Whose pain? Childhood, trauma, imagination

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Citation for published version (APA):
Introduction
If there exists a border-line
between such an inside and outside,
this surface is painful on both sides.
Gaston Bachelard
The Poetics of Space

Writing is a physical effort,
this is not said often enough.
One runs the race with the horse
that is to say with the thinking in its production.
It is not an expressed, mathematical thinking,
it's a trail of images.
Hélène Cixous
Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing

The minimum real unit is not
the word, the idea, the concept
or the signifier,
but the assemblage.
Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet
Dialogues
Searing Insight

An art object – Christian Boltanski’s *Une boîte d’épingles* (*Box of Pins*) – moved me to conceptualize a crucial aspect of traumatization: traumatic pain. Admittedly, the photograph of this work functioned as a trigger because, at the moment of viewing, I was in a state of heightened vulnerability to such “pain.” At the time I could not even bear the sight of this picture: when I was leafing through Didier Semin’s book on Boltanski’s work (1988), the image took me by surprise and frightened me beyond recognition. I held my breath, shut the book, and did not look at it again for a long time. Now, having taken temporal and mental distance from this event, I can read Boltanski’s *Box of Pins* as an attempt to embody the pain of traumatized, wounded (inter)subjectivity. It is a three-dimensional figuration that also emphatically addresses the sense of touch. My interpretation is an integration of my physical and affective reaction to this picture – a reaction of strong fear of “pain” – and my thinking about trauma. The act of looking at a cultural object thus mediated between undifferentiated feeling and articulated understanding.¹

The photograph shows a box, pierced with pins that are driven into it from the outside. Because the box is covered with cloth of a faintly pink color, I see it as a body with a skin, or a subject wounded by piercing pins. By referring to the etymological meaning of the word trauma – a wound resulting from piercing – the object connects trauma with both subjective feeling and external violence. The pain is indexically signified through the acts of piercing that are suggested to have resulted in the pierced box. This pain is accentuated by the sharp points of the pins themselves and the chaotic intercrossing of these pin-points inside the box. There is no room for anything other than pain in this inside. The open lid facilitates the view of this painful chaos, and

¹ Boltanski made *Une boîte d’épingles* in 1969. See the illustration in Semin 1988: 27 and the cover of the present study. Boltanski is explicitly concerned with his position as an artist who lives “after” the Holocaust. I will address this aspect of Boltanski’s work in the final chapter.
indicates that the closure of autonomous subjectivity is opened into intersubjectivity. However, with the lid open to reveal this intersubjective aspect, the piercing pins direct their sharp, wounding points to the outside. Consequently the box cannot be handled without causing pain to the one who wants to touch it. Intersubjectivity is made impossible. The traumatized subject is locked in her painful, fearful inside and cannot make any contact without hurting others. Traumatic pain is figured here in its destructive quality, but significantly, the fact that it has been made visible and has triggered my embodied imagination, makes this pain into an element in the interaction between art object and reader. As I will argue, my reading puts this text in a potential space, creating a sharable site for traumatic pain. It connects this pain to the framework of lived reality – mine and yours.

A moment of searing insight, then, made me acknowledge the traumatic pain of the subjects involved in my investigation of the relationship between childhood and trauma. The phrase “searing insight” clarifies (affective) feeling in terms of physical pain. According to philosopher Susan Feagin the term refers to the as yet unnamed feeling that accompanies the apprehension of a sentence, striking the reader as utterly apt and “right.” Significantly, the moment of insight is described as “recognition”:

[it] pierces with its insight, and the mind is affected by the perspicacity and just the “rightness” of it all. It’s a shudder of recognition of its uncompromising, forthright rightness.

(1996: 200)

It is a moment of integration, when a thought makes a connection with the feeling body in such a way that the insight strikes one as right because it amplifies – gives meaning to – what is bodily felt. More precisely, the thought “feels real” because it enables further action: releasing a vital force, it motivates thought as well as action. At such moments I tend to cry out or curse or jump up or slap my hand on the table: the force of the impact of insight seems to provoke an outburst of physical energy and joy that is expressed in bodily signals. These are the moments when I truly experience myself as a happy intellectual.

