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The Sublimity of Darkness and Its Affective Transmission and Subduing in Picturebooks

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Abstract

Darkness intrigues, promises mysteries, provides anonymity, and creates atmospheres of both safety and danger. As such, it is a source of the sublime. This chapter uses Edmund Burke's separation of the beautiful and the sublime as a starting point to analyze affective differences in the presentation of darkness in picturebooks. By examining a selection of North American and European picturebooks dealing with the fear of darkness, we argue that some books seek to transmit the awesomeness of darkness, while many seek to curb its frightening sublimity via familiarity, anthropomorphism, cuteness, and humor. In choosing these kinds of representations, picturebooks adhere, variously, to discourses of risk, protection, and/or agency.

Introduction: Darkness, Affect, and the Sublime

Darkness is one of the most common sources of fear, but it also affects us in other ways: it intrigues, promises mystery, provides shelter, and offers anonymity. It crawls around the edges of light, creating a sense of coziness and safety. It cuts off our sense of sight and perhaps amplifies other senses like hearing. It makes us face the unknown and the limits of our perception. Darkness, in short, is a source of the sublime. In this chapter, we look at how the sublime power of darkness is transmitted and subdued in picturebooks produced for young readers. By analyzing a selection of books on the fear of darkness, we demonstrate that the sublimity of darkness is something that picturebooks may aim to transmit, though it is also carefully controlled.

‘Dark’ themes such as death and horror have risen to be of interest to a growing group of children’s literature scholars. Mia Österlund (2016), for example, discusses the darkness of Nordic picturebooks, while others have focused attention on dark subjects (e.g., murder) or figures (e.g., zombies, vampires).¹ The perspectives applied to these issues range from psychological and aesthetic to socio-historical, but the affective effect of darkness—the sublimity of darkness—remains less discussed. In fact, in discussions of children’s literature generally, the concept of the sublime has had little attention. One reason for this might be the fact that children’s books are seen as ordinary commodities rather than pieces of fine art or glimpses into sublime natural phenomena. Children’s culture is, after all, often (mistakenly) viewed as ‘lower’ (as in less refined, watered down, less intellectual, less aesthetically ambitious) and more practical (as in educational) than fine art or writing produced for adults (Nikolajeva 2005; Ylönen 2014). At the same time, some might argue that the sublime has not been addressed extensively in studies of children’s literature because the concept of the sublime is itself somewhat outdated and grandiose—its heyday having been the 18th century.²

The limited scholarship on the sublime in children literature necessitates some description of sublimity in order to discuss its relationship to darkness and affect theory. In what

¹ See Abate (2013), Buckley (2018), Clement & Jamali (2018), Jackson (2017), Jackson, Coats, & McGillis (2008), and Ylönen (2018).

² This is not to say it has not been addressed at all. In fact, Edward Gorey’s work (or, more precisely, his ‘lines’) have been described as sublime (Duff 2009), while Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows* has been discussed as an example of the ‘fantastic sublime’ (Sandner 1996). Alan Richardson (2010) has looked at Motherese, or the ‘language strange’ of Romantic poetry, as a kind of cognitive neural sublime; and Susanne Ylönen (2016) has discussed what she calls aesthetic sublimation (a sort of horror-tinged sublime-making not to be confused with Freudian sublimation) in horror fiction for children. Moreover, Debra Dudek (2018) discusses Edward’s and Bella’s relationship in terms of the beautiful and the sublime in her analysis of the vampire saga *Twilight*.

is perhaps the first extended musing on the sublime, *On The Sublime*³ the Roman-era author known as Longinus contended that “the mind is naturally elevated by the true sublime, and so sensibly affected with its lively strokes, that it swells in transport and inward pride, as if what was only heard now had been the product of its own invention” (Ashfield and de Bolla 1996: 23). Much later, philosopher Edmund Burke suggested that the sublime, while often prompted by the overwhelming, can be a source of delight, as long as one is able to engage in it from a safe distance (Burke 2015/1757: 31–34). Immanuel Kant, likewise, found great positive value in the sublime, arguing that its uplifting qualities connect to moral superiority and the human mind’s power for reasoning—a power that transcends both the limits of the senses and the limits of the imagination (2008/1790: 95, 99). Through these definitions, we begin to see that the sublime may be understood as an emotion or affect. Indeed, this sense of the sublime later stood at the center of much of the art during the Western Romantic period.

As an emotion, the sublime is powerful, often describing an experience characterized by a combination of fear and awe. It is fear turned into awe, or a paradoxical enjoyment of one’s own minuteness in the face of something vast, such as the unknowability of the universe. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (2015/1757), Edmund Burke contrasts it with the beautiful, which he considers a simpler, social pleasure. Because of its hard to describe nature, and the fact that it may be located somewhere between the object and the subject, the sublime might also be considered an affect. Like the beautiful, it may be used as an adjective that describes the character of an object, but at the same time, it describes an experience within a person’s body/mind. This aligns discussions of the sublime interestingly with the distinction recent scholars have made between emotion and affect. Edmund Burke emphasized the

³ There is some debate over the author of this work.

internalized rather than expressive experience of the sublime, which resonates with affect theory's claims that, unlike emotions or feelings, affects—as physical and sensory experiences—cannot be fully captured through the social expressions that we have for more recognizable emotive states (Massumi 1995: 88).

