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# 'Childish' beyond Age: Reconceptualising the Aesthetics of Resistance

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## Abstract

This chapter explores the concept of 'aesthetic sublation' – a performative mode of meaning making that seeks to degrade its object (Ylönen, 2016; Korsmeyer, 2011). Here, the phenomenon of aesthetic sublation is discussed as a form of resistance. Moreover, it is related to intergenerational negotiations through cases in which the labels of 'childish' and 'horrific' or 'nasty' converge. The chapter offers a review of how resistance is conceptualized in, for example, childhood studies, aesthetics and research on popular culture and it asks what can be gained by reconceptualising these instances as aesthetic sublation.

## Keywords

children's culture – resistance – aesthetics – childish – nasty

## 1 Introduction

Let us consider some examples related to the consumption and creation of so-called 'low' culture: The enjoyment and creation of content deemed inappropriate or insulting or dirty and trash. Turning high standards into corrupted, humorous interpretations that entertain a selected group. Managing awesome, overpowering things and the fear or admiration that they cause by a willful lowering and concretising. These are examples of activities that humans in general and children in particular engage in. In them, things that are not under an individual's power are managed and controlled through reinterpretations, aesthetically. But how do we conceptualize this form of aesthetic control or management?

This article explores the methodological potential of concepts through a discussion of the concept of 'aesthetic sublation' – a performative mode

of meaning making that seeks to control its object via a willful lowering (Korsmeyer, 2011; Ylönen, 2016). Here, the phenomenon is discussed as a form of resistance. Moreover, it is related to intergenerational negotiations through cases in which the labels of 'childish' and 'horrific' or 'nasty' converge. The questions addressed range from a broader "Why do we need to discuss and to revise concepts?" to more specific ones, such as "What *new* does the concept of aesthetic sublation (as a conceptualisation of resistance) offer in relation to concepts such as the grotesque and the abject, or less well-known terms such as stuplimity and ket aesthetics?"

The approach of the paper is rooted in research on horror in children's culture. Horror is often controlled through aestheticisation (beautification) and cutification (cute-making) in adult-produced children's culture. Children themselves, however, often resort to a carnivalising or an aesthetically sublating approach that seeks to control possibly frightening experiences through interpretations and re-iterations that focus on disgust and humor. This approach resists aestheticisation and counters the practice of cutification, and it does not adhere to discourses that label unwanted content 'trash' either. Rather, it is the playful appropriation of trashy things in a socially meaningful and perhaps 'childlike' (as in open to new interpretations in a positive sense) manner. As such it is also associated with lack of respect and resistance to social norms and, thus, negative 'childishness'. This same label of 'childishness' is also used to discredit similar approaches in adult culture or culture in general.

The dichotomy between childishness and childlikeness mirrors the discourses on what is suitable for children or desirable behavior in children or adults. As such, it directly relates to the UNCRC's Article 31, which states the child's right to engage in play and recreational activities as long as they are "appropriate to the age of the child" (United Nations, 1989). This appropriateness is, of course, under constant negotiation in day-to-day interactions between children and their caretakers and it naturally gives rise to many acts of resistance. Not all of this resistance is aesthetic, but some of it is. In order to outline the phenomenon, it is useful to look at the terminology used in relation to it.

When describing age and generation related resistance, people often talk of the terrible two's, of teenage rebellion, and of whole generations that embrace certain countercultural aesthetics. In the field of aesthetics, resistance may also be described through, among others, terms such as carnivalism, and the embracing of abject and grotesque content and expression - with case examples ranging from offensive humor to punk aesthetics. I claim that there are similarities between the above-mentioned forms of age and generation related

resistance and the aesthetic concepts applied to things that are considered nasty and distasteful. I also argue that we need a new concept to discuss the aesthetics of resistance. Many of the available concepts are too heavily bound to certain theories, fields or cases to sufficiently bridge disciplinary borders and to fully encompass the whole richness of the aesthetics of resistance. I am conscious of the fact that the concept that I am suggesting has its drawbacks as well, but I would like to offer the ideas discussed in this paper as an example of conceptual work that still needs attention within aesthetics more broadly and the study of children's culture in particular.

