham is enormously concerned about the impact that 'images and messages' have on the sexual development of young girls. Her concern is surely well intentioned, but given the weight of her claims — that 'there's lots of evidence that the messages they're getting about sex are harmful rather than helpful' — one would expect this evidence to be a central focus. Not so. Instead, Durham relies largely on rhetoric, imaginatively ricocheting from precocious sexual activity to teen pregnancy to sexually transmitted diseases to sexual abuse. The book is not founded on empirical evidence, but *rhetoric and correlation presented as evidence*. It is an assembly of assumptions that carelessly mixes together a whole package of social anxieties that, as quoted earlier regarding *Crash*, 'do not obviously belong in the same register' (Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath, 2001: 7). Tellingly, Durham appears to back-track later in the book by admitting that 'make-believe worlds of media and marketing … may not cause it [sexualisation], but it makes it acceptable — even fun and trendy' (Durham, 2008: 204). By manoeuvring from 'lots of evidence' and claiming to have unambiguously discovered direct 'effects' to a less causal relationship should mean that Durham is on shaky ground, but her book (along with other popular books of the same ilk) has received widespread feminist support.

That being said, we do not mean to imply that feminism is underscored by unity and consensus. Indeed, there have been many feminist critiques of the 'sexualisation' thesis in recent years (see for example Atwood et al., 2021; Barker and Duschinsky, 2012; Bragg, 2012; Clark, 2014; Egan, 2013; Egan and Hawkes, 2008a; Faulkner, 2010; Hawkes and Dune, 2013; Lerum and Dworkin, 2009; Renold and Ringrose, 2013; Ringrose et al., 2012; Smith, 2010; Smith and Atwood, 2011). This reminds us that 'feminism' is not 'a monolithic body of research, writing and activity' (Storey, 2012: 137), but a multifaced political project riven with fault-lines and schisms. Rather than the singular, 'one should really speak of *feminisms*' (Ibid, emphasis in original).

The surge in 'sexualisation' debates and discourses in the twenty-first century, of which the *Cuties* controversy is illustrative, has been evinced by 'an explosion of writing in this area' (Smith and Atwood, 2011: 327), not only with popular books like Durham's, but also with a series of official policy documents and reviews in the UK (Bailey, 2011; Papadopoulos, 2010), the US (APA Report, 2007), and Australia (Rush and La Nauze, 2006). Woven through these documents is a particular strand of common-sense thinking about these issues, presenting 'a highly conservative and negative view of sex in which only monogamous, coupled heterosexual sexuality is regarded as normal' (Smith and Atwood, 2011: 327). In constructing a specific 'regime of truth' around the issue of 'sexualisation', the authors ignore 'a rich and well-established body of theoretical and empirical work on the relationship between sex and media, culture and technology' (Smith and Atwood, 2011: 328). The meaning of the word 'sexualisation' is employed in a range of ways, most of them vague, axiomatic, and contradictory, and there is no recognition that the concept actually emerged

from sociological research in the 1970s. In fact, the term was originally used as a portmanteau of 'sexual socialisation', a neutral term 'understood as a necessary part of healthy human development' (Paasonen et al., 2021: 93; see also Duschinsky, 2013b: 353-354).

'Sexualisation' has obviously shifted from its original meaning in significant ways, being employed most often as a synonym for 'objectification' (Paasonen et al., 2021: 93). Within this context, 'sexualisation', as interchangeable with objectification, means that *all* media representations of sex and sexuality *per se* would automatically be viewed as 'sexualising' *and* 'objectifying'. No space is left for sexuality to be discussed in anything but negative terms, which inevitably means the promotion of 'views that are often hostile to girls and women' (Paasonen et al., 2021: 97). Yet, as Paasonen et al. are keen to stress, '[a]cting sexy does not therefore automatically make someone an object', and 'sex is not the same thing as sexism, even under patriarchy' (2021: 99). From this perspective, the 'sexualisation' thesis typically 'vilifies sexuality as opposed to sexism' (Egan and Hawkes, 2008b: 319).

Across 'sexualisation' discourses, then, young girls especially 'are assumed to be blank slates, innocent and pure, with no sexuality of their own, until the media injects sexual ideas into them. This is, again, a particular frame — and not a very convincing one' (Paasonen et al., 2021: 99). With these factors in mind, one might wonder about adolescent boys given that 'sexualisation' is often deemed to be 'a girl's problem'. On this point, it is worth considering Gene Stupnitsky's *Good Boys* (2019), a film sharing several prominent similarities with *Cuties* but, as the title implies, is based around eleven-year-old boys instead of girls (Figure 4).

Good Boys is a comedy film about three boys preparing to attend their first 'kissing party', with most of the humour coming from their encounters with, and complete misunderstanding of, anything to do with sex. Along the way, they play with a sex doll, a sex swing, anal beads, and S&M clothing. They also attempt to spy on teenage girls using a drone and purchase ecstasy from a college drug dealer. Though there were a handful of fleeting comments on social media that criticised the film for placing child actors in adult situations,

Figure 4: *The Good Boys* (Gene Stupnitsky, 2019), armed with dildo, anal beads, and a 'gimp' mask.

none of these succeeded in gaining any traction, and the paucity of word-of-mouth condemnation meant there was little in the way of corresponding journalistic coverage, except for one article by Michael Cook (2019a) that promotes similar patterns and motifs as the *Cuties* controversy. 'This is grooming', wrote Cook, '[a]nd it's baked into the film. The very premise of the comedy is the contrast between adult depravity and children's innocence. Beneath the slapstick, *Good Boys* is child pornography for beginners' (Ibid; see also Cook, 2019b).

When someone attempted to start a Change.org petition asking to 'Stop the release' of *Good Boys* and 'Tell Hollywood this is NOT ok for our kids', it received a meagre 31 signatures, compared with an anti-*Cuties* petition receiving over 600,000, two more receiving over 200,000, and another seven receiving 10,000+. Furthermore, when Reddit users discussing its impending release expressed their discomfort at *Good Boys*' trailer ('I'm not a Puritan but the over sexualisation of young children is definitely a bad thing'; 'What's the demographic for this? Men who like to watch boys?'), other users 'downvoted' them heavily. Per the affordances of the platform, this designated their views 'unpopular', relegating their comments to the very bottom of the thread, and automatically contracting them so that they were all but invisible to other users. We are not claiming that the relative absence of a backlash against *Good Boys* was *entirely* due to the fact that the film is about adolescent boys, but it is certainly plausible that this is *one* of the reasons, especially given that 'sexualisation' discourses almost invariably pivot on figures of the 'girl-child'. This, in turn, begs a number of important questions. As Egan and Hawkes ask:

> [D]oes sexualisation only pierce the consciousness of girl children? Is sexual expression or curiosity problematic only when it is found in girls? Does such a lack of elaboration unwittingly grant boy children the patriarchal assumption that male desire is natural, inevitable and thereby acceptable? In contrast, are girls passive, endangered and overly susceptible to the influence of corrupt images and desires? (Egan and Hawkes, 2008b: 309)

While female sexuality has been something to be feared historically, *adolescent* female sexuality tends to spark even more condemnation, perhaps emphasising that 'sexualisation' debates rely mostly on old arguments dressed up in the Empress' new clothes. As William Proctor argues in reference to One Direction fans who write steamy fan fiction, 'such fantasies should certainly be *verboten* for teenage girls who require protection from the onset of potent, sexual awakenings which need to be curbed' (2016: 74). Accounts of the crazed, lunatic fan-girl in popular culture — members of 'the hysterical crowd', as Joli Jensen (1992) terms them — reached an acme in the 1960s as young girls flocked to catch a glimpse of The Beatles (Figure 5). As Barbara Ehrenreich et al. described Beatlemania: 'Shy subdued girls could go berserk. "Perky" ponytailed girls … could dissolve in histrionics … Girls peed in their pants, fainted or collapsed from the emotional strain' (Ehrenreich, Hess and Jacobs, 1992: 87-89). At least in part, this energy was sexual, 'an assertive, powerful sexuality' that was in many

Figure 5: Beatlemania in the 1960s: 'Shy subdued girls could go berserk. "Perky" ponytailed girls …
could dissolve in histrionics … Girls peed in their pants, fainted or collapsed from the emotional
strain' (Ehrenreich et al., 1992: 87-89).

ways an act of rebellion. As girls were expected to be 'good' and 'pure', as Proctor explains
(2016: 74), 'most Americans did not like to believe that twelve-year old girls had any sexual
feelings to repress', nor possess the 'libidinal voltage required for three hours of screaming,
sobbing, incontinent, acute-phase Beatlemania' (Ehrenreich, Hess and Jacobs, 1992: 90). This
kind of unbridled sexual energy, coming as it does from tweens and teens, has historically
been 'coded as unruly, promiscuous, and unacceptable' (Proctor, 2016: 74).[22] In a sense, then,
the 'sexualisation' discourses that circulated around *Cuties* (and more generally) have
'buttressed a narrative in which the sexuality and desires of young women are rendered
pathological and morally unacceptable as judged by conservative standards of public decency
and innocent subjectivity' (Duschinsky, 2013b: 356).

What should be clear is that historic and contemporary understandings of the
supposed 'effects' of media 'messages' are enormously dogmatic, fundamentally rhetorical,
and empirically meritless. Yet, as we have already seen with *Cuties,* they are repeatedly
embraced not only by politicians and journalists, but also by academics and 'ordinary' people.
What is it about this narrative that continues to hold sway in the cultural imaginary? Or, as R.
Danielle Egan asks in *Becoming Sexual: A Critical Appraisal of the Sexualisation of Girls*:

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[22] In the 2000s, similar moral judgements were imposed on young (and in some cases older) female
fans of *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, for example (Harman and Jones, 2013; Jancovich, 2014;
Gerrard, 2022).

