Whose pain? Childhood, trauma, imagination

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Our social climate right now is permeated by rampant empathic failure – the failure to respond to another’s distress. Our disavowal of affect provides strong support for our assessment that we are living in a trauma-organized society. Sandra L. Bloom and Michael Reichert, Bearing Witness: Violence and Collective Responsibility

**Enabling Gestures**

The object of analysis of this chapter is the Dutch film *De ontkennung – Denial* in the English version – made by Thom Verheul in 1992. It is a documentary about “Brigitte,” a woman of thirty who is undergoing therapy because of a severe and cumulative traumatization during childhood. Brigitte appears to have been sexually and emotionally abused and, moreover, re-traumatized by therapeutic mistreatments. In order to cope with the destructive environment Brigitte has developed six alters, that is, she has divided her experience into six separately functioning personalities. The spreading of experience over distinct subjectivities, each with a different mental and behavioral pattern, enabled her, as I will argue, to split off the subject of traumatization – the Silent One she calls her – from other subject organizations. Because alters have taken over, Brigitte is, psychologically considered, suffering from a dissociative identity disorder (DID). *Denial* is an account of Brigitte’s growing insight into her dissociative behavior, a process that is made easier by a benign therapeutic setting, in which a female Dutch therapist and a male American one work together.

As a documentary film *Denial* belongs to a genre in which real life is the explicit frame of reference. Brigitte is the heroine of the film story because the film narrates her life story. Hence, the documentary film is the genre par excellence that demonstrates the relationship between subject constitution and narration, while emphasizing that this relationship produces reality. This emphasis on the reality-forming, life-giving potential of the documentary is particularly relevant as traumatized subjectivity is at stake. Moreover, as my analysis will make clear, the gift of life is implied not only in the theme of the film, but also in the way it is narrated and presented as a
transpersonal text for public circulation. I will argue that the film enacts as well as thematizes holding gestures, making literally visible that the production of a potential space starts with an empathic relationship.

By means of a narratological analysis I will unravel the different levels at which the holding gestures and the potential space function in the film story. My major aim is to draw attention to the distinction between the function of the external narrator (and focalizor) and the different kinds of embedded narratives. Because it is a film narrative that is being studied, the term “filmmaker” is used for the function of the external presenter and director of the story; moreover, I complement embedded narrators with the function of “enactor.” Narratologically seen, Brigitte is not only the principal character of the fabula, but also the main, character-bound, narrator, enactor, and focalizor of the story. However, as a character her position is embedded in the story of the filmmaker who has structured the film story. In addition to his external position, the maker of the film also functions as a character, i.e. as an audible but invisible interlocutor. The story is further complicated by the fact that Brigitte alternates different subject positions in different scenes: sometimes she is an adult, non-dissociative woman, whose voice-over accompanies the film’s images or who is in dialogue with the (invisible) interlocutor; sometimes she is the enactor of her different alters, whether or not in interaction with the same interlocutor; and sometimes she participates in therapeutic settings, which range from dialogues to group sessions.

Furthermore, the analysis is fueled by the theoretical work of Winnicott, which introduces conceptual tools like holding or facilitating environment, transitional phenomena, and potential space. This theoretical framework not only provides the relational start of subjectivity with a space of interaction; it also suggests that this relational space has a semiotic potential, because it is presented as the space where the use of symbols begins. Emphasizing the subject-forming aspect of the space by referring to the mother’s face as precursor of the Lacanian mirror, Winnicott’s ideas support the specificity of the affective dimension of subjectivity. Conversely, his thinking about playing, creativity, feeling alive, and the capacity to be alone is better understood in terms of an emotional development that takes the existence of different levels of experience into consideration.

With the help of Winnicott’s theory I will strengthen the relevance of the potential space for the understanding of traumatized subjectivity, and especially of the holding environment as precondition for this space. First, I will demonstrate that the filmmaker enacts holding gestures that simultaneously give room to Brigitte’s predicament and set the tone for the film’s reception. His way of filming not only offers Brigitte the space for “playing” and “feeling alive,” necessary
for becoming an integrated subject of experience; as mediator between Brigitte and the public the filmmaker also puts the film into the potential space that is needed for wider cultural confirmation and innovation. By means of his holding acts the filmmaker doubles and reinforces the facilitating environment created by the therapeutic setting that is embedded in the film story. Moreover, he enables the viewers to develop or maintain the capacity to be vulnerable.