Content-wise, this article traces points in which aesthetic value statements related to disgust and disapproval co-occur with age-related categorisations and alternative peer-cultural meaning making. It is somewhat like a review article that looks at how resistance is conceptualized in childhood studies, aesthetics and research on popular culture and it asks what can be gained by reconceptualising these instances as aesthetic sublation. The examples brought forth in the paper thus include references to (1) previous research focusing on resistant, aesthetic behavior within childculture studies, (2) references to conceptualisations of resistance within developmental-psychology and counterculture research and (3) examples of the methodological framing that I undertook in my own research of child cultural horror.

## 2 Developing New Concepts

Concepts may be understood as units of knowledge or as mental representations (Blunden, 2014; Margolis & Laurence, 2014), tools that people use to communicate ideas. They 'look like words' and are used to 'facilitate discussion' (Bal, 2002, pp. 22–23) and most research guidebooks would advise the graduate student or aspiring researcher to define the concepts in use in a clear and, if possible, unambiguous manner – or, at least to offer a 'working definition' of the concepts in use. As Geoffrey Harpham notes:

As a practical matter we commonly adhere to several tacit assumptions about ideas: that they can be clearly expressed; that they have kernels or cores in which all is tidy, compact and organized; and that the goal of analysis is to set limits to them, creating sharply defined, highly differentiated, and therefore useful concepts. We assume that, however complex an idea may be, it is essentially coherent and that it can most profitably be discussed in an orderly way. (Harpham, 2006, pp. xxi–xxii)

Whereas some words, like 'childhood' or 'children's culture' may be used as both concrete time-, space- or material-related everyday words and as abstract, theoretical concepts, others are created from the start as theoretical tools, as generalisations of observations or theoretical work that has been done in relation to certain phenomena (Metsämuuronen, 2011, pp. 50–52; Hirsijärvi et al., 2009). The concept of agency, for example, is a purely abstract or theoretical notion and the same applies to the notion of resistance - or, indeed the idea of aesthetics. And of course even seemingly arbitrary concepts can be deconstructed and theorised in ways that produce fruitful conversations and even paradigm shifts (as the field of childhood studies - deconstructing the notion of childhood - exemplifies) (James & Prout, 1997). Concepts, thus, have methodological potential beyond their common or working definitions.

The concept of aesthetic sublation is an example of the more abstract kind. It denotes a process of degradation and control, but it also designates the serious, philosophical potential that disgusting matters have. The concept 'sublate' was first used in relation to aesthetics by Carolyn Korsmeyer in her 2011 book *Savoring disgust: The foul and the fair in aesthetics*. For Korsmeyer, the negative experience of disgust can be turned into the positive experience of the 'sublate' just as the negative experience of terror can be turned into positive awe in the experience of the sublime. Borrowing the term from the field of alchemy, where it denotes the transition of matter from gaseous to solid form, Korsmeyer argues that the concept 'sublate' can be regarded as the opposite of sublimation (or the sublime) also in a metaphorical sense. Hence, the term sublate can be taken to refer to the magnetic pull that death and decay exercise over us, although they are disgusting (Korsmeyer, 2011, pp. 130–135).

When writing my doctoral dissertation, I found Korsmeyer's account of the sublate promising, as I was, at the time, trying to understand the lure of the nasty and ridiculous kinds of horror entertainment. These kinds of horror narratives were not pleasing in the simple, pleasurable sense of the beautiful (as, for example, aestheticised violence), nor did they fit into the category of the sublime (the lofty, philosophical, awe-inspiring over-whelmingness of things beyond the grasp of our senses). Rather, they were affiliated with the grotesque and the ugly, or with what has been theorised as abject in the wake of Julia Kristeva's influential account in her book *Powers of Horror* (Kristeva, 1982). Yet none of the established concepts such as the grotesque or the abject really seemed like the perfect counterpoint to the beautiful and the sublime. Perhaps this was due to the fact that the grotesque, to me, was too bound up with the literary and the art historical to be easily applied to the everyday production and consumption of disgusting entertainment (especially its performative

aspects), while the abject was too heavily indebted to a psychoanalytical framework. Furthermore, I felt like I could not select one of these concepts over the other, as they both have their advantages - and using both would have unnecessarily divided the category that I saw as the third part of the three-partite heuristic model of sublime-beautiful-nasty.