> Why are such hyperbolic claims so culturally palatable? Why do these ideas
> get reproduced with so much ease? If our relations with girls reveal what
> ample data also back up — that, simply put, girls are complicated and diverse
> beings — then why is our culture so drawn to a vision of girls gone wrong?
> (2013: 6)

Not only do traditional 'effects' arguments construct 'figures of the audience', they also construct a very specific figure of the 'child', a figure that is invariably positioned as 'innocent, vulnerable, corruptible' (Barker and Petley, 2001: 11). This idealised 'child' is without doubt a potent figure; so potent in fact that it is truly difficult to marshal counter-arguments without being accused of child endangerment or, in the case of 'sexualisation' proponents, leaving 'critical analysis vulnerable to attack as an apology for paedophiles' (Hawkes and Dune, 2013: 628). This is even more plausible in the social media age, where tweets are cherry-picked by journalists in their search for newsworthy stories (Hermida, 2017; McGregor, 2019), and where conversations can quickly become polarised and adversarial (de Rosa et al., 2021). This has less to do with the 'effects' model being secure (it really is not!) and more to do with the *moral* weight of the argument that situates the figure of the child front-and-centre. Indeed, within *Cuties'* legal discourses, the figure of the 'child' — or more accurately in this case, '*girl*-child' — established the moral centre of the controversy. As Tom Cotton concludes in his letter to the US Attorney General:

> We all have a duty to protect the children under our care. When adults fail in
> that duty, young lives are harmed, predators are emboldened, and society
> itself is coarsened as a consequence. No "art" or "social commentary" can
> justify such a moral outrage. (Cotton, 2020)

This kind of emotional, rhetorical script is indeed very powerful. After all, who among us would want to see children harmed and hurt? Anneke Meyer argues that the figure of 'the child' is shorthand 'for sacralisation and moral status; its meaning no longer has to be made explicit'. The figure is 'so powerful that in fact any opinion can be justified by simply referring to children, and without having to explain *why* and *how* children justify it' (Meyer, 2007: 60, emphasis in original). This figuration of childhood innocence 'makes this discourse deeply seductive and its rhetoric self-evidently true', as Egan explains, ensuring that its 'omnipresence and the consequences involved make critique almost impossible and often politically suspect — after all, who can be for the sexualisation of young girls?' (Egan, 2013: 19).

One of the main problems of the 'sexualisation' thesis, however, is the way in which this figure of the 'girl-child' is repeatedly invoked, collapsing child, youth, adolescence, and young adulthood into an infantilising unity. For all the moralising and emotional rhetoric that fortify social concerns about children, 'sexualisation' discourses end up circling back upon themselves by objectifying young girls 'as passive social objects', universally essentialising

them as 'lacking the rationality and reasoning to make social or moral decisions', as Jessica Clark argues convincingly (2014: 179). For example, in a *Fox & Friends* interview four days after *Cuties*' Netflix debut, congressman Jim Banks claimed:

> As a father of three little girls — 11, 9 and 7 — I can tell you, like so many other parents, it's very hard to police what our kids watch today. I mean, kids don't watch TV like you and I watch TV. Well, they stream it. They stream it on devices, and it's very difficult to prevent them from watching terrible movies like this Cuties movie. […] It's despicable. We've gone from our culture being sexualised to sexualising children. That's what's disgusting about this and why so many Americans are outraged by this movie being so readily available to our kids (Manfredi, 2020, our emphasis).

This figure of the 'girl-child' is thus an empty vessel — swaddled in innocence, robbed of agency, fundamentally different to 'you and I', and stripped of sexuality altogether. Jim Banks does not even seem to trust his daughters to watch television, lest they stumble across some corrupting influence. For the 'sexualisation' thesis to be operationalised effectively, young girls need to be constructed through 'generalisations and universalisms' (Renold and Ringrose, 2013: 251) as an undifferentiated mass, as pure, innocent, and incontestably *asexual*. From this perspective, 'sexualisation' relies upon, and reproduces, 'a particular vision of the sexual child that forecloses the recognition of children as sexual subjects and the possibility of their sexual agency' (Egan and Hawkes, 2009: 391). Within this regime of truth, 'once the sexual consciousness of the child is spurred into expression it is constructed as dangerous and pathological and thus in need of outside [adult] intervention' (Egan and Hawkes, 2009: 392). 'Sexualisation' proponents therefore see 'all children [as] inherently asexual and in need of protection in order to preserve the sanctity of childhood' (Egan and Hawkes, 2013: 641).

To fully understand the ways that the *Cuties* controversy was largely driven by core tenets of the 'sexualisation' thesis, with the figure of both the girl-child and the 'paedophile' standing at its heart, it is necessary to tease out the historic contexts and contingencies that continue to augment contemporary discourses and debates on the topic. The next section offers several insights that hopefully illustrate the way in which 'sexualisation' frameworks draw upon a historic wellspring of ideologies from across the political spectrum.

The Empress' New Clothes: Archaeologies of 'Sexualisation'

The conceptualisation of childhood that informs 'sexualisation' debates and discourses — and by extension, the *Cuties* controversy — is not a natural or biologically innate characteristic, but a romantic, idealised construction that has a lengthy history in the Anglophone West. Egan and Hawkes (2007) argue that the epistemological assumptions that guide and underpin

the sexualisation thesis parallel the anxieties that guided the social purity movement in the mid-eighteenth century. Amidst a frenzy of concerns regarding childhood autoeroticism (masturbation), a shift in child-rearing practices became a central platform of purity reformers 'in order to curb sexual vice and moral turpitude' (2007: 447). Concomitant discourses emerged during the period that fed into the 'sentimentalisation of childhood', within which the child was crafted as '"special" and in need of increased affection and attention from parents, the government and social welfare associations' (2007: 445). Here, we have *two* figurations of the child set against one another: the angelic child — natural, innocent, vulnerable and nonsexual — and its demonic Other — the unnatural, obscene, and autoerotic sexual child. Rather than banish this devilish offspring to the hell from whence they came, the sexual child was necessarily invoked to validate social purity narratives, 'because it was the category against which innocence was defined and made possible' (Egan and Hawkes, 2007: 443). In this way, the construction of the nonsexual child and its eroticised Other 'was largely a figment of middle-class anxiety and defence' (Egan and Hawkes, 2013: 635), functioning as a subtext to 'inoculate the bourgeois child against the contamination of urban street life', and against the threat posed by the 'impure' working classes (Egan and Hawkes, 2013: 643). In other words, the figuration of the 'pure' child cannot exist without its direct opposite.

Alongside class ideologies, this figure of 'the child' became imbued with racial characteristics, in that s/he was coded explicitly as white. As Mary Niall Mitchell writes in *Raising Freedom's Child: Black Children and Visions of the Future After Slavery*,

> images of innocent white children in the nineteenth century developed largely in relation to their imagined opposite. Popular images of black children in the same period often rendered them not as virtuous ideals of feminine beauty but rather as tricksters of untamed and immoral stripe. Representations of black and white children in popular culture, like the real lives of children themselves, therefore, were shaped by notions of prejudice and privilege, one condition dependent upon the other … Even when black children were depicted as good but unfortunate (rather than "devilish" or "stupid"), the tragic stories of their lives still served to shore up an idealised white childhood. (Mitchell, 2008: 68-69)

This (re-)conceptualisation of childhood in the nineteenth century thus served multiple social and ideological purposes, with 'middle-class preoccupations, fantasies and anxieties surrounding race and class difference [becoming] a foundational fantasy structuring the social purity movement and its discourse of protection' (Egan and Hawkes, 2013: 645). These same (classed and raced) characteristics or 'foundational fantasies' still underpin the figure of 'the child' today. Erin J. Rand argues that 'the symbolic values of childhood are not equally available to all children, and the figuration of sexual innocence adheres only to particular kinds of privileged bodies: white, middle-class, and (incipiently) heterosexual' (2019: 257). For

Rand, white supremacy is a key driver in more contemporary figurations of childhood, witnessed 'in the hastiness with which youth of colour, such as Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, or Antwon Rose, are not only denied the assumption of childhood innocence but are themselves perceived to pose a threat' (Rand, 2019: 270). Children 'as an *idea*' are therefore more likely to be white and middle-class (Stockton, 2009: 31, emphasis in original). This line of thinking can be read in reactionary criticisms pertaining to the desegregation of schools in the 1950s, an early example of 'culture wars' in the US which were also hinged on race, childhood, and sexuality (Jeffries, 2022: 7). White southerners in particular espoused racist 'concerns that their white daughters would be sexually corrupted through interacting with Black male children, and vocal anti-desegregationists were not the only ones to express this view' (Jeffries, 2022: 8).

Also in the twentieth century, the topic of childhood sexuality re-emerged, not as an aberrant diagnosis, but as 'a normal and natural expression of the infant and child, the suppression of which creates both individual and social problems' (Fishman, 1982: 270). This radical *volte face*, informed as it was by the influential theories of Sigmund Freud on infantile sexuality, grew in prominence as evidenced by a panoply of discourses — sociological, psychological, anthropological, criminological, legal — that began to acknowledge child sexuality as 'a normal and natural reality' (Angelides, 2004: 141). This is not to suggest that figures of the nonsexual child had disappeared, however, as there were multiple competing discourses and constructions of childhood running parallel and vying for hegemony (which clearly demonstrates that childhood sexuality, and childhood itself, is neither fixed nor immutable but produced by discourse).

According to queer scholar Steven Angelides, the concept of the healthy sexual child came under direct attack once more in the 1970s as the child protection lobby and feminist activists collaboratively sought to tackle the issue of child sexual abuse. There were of course significant, necessary gains to this project, but at the same time, there were also 'equally significant losses' (Angelides, 2004: 142). As Angelides explains, the discourse of child sexual abuse

> expanded at the expense of a discourse of child sexuality. Rigorous attempts to expose the reality and dynamics of child sexual abuse have been aided, if not in part made possible, by equally rigorous attempts to conceal, repress, or ignore the reality and dynamics of child sexuality … [F]igured only as an oxymoron in the feminist discourse of child sexual abuse, its erasure ensures that the categories of "child" and "adult" are kept distinct and at a safe epistemological distance. (Ibid)

For Angelides, the elimination of child sexuality by 'the hegemonic feminist discourse of child sexual abuse' (2004: 155) came with a cost; that 'the resulting neglect, if not utter disregard for, child sexuality may be as damaging to a child's social and psychological wellbeing as the discounting of the reality of sexual abuse' (2004: 157). Within this framing, 'all childhood

sexual acts are inherently traumatic', misrepresenting and simplifying child sexuality with the message that 'sexual behaviour, for them, is dangerous and wrong' and, essentially, pathological (2004: 162). By positioning childhood sexuality and sexual desire as categorically unnatural and abnormal, child sex abuse discourses unwittingly engaged the 'foundational fantasies' of the nineteenth century nonsexual child.

Intersecting with 'the hegemonic feminist discourse of child sexual abuse' came the so-called 'sex wars' of the 1980s (Figure 6), a decade that saw the ascendancy of the New Right following the election of Ronald Reagan to the White House.[23] Underscored by the ideological tenets of neoliberalism, the New Right surged in popularity, with the topic of girlhood sexualities becoming one of the key battlegrounds. In *Teenage Dreams: Girlhood Sexualities in the U.S Culture Wars*, Charlie Jeffries charts the ways in which adolescent female bodies were ensnared by several factors during the period, the most significant being the teenage pregnancy 'epidemic' (Jeffries, 2022). Here, the New Right engineered an aggressive, conservative backlash to the sexual revolution of the 1960s which, for them, could be blamed squarely on a perceived uptick in sexual promiscuity and pregnancy among

Figure 6: Anti-pornography protests during the so-called 'Sex Wars'.