Paradoxically, the specific moment of happy insight was a (belated) reaction to a very painful and distressing period of my life. This paradox made me understand that the productivity of the notion of traumatic pain is not so much directed to the discovery of the “content” of traumatic events, as it is to the understanding of the vital powers that are at stake in traumatization and,
hence, in the attempts to survive the subject-annihilating forces of trauma. It was a quantum leap to make this pain and, consequently, the affective aspect of subjectivity, the center of my study. It took me another leap to make this unnamable, yet existing, pain more concrete and accessible through the concept of potential space, while turning traumatic pain into a mutual concern, without underestimating subjective suffering. The potential space I have in mind is first and foremost a relational space. At the same time defining and defined by its constitutive participants, it is the space where relational subjectivity or (inter)subjectivity has its place. Traumatic pain is a manifestation of the disruption or absence of this space.²

**Trauma as Breach**

By presenting potential space as the heart of this study, I can characterize traumatized people as subjects who are deprived of their relational basis. Hence, I conceive them as amputees. Being left without their relational dimension, they are severely handicapped. In the following chapters I will also refer to the discursive death implied in traumatization. As the words “pain,” “amputation,” and “death” suggest, I use terms indicating physical suffering in my attempt to give empty words like trauma, semiotic crisis, or discursive silence their necessary weight. Boltanski’s *Box of Pins* shows how a figuration of a material process — piercing pins — stimulates the imagination of unnamable pain by addressing the dimension of physical pain. The “image” of physical pain, then, can be helpful for gaining insight into traumatic pain.

In her seminal study about physical pain as occurring in torture and war, Elaine Scarry states that physical pain “resists objectification in language” and that “its undeniable, subjectively felt presence” has “no referential content” (1985: 5-6). Physical pain is only experienced in a bodily way; it is known by being felt. Thus, as subjective, bodily sensation per se, it cannot be shared with others. This brings Scarry to the conclusion that physical pain has “a language-destroying capacity” (19-20). By suggesting that a body in pain loses subjectivity because there can be no speaking —

². Psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott introduced the concept of potential space to delineate the intermediate area between fantasy and reality (Abram 1996, Ogden 1990, and Winnicott 1996a [1971]). I will elaborate on Winnicott’s ideas in Chapter 5.
communicating – subject of pain, Scarry underscores the importance of the interactive, relational aspect of (the subject of) language.

In my argument it becomes important that severe bodily pain can be communicated in a nonverbal way, for example, in the form of a reflex of screaming. Hence, although the bodily sensation of the pain may not have referential content, the affective charge of the pain, its alarming, fearful, hurting, and threatening unbearability, can be communicated by means of various bodily enactments, thus producing indexical signs. In reaction to this enactment of pain a further process of meaning production can take place. If the symptoms of excruciating pain are heard, seen, and understood by others as signs that signal pain, those other people can try to eliminate the possible tormenting cause, to relieve the suffering with palliatives or other aids, or to give emotional support and comfort. The expression of pain can thus affect another person, who then can initiate appropriate action. Hence, pain can be seen as an urgent request for a caring relationship. In this respect the difference between expressions of physical and psychic pain is not relevant.

Paradoxically, the urgency of this relational, affective address becomes clear at the moment the addressee realizes that she cannot be of help. The powerlessness of a witness observing severe pain that cannot be lessened produces an almost unbearable situation for this witness: it is a confrontation with one’s own powerlessness and one’s incapacity to make a relationship effective and meaningful exactly at a moment that seems to be of vital importance for the powerless other. The other’s agony and her own loss of control attack the subjective stability of the witness, a situation that entails the disruption of potential space. The loss of the ability to relate thus endangers subjects. No wonder that witnesses of such de-subjectifying, excruciating pain often resort to flight, denial, or distanced abstraction in order to rescue their threatened selves.

However, it is not only the powerlessness of witnesses that denies the possibility of an invigorating relationship; as Scarry points out with respect to the victims of torture, the act of consciously ignoring expressions of pain can be especially devastating. If their screams for help are ignored, tortured subjects become mere passive bodies of pain. The body in pain, then, is not only deprived of its language-producing function, but also of the sound of its affecting voice. Overridden

3. An indexical sign or Peircean index conveys meaning through the “ground” (rule or code) of indexicality. If a sign functions as an index, there is an existential relationship of contiguity between a sign and what it stands for – its meaning; think for instance of the relation between smoke and fire. Likewise, iconicity (icon) and symbolicity (symbol) point to analogy and conventionality respectively as the basis (ground) of signification. See Chapter 4 for further discussion of Peircean semiotics.
by a totalitarian and overwhelming force, the body is reduced to utter powerlessness and isolation. The de-subjectifying effects of severe physical pain are reinforced by the objectifying effects of the interpersonal (social) denial of the expression of agonizing pain. Importantly, "disempowerment and disconnection from others" are exactly what Judith Herman presents as the "core experiences of psychological trauma" (1992: 133). She summarizes here the general feelings of distress that result from the violent action of traumatization. I would like to address those psychic feelings, that is, the affective load of traumatization, as manifestation of traumatic pain.