This is why I decided to adopt the term 'sublate' - or my own, corrupted version of it as 'aesthetic sublation'. As I saw it, this new, relatively unqualified term promised to be more malleable and, importantly, free from the heavy theoretical baggage that accompanies more established terms like the grotesque or the abject. Since I was leaning on Korsmeyer, I did not wholly invent the new term, but I did turn it into a more performative form, that emphasised the making-of aspect of deeming something disgusting. To me, the notion of aesthetic sublation exemplified how something like horror can be made 'dirty' and yet promising, discursively.

However, working with not-yet-established terms has its drawbacks as well. One of the most obvious problems with using newly produced terms and concepts is the fact that no one will know what you speak about if you do not provide an elaborate definition or description of the concepts while you use them. This can distract the reader from any analysis that you attempt to make while using the concept. In the case of 'aesthetic sublation' one may, furthermore, run the specific risk of people confusing the term with the Hegelian concept of 'Aufhebung', which often gets translated as 'sublation' in English. To Korsmeyer, this confusion does not seem dangerous, as the Hegelian concept of *Aufhebung* refers to two contrasting things or ideas being resolved by a new idea that both preserves and transcends them (Korsmeyer, 2011, pp. 130–131; "Aufhebung", n.d.), which resonates with Korsmeyer's understanding of the sublate as something philosophically productive. Yet, if one wants to read the process of aesthetic sublation as a willful lowering or degradation of things that might otherwise be experienced as beautiful or frightening, the conflation with *Aufhebung* (which carries connotations of lifting up and suspending) might not be as desirable.

A further, more general danger is the fact that by coming up with a new term, one might actually just be referring to the same things as before by a new name, without actually providing new or significant insights to the matter. After all, the sublate is not the first term to appear in theoretical musings as a counterpoint to the sublime. Victor Hugo already famously claimed that the grotesque provided respite from the beautiful and the sublime that had previously dominated the field of art (Hugo, 1827/2001). And in 2005 Sianne Ngai suggested that the term 'stuplimity', a synthesis of boredom and shock, could

be used as 'twentieth-century mutation' of the affect of the sublime (Ngai, 2005, pp. 5, 9, 248–297). This is probably why all textbooks on methodology warn one from getting too creative in the process of academic writing.

Yet there are fields in which reinventions of vocabulary, or corruptions/alterations of existing terms, are more common than in others. The field of philosophy is a good example. Some texts produced within the field of philosophy are nearly untranslatable, because the language in them has been cleverly manipulated to evoke new ideas by twists of words that do not evoke the same ideas in another language. Martin Heidegger's philosophical use of the term *Dasein* presents a case in point, as has been noted by Risto Niemi-Pynttäri (2000) who tackles the problems of translation in relation to this particular concept in his text 'Kuinka Dasein kääntyy?' (How to translate Dasein?). And of course new concepts are invented in any field, whenever developments in science or our understanding of the world call for a renewed vocabulary. What seems important for the success of a new concept, is that it should be evocative enough to 'stick' affectively (Ahmed, 2004; Heath & Heath, 2007). Following Dan and Chip Heath's ideas on stickiness (Heath & Heath, 2007), one could argue that a sticky concept is one that evokes the right connotations and meets the right needs (turns up in the right place at the right time) and that is thus taken into use on a larger scale by people who feel that they need it. This does not mean that the concept needs to be clear or well-defined. In fact, a somewhat indefinite or vague concept may prove more sticky, as its level of abstractness might cover a greater area.