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[23] The 1980s was a febrile decade of moral panic and censorship campaigns in the US and the UK: Tipper Gore and the PMRC's attack on popular music ('the filthy fifteen'); the so-called 'video nasties'; George Michael's 'I Want Your Sex' song and accompanying video; N.W.A's *Straight Outta Compton* (1988); the 2Live Crew's *As Nasty as They Wanna Be* (1988); heavy metal music; role-playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons*; video games; and so forth.

young girls. Writing for the feminist magazine *Ms.* in 1987, Ellen Willis argued that the 1960s sexual revolution 'destroyed the norm for (heterosexual) adults' (in Jeffries, 2022: 15). 'Clearly', continued Willis, 'traditionists' frustration and resentment at having lost this battle are being displaced with special vehemence onto teenagers' (Ibid).

Yet, as Jeffries points out, concerns about girlhood sexuality were not drawn unambiguously across partisan lines — Democrats, liberals and feminists also sounded alarm bells, leading to contradictory alliances that carved significant faultlines across the political spectrum. For example, radical feminists Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin collaborated with the New Right's anti-obscenity movement to figure out how to regulate (or better still, censor) what they saw as a rising tide of pornographic material. Robbie Duschinsky argues that more recent debates about 'sexualisation', in their positioning of girls' bodies endangered by an onslaught of media 'messages', have 'had the unintended consequence of generating a replay of the "sex wars"' that occurred in the 1980s, and that the terrain of debate 'has also facilitated coalitions between feminists and conservatives' (Duschinsky, 2013a: 1; West, 1987). Paasonen et al. explain it thusly:

> These strategic alliances between feminist activism and moral conservative political agendas involve drastically different, in fact incompatible, political stakes concerning gender equality and women's rights, yet similar goals when it comes to explicit media representations of sex. In the course of such alliances, heteronormative and sexist views on gendered agency and sexual depiction, paradoxically, find support in feminist activism dedicated to fight precisely such agendas and views. (2021: 52)

The point here is that the *Cuties* controversy may have been driven predominantly by conservative politicians and journalists in the US, but this should not be taken to mean that 'sexualisation' discourses are inherently right-wing.

As the topic of girlhood sexualities became a key component of these 'sex wars', curtailing access to 'sexual speech' became a core strategy of the New Right. Broad in range, the concept of 'sexual speech' included pornography, children's literature, and sex education, but 'extended to all forms of sexual information and imagery' that children might gain access to (Paasonen et al., 2021: 32). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the term 'exposure' was often used, such as conservative doctor Melvin Anchell's belief that children can be 'seduced' by 'overexposure to sexual activities, including sex courses in the classroom' (in Jeffries, 2022: 37). This line of thinking suggests that providing proper sex education in schools would inevitably lead to precocious, promiscuous activity among young girls, and as such, *limiting* access to sexual knowledge was thought to be an ideal strategy for tackling the perceived spike in teenage pregnancy rates. This position also dominated campaigns that sought to ban Judy Blume novels from schools and libraries because of their frank depiction of adolescent sexuality in titles like *Blubber* (1974), *Deenie* (1973), and *Then Again, Maybe I Won't* (1971). For many conservatives and antipornography feminists at the time, 'sexual speech' had

become conflated with 'sexual harm', thus foreshadowing the 'sexualisation' discourses of the twenty-first century. Indeed, the 'figure' of the 'girl-child' that structures the 'sexualisation' thesis re-appeared in the 1980s, 'due to popular and deep-seated notions of childhood sexual innocence' that, as we show above, have long histories (Jeffries, 2022: 21). Like the social purity discourses of the eighteenth century, this idealised vision of girlhood was constructed along racial and classed lines by both conservatives and liberals:

> Evidence of these beliefs was not, however, found solely in the rhetoric of the New Right. Often, when white liberal adults spoke of protecting young women from sexual harm during this period, the imagined young woman was also often white, middle-class, straight, and sexually "pure" … Conservative frameworks of innocence were, and are, highly racialised, meaning that the vulnerable "universal" girlhoods evoked in antipornography arguments and policy would symbolise explicitly white girlhoods to social conservatives. (Jeffries, 2022: 5, 45)

The publication of the Attorney General's Commission Report on Pornography in 1986 — nicknamed 'the Meese Report' after Reagan's Attorney General, Edwin Meese — included more concerns over the potency of 'sexual speech' and the likely impact on adolescent female sexuality. Although the 900-page report was mainly focused on the 'effects' of pornography, it is telling that the document also recommended looking at non-pornographic materials to 'seriously consider how we can effectively discourage proliferation of these destructive messages which reach out to children on television, in theaters and even by way of toys and comic books' (in Jeffries, 2022: 46). The concept of 'sexual speech', which in and for itself was deemed harmful and abusive, was thus extended to include any and all media forms beneath its rhetorical umbrella. It should be evident that these ingredients form the broth that cooked the 'sexualisation' recipe from the early noughties onwards.

As the word 'epidemic' became entrenched within the political and rhetorical landscape in the 1980s, American society appeared to be 'menaced on all sides by conspiracies and dire threats' (Beck, 2015: 15-16). Encapsulated within fears of pornography, sex education in schools, the AIDS crisis, the rising 'epidemic' of teenage pregnancy, and the way in which young white girls were constructed, at the expense of racial minorities, as the epitome of innocence and risk, discourses of child sex abuse and 'stranger danger' were mobilised with growing frequency and alarm (Figure 7). In 1984, for instance, at a hearing of the Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Senator Arlen Specter claimed that 'the molestation of children has now reached epidemic proportions' (Ibid). Bolstered by an almost hysterical news media and enflamed by political discourse in the US, there was a heightened feeling that child abductions by strangers were growing in frequency. In this element of discourse, 'the disappearance of young people was (incorrectly) assumed to be related to a dramatic rise in sexual exploitation, murder, and victimisation, yet media reports tended to overstate the scope of the problem' (Wodda, 2013: 2-3).
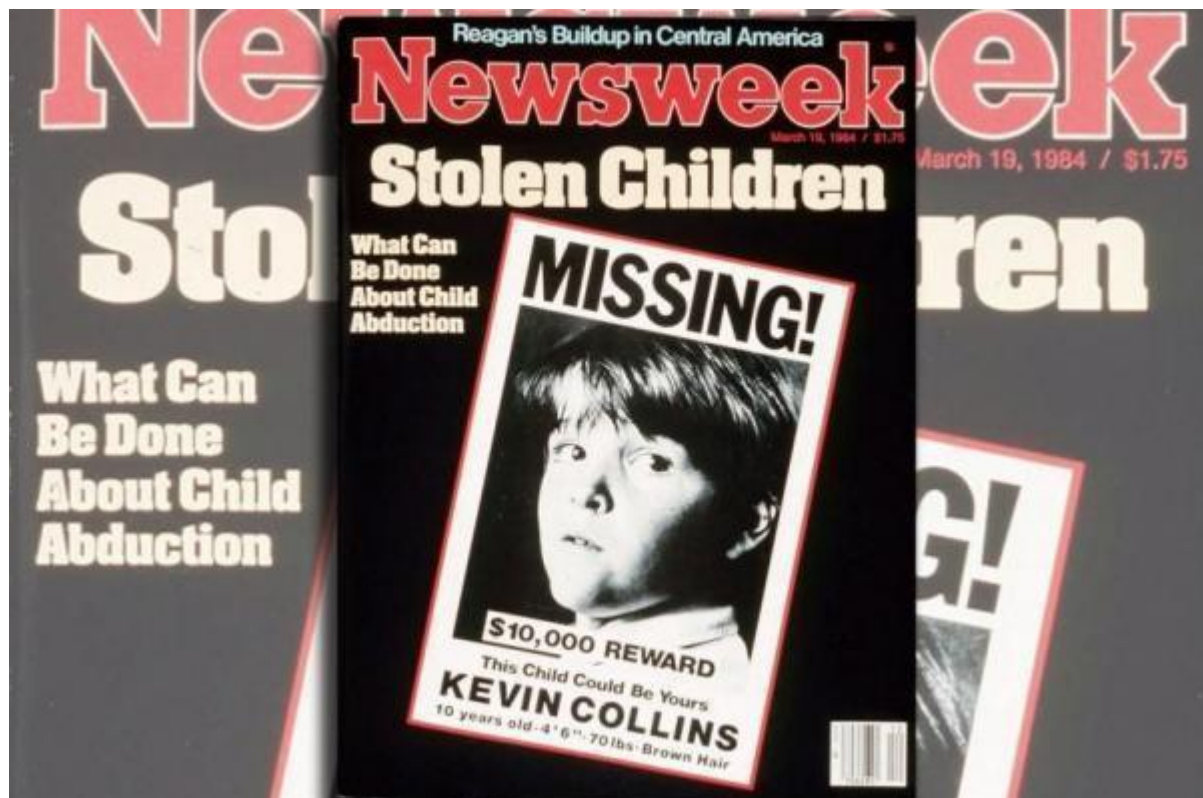
Figure 7: 'Stranger Danger' in the 1970s

Many bizarre claims were made during this febrile decade: reports of Satanic ritual and child sacrifice, an 'epidemic' of child pornography unleashed across the country, readily available to anyone on the street, and in one case, a janitor of a day-care facility accused of boiling and eating a baby (Beck, 2015: 15-16; Phillips and Milner, 2021: 17-48). According to Aimee Wodda, 'stranger danger' discourses were characterised by 'lost innocence', and the figure of the girl-child appeared once more to lend emotional heft to the narrative. Again, the motif of 'lost innocence' was highly racialised; stories about the victimisation of Black children were downplayed in favor of stories that 'sell' — namely, those with young white girls as the victims' (Wodda, 2018: 19). Wodda argues that 'the victimisation of children of colour often goes unremarked in the media, and routine messaging portrays children of colour as less innocent and more culpable than their white peers' (2018: 7). For these reasons, Wodda points out, the discourse of missing children has more recently been framed as 'missing white girl syndrome' (Ibid).