The neglect of the affected subject of traumatization cuts in trauma theory like a double-edged knife. On the one hand, it simplifies the semiotic problems of traumatized people by ignoring a specific aspect of their disablement, that is, the presence of a bodily response that cannot be dealt with; traumatized people are disabled above all with respect to their affectively defined coping mechanisms. Because of the central role played by affects in the traumatic endangering of subjectivity, traumatic pain indicates a need for relationships that can (re)constitute a basic feeling of trust and subjective agency.4

On the other hand, the neglect of these primary needs also entails the risk of re-traumatization. The danger of re-traumatization is overlooked when the telling of traumatizing events is seen as the starting point of a process of recovery or social (re)integration. The social re-integration of the survivor starts instead with the (re)-gaining of one's affective, adaptive abilities. The shift of emphasis caused by the introduction of the affective dimension of subjectivity not only opens up a new potential for semiotic interaction; it also marks the very fragile borderline between living creatively and (re-)traumatization. Traumatic pain marks this border.

However, because traumatic pain is not the same as physical pain, it cannot be concretely and automatically expressed: it cannot be "screamed out." On the contrary, it can be disguised in several ways and is, therefore, difficult to trace. When it is acted out unconsciously through, for instance, physical illness or violent behavior, it is uncontrollable for the one who is enacting it as well as avers to social understandability for possible witnesses. Furthermore, the numbing effect of the dissociation of affective feelings – the splitting between an observant and a feeling subject –

4. In Herman's words: "Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation. In her renewed connections with other people, the survivor re-creates the (...) basic capacities for trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and, intimacy. Just as these capabilities are originally formed in relationships with other people, they must be reformed in such relationships" (1992: 133).
makes it especially difficult to recognize and deal with traumatic pain. That is to say, traumatic pain is silenced through dissociation. As a consequence, this study emphasizes the explanatory value of the concept of dissociation and the meta-theory of structural dissociation.\(^5\)

Many studies concerning trauma implicitly speak about the psychic pain of traumatization by using the metaphors “wounding” and “wound.” Wound, a term that signifies pain indexically, is the original meaning of the Greek word trauma, which derives from a verb that means “piercing” [of the skin].\(^6\) In Chapter 4 I use “skin” as a metaphor to clarify the affective dimension of subjectivity, calling feelings “the skin of the subject.” Traumatic pain thus becomes the piercing of the affective skin. In this way, the use of the words “wound,” “skin,” and “pain” not only dissolves the mind-body split into embodied experience, but these words also make concrete the interrelation between subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Let me explain.

Although a wound implies pain, it is not the same as pain. A wound of the skin seems to indicate a visible mark that can be localized and qualified. However, as a sign of traumatized subjectivity, the word “wound” loses the strength of its concrete place. It is nevertheless a useful term to the extent that it points to the result of violent actions, be they natural disasters or man-made atrocities, single instances, or ongoing, more hidden processes. As Herman phrases it: “Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning” (1992: 33). A traumatic wound makes clear that the violent roots of traumatic pain do not reside in the events per se, but in their aspect of overwhelming danger, their inherent affliction of “the ordinary systems of care.” Most importantly, violence is about force and power relationships.\(^7\)

As the notion of wound makes understandable that violating forces are involved in every traumatization, the notion of skin can elucidate the complexity of traumatized (inter)subjectivity. The skin as physical surface and protection of the body marks the external border of an embodied subject as well as the interface between self and other. Hence, the skin can be read both as a sign for the separate aspect of subjectivity – the (intra)subjective condition – and for the relational aspect of (inter)subjectivity – the intersubjective condition. The skin simultaneously refers to the body as broken as a consequence of external violence; and the effects of such an injury upon the organism as a whole” (1973: 465; emphasis added).

5. See for example Nijenhuis et al. 2001 and Steele et al. 2001. The authors also underscore Herman’s view mentioned in the previous note by proposing what they call a “phase-oriented treatment of dependency in dissociative patients” (Steele et al. 2001: 94-106).