But how could one evaluate the potential of a new concept before applying it? To answer this question, I will go back to my own dissertation process and to the expectations that I had in regard to the new concept of the 'sublate'.

### 3 Dreaming up the Concept of Aesthetic Sublation

What I was searching for, at the time of my dissertation project, was a term that could serve as a third point in a heuristic model that would express the different approaches that people may adopt when creating and evaluating horror. I had characterised the other two parts as a sort of being-overwhelmed in the tradition of the sublime and as a sort of beautification or cutsification in the tradition of the aestheticisation of violence, but I was lacking a conceptualisation for the sort of control that comes in the form of ridicule and degradation. To speak of 'grotesque-making' or 'uglifying' seemed unhandy as none of these terms encompassed the peer-cultural promise of the phenomenon, and to resort to 'abjecting' seemed to evoke the motion of rejecting or

casting away, while there was definitely a sense of enjoyment and appropriation to this kind of behavior in the social valorisation of the bad and the nasty forms of horror that I had witnessed. 'Carnivalisation', in turn, did not fulfill the need, as it strongly connects to the celebratory, which was not always the case in approaches that resorted to this kind of ugly-making. Some of the ugly-making that I witnessed was definitely quite everyday and did not encompass the social role-inversions inherent in the carnivalesque, as the case of labeling some cultural products 'trash' exemplifies.

The sublate, then, came to me at a moment when I was looking for a tool, a concept that would help me build a theoretical and methodological framework for my study. Like the idea of aestheticisation, aesthetic sublation seemed to me a way of controlling the frightening. Yet, it also curiously overlapped with the sublime (or aesthetic sublimation, not to be confused with the Freudian definition of sublimation), in that it could tip into a direction that might be interpreted as frightening or alarming, which makes it a practice that can be used to shock 'outsiders'. As an example, one can refer to the peer- or sub-cultural appropriation of things considered 'trashy' or inappropriate by the mainstream (such as adults, or other more conventional people, people not part of a certain peer-, sub- or counterculture). This kind of appropriation can be observed in, for example, horror fandom (Hills, 2005) and the consumption of weird candies observed in children's culture (James, 1998). In both cases, a line can be drawn according to differing tastes: horror fans will attest to a taste for the nasty or the horrific, and children may prefer candies that toy with the improper (cannibalistic consumption of skull-shaped candy or eyeballs, or, the enjoyment of lollipops dipped in toilet-shaped containers of tasty powder). Next to these even the practice of drawing horns, moustaches or spectacles on celebrities and models in magazines may be considered as an example of aesthetic sublation. But how have these approaches been conceptualised in the above-mentioned fields of study: child and peer cultures?

#### 4 Forms of Resistance in and around Children's Culture

As said, the process of expressing enjoyment in the face of products that insult mainstream taste has been characterised as an act of resistance in both subcultures and children's culture. This can be explained by the Foucauldian notion of power relations, as resistance, for Foucault, was a way of self creation (Butin, 2001, p. 169). The link between resistance as self creation and aesthetics as a field devoted to taste can be exemplified by punk aesthetics. Like shock art, a punk attitude can be described as a manner of puncturing

“conformity’s protective balloon” (Wilson, 2002, p. 71), but it is notable, that this attitude often takes form in clothing and music - that is, aesthetics. When trying to relate this aesthetic stance to children’s culture, one might thus follow the ideas of Roger Scruton, who aptly notes that aesthetic judgement (which to him related to the beautiful) can be ‘experienced as an affliction’, ‘an intolerable burden’ of ideals and aspirations that are in sharp contrast to the ‘tawdriness of our improvised lives’. According to Scruton, child cultural appreciation of disgusting things can be explained by a desire to turn the expectations of niceness around:

The desire to desecrate is a desire to turn aesthetic judgement against itself, so that it no longer seems like a judgement of us. This is what you see all the time in children – the delight in disgusting noises, words, allusions, which helps them to distance themselves from the adult world that judges them, and whose authority they wish to deny. (Hence the appeal of Roald Dahl.) (Scruton, 2009, p. 184)