Second, I will elaborate the fear of being wounded (again) implied in traumatization and the (phobic) nature of severe dissociation. Moreover, because Brigitte’s enactment and explanation of five of her alters is amplified by the use of varying locations and by the way the scenes function in the film narrative, I can highlight the status of the Silent One as being different from the other split-off personalities. Seen as substantiation of traumatic pain this alter, in particular, confirms the decisive role of affects in traumatization, an interpretation that is further clarified through the theory of structural dissociation.

Third, the analysis of a crucial therapy session will demonstrate the subjectifying force of concrete affective communication. Besides foregrounding the translation of nonverbal communication into verbal interaction, this scene also shows that facial expression, and body language in general, play a decisive role in the rhetoric of realism implied in the film medium.

**The Task of the Inter-Viewer**

The tone of the film – its mood – is set from the beginning. The shots that introduce the presentation of the title are holding gestures that enable Brigitte’s narrative and her attempt to live her own life to come about. Figuring a space, the first long shot pictures a teenage girl in bright-colored clothes, alone on a beach. The receding tide has left a wide space of stagnant, shallow water and wet sand. The girl – Brigitte’s alter the Beach Girl as it turns out later – is seen in three-quarter view from behind; she is looking down at her left foot that moves in the wet sand. The slushy sound that accompanies her activity is the only noise against a background of vaguely audible traffic. Although the girl’s absorption in her playing foot connotes loneliness, the image of a girl surrounded by a large open plane also indicates free space. Later on in the film Brigitte explains that the Beach Girl’s preference for this spacious environment represents her longing to be freed from the disturbance of other people. I take this opening scene as a pointer for reading: acknowledging that space is a pivotal issue of Brigitte’s story, the filmmaker gives room to Brigitte
as well as to her story. At the same time, the long shot keeps the viewers at a non-voyeuristic
distance without denying them access to the life story involved.

The opening scene is not the only moment in which Brigitte is occupied with the sand of
the beach; at other instances she is also modeling the sand and drawing in it, thus indicating that
this malleable substance incites shaping and making. Brigitte’s as yet indecisive forming activity –
making a slushy sound – complements the filmmaker’s initial act of giving room that allows the
possibility of playing. Because this potential play also refers to children’s attraction to playing with
sand, it provides the scene with the additional connotation of childhood. The combination of
playing, space, and childhood allows for the connection between the picture of the Beach Girl and
Winnicott’s thoughts about playing and potential space.

In Playing and Reality Winnicott argues that the potential space gives a place to playing
(1996 [1971]). Winnicott’s idea of playing pertains to creativity, because “in playing, and perhaps
only in playing, the child or the adult is free to be creative” (53). As I will clarify later on, according
to Winnicott the possibility of playing starts in the relational space situated between baby and
caregiver; forming the bridge between inner world and outer world, it helps the infant to become
a symbol user and, hence, a subject. Playing thus refers to a relationship, to a theoretical space that
encompasses play in the sense of interplay – both latitude and interaction. Most importantly, both
the activity and the space are based on an affectively defined, holding relationship, because “playing
implies trust” (51). Hence, Winnicott’s thoughts about playing and its location in the potential space
hint at the relation between secure attachment and subject formation that was highlighted in the
previous chapter.

In another publication Winnicott presents “the capacity to be alone” as the precondition
for playing. He terms this capacity “one of the most important signs of maturity in emotional
development” (1990a: 29).1 Winnicott emphasizes the relational quality of the capacity by
describing it as “the experience [of an infant] of being alone while someone else is present” (30).
He further clarifies that the relationship needed for the capacity to be alone can be realized by the
actual presence of a primary caregiver “even if represented for the moment by a cot or a pram or

1. Winnicott wrote the paper "The Capacity to be Alone" in 1958. It was published
in his study about “the maturational processes and the facilitating environment”
the general atmosphere of the immediate environment" (30). Stressing that "without the sufficiency of this experience the capacity to be alone cannot develop," (33) Winnicott indicates that without the reliable presence of another or its representation by the atmosphere of the immediate environment neither playing nor creative living is possible. Thus, the holding environment and the capacity to be alone are closely connected.