The intersection of child abuse and stranger danger discourses constructed a new(er) figure, 'a constant (but often shadowy) figure [who] lurked in the background: the figure of "the paedophile"' (Kitzinger, 1999: 209). Accordingly, this regime of truth

> results in the production of two very specific rhetorical figures: on the one hand, the figure of the dangerous adult, the 'pervert' or 'monster' that is defined by its tendency to prey on children, and, on the other hand, the figure of the child, which by its very nature is in danger and must be protected. (Rand, 2019: 256)

Angelides goes as far as calling the stranger danger panic 'a patriarchal ruse', pointing to the abundance of evidence that shows fathers, other male relatives and male acquaintances to be the primary perpetrators of child sexual assault (Angelides, 2004: 141; Kitzinger, 1999: 207). This fact remains true today, yet the myth of the threatening stranger remained potent throughout the 1980s. It was in the 1990s, however, that the threat of paedophilia was transformed 'into a permanent focus of moral outrage', significantly informing the widely held (and common-sense) belief that, 'rather than rare, the abuse of children is a very common activity' (Furedi, 2015: 201). In large, the second half of the 1990s shifted towards concern about convicted sex offenders being released from prison and into the community, a hypothesis that was amplified irresponsibly by mainstream news outlets (Kitzinger, 1999). The power and potency of the 'paedophile-in-the-community' narrative has 'a formidable capacity to incite moral outrage' (Furedi, 2015: 205), so much so that it is perhaps the most singular topic upon which most people share common ground. Thus, the figure of 'the paedophile' became, and thus remains, 'the dominant way through which sexual threats to children are conceptualised and articulated' (Kitzinger, 1999: 219), a dominant framework that '"dominates" by ensuring that any accounts of childhood that differ from it, including those coming from children themselves, can be muted' (Lee, 2001: 45). Constructed against the figure of the girl-child, 'the paedophile' figure functions as a constant threat, a predator roaming the social landscape in search of virginal prey to feast upon.[24]

Although set in motion by different historic contexts, the idealised figuration of the 'child' remains hegemonic in the Western cultural imaginary (as does the more recent figure of the 'paedophile'). We would argue, however, that the figure of the (white, bourgeois, nonsexual/heterosexual) 'girl-child' is the most potent symbol of childhood, always-on-the-cusp of victimhood, always under threat by 'outside' forces. This paints a rather disturbing picture, suggesting in fact that the 'sexualisation' thesis, as both process and outcome, *may be more harmful than the very things it seeks to critique and eliminate*.

This potted history may be admittedly crude — to that, we recommend consulting the literature cited and quoted in this section — but we nonetheless hope that this provides important and essential context regarding the values, principles, and ideologies that form the underbelly of the *Cuties* controversy (and, by extension, a host of other media 'effects' arguments and campaigns). What should be clear at this point is that anti-media debates and discourses like the *Cuties* controversy are typically not *about* cultural materials themselves; rather, cultural texts are often used as springboards for the wider circulation of political objectives. The next and final section explores the way that *Cuties* intersected with, and provided 'proof' for, a raft of contemporary conspiracy theories.

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[24] In the UK media, the myths of 'stranger danger' and the figure of the paedophile discussed here were magnificently (but controversially) satirised by Chris Morris in the 'Paedogeddon' special episode of *Brass Eye* (Channel 4, 2001). For a discussion of the programme's reception, see Lockyer and Attwood, 2009.

Scandal-Mongers vs. the Blue-Check Bourgeoisie: Conspiracy Entrepreneurs and the Politicisation of Cuties

At this point, it should be clear that anti-media campaigns like those around *Cuties* and *Crash* are rarely as innocent as they appear. As Martin Barker argues, they are 'at best … blind and ignorant forms of protectiveness, at worst disguised political campaigns' (2001: 45). In this final section of the article, we demonstrate that the political valence of *Cuties* was barely 'disguised' at all, and in fact would become central to the developing controversy. Though the backlash began life as part of the prefiguration and reception of one specific *film*, the concerns around 'sexualisation', paedophilia and child pornography discussed above soon became closely intertwined with a broader set of right-wing political discourses and conspiracy theories. As we will see, these went far beyond traditional 'effects' arguments.

Within a week of its Netflix release, *Slate* noted that *Cuties* found itself 'at the toxic intersection of QAnon delusion and right-wing moral panic' (Adams, 2020). Similarly, *NBC News*' Sam Thielman talked of the film being 'cynically hijacked' by 'the paedophile-obsessed American right', while *BuzzFeed*'s Stephanie McNeal described it as 'the latest target of #SaveTheChildren conspiracy theories' (Thielman, 2020; McNeal, 2020). According to its attackers, *Cuties* was not a uniquely 'sick' film, but merely the visible tip of an iceberg of heinous crimes that QAnon and a host of other online movements were courageously battling to expose. QAnon might exhibit the trappings of an obscure online Conspiracy Theory, but its followers have been responsible for multiple murders, and most famously, the attacks on the United States Capitol on January 6th, 2021, which underscored its significance to contemporary US politics. The phenomenon's foundational belief is that an anonymous government official, known as 'Q', has been providing followers — 'anons' — with classified information about Donald Trump's secret war against a paedophilic cabal of global liberal elites. This intelligence was drip-fed to anons via an ongoing series of cryptic 'QDrops' on the messageboard 4chan (later 8chan/8kun) from 2017-2021, before returning 18 months later in June 2022 (Conner and MacMurray, 2022; Thompson, 2022). The use of hashtags #SaveTheChildren and #SaveOurChildren became especially prevalent in the summer of 2020, as a way for social media users to draw attention to what they saw as a global epidemic of child sex trafficking (Buntain et al., 2022; Seitz, 2020).[25] *Cuties* thus came along at an

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[25] #SaveTheChildren is not to be confused with the charity of the same name. In fact, proponents of the hashtag have created significant problems for legitimate anti-trafficking organisations, flooding the charity and law enforcement agencies with false or unhelpful information about alleged trafficking, requiring them to deploy resources that could have been used much more effectively elsewhere, and undermining fundraising efforts of legitimate charities. It is very likely that the hashtag's similarity to the name of a real (and very well established) global charity helped grant legitimacy to QAnon and its followers (Buntain et al., 2022: 1-2). At the very least, concerns about protecting children rank very high on the list of priorities for surveyed QAnon followers, suggesting that the hashtag may have proven to be an effective recruitment tool for some Anons (Garry et al., 2021).

opportune moment in QAnon's development, appearing to followers as 'evidence' of the cabal's campaign to 'normalise' child sexual abuse.

This wider context of conspiracy theories — QAnon, #SaveTheChildren and related accusations about Netflix's political allegiances, to which we return to shortly — provides vital context for the *Cuties* controversy. Some of the most widely repeated charges levelled at the film bore no relation whatsoever to its content, or to any of the publicly available information about its production. For example, one strand of argument claimed that the film constituted 'Hollywood exploitation' (Cotton, 2020) or was the work of 'paedophile networks in Hollywood' (Smith, 2020), despite the fact that *Cuties* was financed and produced using French money, French companies, French locations, French actors, and made by a French-Senegalese director. It is, by any definition of national cinema, a French film, with no connection to Hollywood or the United States (beyond the fact that Netflix bought the rights to stream it in the country).[26]

As mentioned in previous sections, the incessant, outlandish conversations about *Cuties'* alleged connections to sex trafficking were marshalled not only by conspiracy theorists, but by politicians on both the right and the left. When Democratic congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard tweeted that *Cuties* would 'help fuel the child sex trafficking trade', her words were picked up by *Newsweek*, who uncritically reproduced the tweet alongside a collection of replies and exchanges she went on to have with other Twitter users. When one follower claimed, 'Trafficking deserves far more attention that it is getting', Gabbard replied: 'I agree. Most people think it's not a serious issue or that it just happens to some people in other places. It is rampant and happening in our own communities'[27] (Gabbard, 2020b). In late September, two weeks after the film's Netflix release, the American College of Pediatricians issued a press release claiming that:

> Fed by soft pornography media such as [*Cuties*], millions of the world's children (at the age of the 'stars' of this film) are groomed and then forced into sex slavery by porn addicts, many of whom will likely be this film's most enthusiastic viewers. Child Sex Trafficking is a multibillion-dollar criminal industry, which Netflix will encourage by the debut of this film to a receptive, or soon to be receptive, audience. (Van Meter, 2020)[28]

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[26] For useful discussions of the concept of national cinema, and the associated complexities of identifying a film's national 'identity', see Higson, 1989; White, 2004; Vitali and Willemen, 2019.

[27] @TulsiGabbard, 'I agree. Most people think it's not a serious issue or that it just happens to some people in other places. It is rampant and happening in our own communities.', Twitter, September 12, 2020b, https://twitter.com/TulsiGabbard/status/1304592949200793604.

[28] Though the name 'American College of Pediatricians' sounds respectable, the Southern Poverty Law Center include the organisation in its database of 'prominent extremists' in the USA, providing a useful overview of its history and practices. In their words, ACPeds is a 'fringe anti-LGBTQ hate group that masquerades as the premier US association of pediatricians to push anti-LGBTQ junk science,

Even more bizarrely, right-wing news outlet *Breitbart* also chimed in on the matter by interviewing 'child trafficking expert' Joseph Travers, whose volunteer organisation, Saved in America, specialises in rescuing missing children. Travers stated:

> We've had 245 recoveries ... meaning we have 245 case studies. And one of the things we found out [is that there are] five steps of a predator's grooming of children for child sex trafficking ... Out of the five steps, four of the steps are right in that Netflix film on how to groom a child for trafficking ... In other words, what I'm saying is *Cuties* could be a film *that was made and created to train children to be trafficked for the traffickers* (Kraychik, 2020, our emphasis).

A fundamental problem with all of these arguments, however, is that there is *nothing* in *Cuties* that relates to trafficking, however we might define that term:[29] no sex work; no grooming; nobody is coerced or forced into sex; and nobody is transported for the purposes of sex (or any other reason). There is nothing on- or off-screen, nothing seen or even suggested, to corroborate these assertions, not even in relation to the adult characters.

We could spend a long-time interrogating and evaluating the conspiratorial claims made about *Cuties*, carefully evaluating their evidentiary foundations, their logic, and the force of their rhetoric. Fact-checking, after all, has become a well-established response to outlandish political claims in recent years, held up by some as a panacea for combatting 'fake news' and various forms of propaganda (Uscinski, 2019: 448). Yet this practice also comes with a number of significant risks, including unintended legitimation, the amplification of problematic ideas or spokespeople, or encouraging conspiracy theorists to become even more committed to their views. In short, fact-checking, and broader attempts to draw attention to the fragility of conspiracy theories, may actually do 'more harm than good' (Uscinski, 2019: 444; also see Cassam, 2019: 93; Phillips, 2018, Part 2: 4; Phillips and Milner, 2021: 35, 159, 173; Uscinski and Butler, 2013; Uscinski, 2015).

Perhaps more importantly, debating the 'truth' of conspiracy theories can cause us to overlook more important questions. To use Quassim Cassam's example, Holocaust deniers 'might have intellectual failings, [but] their *moral* failings are surely far more significant' (2019: 122, our emphasis). Cassam goes on to explain:

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primarily via far-right conservative media and filing amicus briefs in cases related to gay adoption and marriage equality' (SPLC, n.d.).

[29] The problem of defining 'sex trafficking' is no trivial matter. Studies and reports on the subject repeatedly outline the barriers that prevent police, health professionals and non-profits from even knowing how prevalent trafficking is. These include not just the complex nature of the problem itself, but significant limits to the data that are collected, especially inconsistent collection, recording and definition of human-trafficking data across different regions, jurisdictions, systems, etc. (Nemeth and Rizo, 2019: 1318). As one study put it, 'the currently available data from any source are not sufficient to provide an adequate estimate of the extent of trafficking' (Franchino-Olsen et al., 2020: 193; also see Cheon, Katz and Webb, 2019).