This delight that children take in trash has inspired some research, although none of it is very recent. In his article “‘Trash’ as a Barrier against the Adult World” Kaspar Maase (2002) discusses children’s movie screenings in pre World War I Germany. He suggests that children of the time used the emergent media constellations of ‘trash mag’ series and film as well as pop music to “mark out a territory in which they temporarily – liberated themselves from the duties and constraints of the adult world” and in which they evaded adult control and middle-class protection. In the pre WWI context studied by Maase, ‘filth’ denominated things that were not forbidden, but that were considered obscene, lewd or erotic and which thus represented a danger for the unsophisticated masses under the title ‘Volk’ (Maase, 2002, pp. 153–154). Margareta Rönnerberg (1990) takes up this same theme in a 1990’s Finnish context her book on the child cultural appropriation of trash, or, not-so-good children’s culture. Her argument can be placed in the context of the 1980’s TV violence debate and it represents an attempt to defend children’s rights and agency in an atmosphere of moral panic and amongst calls to protective measures that seemed to overlook children’s rights and agency. In short, she questions the adult ability to decide which child cultural products are good or bad while arguing that children have the right to determine what is good and interesting to them. Allison James’s term *ket aesthetic*, which she used to describe the above mentioned consumption of sweets, has likewise been recycled/re-used in discussions of the values of child cultural products such as the dislike that some parents faced in the case of Barney the purple dinosaur (Thompson,

2005), which proves that the phenomenon of culturally negotiating between children's and adults' differing tastes is itself a somewhat 'sticky' a theme, even if the concepts used to describe the aesthetics of resistance related to it do not really 'stick' enough to become big mainstream concepts.

In order to understand how large the variety of concepts applied to child cultural resistance actually is, one would, however, also have to look at how resistance itself has been theorised. The Oxford Living Dictionary defines 'resistance' as "the refusal to accept or comply with something" attaching it to more or less open power-play such as the use of force or violence or a "secret organisation resisting authority" ("Resistances", n.d.). On a general definitional level, resistance is, hence, seen as a reaction to oppression and as a mode of defiance directed at dominant cultural norms and hierarchies, whether these be gender, class, race or age related (Leblanc, 1999). Within (or in relation to) children's culture, the phenomenon has been described as rebellion, inappropriate behavior and opposition or counteraction, next to which we also speak of 'childish antics', defiance and noncompliance (Stolp, 2011; Dix et al., 2007; Lickenbrock et al., 2013). Following a developmental framework, people also speak of 'the terrible twos' or of 'teenage rebellion' assigning the defiance of adult rules and norms to certain more oppositional life phases that one is supposed to grow out of.

It is fairly easy to find examples of child cultural resistance, but as the multitude of terms used about the phenomenon indicates, the conceptualisation of the phenomenon itself is rather uneven and scattered. In fact, conceptual aspects are largely left undiscussed in many of the empirical studies on the subject. Research on (or related to) child cultural resistance tends to focus on conflicts around food, media consumption and clothing, or, more exactly, on (1) disagreements around sugar and other unhealthy products, (2) disputes on sexual and violent media contents and (3) generational battles around (foul) language and neat or sloppy dressing (Fuhs, 2017, p. 58; O'Connell & Brannen, 2014; Jenkins, 2006; Rönnberg, 1990; Martsola & Mäkelä-Rönholm, 2006; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Leblanc, 1999), but while the acts of children and young people within these conflicts are often categorised as resistance, the conceptualisation of the term itself remains vague. Furthermore, the terms used to describe the phenomenon seem to be field-specific. The search word 'noncompliance' will, hence, not yield any research results within sociologically oriented journals such as *Childhood*, while it does produce hits when used within journals like *Infant and Child Development*. 'Resistance', which is more commonly used throughout the different child culture related research fields, may thus seem like a better term. It is, however, a "rather loose concept, one open to many interpretations" as Lauraine Leblanc, writing on girls within the

punk subculture, notes. In youth or subculture research, it has been read into the 'construction of sartorial style'. Feminist studies, in turn, have located it in, for example, "subversive interpretations of texts" (Leblanc, 1999, p. 14; see also Lurie, 1990). Searches with the search word 'resistance' are thus likely to produce many hits, but not many of the found studies will provide helpful definitions of the concept itself.