It is important to recognize here too that, while there are many competing strands of affect theory, a distinction between affects and emotions (and/or feelings) is often a starting point for research on the subject. One strand of research focuses on the pre-cognitive nature of affects (vs. the more cognitive aspect of emotion). Silvan S. Tomkins, for example, argues that affects reside in between stimuli and response-reactions as “unmodulated physiological reactions present from birth” (2008: xiv). This emphasis on the physiological nature of affects has since been augmented by theories that highlight the manner in which affects take part in sociological processes via embodied meaning making (Wetherell 2012: 2–4, 12). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, for example, argues that “[a]ffects can be, and are, attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects. Thus, one can be excited by anger, disgusted by shame, or surprised by joy” (2003: 19). This manner of attaching affects to people or things has also been discussed by Sara Ahmed, who emphasizes how affects can be linked to certain objects and mediated through cultural practices and discourses. Ahmed speaks of this practice of attaching affects as ‘stickiness’ and traces it especially in relation to racialized, gendered, and queered bodies that become othered via negative associations such as impurity and danger (2004a, 2004b, 2014). Teresa Brennan (2004), who, like Ahmed, predominantly focuses on the transmission of negative affects (e.g., anxiety and depression), also explores the transferability of affects, which, of course, may help account for how literary texts—like picturebooks—can offer affective experiences.

At the same time, the sublime stands as a more complex affect than the more unilaterally negative ones Ahmed and Brennan focus on, for, as noted, it has often been seen as edifying or philosophically uplifting as much as potentially overwhelming or crushing. This multilayered effect makes it an especially interesting one to focus on in relation to children's picturebooks. While the 'uplifting' aspects of the sublime seem to fit with many notions of what children's literature ought to do in children's lives, its other aspects raise questions about its 'appropriateness' for and its possibilities in texts for children. In particular, the sublime's almost paradoxical, simultaneous juxtaposition of fear and awe offer the potential to both transmit and curb fear of the unknown—especially when represented through darkness. Burke, in fact, asserts that darkness and obscurity are among the first sources of the sublime:

To make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes. Everyone will be sensible of this, who considers how greatly night adds to our dread, in all cases of danger, and how much the notions of ghosts and goblins, of which none can form clear ideas, affect minds which give credit to the popular tales concerning such sorts of beings. (Burke 2015/1757: 48).

Our study of picturebooks that address darkness and the fear of the dark highlights ways in which the format uses affective tonalities in order to transmit the sublime power of darkness. Ultimately we find that, in evoking feelings of fear and awe through darkness, most picturebooks induce the difficult pleasure that Burke has termed 'delight.' To some degree, our discussion aligns with studies of horror, as the sublimity of darkness is often used to evoke ideas of the

unknown and the threatening within the horror genre. The sublime has, in fact, been linked to experiences of horror at least since Burke's *Enquiry*. For example, in a much-quoted passage, Burke notes that "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite ideas of pain, and danger, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime" (2015/1757: 33). Yet, Burke also explains that many of the emotional and physical experiences that prompt the sublime affect (i.e., power, privation, vastness, difficulty, magnificence, light, suddenness, and loud sounds) can be turned into delight in the sublime experience. This delight is the pleasure of "pain threatened but avoided" (Burke 2015/1757: xv).

Children's fear of the dark—as represented in picturebooks—may be one such kind of 'delight.' Fear of darkness is one of the more common themes in picturebooks. This is not surprising as fear of darkness is an ordinary concern of children in everyday life,⁴ and children's fiction sometimes serves as a type of "emotional laboratory"—one in which emotions such as fear can be explored and played with (Mendonca 2012: 41, 55). However, the process may also be perceived as proceeding in the opposite direction. For example, Maria Nikolajeva notes that certain life experience may be needed when interpreting literary characters' unarticulated emotions, suggesting that a child cannot understand a fictional character's experience until they have had that experience themselves (2005: 163). Regardless of whether picturebooks are scripting or responding to emotions, though, the commonness of the fear of darkness in picturebooks draws attention to its perceived ubiquity in childhood.

Even more important, perhaps, is the fact that picturebook narratives focused on the fear of darkness were, in the books that we went through for this chapter, stories of children and

⁴ For instance, 24% of Finnish 5- and 6-year-olds are afraid of darkness and/or dark places (Lahikainen, Kirmanen, Kraav & Taimalu. 2003: 92).

childlike characters overcoming, outgrowing, or otherwise handling their fear. In the process, the affective power of darkness was often aestheticized, domesticated, and diffused. For our study, we looked up picturebooks that contained the word “dark” or “darkness” in their title on Amazon.com and our local libraries. In many of the available picturebooks the initial scariness of darkness was turned cozy or fun, its sublime power downplayed in an attempt to reassure the characters and/or implied young reader. Plot arcs were similar, usually beginning with the depiction of scared child characters and bedtime fears, shifting to strategies for the overcoming of fear, and concluding with fear turned into familiarity. Many also used a range of techniques to curb the intensity of the powerful affectivity of darkness, including anthropomorphizing, cute-making, adventure narratives, and humor.

From the initial overview, we chose a handful of books for closer scrutiny in order to highlight the different approaches that they adopt in their depictions of darkness. The selection of books includes six North American and European picturebooks. All of the books discussed have been published within the last ten years, and none of them has acquired the status of a classic yet. In addition to books that focus on transmitting the affects of creepiness and obscurity, we included books that favor a lighter or more humorous, anthropomorphic approach—an approach that we address as domestication or aestheticization. In our discussion, we depart from the most awe-inspiring and thus sublime-inducing narratives and move towards ones in which the affective power of darkness has been more forcefully subdued, although we note that most of the books discussed here combine both approaches to varying extent in their affective output. A look at the affective force of the presentations of darkness discloses that there is a tension between the induction and controlling of sublime intensities—a tension that we believe highlights conflicts

between discourses of protection and calls for the recognition of children's agency in children's literature more broadly.