6. According to Laplanche & Pontalis the term “trauma” comes from the Greek verb ττροοσκοω, which means, “to pierce. It generally means any injury where the skin is

7. The phrase “ordinary systems of care” hints at what I will clarify later with the help of the affective dimension of subjectivity, namely, the intertwining of caring relationships, affect regulation, and the production of meaning.
container of an independent agency and to the extended body: the body-in-relation. Moreover, as the
double meaning of "touch" indicates, the skin suggests that these aspects are based on sensations
as well as feelings. The connection between a physical and an affective skin appears to be inherent
in the interdependence of separatedness and relationality of (inter)subjectivity.8

When this double-sided, sensing, and feeling skin is pierced or wounded and, hence, loses
its protective function, the traumatized subject is attacked in her (inter)subjectivity, that is, in both
her capacity to integrate inner experience and her capacity to relate to others. Consequently, she
loses contact with reality, a loss that is substantiated in a specific way: while not being physically
dead, she nevertheless suffers from the incapacity of feeling alive and feeling in control of her life
history. I claim that in the overwhelming, life-threatening attack on the "protective skin" a very
basic vitality is involved, which makes it plausible to interpret the terror resulting from this subject
annihilation in terms of fear of death or agony. Such agony is the core of traumatic pain, the
breaking point around which the incapacity to relate is centered. Because the alarming force of
that agony cannot be countered by adequate action, it becomes unbearable: it has to be stopped or
silenced. If there is no adequate help, the traumatized subject will – unconsciously, automatically –
do everything to escape from that agony: she will dissociate. This is why in the present study
"trauma" refers to a "breach," an intrasubjective disintegration that cannot be understood without
its relational complement, the disruption of potential space.

Affective Skills

As I can see in retrospect, my initial reaction to Boltanski's *Box of Pins* – shutting the book – was
one of self-defense; I was protecting myself intuitively against re-traumatization. In this particular
case, my behavior appeared to be partly instigated by fear of a repetition of an agony from infancy.
This disruptive feeling had been caused by the loss of a primary caregiver, a loss that was,
moreover, framed by the massive threat and specific dangers of World War II. In the last chapters,
with the help of Winnicott's fear of breakdown, I will explain what nearly re-occurred in the confrontation with Boltanski's *Box of Pins*. In addition, there was the wish to protect myself against the danger that my view of the world – my desires and beliefs – would be permanently damaged. I feared being overwhelmed by the seemingly unbridgeable discrepancy between the huge extent and severity of other people's traumatization with which my study faced me and my wish that life might retain a meaningful option for people. In other words, I also protected myself against vicarious traumatization. The two aspects of my self-defense foreground the interdependence of a loss of control over affective feelings, the loss of positive desires and beliefs, and the loss of trust – in oneself and others.

I have also learned that an object can cause strong feelings, here distress. My state of hyperarousal apparently made me so sensitive to the figured suggestion of threatening pain, that seeing piercing pins triggered an embodied imagination that came close to bodily simulation: I feared real “pain.” My encounter with near re-living revealed an area of experience in which it is difficult to distinguish imagination, simulation and re-living. Retrospectively, I even think that had it not been for my personal experience at the time, I might have overlooked the affective dimension of Boltanski's object. In other words, my temporary hypersensitivity prevented me from my common neglect – my dissociation – of the bodily felt aspect of affective knowledge, at least as far as fearful events are concerned. And here surfaces a final insight from this experience: the affective capacity need not be automatically available; its development requires conscious attention and training. It needs to be effectuated in affective skills and “affective flexibility.” This study can be seen as an exploration of the relevance of those skills for cultural analysis.9

Because traumatized people cannot take the first step towards a potential space, the choice between being silenced and feeling alive is in the hands of others. The latter fact, in particular, turns traumatic pain into a notion with social, ethical, and political consequences. Realizing those implications, I decided to write this study while allowing myself to become touched, moved, and often dejected when I felt and imagined the “pain” in and through texts. Accordingly, I have tried to make my feelings – ranging from helplessness, confusion, fear, and disgust, to distress, aloneness,
rage, and despair—intellectually productive. I did not put these feelings aside as a disturbing factor, but struggled to make that disturbance part of my argument, using my feelings to motivate imagination and to evaluate through analytic thought. The present text thus makes a case for a practice of cultural analysis that combines the readiness for cognitive challenge with the awareness of interpersonal and intergroup vulnerability.

A Transpersonal Space

I invite you here to enter into a potential space. However, my proposal to share this space does not imply that it already exists. As the word “potential” indicates, the space merely has a virtual existence that has yet to become actual. Its reality depends on your willingness to accept the invitation; only if you respond affirmatively can the space come into being. I like to call it a space of touching, because “touching” both emphasizes the physical base of the subject implied in this interaction and highlights a subject who is moved and motivated by feelings. Consequently, this potential space cannot be shared in a noncommittal way. If you accept the invitation, you assent to a relationship that will affect you, as I must be open to be affected by your reading. Performing an invitation through my writing, I remind you of the interactive quality of writing and reading, of the doing and being done to implied in interpretation.