One of the few attempts at discussing the phenomenon of child cultural resistance through its various conceptualisations is provided by Marleena Stolp (2011), who examines the phenomenon and the different terms that can be applied to it within and in relation to a theater project prepared and executed with 6-year-old children. In the project, the screenwriter-actor-children defied the adult researcher-directors by showing no interest in rehearsing, by clogging the toilet minutes before the show and by using unplanned props on stage as well as by altering the storyline ad hoc, while performing. While the toilet episode can be described as an overt prank, the refusal to rehearse may be conceptualised as a more obtuse, less flashy, form of defiance (related to the silences discussed by Spyrou, 2016) and the altering of the storyline may be interpreted as a form of losing oneself in imaginative play while forgetting that the event is supposed to be a scripted performance (which is not necessarily an act of defiance at all). According to Stolp, the terms that we choose to describe the phenomenon matter, in that each of them carries different connotations. Using a term like 'rebellion' associates the act with the seriousness of historical uprisings. Talking about it as 'fooling around', 'pranking' or 'playfulness', in turn, links it to the idea of 'mere' childishness or even a more positive childlikeness. As Stolp notes, the terms that we use are indicative of the position that we choose or represent in what comes to the unequal power relations between children and adults (Stolp, 2011).

Other terms that have been applied in the study of child cultural resistance include the idea of interpretive reproduction, as well as terms such as hybridisation and bricolage. Following the by now paradigmatic idea of children's own agency and input in the shaping of their own cultural environments, these terms highlight the way in which children are no longer seen as passive recipients of cultural input, but as active producers and recyclers of cultural content (Corsaro, 1985, 1997; Thompson, 2005, 2007; Tam, 2012). Interpretive reproduction addresses the way in which children operate both within adult culture and within their own, independent cultures, borrowing, preserving and changing or mixing aspects of both of these overlapping worlds/cultures. It emphasises children's creativity and focuses on their participation in the shaping of cultural realities. As such, it undermines ideas of linear, top-down socialisation and indicates the importance of peer cultures in the creation of, for example,

routines and values. This has made it instrumental in the development of the 'new' sociologically oriented childhood studies and its focus on children's agency (Corsaro, 2012).

Po Chi Tam (2012), writing about children's cultural resistance within the practise of sociodramatic play, offers some examples about how children in a Hong Kong kindergarden used hybridisation and bricolage as means of cultural resistance against play frames constructed by the teacher. Instead of reproducing the teacher-prescribed play frame, the children that Tam observed also broke the prescribed play frame in more or less visible ways, resorting to tactics that Tam has titled 'disarray', 'disguise' and 'invalidation'. Examples that Tam discusses include "degrading the heroic and serious task of fire fighting into a mundane housekeeping theme which even includes a whimsical and comic storyline of killing cockroaches" and turning a fishing scene supposed to train their fine-motor skills into "a rhythmic and bizarre cooking game" (Tam, 2012, p. 256). Similar research has been conducted in Finland by Suvi Pennanen (2009), who has observed, that children react to discourses of risk and protection by openly playing media related content despite the teacher's disapproval or by hiding or camouflaging non-proper content. A further Nordic example is provided by Ingvild Åmot and Borgunn Ytterhus (2013) who describe a scene of bodily resistance or rebellion in a Norwegian daycare center. They observed a situation in which a group of children peed their pants in order to get indoors during 'outdoor time', an action termed 'sneaky' by the caretakers, but conceptualised as "a response to the misrecognition of children's rights in the name of institutional logic" by the researchers.