> If Conspiracy Theories are unlikely to be true and some of them — such as the theory that the Holocaust is a myth — have been conclusively refuted, then what's their point? What purpose do Conspiracy Theories serve, if not to tell the truth? And why do people continue to peddle Conspiracy Theories that have virtually no chance of being true? *Because Conspiracy Theories are first and foremost forms of political propaganda.* They are political gambits whose real function is … to advance a political or ideological objective, be it opposition to gun control, anti-Semitism, hostility to the federal government or whatever. Conspiracy Theories advance a political objective in a special way: by advancing seductive explanations of major events that, objectively speaking, are unlikely to be true but *are* likely to influence public opinion in the preferred direction. (2019: 7-11, original emphasis)

So, rather than spending time analysing what *Cuties* 'really' means, whether or not it 'really' 'sexualises' or 'exploits' its young actors, or whether the film could 'really' be used as a tool for 'normalising' paedophilia, we need to think about what these accusations actually *do*. That is, in what ways did conspiratorial claims about *Cuties* help to further specific political agendas? And are there any personal benefits to the various actors producing or furthering the theories?

Part of the answer to these questions lies in some important technological and political developments in the late twentieth century, especially the rapidly decreasing costs of production and distribution, and the fragmentation of the marketplace, which have led to profound changes in the format and structure of news content (some of which we explored earlier). As Kevin Munger explains, mid-twentieth century journalists were largely nonpartisan, and 'explicitly embraced their roles as curators and verifiers of information'. Today, however, those roles have been reorganised around the pressure to attract attention in the form of clicks (in the vernacular, 'click-bait'). In doing so, news content has become increasingly partisan, and more invested in the *presentation* of information than concerns about its veracity (Munger, 2020: 377; Berry and Sobieraj, 2014). Munger goes on to argue that, in the contemporary online media environment, 'stories acquire credibility as they are shared along social networks, becoming more desirable at the same time as they increase their potential audience' (Munger, 2020: 377). The internet is thus fertile ground for the proliferation of what Cass Sunstein calls conspiracy entrepreneurs — individuals or organisations who profit, whether directly or indirectly, from the deliberate spreading of conspiracy theories (2014: 12; Muirhead and Rosenblum, 2019: 32-33). Such entrepreneurs would include celebrity conspiracists like Alex Jones of *InfoWars*, who has built a career out of monetising audiences' fears, slandering his ideological opponents, and generating revenue through the sale of various health supplements and survivalist products (Van den Bulck and Hyzen, 2020: 52; Hyzen and Van den Bulck, 2021a, 2021b; Cassam, 2019: 34). The entrepreneurs most relevant to the *Cuties* controversy, however, include conservative news outlets like *Fox News* and *Breitbart*, both of whom contributed

substantially to the backlash. Their contributions took three main forms: (1) reporting on and amplifying social media discourse; (2) producing flurries of hyperbolic opinion pieces by their own writers and broadcasters; and (3) providing a platform for various politicians and other stakeholders to speak out against the film, furthering their own brands and ideologies in the process. *Breitbart* were especially invested in the controversy, publishing twenty separate articles on *Cuties* in the space of eight days around the time of its release. Topics ranged from new developments in the controversy — ''Cancel Netflix' Trends on Twitter After Preteen Twerking Film *Cuties* Debuts'; 'Film Critics Praise Netflix's Tween-Twerking *Cuties*, Condemn 'Right-Wing Campaign'' — through to stories about prominent liberals *not* criticising it — 'CNN Ignores *Cuties* Controversy in Interview with Netflix CEO'; 'Obamas, Netflix Board Member Susan Rice Silent Amid *Cuties* Firestorm' — and finally, more explicit conspiracism — 'Why the Left is Normalising Child Pornography'; 'Netflix *Cuties* Could Be Used to Groom Kids for Sexual Exploitation'. By producing and disseminating content of this kind, *Breitbart* was defining, deepening, and exploiting the fault-lines of the controversy. Whether the site did so intentionally or not, we nonetheless need to consider the ways in which its economic functions overlapped with political ones, namely, the amplification, legitimation and sustainment of conservative talking points.

On the topic of conspiratorial discourse as a vehicle for personal gain and reputation work, we can return to the abovementioned *Fox News* interview with Indiana congressman Jim Banks. In Figure 8, notice how Banks delivers his interview in front of an office backdrop that is practically overflowing with symbols of American conservatism: photos of himself shaking the hand of President Trump and standing proudly with Vice President Mike Pence; a photo of his three young daughters, emphasising his fatherhood; several books about conservative politics and politicians, including texts on the American revolution and the US

Figure 8: Rep. Jim Banks being interviewed live on Fox News, September 13th, 2020.

Constitution; an elephant ornament, the symbol of the Republican party; an Indiana Hoosiers-branded basketball, and several other identifiers of his home state; and a folded American flag, symbol of fallen members of the Armed Forces. Scenes like these should serve as a reminder that media appearances for politicians are never just neutral commentary, and that the relationship between politician and journalist always has transactional qualities to it which may dictate or delimit the tone and content of the interview (Davis, 2009).

We could also consider the example of another Republican congressman, Vern Buchanan, who issued a press release of his own about *Cuties* on September 13th, 2020. In-keeping with his congressional colleagues, Buchanan spoke out about 'highly sexualised dance routines' he felt were 'inappropriate', 'exploitative, dangerous and border[ing] on child pornography' (Buchanan, 2020). Reading the press release in full, however, makes it clear that Buchanan saw in *Cuties* the opportunity to garner support for another bill that he had a long-standing investment in:

> Buchanan has a long record in Congress in support of child protection. He has introduced and co-sponsored bills to combat human trafficking, a crime in which half the victims are children and he passed a sweeping foster care reform bill endorsed by the Children's Defense Fund. His newest bill, the *CREEPER 2.0 (Curbing Realistic Exploitative Electronic Paedophilic Robots) Act* would ban the sale, possession, importation and transportation of sex dolls resembling children. The original *CREEPER Act* introduced in Congress in 2017 banned the transportation and importation of child sex dolls but languished in the U.S. Senate. (Ibid)

When faced with ideologically-charged opprobrium, then, it is vital that we do not read these comments as straightforward responses to a particular text. Instead, we must consider the *functions* of their claims and the opportunism involved (i.e., how their claims work to position the speaker politically, and the personal benefits that such positioning might bring).

Conspiracy entrepreneurship was also rampant outside of 'formal' media spaces and political spheres. On YouTube, for instance, several high-profile accounts produced widely watched videos on the film and its reception within a week of its Netflix release. The five most-watched videos all received between 2 million and 6 million views each, all of which were incredibly critical of Cuties. Their reactions, including several recorded in 'real-time', to what they had seen combined anger, disbelief, and amused incredulity. These videos placed far greater emphasis on close analysis than any of the attacks from more 'formal' sectors of the media landscape. That is to say, all of the YouTubers we examined had watched all (or nearly all) of the film, and so were able to speak about specific scenes in relation to wider themes and narrative arcs, a tactic that was not often employed by most of the film's opponents. Beyond their hyperbole, one of the most interesting aspects of these videos was their repeated refrain that the backlash was not, or should not be, 'political'. For instance, one visibly angry creator declared that 'It is unbelievable how anyone would try and defend

this movie. Leave it to Twitter to make paedophilia a political issue!' Another baffled user said, 'You can get away with shit like this now, and there is *debate*! The fact that there's even *debate* is blowing my mind!' One of the more detailed YouTube videos on *Cuties* captured the tone of this discourse particularly clearly:

> Now one of the reasons I felt like I needed to talk about [*Cuties*] … is this *narrative* that it's only the right wing that are mad about this… Every left winger I know was disgusted by this. Every single person I know, from all corners of the political spectrum, were disgusted by this. Like it was literally a meme for a few days, that literally everybody agreed on this one topic … But no! As always, here comes the journo class, right on cue! The blue-check bourgeoisie, to tell us that everyone who has a problem with *this* [the original Netflix artwork] is right-wing! … Can we please not give the concept of being against paedophilia to the right wing? Or *any* wing for that matter?! It's very gross how this is being forced into some, like, political partisan issue … Like I said, I see a lot of blue checkmarks [i.e., 'verified' Twitter accounts] defending this, and like journos defending this, and, I don't know if they're being paid, [but] I promise you, we don't gotta do this! We don't gotta defend the paedo movie just because some right wing e-celebs are mad about it!

This is a fascinating extract in its claims to reject political partisanship, but it also brings the polarised nature of the *Cuties* discourse into sharp relief, with the 'blue-check bourgeoisie' on one side, and 'literally everybody' else on the other. This is bolstered by the 'common-sense' implication that *Cuties*' 'meaning' is fixed and univocal, rather than being open to interpretation. This grew into a common pattern among the film's detractors, who cast the controversy as 'a war between two opposing groups, one with obvious moral leverage over the other: those who support child sexual exploitation, and those who do not' (Dickson, 2020a). The suggestion that those defending the film may have been paid to do so was also an effective rhetorical tactic, adopting a 'just asking questions' stance that forgoes the need to evidence one's claims or take responsibility for one's arguments. Needless to say, these arguments *are* political — they discursively consolidate the 'meaning' of the film, position themselves and their creator-brands on the 'right side' of the debate, and provide further elaboration of the powerful 'figures of the audience' we critiqued earlier in the article.

The long quotation above is also interesting for how the creator constructs two coherent collective identities. Again, this is a common trope in conspiracist discourse. Most conspiracy theories are comprised of dramatic, Manichean stories, with evil, powerful conspirators pitted against the innocent victims of a secret plot, typically 'the people' (Butter and Knight, 2020: 1; Fuchs, 2021: 67; Butter, 2020: 32; Cassam, 2019: 58). In doing so, these theories tap into archetypal themes like sex, corruption, or betrayal (Atkinson and DeWitt, 2019: 129). For politicians attempting to capture people's attention as a way to galvanise them into collective action, conspiracist storytelling may even be 'the most useful tool [in

their] toolbox' (Atkinson and DeWitt, 2019: 123). While individuals are typically members of many different 'groups', conspiracy theories can help to make one of those groups more salient and emotionally compelling via their appeals to group affinities, connections, and hostilities; and through their binary narratives of one group socially benefiting at the expense of another (Atkinson and DeWitt, 2019: 129; Muirhead and Rosenblum, 2019: 51). We can see this sense of group identity manifesting itself very clearly throughout criticisms of *Cuties*, which were predicated on a well-defined sense of 'us' versus 'them', wherein 'the people' (or 'literally everybody') are the heroic whistle-blowers speaking truth to power. For example, Congressman Ken Buck tweeted, '*we cannot stand idly by* while @Netflix distributes this disturbing film'[30] (Our emphasis). More acerbically, conservative website *Chicks on the Right* wrote that those 'on the left and in the main slime media will try to smear us for our non-inclusive "far-right views" on this. I say go for it. It will be a good way for all low life paedophile supporting scum to surface and expose themselves above water' (Liberty, 2020).

As Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum argue, 'it seems clear that part of the point of assenting to conspiracist fabulations is to communicate belonging', so as researchers we must stay well attuned to 'the "we" that stands behind assent to claims like the election is "rigged"' (2019: 50-51). Muirhead and Rosenblum compare conspiracist tribalism to Boston Red Sox fans' belief that the 'Yankees suck' (and we could add to this the popular English football supporter song about their team being 'by far the greatest the world has ever seen'). Assertions like these are not meant to be taken literally, and typically do not 'correspond to facts in the world'. Yet, these statements about the superiority of 'their side', or the failings of their opponent, remain valid because they 'reflect fans' identification with their team and each other' (Muirhead and Rosenblum, 2019: 51). These appeals to group identity are justified through repetition and appeals to 'common sense' rather than through evidence or logic.

This point is key to understanding the *Cuties* controversy since the film's attackers and defenders held wildly different attitudes towards defining and deploying 'evidence'. Professional critics and journalists were resolute in their defence of the film, labelling its opponents 'scandal-mongers [on] the far-right' (Brody, 2020), and repeatedly admonishing them for not having watched the film:

> *NBC News*: 'people who take the time to actually watch the film are shown again and again that the characters are dancing to impress one another with their skill … not for the benefit of perverts onscreen or off'. (Thielman, 2020)

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[30] @RepKenBuck, '"Cuties" creates an environment that encourages the exploitation of children. We cannot stand idly by while @Netflix distributes this disturbing film. @RepAndyBiggsAZ and I are urging @TheJusticeDept to investigate immediately.
https://buck.house.gov/sites/buck.house.gov/files/wysiwyg_uploaded/091420%20Letter%20to%20AG%20Barr_Netflix%20Cuties.pdf', Twitter, September 14, 2020,
https://twitter.com/RepKenBuck/status/1305603814079246336.

> *Washington Post*: 'it requires a wilful ignorance of the film itself to claim that these scenes sexualise the girls involved'. (Drezner, 2020)

> *Washington Post*: 'If I had the power to issue a single dictatorial edict, it would be this: If you want to talk nonsense about a movie on the Internet, you have to prove that you've actually seen it'. (Rosenberg, 2020)

> *Associated Press*: 'The campaign against the film … is riddled with inaccuracies due in part to the fact that some critics have not seen the film (one claims that there is child nudity when there is not)'. (Bahr, 2020)

> Vilanova Law Institute: 'The themes in *Cuties* are incredibly important; we must recognise and address the hyper-sexualisation of young girls. But in the case of *Cuties*, QAnon and other conspiracy theorists have twisted the realities of human trafficking and child sexual exploitation to create mass hysteria and public outcry. Truth matters'. (CSE Institute, 2020)

Note the choice of language throughout these remarks: 'wilful ignorance', 'nonsense', 'riddled with inaccuracies', and 'twist[ing] realities … to create mass hysteria'. Their emphasis on accuracy and evidence implies that there are correct and incorrect ways to read *Cuties* and its 'messages', and the only legitimate way to 'decode' the film would be to engage in something resembling close textual analysis (notice also the way that these defences construct 'figures' of the right-wing audience to underscore their interpretations).

Put more simply, the people attacking *Cuties* were fighting a different battle to those defending it. Most had little interest in close analysis, with numerous politicians, bloggers, content creators and social media users openly admitting they could not, or would not, sit through the entire film. Moreover, they insisted that there was no need to do so in order to know what the film stood for or really 'meant'. This is an example of what Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019) call 'the new conspiracism'. Where 'classic conspiracism' proffers *explanations* of particular events, the new conspiracism eschews explanation, with events like Pizzagate seemingly 'aris[ing] out of thin air' (Muirhead and Rosenblum, 2019: 25). The new conspiracists, they argue, 'posit odious designs but not the how or why, and often not even the who' (Ibid). Instead of marshalling evidence (however implausible), or latching onto 'errant data', 'the typical form of the new conspiracism is bare assertion' (Ibid).

But if critics and conspiracists were not particularly interested in evidence, what *were* they interested in? What function(s) were they pursuing? The answer to this question is often unclear, as Muirhead and Rosenblum have noted in relation to other conspiracy theories that eschew the need for evidence:

> [W]hat should follow from bare assertion, innuendo, and ominous questions? Voter registration drives? Criminal indictments? Noncompliance? Violent

resistance? We don't know, because there is no call to vote, litigate, resist, or arm. After the summary diagnosis of 'Rigged' or 'Something is happening here,' there is a yawning hole where organised political action should be (2019: 31).

These questions become especially interesting in relation to *Cuties*, since, as we have seen, so much of the backlash seemingly *did* take the form of organised political action: scores of online petitions called very clearly for the removal of the film from Netflix; politicians wrote to the Department of Justice calling for federal investigations into whether the film constituted 'child pornography'; and, at the height of the controversy, there was a period of several days where it seemed as though the collective condemnation from social media, journalists and politicians was having a tangible effect on Netflix's subscriber numbers and/or share price (Fung, 2020; Shaw, 2020; Spangler, 2020a, 2020b).[31]

In addition, both Republican politicians and like-minded audiences had already spent several years attacking Netflix as dealers in 'woke capital' (McArdle, 2022), targeting specific content including *Dear White People* (2017-21), *Master of None* (2015-2021) and *Orange is the New Black* (2013-19). Naturally, *Cuties* was added to this list by the anti-woke brigade.[32] As news surfaced in 2022 that Netflix's subscription rates were plummeting, many conservative journalists, cultural commentators and online audiences gleefully claimed that this was due to the platform's liberal content, lending weight to the Right's mantra, 'get woke, go broke' (see for example Faughnder, 2022; Markowicz, 2022; McArdle, 2022). This kind of thinking occurred quite regularly across *Cuties'* discourses. In particular, Barack and Michelle Obama's reported $50 million deal with Netflix to produce content that would 'promote greater empathy and understanding' was mobilised as evidence that *Cuties* forms part of a leftist 'woke' agenda. One exemplary piece by *Fox News* contributor Rachel Campos-Duffy and collaborator Evita Duffy (2020) was headlined, 'Michelle Obama Is Complicit In Netflix Child Porn Film "Cuties"'. The article went on to argue that the former First Lady's 'silence on Netflix's controversial movie … has not gone unnoticed. It is also undermining her brand as "America's mom" and chief defender of female empowerment across the globe'. Other right-wing voices expressed discontent with the Obamas, such as radio talk show host, Jesse Peterson, who tweeted that 'there's no way @netflix put out a movie sexually exploiting a black girl w/o approval from their most influential partners: the Obama's & Susan Rice. Not happening'.

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[31] Though many of these stories came from reputable sources, we should take their claims about widespread subscription cancellation with a pinch of salt. The evidence they draw on is largely anecdotal, and Netflix's evolving share price suggests any downturn was very minor, short-lived, and completely in-keeping with normal share price fluctuations.

[32] Disney has also featured in the Right's 'war on woke'. One of the Republican politicians who targeted *Cuties*, Senator Josh Hawley of Missouri, singled out 'woke corporations like Disney', proposing a federal bill that would 'limit the entertainment giant's copyright protections' (Montlake, 2022).

The fact that the Netflix board includes Susan E. Rice (Obama's former National Security Advisor and current Director of the United States Domestic Policy Council), as well as Netflix co-CEO Ted Sarandos, husband of Nicole Avant (former ambassador to the Bahamas during Obama's Presidency), has directly fed into the idea that the Netflix platform operates as a container for democratic ideology and 'loony lefty' propaganda. It is an argument that billionaire mogul Elon Musk expressed support for when he tweeted: 'The woke mind virus is making Netflix unwatchable' (in Wallace, 2022). With this in mind, the attack on *Cuties* should not be viewed as unique, but as part of a broader reactionary campaign against 'woke' content generated by Netflix (and by the 'leftist media' in general). As Liz Crokin wrote on *The Daily Caller*, 'some members of the LGBT movement are not only attempting to normalise rape and paedophilia — they are pushing to legalise the rape, torture, and genital mutilation of children' (Crokin, 2017).[33]

At the time of writing, the backlash against *Cuties* specifically cannot be said to have achieved much in the way of tangible success: no 'truths' about Netflix or a paedophilic cabal have been exposed, and nobody involved in the film's production or distribution has faced any punishment. The closest *Cuties*' detractors came to a victory was in October 2020, after a Texas grand jury indicted Netflix on charges of disseminating lewd visual material depicting a child (Maddaus, 2020). An insightful *Rolling Stone* article at the time reported that the case was 'very close to frivolous', that 'a grand jury is likely to bring an indictment against a ham sandwich, if the prosecutor so wishes', and that the case should be seen 'more as a culture wars attack on a sexualised film than a law enforcement issue' (Dickson, 2020b). Further, in March 2022, Netflix's lawyers filed for 'injunctive relief' against Lucas Babin, the Tyler County District Attorney who filed the indictments in question.[34] Essentially, Netflix's complaint accused Babin of abusing his power, and were asking the court to intervene to prevent further 'unconstitutional', 'bad-faith' indictments. The complaint is extremely detailed, systematically taking apart each of the charges and explaining why there is no legal basis for prosecution. It seems, however, as though the Republicans who brought forth the charges had little intention of 'winning' it in the first place (Netflix v. Babin, Section E). Instead, the indictments seemed to serve two primary functions. The first was a reputational one for the politicians involved, who were able to point to their ostensible legal proceedings as evidence that they are protectors of vulnerable children, tough on crime, and unafraid to hold powerful

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[33] The idea that content on Netflix is invariably 'leftist' is clearly nonsense, given the widespread accusations that Ricky Gervais' various comedy specials and Dave Chapelle's *The Closer* engage in transphobia.

[34] It is probably not a coincidence that Babin is the son of congressman Brian Babin, who was also one of the House members to come out in opposition to *Cuties*. Bizarrely, prior to embarking on his legal career, Lucas Babin was a model and actor, best known for his appearances in the music video for Paris Hilton's song 'Stars are Blind' (2006), and for his role in the family film *School of Rock* (Richard Linklater, 2003), in which he plays a shirtless member of a rival soft rock band, who flirts with Principal Mullins (Joan Cusack).

'woke' media companies and depraved liberal politicians to account. The second function, however, simply seems to have been about repetition, keeping *Cuties* in the news cycle to play a game of political football. As journalist EJ Dickson suggests:

> If the goal of Babin's indictment was simply to re-invigorate the debate around *Cuties* and affirm right-wing talking points about the film … it has been successful. Outlets from *People* to CNN to the *New York Times* have covered the indictment, largely uncritically, drawing renewed attention to a controversy that had been gradually dying down. Even if the indictment against Netflix is more likely than not to go nowhere, the fact that *Cuties* has once again entered the discourse indicates that its import to the right-wing as a talking point far outweighs its actual cultural relevance (Dickson, 2020b).