Moreover, as propositioning “I” — a pronoun that does not necessarily coincide with my all and only self — I need you as reader, for without semiotic interactions with a reader this text will “die.” This obvious statement should help you bear in mind that the implied readers written into my text need the resonance of actual, living readers in order to become meaningful signs. Accordingly, the word “resonance” is used here in the sense of both affective vibration and cognitive responsiveness, the parameters of empathy. Despite my use of the pronouns “I” and “you,” however, the relationship between “me” and “you” cannot take place in one and the same potential space. In the production of this text, for example, the potential space is shifted from one place of

10. Gilles Deleuze has conceptualized the relationship between “virtual” and “actual” — inspired by the work of Bergson — to indicate a potentiality that already exists in reality but requires actualization to become significant and effective. See Massumi 1996, Deleuze 1997, and Pisters 1998: 66-80.

11. Frans Willem Korsten coined the term “propositioner” to distinguish the agent that makes the argument from a narrator, the enunciator of a narrative. The term thus makes it possible to differentiate between two modes of semiotic behavior: arguing and narrating (1998). See also Bal 1997.
meaning production – the space of writing – to another – the space of reading. The space of writing refers to the semiotic interaction between a writer and her “pre-texts” and is manifested in the resulting text; the space of reading refers to the semiotic interaction between the text and its reader and is manifested in the interpretation, often manifested in another text (Van Alphen 1988: 235). Nevertheless, a living interpreter – be it writer or reader – is always needed to signify a (pre)text.12

Reading can change a reader. This rebounding is expressed in my use of the pronouns “I” and “you.” By means of these words I give my introduction the status of an utterance, positioning “you” in relation to “me.” Besides making you a participant of a mutual relationship, I also try to transfer that relationship into the here and now. For it is in the live moment of both my writing and your reading that the reality of affective impact – or its denial – takes place. Because being affected is being liable to the dynamics of change, taking part in an affective relationship cannot but involve “risking who one is.”13

Although there is risk involved in such interaction, it is also a productive resource. As my reference to the “death” of a non-read text already suggests, the fact that signifying acts of addressees are indispensable for the “life” of texts reveals that existential concerns going beyond a single reader are at stake. Since subjects are the effect of all kinds of semiotic, subject-forming interactions framed by manifold discursive practices, and since the production and interpretation of cultural objects or texts are common discursive practices, they play an important role in the formation of subjectivity.14

However, because the reality of subjects is also dependent on those signifying interactions with texts, that reality can be threatened when these interactions fail to occur. By mediating and facilitating the social space that makes subjects into (inter)subjects, texts can both consolidate and change the symbolic order. Hence, texts can also silence and be silenced, and this silencing through texts can harm. Consequently, the existential concerns at stake in the making and interpreting of semiotic objects become urgent, particularly when traumatized subjects are at issue.

The latter remark not only implies that my position of cultural analyst as well as your position of reader should enact the live moment of interpretation; this interpretive act can also be

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12. I will not restrict the term “text” to literature and the term “cultural object” to art objects, because both terms refer to semiotic objects. They both indicate a structured, meaningful and delineated interplay of signs.
13. Susan Suleiman uses Risking Who One Is as a book title (1994). I will come back to her study, in particular to her practice of “mediated autobiography,” in my last two chapters.
14. Starting from the idea that subjectivity is the effect of semiotic events, the present study points up that the discursive practices that frame these semiotic processes are not solely based on linguistically mediated interaction and reflection. A semiotic view requires what Bal calls “a ‘multimedialization’ of the concept of discourse itself.” In her formulation, “discourse implies a set of semiotic and epistemological habits that enables and prescribes ways of communicating and
the moment that textual figurations of traumatization are explicitly connected with the framework of real life. This entails a focus on the motivation of the production of these figurations and brings the producers of texts that deal with trauma into the picture. These producers, above all those making use of autobiographical material, are concerned with real problems of real people. They try to make these problems communicable, using their own traumatized lives or understanding of trauma as points of connection for those of others. Moreover, as traumatization generally problematizes the notion of meaning as articulable content, these producers do not merely convey constative meaning; rather, they address: they substantiate the need of response.

"Theorizing trauma through the visual arts," art historian Jill Bennett argues in favor of the inclusion of the bodily, subjectively sensed and felt experience of both the producers of artifacts that deal with traumatization and their viewers. She presents visual art as the basis for a "poetics of sense memory" (2000: 87), ascribing the relevance of visual images to a specific "allegiance of sight to affective memory" (84). Supporting the idea of a separate register of bodily experience, Bennett also draws attention to the role of visual art in the late Middle Ages as "facilitating an empathetic imitation of Christ" (85; emphasis added). Her conclusion that "images have the capacity to address the spectator's own bodily memory, to touch the viewer who feels rather than simply sees the event, drawn into the image by affective contagion" is helpful for my theorization of the intertwine ment of embodied imagination and empathic understanding (85; emphasis in text). The analysis of Boltanski's *Box of Pins* has set this process in motion.