It also is the holding quality that ties the position of the filmmaker as primary organizer of the film story to his function of embedded interlocutor. In light of Winnicott’s ideas, the presentation of the Beach Girl in the opening scene signifies a facilitating environment. Giving pride of place to the personality who both enacts a fear for intrusive people and a need for playing, the filmmaker attunes himself to his main character. By making an empathic gesture he suggests that the Beach Girl’s wish, or rather, her need to be left alone can be turned into a capacity to live creatively. Seen as facilitating environment, the opening shot prepares the filmmaker’s coming task of invisible, but reliably present, interlocutor. Hence, the atmosphere of the film’s beginning, which can be read as a reference to the filmmaker’s holding presence, also pertains to the position of the interlocutor. This interpretation underlines the existential – indexical – connection between the external and the embedded focalizor; these figures do not so much give the same view as they shed the same enabling light. This indexical relationship brings the two positions under a common denominator, foregrounding an inter-viewer who mediates between heroine and public, that is, between interpersonal and transpersonal interaction.

During the first scene the slushy sound of the Beach Girl’s foot is replaced by a voice-over. The non-authoritarian, hesitantly formulating voice of a man – a therapist, as will soon become clear – is recounting his first meeting with Brigitte. He describes her psychic condition as depressed and troubled. The gentle tone of the voice is even more in concert with the solitary, bent-headed girl on the film screen, when the speaker continues: “She could not make eye contact. When I tried to make eye contact, she was very nervous, full of anxiety” (emphasis in the voice of the speaker). Using italics, I make the word “eye contact” into a signal that foretells Winnicott’s relational variation of the mirror stage and, moreover, the crucial connective moment in Brigitte’s therapy.

Immediately after the word “anxiety” – the sound of which tends to reverberate in one’s mind – a close-up of the kind face of the therapist provides his voice with a matching look. He is seen at three-quarter view, looking diagonally at an invisible and as yet silent interlocutor before him. The same shot that brings the therapist into the picture thus introduces the inter-viewer.
Although there is a reasonable chance that this inter-viewer is the filmmaker himself, the viewers are kept in the dark about the precise identity of the interlocutor, an uncertainty that remains at work during the entire film. The indeterminable nature of the filmmaker's presence reinforces the ambiguity of his double function.

This status enacts the delicacy of the in-between position of an inter-viewer who combines an interpersonal with a transpersonal perspective. On the interpersonal level, the inter-viewer functions, to begin with, as a non-intrusive listener who intends to intervene as little as possible in favor of giving the floor to Brigitte. He fills in the outlines of his empathic position with the help of a shot that presents him in dialogue with a therapist who appears to be a careful and caring focalizer of Brigitte's problems. In addition to drawing attention to the relational function of dialogue per se, the inter-viewer also foregrounds the holding aspect of the therapist's focalization. The "light" of this scene, then, reinforces the effect of the filmmaker's initial room-giving acts of filming; it makes him into a witness who is more than a distanced, objective or inactive onlooker.

The double task of the inter-viewer thus complicates the structure of embedding. Although the therapist's function is embedded in the story of the filmmaker, the filmmaker, in turn, subordinates his own position to the dialogue with real characters. Because the tone of these dialogues not only affects the characters themselves, it hints at a space that exceeds the interpersonal level.

The transpersonal level of the task of the inter-viewer is openly addressed in the shot when the therapist disappears from the picture. At that moment the therapist's voice is replaced by an abrupt, dry clack. Because it is unclear what is making the sound, the clack might hint at a slate or clapperboard, the technical device that makes possible the identification of film takes. Showing the numbers and other identificatory data of the takes, the board is held in front of the camera at the beginning and the end of each spell of shooting. As the onomatopoeia "clapperboard" suggests, the "clapper" of the device has a specific function: it is needed for the synchronization of picture and sound. This distinctive sound – as if a door were being shut – accompanies the appearance of the title De ontkkening (Denial): white letters on a black ground, followed by the simple phrase that names the filmmaker: "een film van Tom Verheul." Just as the clapperboard bridges sound and

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2. The complexity of the intertwinenment of the documentary practice, relational subjectivity, and ethics is indicated by the theoretical observations of, for instance, Michael Renov and Martha Rosler. The former defines the four documentary functions he outlines explicitly as "modalities of desire," although he does not address the response side of this "documentative desire" (1993: 12-36); the latter addresses the connection of ethics and aesthetics within documentary photography in terms of the responsibility of the filmmaker (1997: 360-399).
picture, the combination of sound, title, name, and blackness – this image-defying darkness lasts some time – enhances the in-between function of the inter-viewer.