In seeking to complement and expand the body of research focusing on 'dark' themes in children's literature, our analysis of literal darkness and the sublimity it evokes in the picturebook addresses questions such as 'How is the sublime force of darkness presented or bridled and harnessed in picturebooks?' and 'What is the performative, childhood-sculpting outcome of such harnessing moves?' The books at the center of the analysis are Chris Hadfield, Kate Fillion, and The Fan Brothers' 2016 *The Darkest Dark*, Lemony Snicket and Jon Klassen's 2013 *The Dark*, Hannele Mikaela Taivassalo and Lena Frölander-Ulf's 2009 *Mörkerboken* [*Twilight*], Javier Sáenz Pinillos and Alberto Villaverde Grela's 2016 *¿Dónde estas oscuridad?* [*Where Are You Darkness?*], Emma Yarlett's 2014 *Orion and the Dark*, Maudie Powell-Tuck and Alison Edgson's 2014 *Pirates Aren't Scared of the Dark!*.

Transmitting the Sublime: The Darkness of the Universe

The Darkest Dark by Chris Hadfield, Kate Fillion and The Fan Brothers (2016) offers a good example of how picturebooks transmit the sublimity of darkness. The story is based on the childhood memories of Chris Hadfield, a Canadian astronaut, and it transmits the sublimity of darkness with more empathy and texture than most of the other books in our set. Shortly summarized, *The Darkest Dark* focuses on curing the fear of darkness by contrasting the everyday darkness of bedrooms at nighttime with the awe-inspiring darkness of outer space. The story centers around a boy in the late 1960s named Chris. Chris is an aspiring astronaut but he is also afraid to sleep in his own room because it is "Very very dark. The kind of dark that attracts the worst sort of aliens." One evening, however, his whole family joins a gathering in the house

next door to watch the moon landing on TV. The boy is “amazed” by how dark it is on the moon (“Outer space was the darkest dark ever”), and that very night he turns off all the lights in his room to experiment with darkness. Doing this, he notices that he is less afraid of the alien-looking shadows than before. The reason for the change is described as emerging from his own awe: “He’d seen that the darkness of the universe was so much bigger and deeper than the darkness in his room.”

Affectively speaking, there are different kinds of darknesses depicted in the book. First, there is the approaching darkness that strips sceneries of their colors in the dusk period that follows the sunset. This affect of darkness-a-coming is delivered by a picture that portrays a house at a lakeside, surrounded by dark, shadowy trees as the setting sun colors the sky behind the scene purple. Some of the windows of the house are lit, which promises coziness, despite the looming darkness. In the beginning of the story, in other words, darkness is visually shut out of the house, inside of which a family is preparing for bed.

Later, however, the dark moves into the house as the lights are turned off. At this point, the only light source in the images is the moon. Its light falls in through the window of Chris’ bedroom and the reader is presented with an image of Chris covering under his blanket, while shadowy monsters with glowing eyes lurk around his bed. There is nothing cozy about this darkness and the blue moon light only emphasizes the obscurity of the room.

These two affects of darkness as a source of coziness and a cause of fear or anxiety repeat throughout the story. When Chris runs to the neighbor’s house on the evening of the moon landing, both affects are present. The wind ruffles the trees and there are shadowy creatures behind the house. Intimidating natural and imagined forces thus frame the scene. Yet, at the same time there is light streaming out of the windows of the house that the family is entering—a light that promises

warmth and shelter from the unbridled forces outside of the house. Light would not offer such coziness without the looming sublimity of darkness. [Image 1: Chris walking to the neighbor's house to watch the moonlanding in Chris Hadfield, Kate Fillion and The Fan Brothers *The Darkest Dark*]



As he watches the moon landing, Chris begins to “see the power and mystery and velvety black beauty of the dark.” In this, the affective force of darkness in *The Darkest Dark* begins to shift from fear to something else. The shift is not from fearsomeness to another simple emotion (such as contentment or joy), though. Instead, the picturebook seeks to affect the reader by describing the power and mystery of darkness. In doing so, the narrative structures a heightened affective engagement with its thematic of darkness. This kind of affective engagement with literary texts has been theorized as ‘disportation’ by Michael Burke (2010). It is a moment in which the act of reading (an affective-cognitive act) produces meaning for the reader. It is the affective moment that, even when the actual reading process stops, causes the story to linger in the reader’s mind, stretching out in a euphoric manner. Burke’s account of disportation mirrors many descriptions of the sublime experience, for the euphoric feeling he describes is often

accompanied by a sense of being overwhelmed or transformed—much as Chris feels in relation to darkness in *The Darkest of Dark* and readers may themselves feel in reading the partial pseudo-biography.

While *The Darkest Dark* exemplifies how the sublimity of darkness may be evoked even in picturebook format, it also raises the question of why anyone would want to try to transmit a sublime experience via a picturebook. To answer such a question, one might reference Edmund Burke's notion of delight. For him, the human mind exists mostly in a state of indifference. Most pleasures offer only quick and fleeting satisfaction, after which we relapse back into indifference. More difficult passions, such as the sublime, are different; as they involve a sort of positive pain, a "species of relative pleasure." Such passions do not only produce lingering after-effects but also delight that "accompanies the removal of pain or danger" (2015/1757: 31-32). Delight, then, explains why even children's authors may aim at transmitting sublimity. In depicting darkness as sublime, they depict it as intriguing and awesome instead of as merely frightening. Importantly, they also offer readers safety which makes the terror delightful. For as Burke notes, the sublime delights us only when danger and pain are experienced from a certain distance and with certain modifications (Burke 2015: 34). In the case of picturebooks, the medium itself already offers a safe distance, as the book object may be closed at any time. But the fear and danger aspects are essential to the transmission of sublimity, as will be elaborated on in the next section on gothic darkness.