Nevertheless, the present study demonstrates that not only visual images but also written accounts can trigger in the viewer a "memory" that embodies her imagination and fleshes out her interpretation. I am especially interested in the way in which all kinds of text figure bodily traces of trauma as manifested in traumatic pain. Likewise, I am interested in the way in which these traces can function as pointers for reading, facilitating the articulation of a mode of reading that sensitizes the imagination of an interpreter – mine as well as yours – to these traces. The difficulty is, however, that we are dealing with traces of "silence."

15. The term figuration distinguishes the subjective process of mental imagination from the result of that process as manifested in texts. Significantly, in both imagination and figuration there is more at stake than visual imagery.
The Course of the Argument

Focusing on the relationship between childhood and trauma, this study proposes an insight into children's vulnerability to trauma and the failures of experience that early-traumatized subjects have to cope with – both as children and adults. The primary thesis is that early traumatization can result in a prolonged and cumulative process. Because childhood as well as trauma can be seen as border areas of (inter)subjectivity, I draw particular attention to the knot where the initial limits and critical limits of (inter)subjectivity interface. The articulation of a developmental view of traumatization brings about another border area, a transitional area of experience that requires a child's ability to integrate.

The integrative moment of children's development that interests me pertains to an infant's transition from (nonverbal) affective communication (body language) to verbal communication (a language that makes use of arbitrary, conventional symbols).16 This developmental accomplishment is best explained with the help of different registers of experience and the notion of embodied (inter)subjectivity. Consequently, it brings in the issues of embodied imagination and empathic reading. My argument starts with bringing these theoretical points into view in Part I (Chapters 1 to 3) and ends with their elaboration in Part II (Chapters 5 to 7). The two parts are connected by a theoretical intermezzo concerning the affective dimension of (inter)subjectivity, which leads to a radical turn towards relational (inter)subjectivity (Chapter 4). This integrative move leads to the explanation of trauma as a disruption or absence of potential space and makes traumatic pain into a relational concept.

To make my case, I deploy the imaginative and theoretical potential of different cultural objects: a literary text, a documentary film, a photographic picture book, and an art installation. The method of cultural analysis I practice includes an interaction of detailed interpretation and theorizing, substantiated in the “case studies” of the following chapters. My starting point is the discursive approach to trauma as articulated by Ernst van Alphen, who explains trauma as a failure of experience (1997; 1999b). The first part of the argument is based on W ou le souvenir d'enfance

16. When I refer to verbal language and communication other differential, lexicogrammatical sign systems comparable to verbal languages are included, such as American Sign Language or ASL. This is the language for deaf people that is based on a spatial syntax and makes use of nonverbal (arbitrary) signs or signifiers. See Oliver Sacks, Seeing Voices (1989).
(W or The Memory of Childhood), a récit (account) by Georges Perec of his childhood in World War II (1975). The use of Perec’s book to set my inquiry in motion reflects the fact that his text also models a developmental structure: W pivots around a breach that drastically re-structures the narrator’s life story.

In Chapter 1, Le réseau qu’ils tissent – Gaps and Connections, the focus is on the use of two parallel texts, a fictional and an autobiographical tale, in alternating chapters. My reading conjures up a “child of war” who suffers from a complex traumatization, a process in which (first-hand) personal losses interact with the (second-hand) violence of war and concentration camps. The difference between the tales highlights the predicament of this child: the connection between the death of the parents and the war, which is possible in the fictional tale, fails to occur in the autobiographic tale. Narrative and rhetorical strategies perform this predicament, hovering between connecting and keeping separate. In order to make the discursive problems involved in the child’s cumulative traumatization analyzable, I propose a distinction between specific and structural traumatogenic aspects of this process. The distinction takes into account that primary caregivers (specific persons) and the symbolic order (structure) play different mediating roles in the genesis of (inter)subjectivity. The possibility of different kinds of discursive disablement is addressed in a way that accounts for the layered, development-dependent structure of children’s vulnerability to trauma.