When the filmmaker audibly and visibly indicates that he is the implementing, mediating, facilitating, and steering agent, he also “awakens” the public. However, he not only alerts the viewers to his undertaking but also engages them in it. In this way, the filmmaker reinforces the invitation that was implied in his indexical presence as invisible interlocutor of the therapist. Firmly positioning himself outside the frame of the visible scene and, hence, outside the screen, the filmmaker indicates that his fellow outsiders, the viewers of the film, can participate in the dialogue with the therapist. Thus making them co-producers of his inter-viewing, he also offers them a task in the production of the potential space he is creating for Brigitte.

The film Denial is launched with the help of audiovisual scenes, which together enact the holding gestures that steer the interpretative practice of this documentary. The scenes constitute a relationship between Brigitte, her therapist(s), the filmmaker, and a public. However, this supportive environment for the coming into being of Brigitte’s life story points at a cooperation that cannot be placed in a merely interpersonal space. It calls for the existence of a potential space that exceeds the space implied in the relationship between two people. Hence, it also reminds the viewers that they are supposed to do more than observe Brigitte’s therapeutic adventures. Functioning at the transpersonal level of a text the film underscores that a wider, intersubjective aim is at stake when a traumatized life is being put into cultural perspective.

This widening of perspective requires affective sensitivity on the part of the viewers. Only their emotional availability enables the potential space to emanate from the screen. It is up to them to become affected by the mood of the filmmaker’s gestures and the tone of the therapist’s voice and look. If viewers pick up these markers of a relational perspective, they can share the atmosphere of consideration suggested, an ambiance that discourages sensationalist, narcissistic curiosity or defensive disgust. This atmosphere helps them not to deny what happens before their eyes. At the moment the viewers become involved in the life-giving practice of the film from within their embodied subjectivity – with empathy – they make the genesis of the potential space possible.

3. In a recent conversation with Thom Verheul, the filmmaker brought up the reference to a door being closed. The sound refers to the image of the isolation cell that introduces Brigitte as narrator of her own story, a transition to which I will return. Accordingly, the blackness at the beginning of the film connotes Brigitte’s utter isolation.
Similarly, the desire not to let Brigitte down predates and conditions – in short *holds* – the wish to analytically understand or to be able to tell about Brigitte’s quandary.

The indexical relationship with real life implied in *Denial* as documentary film makes the affective appeal of the story concrete; the film moves and motivates its public to act upon reality. This effect is substantially enhanced by the use of the realistic medium of film, which also implies the seductive working of the iconic relationship to reality. Because the viewers are indexically and iconically brought in touch with historic reality, it is not only Brigitte’s life or, more exactly, her capacity to feel alive that is at stake but also the life of the viewers of her predicament. As viewers – and I emphatically include myself in this plural pronoun – who are motivated to imagine her life as being real, we too are supposed to cope with a traumatic life history, albeit that of another person. Whether we like it or not, our affects and moods, our evaluative and motivational feelings, our desires and beliefs have to deal with the reality of this traumatized existence. The film then offers more than an exercise in pretend play or acting as if there were a fictional Brigitte who had been traumatized. The fact that she really exists, as do many people like her, requires that we take our feelings and thoughts seriously.

The introductory scenes of this documentary underscore that the interpretation of the film should go beyond disembodied reflection. Moreover, the analysis takes place in a space of interaction that exceeds intrapsychic processes. Hence, the present analysis, as cultural analysis in general, is located in an intersubjective space in which affective forces remind the subject of interpretation of her interactive relation to the object of analysis. In the framework of this study, I can best describe this semiotic practice in terms of the capacity of being vulnerable, while presenting this capacity as the relational complement of the capacity to be alone. Together they emphasize that (inter)subjectivity has autonomous as well as relational aspects and functions on both an intrapsychic and interpersonal level. As relational concept, vulnerability is not so much the answer to the question “Whose Pain?” as the responsive condition that makes answering possible. Indicating the possibility to be wounded and the capacity to survive that wounding, it yields further insight into the relational aspect of traumatic pain.  

4. No wonder I was touched when I found Andrea Liss using the phrase “my intact vulnerability” in the introduction of her study about the confrontation with documentary pictures of the Holocaust. Comparing her book with a distant letter in want of an addressee, Liss continues her opening paragraph as follows: “This letter comes face to face with memories of photographs whose horrific images
Like the capacity to be alone, the capacity to be vulnerable is a precondition for creative living or playing. Traumatized subjects, and especially those children who have been subjected to a cumulative and prolonged traumatizing process, are hampered by the fear of being wounded (again). This fear is the subject of the two fragments that are analyzed in the next section. It will be clarified there with the help of Winnicott’s thinking about the function of the transitional space, because that space foregrounds the role of the primary relationship of trust that prevents the fear of being wounded from arising. Eventually, Winnicott’s theorizing helps to pinpoint the basic anxiety that makes a subject vulnerable to trauma and forces traumatized subjects to maintain their disintegration.