Gothic Darkness and the Affective Transmission of Fear

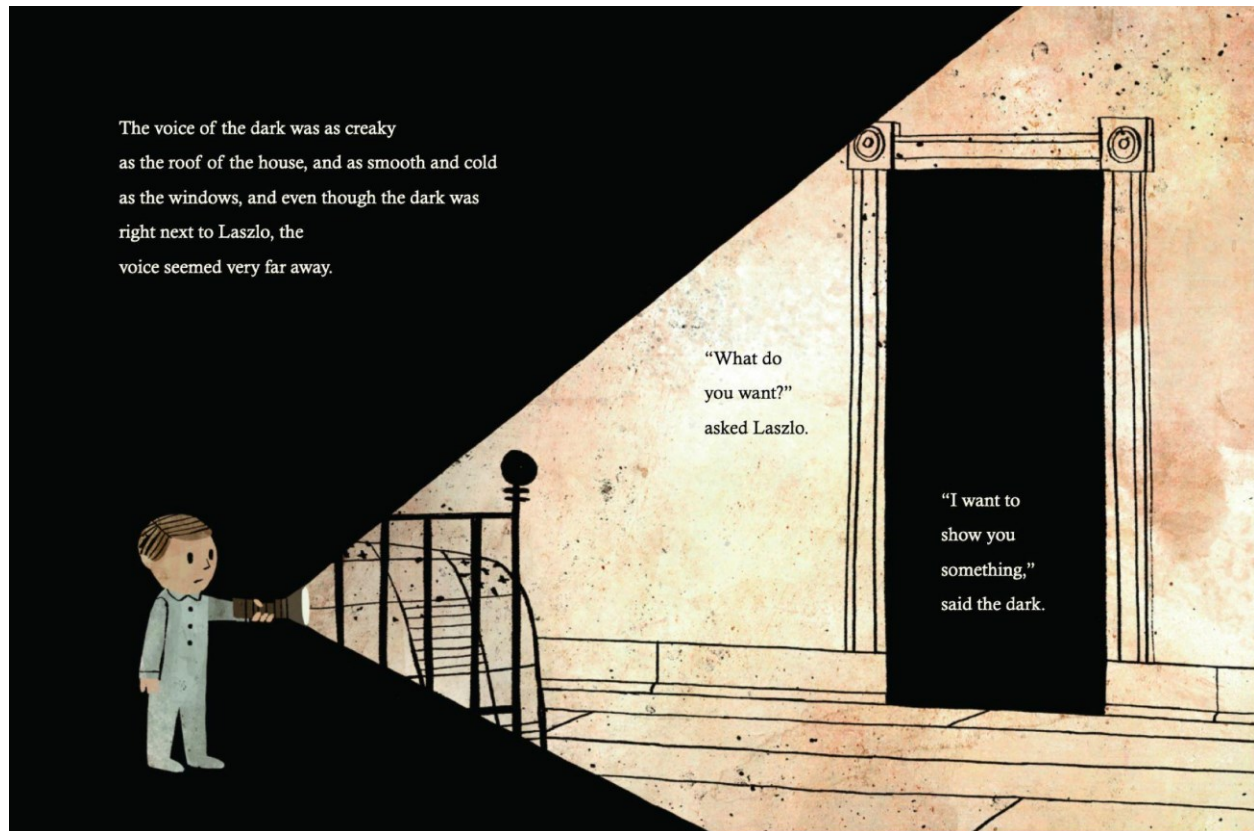
Darkness and the sublime are a mainstays of horror fiction. Allegedly, writers of the Gothic novel have regularly consulted Burke's *Enquiry* (2015/1757), treating his empirical list of

causes of the sublime as a “storehouse of approved and guaranteed terrors” (Morris 1985: 300).

In our book set, there are two books that visibly adhere to the gothic tradition: American Lemony Snicket and Jon Klassen’s *The Dark* (2013) and Finnish Hannele Mikaela Taivassalo and Lena Frölander-Ulf’s *Mörkerboken* (2009). In these books, darkness is formless and danger-evoking. Both make use of a deep black color that bleeds over the edges of the books, inviting immersion.

The Gothic bent of Snicket and Klassen’s *The Dark* is already visible in the setting of the story: a gothic house, a “big place with a creaky roof, smooth, cold windows and several sets of stairs.” The narrative describes the actions and thoughts of a boy called Laszlo, who is afraid of the dark—an agentic, faceless entity that creeps around the house during the day (“hiding,” “sitting,” and otherwise “spending its time”) until the night comes. This half-personification is made even more ominous by a description of the dark’s patient nature: the dark would “[a]ll day long . . . wait in a distant corner . . . pressed up against some old, damp boxes” until the night, when it “went out and spread itself against the windows and doors of Laszlo’s house.” As the description mixes common accounts of ‘darkness spreading’ with a personifying approach, the book makes darkness seem like a supernatural entity or ghost of sorts.

The story properly begins one night, when Laszlo’s night light goes off. Suddenly, the dark is in his room, right next to him, addressing him directly. Its voice is “as creaky as the roof,” “as smooth and cold as the windows.” Although the dark has a voice, it is not embodied but rather is depicted by the pitch-black that covers the whole page except for a few sharply cut out areas, representing illumination from the beam of Laszlo’s flashlight. As the faceless, bodiless dark lures Laszlo into the basement in the middle of the night, encouraging him to “Come closer” and “Even closer,” gothic horror evocations abound. [Image 2: Laszlo follows the dark into the basement in Lemony Snicket and Jon Klassen’s *The Dark*]



But at the peak of suspension, the titillating atmosphere is flattened by an explanation, and the intense scariness of darkness falls apart. A narrative voice, words set in white on a black background, explains to Lazlo (and the reader) "You might be afraid of the dark, but the dark is not afraid of you. That's why the dark is always close by." It elaborates, noting the dark "peeks around the corner and waits behind the door" and observing how you can see it "up in the sky almost every night, gazing down at you as you gaze up to the stars." In other words, the dark is grand and enigmatic, but also domesticated by its closeness and everydayness as well as habits such as peeking. Adding to this, the narrative voice further minimizes the scariness of the dark by pointing out how all the dark places in the house have a purpose: The closet is there for the shoes to be put in; the creaky roof shields 'you' from the rain; and "without a set of stairs, you could never go down to the basement, where the dark spends its time."