In Chapter 2, (...) – Deaf-Mute or Gagged?, the point at issue is the “breach” in Perec’s book that is signified as “(...)”. It indicates the moment in which the disappearance of the mother is (cannot be) connected with her death in a concentration camp. The sign suggests how the interaction of specific and structural traumatogenic factors has resulted in the breach that substantiates Perec’s trauma. Through the textual strategy of personality doubling, the connection between this trauma and dissociation becomes visible. Moreover, images of children and childhood in the fictional tale further clarify the distinction between specific and structural discursive disabilities. The deaf-mute child in Part One figures a specific disablement as an internal shortcoming, while bringing the absence of primary relationships into the picture. The gagged children in Part Two figure a structural disablement as a violent action, underlining that structural exclusions and repressions of the dominant symbolic order result in powerlessness. It is the autobiographical tale, however, that figures a disablement – a child with the arm in a sling – referring simultaneously to the impossibility of feeling the “pain” implied in the breach and to the bodily base of experience. Thus a tension surfaces between an embodied “telling from within” a lived experience, and a disembodied “telling about.”
In Chapter 3, *Living to Tell or Telling to Live?*, the relationship between traumatized subjectivity and lived experience is further explored by means of Perec’s autobiographical tale. Three examples of Perec’s “memories” make clear that Perec’s autohistory hints at the nonverbally mediated, bodily base of experience that predates verbally mediated experience, an issue addressed, above all, by Perec’s “earliest memory.” Seen as a text that “mirrors” W’s attempt to make a cumulative traumatization representable, this memory fragment puts forward the problem of infantile memories, the constructive nature of all (childhood) memories, the narrative construction of subjectivity, the idea of (non)verbal discursivity, and the possibility of retrospective traumatization. Moreover, the memory points to a potential space. The second analysis concerns a (screen) memory, in which Perec explicitly appeals to the embodied imagination of the reader, thereby assuming that the performative power of language is heightened when body-based experience is taken into account. The last memory indicates the problem of the absence of affective feelings. It entails an elaboration of the function of dissociation as reaction to inadaptable occurrences and the role of fear implied in this process. The text fragment also raises the issue of a hidden potential for reactive violence.

The first part of this study leads to the understanding of traumatized subjectivity in terms of disintegration and disembodied telling. Because relationships with primary caregivers appear to play a decisive part in these impairments, an elaboration of specific traumatogenetic factors and the specific discursive (dis)ability is required. The analysis of the last memory and the function of dissociation suggest that an inquiry into the subject-constituting function of affects and emotions might be productive for this elaboration. The next chapter responds to this suggestion with a semiotic account of the relational, affectively defined genesis of (inter)subjectivity. It is the only chapter in which theorizing does not interact with literature or art.

In Chapter 4, *Infancy Revisited – Without Words*, Peircean semiotics makes thinkable how subjects (unconsciously) share meaning through feeling and doing before they (consciously) share meaning with the help of (verbal) telling about. The issue is a semiotic competence that does not make use of a sign system structured by arbitrary or conventional linguistic symbols, although it is framed by cultural conventions. This competence implies that a nonverbal affective communication based on discursively defined semiotic practices simultaneously “grounds” subjects in their bodies and in the interpersonal, social, and cultural environment. Through the approach of affects as the *skin of the subject*, the idea of piercing this skin yields an insight into the trauma of affective and emotional deprivation.\(^\text{17}\)
The argument involves four steps. Firstly, the function of affects and emotions is addressed with the help of developmental psychology, an approach that presents their differentiation and regulation as a developmental achievement (Sroufe 1996). Foregrounding the relevance of “attachment,” this view makes it possible to relate the capacity to form an emotional relationship to the genesis of (inter)subjectivity. This implies that primary relationships, successful or not, set the tone for all interactions with the world, including the relationship with others and the self. Secondly, a psychoanalytical approach to early infancy sheds light on the issue of affective contagion, that is, the unconscious, concrete sharing of affective states or moods, which does not remain restricted to early childhood (Kumin 1996). Thirdly, the work of a psychoanalyst and semiotician explains development as a layered learning process, which can be approached as an integrative sequence of different forms of semiotic communication – iconic, indexical, and symbolic (Muller 1996, 2000). Besides emphasizing the cultural embeddedness of these interactions, John Muller also underscores the importance of Peirce’s notion of interpretant for subject-constitution. He turns the sequence of emotional, energetic, and logical interpretant into a developmental hierarchy.