## 5 The Aesthetics of Resistance, Reconceptualised

In my own research, I have made observations similar to the ones described above. In my study of child cultural horror, resistance was visible in both the production of exceptional or more daring picture books that defied the norms of children's literature in one way or the other (child culture-related resistance by adult producers) *and* in the manner in which some of the children that I interviewed, in particular moments, purposefully misinterpreted the books that we were reading (or the general subject of the discussion - the theme of horror). In the children's case, the acts of resistance included a humoristic misreading of a violent happening (the hair of a girl catching fire after she plays with matches in the 1845 picturebook *Slovenly Peter*) as 'cool hairdo', which would follow the subversive interpretations of texts as described by Leblanc in relation to feminist studies. The resistance that I identified in this case was,

hence, directed at hegemonic discourses and conventions or practices of how to talk about horror *to* children and *as* children. In the first case, the actors engaging in the act of resistance were adults in charge of the production of children's culture and the manner of defiance was visible in the punk-like aesthetic and the embracing of a violent or physical solution (boxing) to the mastering of fear in a picture book. In the second case, the case of the children, resistance, in turn, took the form of subversive interpretations.

What the above presented examples have in common is that they are all rather bodily, messy, bizarre and cheap (as in sneaky) instances of rebellion - instances easily considered more or less nasty or disrespectful by adults. Terms that have so far taken the aesthetic aspects of such behaviour most fully into account are the concept of carnivalism and the idea of 'ket aesthetics'. The term 'ket aesthetic', already brought up above, was introduced to the field of child culture studies by Allison James, who used it to describe the consumption of cheap candy. James noted that the term 'ket', which had, in old English, been used to describe animals, whose meat was sold although they had died of natural causes (James, 1998, p. 394), was used by children in (which area of Britain?) in reference to cheap candies popular among them, but not valued by adults. James observed that consuming kets was marked by the breaking of regular eating times and customs. Not considered 'proper' food, kets were consumed in between regular meals. Practices like taking an already sucked-on candy out of the mouth and passing it on to the next child can likewise easily be considered improper and disgusting. Next to this, James noted that many of the kets had names that connected them to humans or items, evoking ideas of cannibalism and surrealism (James, 1998).

As said, the notion of ket aesthetics has since been used by other researchers in relation to undesired childish consumption whether this be related to food or popular culture (Thompson, 2005; Ruckenstein, 2014; Campbell Galman, 2017). Yet none of this research develops the aesthetic side of the 'kets' further and the term itself has not encountered wider following beyond the field of child culture research.

In the field of literature and visual art, the preferred term for discussing acts of word-image-based resistance, is the grotesque. Here, the reference point is most often Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the carnivalesque and its subversive power (Bakhtin, 1968/1984). In a sense, the rebellious aspect of carnivalism can be equated with the idea of profanation, which, according to Paul Bouissac signifies the challenging of the limits that "determine normalcy and decency in the culture in which it occurs" (Bouissac, 1997). Scatology, blasphemy and obscenity can thus be related to each other and used as a means to resist the pressure of social norms. Yet this usage is, as Bakhtin has argued, not merely

abusive, but can also be interpreted as a representation of irrepressible vitality and freedom. Hence, it may be argued that, while “subversion often takes the form of so-called perversion” (Hutcheon, 1983, p. 88), this perversion is fruitful and meaningful in that attacks the powerful from below, creating a low-brow laughter that is easily equated with the laughter of the common folk, the uneducated masses, the down-trodden and the less powerful. Consequently this kind of rebellion has also been labeled ‘childish’, as the same custodial stance that marks attitudes toward childishness has also been applied to various other groups from the common folk to women and colonial subjects.

What is missing in the bigger picture, is a study that would draw together all these notions, made in the different fields of developmental philosophy, childhood studies and studies of children’s culture, anthropology and aesthetics. Such a study could produce a more encompassing description of how the aesthetics of resistance draw on the disgusting in order to demarcate the lines between us and them. While an attempt to provide such an all-encompassing theory is beyond the scope of this article, the discussion provided here hopefully exemplifies why conceptual work is still needed in this area.