In Fear of Being Wounded (Again)

A suggestive shot right after the title introduces the first fragment of analysis. It shows a mattress lying on a floor, half-hidden by darkness, an image that is accompanied by Brigitte’s voice-over. She speaks in a matter-of-fact tone about her decision to look for help when she was a girl of fifteen, suffering from anorexia. In the course of the film it becomes clear that this mattress not only refers to the regular sexual abuse by her father and the singular rape by a group of men, but also to re-traumatizing events during several therapies and solitary confinement in an isolation cell. At this moment in the film, however, the image and the voice-over, first of all, mark the contrast with the next scene, in which Brigitte is crying, fighting against a pain she does not want to – cannot – feel. She is seen in close-up, not looking to the camera or the invisible person to whom she is talking. She looks down or looks away.

The first point I wish to make is that the filmmaker, by bringing a crying Brigitte into the picture, presents her for the first time as a focalizer for whom body and voice no longer function separately; she is not a visible body without a voice (Beach Girl) or a voice-over without a visible body (image of mattress). For the first time voice and body come together, an integration that results in the picture of a suffering person. This imaginative act of the filmmaker suggests that non-dissociative behavior – the coming together in one person – inevitably invokes feelings of psychic pain. The scene thus presents a Brigitte who realizes that integration is a painful process. The "I" who is speaking cannot fully hide in one of her alters anymore, precisely because she is caught in a more or less conscious fight to keep away the hurt she is fearing: “I don’t want it.
I want it to be cut out, not to exist. (...) I don't want to know or feel it. I don't want to be there. Let the others sort it out. They can do it, can't they?"

Brigitte thus gives both a simple and profound, acrid as well as precise account of her unlivable predicament: she does not want to live, if living requires feelings that cannot be dealt with. She voices her fear that unruly affects interfere with her "being there," while confirming the interdependence of knowing and feeling: "I don't want to know or feel it. I don't want to be there." She appears to understand that being implies a connection with both knowing and feeling; at the same time, she is aware of the apparently unbearable pain that marks this connection. And because this threatening pain appears to be the only sign of a vital divide, she cannot but say: "I don't want it. I want it to be cut out." This ambiguous situation demonstrates the complexity of the failure of experience involved in her traumatization. It is not only the haunting images of past events that need to be cut out, but also an affective overwhelming has to be dealt with. Hence, the fear of being wounded (again) makes re-integration of experience into an almost impossible mission.

This problem makes the second point I wish to highlight even more pertinent. The end of the scene with Brigitte's emotional outburst reveals that she is talking to a woman therapist. Showing the face of an attentively listening woman, the filmmaker brings the female therapist into the story. Her presence indicates that Brigitte need not struggle alone. Moreover, because the therapist's function of listener is emphasized by the dialogic position of the face in profile, the image underlines the importance of interpersonal communication; it is a visual statement of the fact that a life after traumatizing is only possible with the help of another being. The presence of the therapist in the scene implies that not the acknowledging of the hurt as such is necessary for the integration of experience, but that this acknowledging requires a personal, enabling relationship. Hence, the scene makes visible that traumatic pain is a relational concept that needs a space of interaction.

It is Winnicott who has provided this facilitating interaction with an explicit hypothetical space. Therefore, it is the proper moment to bring in Winnicott's theorizing about the transitional area of experience, the area that enables an infant to become a symbol user. The transitional phenomena, including the transitional object, are particularly relevant to my argument, because their use appears to ward off anxiety. Although Winnicott does not take the differentiation of affects into consideration, his thinking about development gives the affective quality of the relational space between baby and caregiver pride of place, while foregrounding the relevance of feelings of trust and safety.
Winnicott’s ideas about the transitional space and its extension, the potential space, stem from his lifelong interest in the transition of the baby from dependency on the primary caregiver via relative dependency to independence. His focal point is the relative dependency, the in-between stage he calls the realm of illusion, which is manifested in the infant's use of transitional objects. In *Playing and Reality* he argues that the infant’s passage into the world of symbolization through this realm of illusion is enabled by good-enough mothering, i.e. “the mother's special capacity for making adaptation to the needs of her infant” (1996: 14). Good-enough mothering “gives the infant the illusion that there is an external reality that corresponds to the infant's own capacity to create” (12; emphasis in text).