Together these views point out three relevant issues, beginning with the formation of the relational intersubject (at about the age of nine months), who makes use of (unconscious) emotion schemas. With the help of Teresa de Lauretis’ use of Peirce’s theorizing (1984, 1994, 2000), I will explain these schemas as Peircean “habits.” Further, infancy surfaces as a transitional period, in which the transposition from the affective register of experience to the linguistic register of experience takes place. Finally, emotional availability is the precondition for every “telling about” that incorporates a “telling from within.” The affective dimension of (inter)subjectivity, then, makes clear that emotional isolation adds to the social exclusion inherent in traumatization. Consequently, emotional isolation, which is caused by affective and emotional deprivation, is the focal point of the last part of this study, which centers around the way art objects make traces of this specific discursive silence or traumatic pain visible.

In Chapter 5, The Silent One, the cultural object is a film: Thom Verheul’s documentary De ontkennning (Denial), made in 1992. The analysis of this story of a woman who tries to cope with

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17. Throughout this study I use the term “affect” for the nonverbal – felt and enacted aspect of affective communication, while the term “emotion” implies an affect that is amplified by verbal(izable) content.
a past of severe sexual abuse is based on the work of psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott. His theorizing makes it possible to specify emotional availability and empathic response in terms of “holding,” a specification that leads to an elaboration of the concept of potential space. The film not merely thematizes Winnicott’s holding environment but also enacts it through the holding gestures of the filmmaker, who is both the external “presentor” of the film narrative and a character-bound interlocutor of Brigitte. By turning into an inter-viewer who simultaneously gives room to Brigitte’s predicament and sets the tone for the film’s reception, Verheul mediates between an interpersonal and transpersonal potential space. In this facilitating function the viewers are emphatically engaged.

The need for holding is especially embodied by the Silent One, Brigitte’s most elusive dissociated “alter,” which is easily overlooked in the narrative. She is the enactor of traumatic pain, an interpretation that is clarified by the theory of structural dissociation. This theory also contributes to the understanding of the most moving scene of the film: a therapy session in which Brigitte overcomes traumatic anxiety thanks to the holding capacities of her therapists. This film fragment demonstrates the subjectifying force of affective communication through facial expression (body language).

In Chapter 6, My First Picture Book – Realizing Who I “Am”, and Chapter 7, In the Frame of the Family, I discuss mijn eerste prentenboek (My First Picture Book). This photographic picture book (1988) is an autohistorical text concerning my own acculturation. It highlights a trauma instigated by the loss of a primary caregiver during infancy, which is best understood as affective non-attunement. Because an infant was involved who could not yet “tell about” her distress, the resulting traumatic pain seems unavailable by definition to consciousness and verbal, symbolic thought. As autohistory the picture book thus hints at the developmental problem of “linking feelings and words,” i.e. the “referential process” concerning the integration of different registers of experience (Bucci 1997).

As art object the picture book addresses the problem of the textual figuration of these impossible traces. Hence, My First Picture Book raises the issue of a nonverbal, symbolic “imagery” that has its roots in the affective register of experience. This imagery is investigated by means of emotion schemas – and their possible dissociation – as elaborated by Daniel Stern (1985) and Wilma Bucci (1997). Winnicott’s “fear of breakdown” is especially applicable to pinpoint the affective load – the agony – implied in these images of an affective deprivation and a vital attack on the motivation to live. All photographs picture variations on the general theme of the “irremediable aloneness” inherent in this trauma.
My triple involvement in this cultural object, as living frame of reference, producer of an art object, and cultural analyst, is guided by the relational reading attitude introduced by Susan Suleiman, which she terms “mediated autobiography” and “autobiographical resonance” (1994). Moreover, two different frameworks structure my argument. The children’s picture book frames Chapter 6, stressing the issue of imagination and figuration through the image called huisje (little house).

The family album frames Chapter 7, emphasizing autobiographical memory through the pictures vader, moeder, and kindje (father, mother, and little child). Little House elucidates the way in which feelings can be enacted by forms, while addressing the difference between the sensorimotor aspect of experience (house as material space) and the affective aspect of experience (house as home). Hirsch’s notion of familial look (1997) helps to elaborate on the absence of looking presented by the pictures of the family members. Although My First Picture Book can function as a critique of the ideology of the happy (nuclear) family, its last image also points to the potential space as room for playing.

The concluding chapter, Children in Search of Their Parents, a title that quotes Boltanski’s multiple installation in Cologne (1993-1994), involves a shift to the social function of cultural analysis. A social environment in which the sensitivity to traumatic pain can become productive entails a specific way of dealing with a past. Using primary caregivers – parents – as parameters for an attempt to make new connections possible, Boltanski hints at an alternative conception of history-making. In line with his suggestion I propose to use the notion of cultural memory as model for social action. Hence, my plea for a construction of history that emphatically takes place in the present and between people. The social function of cultural objects is put in a potential space, in which (inter)personal and transpersonal concerns interact.
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