

The Problem of Sexualization: Not So Cute

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Cuties sparks international controversy on the public transgression of child sexualization in film. The taboo of sexualizing children is culturally specific. George Bataille, in his book *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, regards all taboos as applying to everyone but varying in degree and manifestation depending on cultural context. While children expressing their sexuality is *not* highly transgressive in every culture, in Senegalese-French and American society, childhood and sexuality must be kept separate. Children are viewed as too young and 'un-initiated' into the profane world of sensuality. Only once children make the transformation into the social role of adulthood can they exhibit sexuality. Girls are often prematurely indoctrinated by the internet, media culture, and society that becoming a woman means being valued for their beauty and their sex appeal. *Cuties*, a French film written and directed by Maïmouna Doucouré in 2020, follows 11-year-old Amy growing up and contending with her sexuality. This paper will examine the tension between Doucouré, Netflix, and critics on whether the film is socially beneficial or dangerous. Set against Bataille's theory that normalization weakens taboo and limited transgression strengthens taboo, I will argue *Cuties* is intended to shock its audience, and if it does not, that even further emphasizes the problem of society hiding and ignoring child sexualization.

The sensitive coming-of-age film chronicles the clash between Amy's conservative family values and the allure of her liberal French classmates who are influenced by internet and media culture. Amy recently immigrated from Senegal to Paris with her traditional Muslim family. She projects disaffection with her demanding family and religious responsibilities and soon becomes drawn to a dance group at her school called the *Cuties*. Amy admires them and mimics their lifestyle. She learns skilled dance moves to impress the girls and, together, they

devotedly practice for an upcoming competition. Amy hides her new and more sexualized persona from her family but eventually becomes overwhelmed by conflicting expectations.

Initially, *Cuties* was well-received, and critics left generally positive reviews. The film premiered at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival where Doucouré won the Directing Award. However, controversy began with the U.S. premiere on Netflix and their advertisement poster. The artwork received furious backlash for sexualizing children. Netflix publicly apologized for inappropriately representing the film; nevertheless, disapproval of the film spread quickly on social media. Before the poster, the film was viewed as a stirring commentary rather than exploitive propaganda. Doucouré had not even seen the poster prior to its release, and upon becoming aware of its presence, she condemned it by saying the poster is “not representative of the film and especially its message” (Grater). However, the critiques of the sexual portrayal of preadolescent girls as inappropriate have not died down, and the actual message of the film is lost for some.

Much of the strong objection is a result of the nuanced and sensitive nature of the subject, which is overlooked or not understood by the critics. Prior to writing the film, Doucouré spent over a year interviewing adolescent girls to accurately represent their ideas. Through her research, she created *Cuties* to deliver the message that “young girls should have the time to be children, to enjoy their childhood, and have the time to choose who they want to be when they are adults” (Grater). Sexualization, far too often, appears as the only path to womanhood, and girls are prematurely force-fed or feel obligated to conform to this identity. Doucouré also has the goal of exposing the domineering influence of social media and internet culture and how it devours self-esteem. Not only is beauty equated to female value, but there is a very narrow and nearly unattainable standard for ‘achievement.’

As the film observes rather than judges the girls, the unbiased lens opens up the possibility of misreading the message as an endorsement of premature sexualization. In Senegalese-French and American society, childhood innocence is considered sacred, and laws exist to protect against its violation. Laws span across the majority of sexual activity and sexualization of minors, including the prohibition of child pornography. The U.S. law defines child pornography “as any visual depiction of sexually explicit conduct involving a minor” and does not “require that an image depict a child engaging in sexual activity” (U.S. DOJ). According to this definition, protestors argue that *Cuties* is in violation. In the film, the girls mimic and adopt sexualized behavior that they see on the internet and in explicit music videos. Their burlesque-style dance includes twerking and other sexually overt moves. They dress in revealing clothing that highlights their sexually charged body parts, such as breasts, buttocks, and legs. The cumulative portrayal is deemed an assault on childhood innocence.