Conspiracy entrepreneurship, then, does not need to lead to formal or even tangible political victories in order to achieve their goals, and often succeeds in disrupting the established rules of engagement by prioritising narrativity over rationality or logic. Existing literature on conspiracy theorists has often characterised them as losers, in the political rather than pejorative sense of the word (Uscinski and Parent, 2014; Douglas et al., 2019). But, as Atkinson and DeWitt argue, 'political losers do not become winners through the art of persuasion'. Instead, they strive to 'activate new issues, reframe existing problems, and challenge existing norms. In a word, their aim is to disrupt … to draw new people in the conflict until the balance of forces is changed. Losers are the innovators. They are the source of political change' (Atkinson and DeWitt, 2019: 125).[35]

In a 1984 profile on Republican congressman Newt Gingrich, one veteran reporter wrote:

> I watched him [Gingrich] give a speech to a group of conservative activists. "The number one fact about the news media," he told them, "is they love fights." For months, he explained, he had been giving "organised, systematic, researched, one-hour lectures. Did CBS rush in and ask if they could tape one of my one-hour lectures? No. But the minute Tip O'Neill attacked me, he and I got 90 seconds at the close of all three network news shows. You have to give them confrontations. When you give them confrontations, you get attention; when you get attention, you can educate. (Mann and Ornstein, 2012: 36)

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[35] Also see Steve Fuller's useful work on post-truth knowledge, in which he talks of a struggle between 'lions' and 'foxes' rather than 'truth' versus 'emotion' as most scholars have described it: 'In … the post-truth condition … You try to win not simply by playing by the rules but also by controlling what the rules are. The lion tries to win by keeping the rules as they are, and the fox tries by changing them' (Fuller, 2018: 3).

For precisely those reasons — the need to disrupt the status quo and redraw the political battlefield — research has long shown that supporters of parties who are *out* of power will be much more inclined towards conspiracy theories than those *in* power (Muirhead and Rosenblum, 2019: 49). Yet in recent years, that symmetry seems to have largely disappeared, with conspiracism today coming predominantly from the right (at least in a US/UK context). More than that, the Donald Trump presidency also tells us that conspiracism does not only come from the margins, but also from those in power (Ibid).

In part, 'the new conspiracists' are distinguished from classic conspiracy through the digital tools that are readily available to them. As Muirhead and Rosenblum put it, 'the internet is vital for the new conspiracists' where 'all the energy is directed at repetition and affirmation' (2019: 32-33). Indeed, repetition is 'the new conspiracism's oxygen and, it sometimes seems, its whole purpose' (Ibid). Thus, the affordances of the internet provide conspiracists with technological advantages in the post-truth economy, whereby

> repeating charges takes no effort. Bare assertions are easily echoed and affirmed. Whereas explanation can be difficult, innuendo is simple. Even the character limit built into Twitter aligns with the new conspiracism's avoidance of evidence and explanation. The medium invites emphatic, unelaborated assertion. Social networking is the stage for performing "a lot of people are saying," and for buttressing the claim by measuring the number of tweets, likes, and shares. The internet is the ideal medium for repetition and for signaling identification with others who spread conspiracist narratives … the revolution in broadcast technology that allows anyone to disseminate what he or she writes or says without any intermediary and at no cost. This has displaced the gatekeepers, the producers, editors, and scholars who decided what was worthy of dissemination. The way is opened for conspiracy entrepreneurs who initiate and disseminate a seemingly infinite array of wild accusations. (Muirhead and Rosenblum, 2019: 33, 40)

Repetition is, of course, the hallmark of contemporary propaganda, of 'fake news' and widespread conspiracies, with COVID denialism and the anti-vaxxer movement being recent phenomena (although hardly new in and of themselves) (Fuchs, 2021; also see Kalichman, 2009). In psychological spheres, this is known as the 'illusory truth effect', by the notion that '[r]epeated information is often perceived as more truthful than new information' (Hassan and Barber, 2021: 1), a sentiment captured succinctly by Joseph Goebbels, Adolf Hitler's Minister of Propaganda, through his (in)famous statement: 'if you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it'.

Conclusion: The Sound of Controversy and the 'Meaning' of *Cuties*

It is astonishing how *Cuties* was used by its attackers to weave an array of socio-political concerns within the tapestry of talk that surrounded the film; not only the 'sexualisation' of young girls, but also the stimulation of the child sex trafficking trade, the 'normalisation' of paedophilia, and a litany of other conspiracy theories that claim the film provides concrete evidence that 'the secret end-goal of all liberals and leftists is legalised sex with children' (Edwards, 2018). Although *Cuties* became subsumed in discourses that share key narrative patterns and motifs with other media controversies, historically speaking, some of the more peculiar claims certainly went above and beyond the 'effects' tradition, and are perhaps indicative of an acceleration of 'effects' into new areas of conspiracism and balderdash, characteristics that can be seen as part and parcel of our age of 'post-truth' bullshit (Ball, 2017; Hopkin and Rosamond, 2018; Tuters, Jokubauskaitė and Bach, 2018).

What does *Cuties* 'mean', then? As we have shown, the film's reception was split along ideological fault lines, structured by deeply-entrenched 'figures' of the audience and long-standing ideas about children (and especially girls). For writer/director Maïmouna Doucouré, *Cuties* is a *critique* of 'sexualisation', not an endorsement, an argument that appears regularly across defences of the film. Writing for *The Washington Post* in the midst of the controversy, Doucouré sought to set the record straight by relaying her authorial intentions in the hope of paratextually guiding audiences towards her preferred interpretation:

> I wanted to open people's eyes to what's truly happening in schools and on social media, forcing them to confront images of young girls made up, dressed up and dancing suggestively to imitate their favorite pop icon.[36] I wanted adults to spend 96 minutes seeing the world through the eyes of an 11-year-old girl, as she lives 24 hours a day. These scenes can be hard to watch but are no less true as a result … That's why I made *Cuties*: to start a debate about the sexualisation of children in society today so that maybe — just maybe — politicians, artists, parents and educators could work together to make a change that will benefit children for generations to come … The movie has certainly started a debate, though not the one I intended (Doucouré, 2020).

Ironically, Doucouré's stated authorial intentions align quite neatly with the ways in which the film was attacked. As Bradshaw explained, 'the film and its accusers turn out to be on the same side: *Mignonnes* [*Cuties*] attacks the pornification of girls and young women by social media and society in general' (2020). Intriguingly, this point was also raised by right-wing

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[36] Although here Doucouré argues that young girls dress up and dance provocatively to 'imitate their favorite pop icon', within *Cuties*, the protagonist is directly inspired by her *peers*. In one scene, where she is seen watching a video of older girls dancing, it is made clear that those girls are also peers, not famous pop stars. Perhaps unintentionally, Doucouré intimates that social and cultural environment is as important as media engagement.

political pundit Ben Shapiro (2020). Though he agreed with the consensus view about Netflix's 'supremely disturbing marketing' — that 'as a father of two daughters under the age of seven, I can say that the way these girls were dressed [in the poster] was perverse and disgusting and paedophilic' — Shapiro offered a surprisingly nuanced account of *Cuties*. 'Many things can be true about the film simultaneously', he said, arguing that 'the actual message of the film is quite conservative' in the way that it frames the 'over-sexualisation of children' as a bad thing (Ibid). There is certainly a case to be made that Doucouré embraces the central tenets of the 'sexualisation' thesis, that, in Shapiro's account, the main character is being 'raised by the internet', which in 'our over-sexualised culture deliberately forces the internalisation of hyper-sexualisation onto young teens, to pre-teens' (Ibid). Shapiro, however, argued that the 'problem' with *Cuties* is that its conservative 'message' is cancelled out altogether by the manner in which Doucouré chose to represent the 'effects' of 'sexualisation' through depictions of 'hypersexualised lesbianic dances' that are 'very much like WAP' (Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion's video for 'Wet Ass Pussy'). He does say he believes the director did not mean to 'hypersexualise the girls for the pleasure of paedophiles', but also that Netflix certainly *did* 'sexualise' the young actors 'for paedophiles'.

Evidently, those who defended the film tended to fall in line with Doucouré's stated intentions, which indicates that the author is not as dead as Roland Barthes would think, demonstrating instead that authorial discourses remain *one* of the central ways through which audiences and critics are paratextually guided towards certain interpretations. For most of the attackers, the film's central 'message' — as a critique of 'sexualisation' — is simply not important. As Republican Tom Cotton wrote, both Doucouré and 'a disturbing number of film critics have defended the film' as a '"social commentary against the sexualisation of young children"', but, for Cotton, 'no matter how interesting the movie's "social commentary" is to critics at the Sundance film festival, *that doesn't excuse the fact* that the movie depicts real-life children performing extended, pornographic dance routines' (Cotton, 2020, our emphasis). Likewise, Melissa Henson, Programme Director of the Parents Television Council (PTC), wrote that the 'message' of *Cuties*, 'one that under different circumstances we might applaud', is eclipsed completely by the film's representation of twerking, which is 'a dance move that originated in strip clubs before making its way to night clubs' (Henson, 2020). *Cuties*, she argues, '*could have been* a powerful rebuke of popular culture that sexualises children and robs them of their innocence', but instead 'these young actresses were sexualised in the making of this movie' (Ibid, emphasis in original). Arguing that 'there is a danger little girls will be attracted to this film', the main problem for Henson, and 'the far greater risk' attached to *Cuties*, 'is the way this film normalises the sexualisation of little girls' (Ibid). As such, by distributing the film, Netflix are guilty of 'desensitising millions of viewers at home by asking them to be entertained by it' (Ibid).

Certainly, there were clear differences between the way that defenders interpreted *Cuties* as 'social commentary', and the manner by which attackers read the film as a 'transmission', one that would unambiguously work by 'infecting' its viewers directly with a behavioural pathogen. The problem with both stances is not so much that their reading is

'wrong', but that they assume the 'meaning' of *Cuties* lies somewhere in the text itself. It does not matter that the director *intended* the film to act as 'social commentary', nor that its attackers cried foul at the representation of female tweens twerking themselves into exploitation and sexual abuse. Ultimately, the 'message' of *Cuties* depends upon the position of the interpreter, on their socio-cultural being and lived experience(s), and the various political implications that accompany their engagements with the film.

What this case study illustrates, however, is that the post-structuralist tendency to make over-blown claims that media texts are capable of being interpreted in an infinite number of ways ('It's all just subjective, isn't it?!') is complicated by the fact that *Cuties* was actually read in very *limited* ways. Of course, we do not claim to have mapped *all* the different ways that audiences interpreted the film. For example, there are also readings that suggest that *Cuties* is Islamophobic (Mitchell, 2020; Cheney, 2020; Shareef, 2020), but this position failed to gain much traction because the discursive noise of 'sexualisation' drowned out alternative perspectives. Nevertheless, our detailed discursive excavation has shown that the controversy was organised and structured binarily, between attacking 'sexualisation' and defending 'social commentary'.