The text thus alternates between depicting the dark as a natural phenomenon and as treating it as an agentic entity. Through this ambivalence, Snicket and Klassen's story retains a gothic bent not explicitly visible in most picturebooks on darkness. Although it includes a happy ending in which Laszlo, guided by the dark, finds a lightbulb in a chest of drawers in the basement, the dark that it depicts remains strange and faceless. The next morning, when Laszlo visits the dark in the basement, it does not answer anymore, but the bottom drawer of the chest of drawers is still open "so it looked like something in the corner was smiling." This ending restores some of the eeriness of the story, allowing darkness a kind of delicious, playful scariness rather than explaining its scariness away altogether. In this, *The Dark* differs starkly from books that seek to control or minimize the frightening sublimity of darkness via humor, anthropomorphizing, a focus on fun and excitement, and/or the use of light colors.

In its use of the sublimity of darkness, *The Dark* also marks itself as truly adhering to gothic conventions—unusual for a picturebook. The gothic sublime may be best described via a momentary lapse of reason as it gives way to imagination; it is subterranean dreamscape conjured up by the unconscious mind. In the field of psychoanalytic interpretations, this lapse has been described as "collective disempowerment" or an irresistibly attractive melancholy promised by "an overabundance of stimulation" (Mishra 2010: 154; Weiskel 2010: 157-158). The unsayable or unspeakable nature of this experience is also attended to by Julia Kristeva, who argues that the sublime has no object but rather is a cluster of meanings, colors, and words that carries one away, sweeping one beyond the things that one can see, hear, or think. (Kristeva 1982: 11-12). In other words, these accounts all mirror Burke's delineation of the sublime as a psychological experience rooted in encounters that cause uncertainty and confusion: "The ideas of eternity, and infinity, are among the most affecting that we have, and yet perhaps there is

nothing of which we understand so little, as of infinity and eternity” (Burke 2015: 50-51).

Snicket and Klassen’s *The Dark* leaves the reader sublimely uncertain and confused as to the nature of the dark. Darkness is at once a natural phenomenon (limitless, formless, not contained in an embodied form) and a character imbued with qualities such as patience and a human voice. Through this facelessness, the depiction becomes affective and obscure in a gothic sense, despite the explanations of benign purpose given at the end of the story. Hence, the narrative excites admiration and fascination, fueled by a sense of danger and mystery.

Hannele Mikaela Taivassalo and Lena Frölander-Ulf’s picturebook *Mörkerboken* (2009) both parallels and adds to what *The Dark* shows about the picturebook format’s dark sublime possibilities. Like *The Dark*, *Mörkerboken* uses gothic imagery and embraces darkness as something that does not need to be eliminated in order to become pleasurable. Unlike Snicket and Klassen’s more realistic, contemporary setting, though, Taivassalo and Frölander-Ulf’s approach aligns with the fairy tale traditions of castles, princesses, and the dark woods as it tells the story of Princess Small, who lives in a castle with her treasurer and quite enjoys the dark stormy nights such as the one on which the story begins. The Princess’s calm is shattered, though, as her treasurer’s anxiety starts affecting her. The treasurer, a nosferatu-like creature, is worried about the dark, the storm, and possible thieves and monsters outside of the locked doors of the castle. Yet, as the narrative soon reveals, the treasurer is actually only using the evocation of risks as a rhetorical means to control the princess. [Image 3: The treasurer evokes fears Hannele Mikaela Taivassalo and Lena Frölander-Ulf’s *Mörkerboken*]



In a turn of events that celebrates the active, participatory force, and freedom of the child character, Taivassalo and Frölander-Ulf's princess breaks free from the treasurer's grip by opening all the doors of the castle and by running into the dark woods, where she finds a sick character called Poor to take care of. In doing this the princess embraces the darkness of the woods, breaking through the wall of fears crafted by the treasurer.

The primary message of Taivassalo and Frölander-Ulf's story seems to be that one fears what one does not know (or, that with wealth comes worry). The story suggests that such fears can be overcome by welcoming the unknown and non-material. One of the most interesting features of the story, though, is the fact that it acknowledges how fear can be affectively spread via risk speech. The story uses well-known gothic fairy tale tropes (such as the menace of the dark, stormy night) to evoke feelings of fear and unsafety, but at the same time, these evocations are exposed as means of manipulation, which can be resisted through courageous action and

caring for others. The story, thus, interestingly combines traditional, fairy tale like features with contemporary issues and approaches that focus on the affective transmission of fears and worries and the agentic traits of children, who may actually be braver than adults in not having already absorbed the discourses of risk and looming danger.

This attention to the discursive transmission of fear and risk creates distance and teaches readers how they can shield themselves from affective manipulation. As a consequence, *Mörkerboken* manages to introduce young readers to gothic tropes while simultaneously installing a belief that these are merely aspects of stories—stories thought up and shared in order to evoke delightful experiences such as fear, excitement, and wonder. In this, the book enacts Burke’s claims about darkness becoming—rather than being—frightening by association: “having once associated the ideas of ghosts and Goblins with darkness; night ever after becomes painful and horrible to the imagination.” (2015/1757: 117). *Mörkerboken* draws on such existing imaginative associations, but it also sheds light on the processes which create such associations. Thus, it reminds readers that these associations may also be undone. In this, we see a means through which the picturebook as a format is able to control the affective transmission of sublimity—perhaps making it more ‘child appropriate’ but without diminishing it in an affective sense.