Critics argue that the film should not be protected as ‘art.’ Republic Senator Tom Cotton argues film director and producers cannot use the title of “artist” to protect themselves nor their “gross depictions” of art (Cotton). Senator Cotton, as well as other Republic politicians, believe that Netflix should be held legally responsible to exclude child pornography or sexual exploitation of children from their platform. As Netflix continues to stream *Cuties*, Senator Cotton urges the Department of Justice to investigate and bring charges against Netflix for distributing child pornography. On October 8, 2020, almost exactly a month after *Cuties*’ release on Netflix, Tyler County District Attorney Lucas Babin announced Netflix’s indictment for “promotion of lewd visual material depicting a child” (Alexander). The Texas grand jury brought criminal felony charges against Netflix, who face fines up to \$20,000 if DA Babin proves that the film’s main purpose is to promote the sexualization of children (Alexander).

Critics interpret *Cuties* as a challenge to the schema— the order and harmony of society (Douglas 45). The film threatens society's view of children as asexual. DA Babin fears that transgressing against these expectations will insight disorder by potentially emboldening child sex offenders and increasing premature sexualization. Senator Cotton makes the moral argument that “the fact we must even engage in this argument surely implies the images are, at best, indecent” (Cotton). Yet, he fails to consider the implications of society not having any material to reference as “indecent.” Bataille would argue that our society “depends on the limited acts of transgression,” like *Cuties*, in order to maintain and even strengthen the taboo of sexualizing children (Bataille 68). The film is intended to incite discomfort and inspire the audience to engage in deep and meaningful discussions on the realities of premature sexualization of girls. The alternative of hiding the reality, which critics like Senator Cotton and DA Babin advocate, results in ignorance. Education and strong negative emotions enforce the undesirability of child sexualization, and overall, aids in society's responsibility of protecting their children.

The majority of the film's controversy is rooted in the fear of corrupting childhood innocence. Childhood is a period associated with purity and cleanliness, while sex and the world of sensuality is profane and dirty. In the minds of society, children and sex should be kept separate. The preteen girls in *Cuties* violate this ideal through sexualizing themselves, exploring the liminal stage between childhood and adulthood. Victor W. Turner outlines the liminal period as structurally invisible (Turner 235, 237). The preteen is invisible because “society's secular definition do not allow for the existence of a not-boy-not-man” or a not-girl-not woman (Turner 235). Amy and her friends must be either androgynous children or full, sexual adults. However, the liminal phase, including puberty, is essential in setting the framework for adulthood.

Child sexualization, whether self or externally induced, is arguably common. Bataille says limited transgression is needed to uphold a taboo, but excess transgression normalizes and diminishes it. As girls become less the sacred symbols of purity and innocence, they are more susceptible to suffer emotionally and physically. Sexualizing girls increase the likelihood of eating disorders, poor body and sexual self-image, low self-esteem, depression, shame, self-disgust, anxiety, and diminished sexual health (APA 3). Amy experiences difficulties with multiple of these. She compares and aspires for her 11-year-old self to look like the hyper-sexualized dancers in the explicit videos she watches. Her friends shame her for not being sexual enough and then again for being too sexual. She struggles to find balance between the expectations of her friends, family, religion, and society—all who seem to have an opinion on her expression of sexuality.

Children should have time to be children, and society should be held accountable for failing to protect this period of life. The controversy over *Cuties*' appropriateness demonstrates that there is still hope to restrengthen the taboo—the hyper-sexualization of children has not lost all of its shock value. As Doucouré intended to incite with her film, people—all over the world—are engaging in discussion of how we value women and femininity in our society. The ongoing criminal case against Netflix, although unfortunate regarding the misinterpretation of the film's message, inflames the ethical debate by drawing publicity. Society must reevaluate the expectations placed on women and the detrimental costs they inflict on the wellbeing of girl's self-worth and development. Realistically altering the values of society is a serious challenge. Children can be legally protected against sexualization, but the problem is deeply rooted in society and our infatuation with social media. *Cuties* proves one film can shock and agitate

society out of their complacency, and we must continue to harness popular mediums, like film and social media, to continue confronting child sexualization.

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