Here, *Cuties* again shares a certain affiliation with the *Crash* controversy in that 'equivalent counter-assertions can be found among' defenders of that film (Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath, 2001: 9), and these kinds of challenges uncannily appear across both discourses. For defenders who see 'social commentary' in line with Doucouré's expressions of authorial intent, *Cuties* provides 'a provocative, thought-provoking cautionary tale' that stands firmly *against* the 'sexualisation' of young girls (Apelgren-Coleman, 2020), just as *Crash's* defenders argue that that film 'clearly warns us *against* dehumanisation, *against* a society drifting into affectlessness' (in Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath, 2001: 9, emphasis in original). Across *Cuties* and *Crash* discourses, both camps found conflicting 'messages' in the film which were 'presumed to be readily noticeable by "ordinary" viewers' (Ibid). As Martin Barker (with Thomas Austin) asserts, we

> can't deduce 'harm' (or 'good' for that matter) from analysis of films. We can't place films along some supposed dimension of political or ideological acceptability, from conservative/ reactionary to radical/ subversive. Most importantly, we cannot read off possible influences upon an unnamed, "vulnerable" audience. And part of the reason for that is that films don't contain "messages" plus message-launching devices in the way that much analysis has supposed. (Barker with Austin, 2000: 174)

It is also worth noting that *Cuties*' attackers did not typically reach their conclusions via careful analysis of the film, instead choosing to pluck key scenes from out of its narrative context in order to cast assumptions about how it will impact its viewers by constructing 'figures of the audience'; or as we have argued in this article, 'figures' of the innocent and vulnerable 'girl-child', her demonic 'Other', the precocious sexual nymphos, and always lurking in the

shadows, the predatory 'figure' of the paedophile. By 'positing a causal claim about what the text is *doing to* audiences' (Schiappa, 2008: 56, our emphasis), the *Cuties* controversy, like *Crash*, turned on 'these abstract entities' (Barker et al., 2001: 8), rhetorical figurations that are 'ultimately more metaphorical than material' (Egan, 2013: 7). Conversely, *Cuties*' defenders usually interpreted the film in traditionally critical ways by highlighting evidence from the text, rather than worrying over specific scenes that will harm audiences (although they did, at times, rely on constructing 'figures' of the right-wing audience, as mentioned briefly in the previous section).

By using the *Cuties* controversy as a case study, the evidence conveyed in this article demonstrates quite convincingly that 'audience conjectures' (Schiappa, 2008: 29-59) are a very standard and rudimentary way of making outlandish and conspiratorial claims about cultural objects, claims that generally have little to do with texts themselves, and more to do with specific political and ideological worldviews. Therefore, critics, politicians, and indeed audiences themselves, commonly deploy 'figures of the audience' as metaphorical devices, as emotional and affective totems that allow for the propagation and proliferation of claims that do not have the necessary empirical weight behind them. In fact, it is principally for these reasons that conjecture, assumption, and rhetoric continue to inform 'dominant' common-sense thought as applied to media representations of sexuality. They *must* be true because strong feelings tell us that *they are true*.

Another striking example of this unfolded in the summer of 2023, just as we were putting the finishing touches to this article. Alejandro Monteverde's *Sound of Freedom*, a low-budget indie film about a former Homeland Security agent who travels to Colombia to rescue children from sex traffickers, was released in cinemas on July 4th, 2023. Made for just $14.5 million — roughly a tenth of the average Hollywood blockbuster's production budget — the film impressively outperformed other high profile summer releases in North America, including *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny* and *Mission: Impossible – Dead Reckoning Part One*.[37] But it was the film's reception, more than its commercial success, which garnered widespread media attention, and which is worthy of briefly mentioning in this conclusion. Colloquially referred to by the mainstream liberal press as 'the QAnon movie', 'QAnon-adjacent' and 'MAGA-friendly' (King, 2023; Bramesco, 2023; Cain, 2023), the film was widely read as a kind of recruitment tool for the American alt-right. These QAnon associations were downplayed by US Republicans and conservative news sources, who claimed their enthusiasm was simply because the film was a 'very important' piece of social commentary (Gorka, 2023), which was drawing attention to the urgent need to combat human trafficking and child sexual abuse. Echoing the attacks made by YouTubers on *Cuties*, those embracing the film repeatedly claimed that *Sound of Freedom* was 'not in the least political. … [P]ersonal politics should be irrelevant when you are rescuing children from human trafficking' (Panreck, 2023).

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[37] At the time of writing, these figures only apply to domestic (i.e. North American) box office performance.

Yet it very quickly became clear that the heated debate about 'messages' or politics was not rooted in analysis of the film itself, but on powerful (and very familiar!) figures of the audience. For mainstream liberal critics in *Rolling Stone* or *The Guardian*, *Sound of Freedom* was 'a Superhero movie for dads with brainworms … designed to appeal to the conscience of a conspiracy-addled boomer' (Klee, 2023), embraced by 'a constellation of paranoids' (Bramesco, 2023). The response to this discourse from the right was predictable, with Caviezel and especially Tim Ballard (the former government agent whose story the film's events were based on) playing a central role in the counterclaims. Outlets like *Fox News* and *Breitbart* leapt to the defence of *Sound of Freedom*, dedicating large amounts of airtime and copious column inches to an array of Christian and Republican voices (Parks, 2023). Central to these claims was a steadfast incredulity that anyone could possibly criticise a film that was so 'obviously' against child trafficking:

> This movie zeroes in on the multi-billion-dollar human trafficking industry, and honours a hero – someone who saved children from sex slavery. But to the media, this person *isn't* a hero. Someone who rescues kids from paedophiles is a *villain*. … For some reason the *entire* media is smearing this movie as a dangerous conspiracy theory (Fox News, 2023).[38]

In conversation with Jesse Watters on *Fox News*, Ballard offered an explanation:

> I think that the left and these media outlets, they don't want to have the discussion that this film is going to compel. … They don't want to talk about why these same publications are pushing an agenda to change the word "paedophile" to "minor-attracted person" in order to normalise sexual activity with children. I think that's what they're trying to avoid, and they know this film is going to shine a light on all of [those] things (Ibid).

The enemy in this discourse, then, is once again the 'Woke Reich' who are 'bitter and terrified' of the 'truth' the film reveals (Nolte, 2023; Olohan, 2023; Yeates and Weakland, 2023). More specifically, the debate hinges on which side wants to protect children the most. Ballard goes on to say, 'I hunt paedophiles, I've been hunting them for 20 years, and they are watching [the criticism of *Sound of Freedom*] and they are *salivating*. They are *happy* that *Rolling Stone* and the *Guardian* are ripping on a movie that exposes them' (Fox News, 2023). Once again, then, the shadowy figure of the paedophile rears its head, and is invoked as a powerful but empirically baseless way of condemning the film's critics, who had labelled it 'problematic', 'misleading' or 'downright dangerous' (Abrams, 2023; Lloyd and Albright, 2023).

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[38] Note that *Fox News* implicitly does not include itself (or other embracers of the film) in this designation of 'the entire media'.

So, while it might initially seem as though the furore around *Sound of Freedom* was a sort of 'reverse *Cuties*' — with liberals now very concerned about a film's 'harmful' depictions of child abuse, and conservatives celebrating its ability to highlight important social problems — a Barkeresque emphasis on 'figures' of the audience shows that the two controversies are in fact very comfortable political bedfellows. In both cases, the liberal press was keen to advance nuanced arguments about the *specific* depictions and representational strategies involved in each film, invoking figures of the conspiracy theorist in order to highlight the dangers of overly-simplistic interpretations. The conservative right, however, eschewed close analysis or any detailed discussion of the films' nuances, preferring emotionally charged claims about vulnerable children and aggressive paedophiles. These, in turn, were used as springboard for broader attacks on 'woke' media outlets, as well as being channelled towards more explicitly political calls for immigration policy reform (Gilbertson, 2023; Bleau, 2023).

Unlike the *Crash* controversy, then, *Cuties* and *Sound of Freedom* teach us several things about how 'discursive events' and panics over particular media texts have changed since the 1990s: that the affordances of Web 2.0 have shifted potential terrains of debate significantly; that, as a result, audiences can now wield personal (and often powerful) bullhorns to prompt discursive activity around cultural objects (whether positively, indifferently, negatively, toxically, etc.); that audiences are just as invested in the core ideas that underscore the media 'effects' tradition; and that today's media landscape is fertile territory for increasingly rapid political entrepreneurialism. As we have shown in this article, the *Cuties* controversy was not generated initially by conservative critics or film reviewers, but by audiences equipped with a computer (or a smartphone or tablet) and an internet connection. For Martin Barker, scholars 'need to have the courage to critique our own and others' "figures of the audience" and to commit ourselves to developing research into real, no longer putative or laboratory-conditioned audience responses and understandings' (Barker, 2009: 60). It is in this spirit that we hope this article contributes to the way in which we reckon with media controversies and the (non-empirical, rhetorical) common-sense beliefs that continue to dominate, although not without challenge and contention, our contemporary regime(s) of truth.

Biographical Notes

Richard McCulloch is an independent researcher based in Leeds, UK. He has held academic appointments at six universities across the UK, most recently as Senior Lecturer in Media and Film at the University of Huddersfield from 2016-2023. He is co-editor of the BAFTSS-award-winning *Disney's* Star Wars (University of Iowa Press, 2019) and *The Scandinavian Invasion* (Peter Lang, 2023), both with William Proctor, and was a founding board member of the Fan Studies Network. Richard's research is broadly concerned with media use, entertainment brands, and the politics of popular culture.

Contact: r.mcculloch@hud.ac.uk

William Proctor is Associate Professor of Popular Culture at Bournemouth University, UK. He is the author of *Reboot Culture: Comics, Film, Transmedia* (Palgrave 2023) and co-editor of the books *Global Convergence Cultures: Transmedia Earth* (with Matthew Freeman, Routledge 2018); the BAFTSS-award-winning *Disney's* Star Wars*: Forces of Promotion, Production and Reception* (with Richard McCulloch, University of Iowa Press, 2019); *Horror Franchise Cinema* (with Mark McKenna, Routledge 2021); and *The Scandinavian Invasion: Nordic Noir and Beyond* (with Richard McCulloch, Peter Lang 2023). William is currently researching his next book, tentatively titled *When Boom Reigned Supreme: The Rise and Fall of Electro Hip Hop*.

Contact: bproctor@bournemouth.ac.uk

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Cuties (Maïmouna Doucouré, 2020)
Dave Chapelle: The Closer (Stan Lathan, 2021)
Good Boys (Gene Stupnitsky, 2019)
School of Rock (Richard Linklater, 2003)
Sound of Freedom (Alejandro Monteverde, 2023)

Television

Brass Eye, Episode 7: 'Paedogeddon' (Channel 4, 26 July, 2001)
Dear White People (Netflix, 2017-2021)
Master of None (Netflix, 2015-2021)
Orange is the New Black (Netflix, 2013-2019)