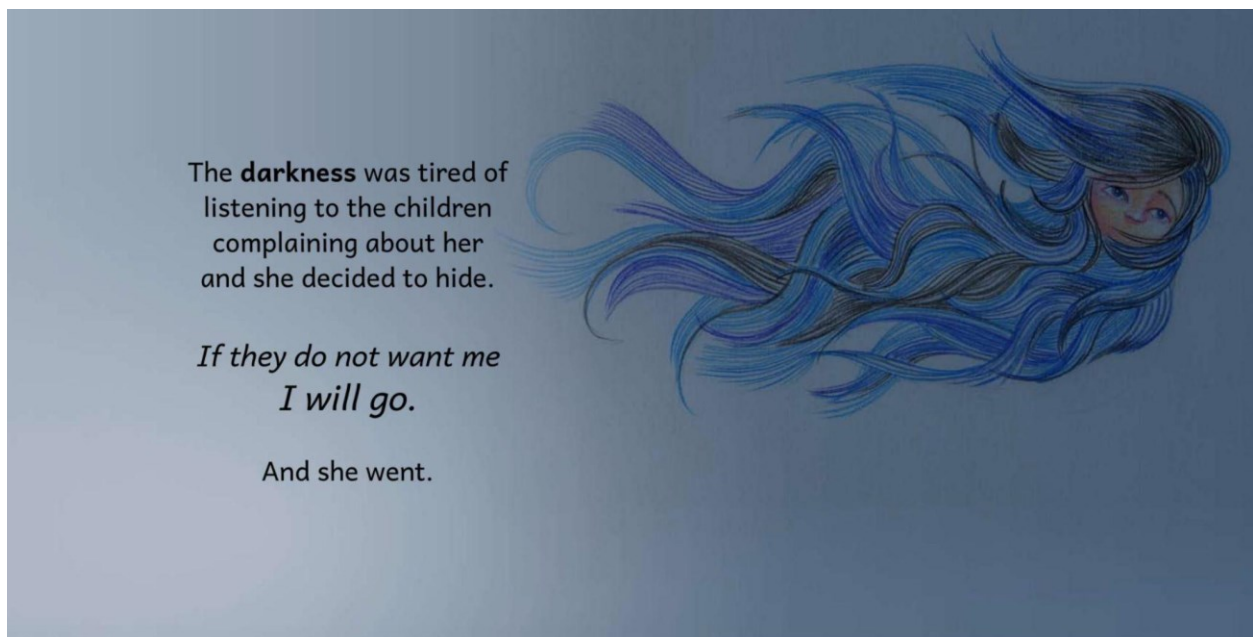
Darkness Aestheticized through Light colors, Anthropomorphism, Cuteness, Adventure Narratives and Humor

The Darkest Dark, *The Dark*, and *Mörkerboken* all show that the affective force of darkness is, by some authors, considered worth transmitting in its full, fearsome sublimity. Yet even the most awe-inspiring and gothic narrative features of darkness are often somewhat

softened in the picturebook format. In this chapter, we refer to these acts of softening as aestheticization. Following a narrow understanding of aesthetics, aestheticization may be regarded as a sort of beautification. And beauty, following Burke's arguments, may be used to evoke a less affective pleasure response that contrasts the powerful effects of the sublime. Instead of evoking the limitless, awesome, and dangerous nature of darkness, beautification strips darkness of its power to overwhelm us by deconstructing its dangers and illuminating its obscurity. To Burke, beauty resides in all things small, smooth and delicate (2015/1757: 91-94, 121-127). His attention to "agreeable" physical qualities and mild color as causes of beauty (2015/1757: 94-95) provides further background to our claim that aestheticization can be a means to flatten the deep and to give limitless ideas palpable form so that they can be neatly handled. This sort of form-giving or flattening may be achieved by offering knowledge, as we saw in the case of Snicket and Klassen's *The Dark* and Taivassalo and Frölander-Ulf's *Twilight*, but light colors, anthropomorphism, cuteness, adventure narratives and humor are also much used to this end in picturebooks.

For example, in Javier Sáenz Pinillos and Alberto Villaverde Grela's *¿Donde estas oscuridad?* darkness is anthropomorphized through the depiction of a creature (pronoun 'she/her') that floats in the air. Her face expresses "gentle and amiable qualities" in a manner that echoes Burke's qualifications of beauty (2015/1757: 95). Pinillos and Grela attribute human mental states to this figure and the story begins with her becoming insulted by an exclamation of dislike. Tired of listening to children who are afraid of her, Pinillos and Grela's anthropomorphic rendition of darkness decides to leave and hide: "If they do not want me I will go." At first, the children are shown as being happy about the absence of darkness. But soon enough, her absence affects their sleep and eventually pushes the whole world into a crisis. The forests get sick,

people crash into each other, and eventually the most powerful adults (who all happen to be bold, old men) come together to look for darkness. They look everywhere (underground, in the ocean, and in space), but all the places that used to be dark are now bathed in light. Only when darkness, who has locked herself into a box, becomes bored and lonely hiding, does the world become ordered again. [Image 4: Darkness decides to hide in Javier Sáenz Pinillos and Alberto Villaverde Grela's *¿Donde estas oscuridad?*]



There are several things to analyze in this book, among them the way in which anxiety replaces fear as the main affect of the story, or, the manner in which darkness is depicted as necessary and benevolent rather than dark and menacing.⁵ However, read through the feelings elicited by the story and the affects transmitted by it, what stands out is the way the book tones down the sublimity of darkness. The main source of this is the book's light color palette. Even

⁵ The latter reading could apply a critical feminist approach and compare Pinillo's story with myths in which darkness is depicted as a feminine goddess or an evil Northern force (such as the Greek mythology of Nyx or the Witch of the North in the Finnish national epic Kalevala).

the beginning and the end, which depict a world affected by darkness, are relatively light, consisting of blue-grey tones and tone-darkened pastels. Conventionally, this light coloring should not evoke the fear and awe experience of sublimity since, following Burke, soft and cheerful colors are “unfit to produce grand images” (2015/1757: 67). Indeed, along with the low modality of the drawings, the color scheme generates a rather more familiar mode of expression that most people today know to expect from picturebooks. And familiarity, according to Burke, “affects us but little” (2015/1757: 51).