The terms that we choose to describe resistant behavior do not just reflect our ideas and positioning in what comes to child-cultural resistance. They also affect the way in which we view the people participating in such behavior. As Sally Galman (2017) remarks in her article “Brave is a dress: Understanding ‘good’ adults and ‘bad’ children through adult horror and children’s play”, play that is considered bad by adults may taint the materials and even the players themselves faulty in the adults’ eyes. Hence, if we term resistant behavior that we consider ‘low’ ‘childish’, we end up promoting attitudes that relate children and childish tastes to ‘lower’ forms of culture. This is a colonialist, custodial stance. Hence it is not surprising that Sarah Ahmed has chosen to exemplify her intersectional discussion of willfulness and collective histories of struggle with the Grim Brother’s fairy tale of the willful child. While willfulness as a diagnosis is often regarded a negative, problematic trait (related to spoiling and disobedience at least in the case of children (Ahmed, 2014, 59–96)), she notes that it may also be seen as positive, especially when connected to the idea of a strong will. A strong will is, furthermore, “bound up with a normative decision about what directions are forces that should be resisted” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 81).

Like willfulness, childishness could, then, also be re-appropriated in a more positive sense if its connection to the more desirable ‘childlikeness’ was emphasised more. As a solution we might also want to develop a vocabulary that takes into account the wider applications of ‘lowering’ forms of attributing value. The development of the concept of aesthetic sublation as a tool for

discussing aesthetic 'lowering' is one such attempt, but its stickiness has yet to be tested outside of the case study that focusing on child cultural horror.

## 6 Conclusion: Sticky, Muddy and Confusing – Promises and Pitfalls of Using New Concepts

While clarity is considered a virtue that science should aspire towards, a focus on concepts often ends up blurring the subject and causing confusion. The fact that we speak of 'working definitions' reveals that most concepts used in research are far from coherent and clear. Geoffrey Harpham, continuing the line of thought quoted in the beginning, and relating it to his research on the grotesque, observes, that:

The grotesque places all these assumptions [of clarity and neatness] in doubt. Whether considered a pattern of energy or as a psychological phenomenon, it is anything but clear. Whereas most ideas are coherent at the core and fuzzy around the edges, the grotesque is the reverse: it is relatively easy to recognize the grotesque "in" a work of art, but quite different to apprehend the grotesque directly. (Harpham, 2006, pp. xxi–xxii)

In research constellations aiming to capture the children's own voices, obstructive behaviour that seeks to deflect or complicate the action by resorting to, for example, silence or mocking carnivalisation, is often discussed as a methodological problem. Yet as Stolp and Spyrou both claim, it is essential that researchers take instances of obtrusive, resistant behaviour seriously as a comment. Taking resistant behavior seriously as a comment adheres to the UNCRF's statement of a child's right to participate in cultural life, even if it at the same time questions the appropriateness clause within this statement. Brushing such behavior off as mere disinterest, boredom or non-compliance fails to ask what else might be communicated or achieved by it (Spyrou, 2016; Stolp, 2011, p. 18; United Nations, 1989, Article 31). When applying the concept of aesthetic sublation to examples or observations, one must, hence, of course, also ask what gets sublated in these instances and why.

All in all, the fuzziness of concepts and the fuss we make about concepts shows that concepts are enormously powerful. At best, new concepts may create interest in a previously under-researched phenomenon or provide new angles to an already much discussed issue. The development of concepts also serves to highlight the researcher's own thought processes and methodological journey, which may be considered a sign of maturity in comparison to a

copy-paste method. While the invention of new terms is risky – especially in some research fields and especially when practiced by young, not well-established researchers, it is quite common in other fields, and more accepted when practised by well-established intellectuals. The question of how much liberties one can take in relation to concept-building is thus discipline-related and dependent on one's social positioning.

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