The story of *Where are you Darkness?*, then, generates an aestheticized, domesticated approach to darkness in its light color scheme and anthropomorphism. In terms of the latter, it is useful to study the domestication achieved through anthropomorphism in more detail.

Anthropomorphism may be regarded as a sort of animism. If animism is the attribution of intentional action and life to objects and natural phenomena, anthropomorphism adds human-likeness to this attribution. In general, anthropomorphizing makes things more meaningful and pleasing to humans—particularly in instances that elicit strong or negative feelings by, for example, evoking danger. While theories such as Jean Piaget connect animism (and, as an extension, anthropomorphism) to beliefs that people, especially children, hold about the world, the practice of assigning human-likeness to non-human objects and phenomena may also be considered as a sort of interaction. Gabriella Airenti (2018) makes this claim by writing that anthropomorphizing establishes a relationship or communicative situation with a non-human entity: “one can speak to, complain, scold, justify, compliment, etc. any entity that he or she intends to address. The motivations may be multiple, such as uncertainty, fear, desire, hope, etc., but the format is the only one that humans know how to use to influence others” (2018: 8). Considering this, it is easy to see how anthropomorphizing may be used to produce a sense of

control. Thus, anthropomorphizing darkness in picturebooks—as seen in *The Dark* and *¿Donde estas oscuridad?*—gives readers a chance to address their fear of darkness by entering into dialogue with it.

Picturebooks also—and perhaps even more commonly—anthropomorphize animals, toys, and objects. In contemporary children’s culture, anthropomorphism is usually complemented by cute-ification, which then becomes a further means of aestheticization or domestication, as cuteness turns even frightening beasts enjoyable. As a rhetorical or discursive choice, cute-making casts its objects as “diminutive and the nonconsequential,” and affects us by evoking tenderness (Ngai 2010: 950) and “superflat” aesthetics (Yano 2013: 254–256).⁶ When applied to stories, such cute-ifying reveals a strategy for controlling darkness’ affectivity—even when darkness itself is not anthropomorphized.

Maudie Powell-Tuck and Alison Edgson’s *Pirates Aren’t Scared of the Dark!* (2014) exemplifies this process of aestheticizing well as it controls frightening elements largely via cuteness. In Powell-Tuck and Edgson’s story, darkness is portrayed as a play environment that the main character, a teddy bear wearing a pirate hat, finds attractive and fun until his imagination runs wild and casts sounds in the darkness as dangerous and frightening. Cuteness presents itself immediately in the teddy bear character, who might be also considered a tamed modification of a bear. The pirate theme, visible in the iconic pirate sign of a skull and two crossed bones that decorate the main character’s hat, here evokes adventure and pretend play rather than crime, death, and violence. The end of the story emphasizes this even more as the

⁶ Artist Murakami coined the term “superflat” to refer to a cultural flattening (or the diminishing distance between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture) and the general two-dimensionality of society, customs, and art in 21st century Japan. The superflat aesthetic has subsequently been linked to political avoidance-strategy and anesthetization (Yano 2013: 256).

mother bear's calming presence reminds all readers that even play pirates need to be comforted by their mothers in frightening situations. This manner of talking about the pleasures of darkness by offering the reader a soft, furry perspective on it, effectively shifts attention from the fearsome unknowability of darkness to play-spaces where bears become teddy bears and where a mother's comforting presence is never far away.

Pirates Aren't Scared of the Dark!'s use of the cute to diminish the scariness of darkness confirms Ngai's claims that, in our moment, cuteness is one of the new aesthetics of inconsequentiality that contrast the moral and political resonances of the beautiful and the sublime (2015). It may be found everywhere in contemporary culture, ranging from speech to fashion, but it strongly connects to children's culture and the idea of childlike innocence (Cross 2004). In anthropomorphism, the inanimate, abstract, or invisible become something that can be communicated with. In cuteness, the anthropomorphized gets domesticated, toning down wildness. In the case of *Pirates Aren't Scared of the Dark!*, moreover, it becomes a means to tame the sublime effects of darkness, as the story focuses on the cute little feelings of a cute little character.

Next to light colors, anthropomorphism and cuteness, picturebooks also tame the sublimity of darkness through the use of adventure narratives and humor. While these taming measures appear to some degree in previously discussed books, they are most pronounced in Emma Yarlett's 2014 *Orion and the Dark*. This book shows quite vividly how adventure narratives control the sublime frightfulness of darkness through, amongst other things, the activities and fun involved in them. These activities work to set characters (and maybe readers as well) free from the "being suspended" part of sublimity, from the being struck and muted or dwarfed by the immenseness of sublimity (Burke 2015/1757: 58, 68–69).

In Yarlett's story, adventurousness mingles with an active, scientific approach as the story's main character, a boy named Orion, recounts his battle with his fear of darkness by listing inventions that he has tried: an everlasting light bulb, night vision goggles, eating a lot of carrots, and painting his room with neon paint. The real adventure starts, though, when the Dark—a plump figure with a rather jolly appearance—pops by in Orion's bedroom. Together, Orion and the dark explore the “shadowy and scary bits of the house,” somewhat like in Snicket and Klassen's story, discussed above, but with the difference that, in *Orion and the Dark*, the Dark is a friendly physical companion, whose facial expressions reveal that he sympathizes with Orion as they visit scary places such as the wardrobe, the plughole of the bathtub, and the basement. In fact, visiting these places with the Dark makes them fun. The bathtub, for example, turns into an opportunity for ice hole fishing, and the basement becomes a place to play with casting shadow animals on the wall. [Image 5: Orion and the Dark explore the dark places of the house in Emma Yarlett's *Orion and the Dark*]



The scary sounds of the night are furthermore revealed as “dad’s snore” or the chimneys whistling. The grand finale of their adventure takes the characters to outer space “the awful place where the DARK is DARKEST of all.” And it is there, in the depths of the universe, that Orion suddenly “knows” that, when he stops worrying and being scared, the dark becomes “fun,” “interesting,” and “magical.” This is the only reference to the sublimity of darkness. For the most

part, the story focuses on action and activities that anchor the characters in the material world—in the everydayness of being—instead of letting them immerse themselves in the affective, philosophically fruitful, even existential state induced by the sublime.

Humor is also an obvious means to control fear in *Orion and the Dark*. It is prevalent from the beginning when darkness is mentioned amongst a list of fears that includes storms, heights, girls, and haircuts. The incongruous juxtaposition of silly fears (girls, haircuts) with more common, sublime causes of fear (storms, heights, and monsters) minimizes the affective effect of the latter. Humor also becomes visible in the manner in which the chubby figure of the Dark literally “drops” in through Orion’s skylight window, almost getting stuck on the way and thus undermining any semblance of stealth or real threat. In *Orion and the Dark*, the frightening character of darkness is thus turned into something entertaining via action and humor. If the sublime turns fear into awe, this approach turns fear into adventure and amusement. As such, it does not transmit sublimity, but instead makes darkness its playground, a mere backdrop to happenings that emphasize fun.

Being Brave and Staying Safe: Darkness in the Context of Risk, Protection and Agency

As Edmund Burke notes, “It is a common observation that objects, which in reality would shock”—such as darkness—“are in [other kinds of] representations, the source of a very high species of pleasure” (2015/1757: 38). He chides the inquiries of his time for paying too much attention to the faculty of reasoning and for neglecting the feelings that arise from our bodies and minds, and he promotes the sublime, although painful and striking, as the most affective source of a kind of pleasure called delight. With this in mind, and as we pay attention to the transmission of sublimity in the picturebook format, we are prompted to remember that darkness

affects us in many ways, and that these affectations are not merely painful or uncomfortable, but they may also be experienced as delightful. While it may seem like a good manner to control or counter the frightfulness of darkness—especially in consideration of the picturebook’s young audience—aestheticizing regulation may result in a flattening of the deep, affective sublimity of darkness and its potential to produce delight.

While, as Michael Burke reminds us, there is no guarantee that a story will be experienced as powerful by a reader—that any sort of “disportation” will occur (2010: 249)—we can probably agree on the fact that darkness as such is a very affecting theme. Whether it is the awe-inspiring vastness of the universe, the horrifying obscurity of gothic buildings and dark woods or the atmosphere of the coziness of a warm, brightly lit home or a campfire surrounded by darkness, darkness is a moving, affective topic that plays with the transmission of sublimity. Picturebooks explore it in relation to outer space and space travel and in the tradition of gothic horror stories, but it also plays a role in fairy tales and in ordinary bedroom settings. As the books discussed here show, the sublimity of darkness also mingles with other affects such as anxiety, curiosity, and intrigue. Often, it evokes a sense of mystery and unknowability.

Like all children’s literature, picturebooks on darkness balance between different discourses that determine how we view children and childhood. These discourses include ones focused on risk and protection, as well as others more interested in child agency. For those concerned most with a notion of the child as vulnerable, picturebooks must negotiate the extent to which they transmit fear. That is probably why safety and coziness feature so strongly in picturebooks on darkness. Picturebooks that minimize or undercut or diffuse the sublimity of darkness are most often trying to protect a particular idea of the child and childhood. In comparison, picture books that emphasize the danger and frightfulness of darkness seem to not

only tap into the sublime power of darkness but they also suggest a more agential child, offering child characters who are portrayed as brave and resourceful.

Our analyses, hence, suggest that picturebooks' use of affective tonalities are connected to discourses of risk and agency. The picturebooks analyzed here highlight the fact that discourses of risk and danger can be countered by approaches that celebrate agency, enjoyment, and bravery. A right amount of danger or terror is, in fact, necessary if one wants to portray braveness. This is visible in the manner in which picturebooks on darkness use the sublimity factor to affectively "move" their readers to take action and to face darkness—to become an astronaut, to explore the closet and basement, to seek darkness—instead of running away from it. Notably, while the child characters in the books that we have discussed are mostly alone in their battle against the fear of the dark, the stories center on their capacity to deal with their fears rather than on their vulnerability. The childhood sculpting outcomes of these manners of transmitting sublimity thus solidify the ideas of children as being both in need of care and protection and as being strong agents within their everyday lives and the struggles with fear that might occur.

To us, it seems that the will to transmit the sublimity of darkness is motivated by the desire to teach children how to cope with the everyday fears related to darkness. The books discussed here also try to provide a positive experience of darkness by attaching a sense of adventure and mystery to it. This stance calls attention to the possibly edifying aspect of the sublime experience. Next to being pleasurable, the experience of sublime darkness may also be transformative, in that it invites readers to think about the way in which our sense experiences shape our understanding and reveal its limits. In this, picturebooks dealing with the fear of the

dark ultimately deal with more than just one simple emotion (fear). They transmit a whole range of affects—many of which can be approached via theories of the sublime.

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