With this description Winnicott clarifies the hypothetical perspective of a baby or infant. Hence, the term “illusion” does not pertain to the idea of mental image; it belongs to the intermediate area of experience implied in the relationship between caregiver and child, the experience that I specified, in the previous chapter, as the dimension of felt and enacted semiosis. Seen from the point of view of a baby such a relational space cannot (yet) be conceived in terms of a distinction between internal and external life. As Winnicott formulates it, it concerns an experience for which the question “Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from the outside?” should not be posed, because it does not matter for the infant concerned (12).

This area of illusion is given shape by transitional phenomena. When, from about four months on, a pattern of behavior becomes manifest, the infant’s illusion can take the shape of the use of a material object, the so-called transitional object. The following quotation underscores that the transitional object has an affect-regulating function, because it enables the infant to feel safe:

Also, out of all this (if we study any one infant) there may emerge some thing or some phenomenon – perhaps a bundle of wool or the corner of a blanket or eiderdown, or a word or tune, or a mannerism – that becomes vitally important to the infant for use at the time of going to sleep, and is a defence against anxiety, especially anxiety of the depressive type. Perhaps some soft object or other type of object has been found and used by the infant, and this becomes what I am calling a *transitional object*. This object goes on being important. (4; emphasis in text)5

5. Both material object and phenomenon can be approached as a Peircean representamen, i.e. as perceptible sign.
What counts is not the object *per se* but the fact that the baby makes use of it: she has a specific relationship with it. I would say that the infant enacts an affective relation with the transitional object, a semiotic activity of which the meaning is the feeling of safety when the infant is in touch with the object. Semiotically seen, such a transitional object functions as both icon and index: resembling (an aspect of) the physical body of the caregiver, it signifies her soothing presence. Still, it cannot be said that the baby knows she is using a symbol; the baby is only on its way to the awareness of symbolization by means of an object that embodies an affective relationship. The transitional phenomena, then, reinforce the idea that the infant is a semiotically competent being, and because their existence is linked to feelings of safety, they also emphasize the necessity of holding.6

Although Winnicott’s use of the terms transitional and potential is somewhat confusing, I see the potential space as the successor of the transitional space. The transition to this space is marked by the fact that, at a certain time, the transitional object loses its function. Winnicott’s formulation of the reason for this loss of meaning hints at the coming into being of the triangulation that makes possible the conscious use of symbols. Transitional phenomena lose their meaning because they “have become spread out over the whole intermediate territory between ‘inner psychic reality’ and ‘the external world as perceived by *two persons in common,*’ that is to say, over the whole cultural field. At this point my subject widens out into that of play” (5; emphasis added). Winnicott sees playing, which implies all kinds of creative symbol use, as the continuation of the infant’s dealing with transitional objects.

The causal relationship between affective development and playing is the reason why Winnicottian creativity does not stand for the mere possibility to produce meaning. Creative living is equated with feeling alive and enjoying oneself, for “it is creative apperception more than anything else that makes the individual feel that life is worth living.” Finally, Winnicott’s claim that “the potential space happens only in relation to a feeling of confidence on the part of the baby” is a reminder that the space depends on a successful emotional development (100; emphasis in text). Trust in self and others appears to be the basis of the existence of the potential space. Conversely,

6. I see the affective investment of an object as the predecessor of the affective investment of the house, the material environment that “houses” the relationship with the caregiver. This specific home quality of the house – the house as holding space – will be addressed in the next chapter. Although Winnicott’s texts suggest that the attachment to a transitional object is a universal developmental phenomenon, Lavinia Gomez believes that “transitional phenomena are culture-specific, although Winnicott presents them as universal” (1998: 93). For my argument, however, it is not important whether this phenomenon is universal or not; what counts is the apparent possibility of a non-conscious, iconically and indexically structured semiosis and the interpersonal space of affective, nonverbal interaction implied in this semiotic activity.
lack of trust endangers subjectivity. This conclusion will be further elaborated with the help of another fragment of *Denial*.

The fragment shows a therapeutic session in which Brigitte’s position as enactor and verbal focalizer of her situation is complemented by the drawing she is making on a board. This complicates Brigitte’s role as character in the film with still another embedded story, that of her drawing. Because of its layered structure the scene in its entirety makes it possible to delineate the implied contrasting relationships, a contrast that is best understood by making the potential space into the umbrella theme of the scene. This theme is suggested by the filmmaker’s decision to bring in a therapeutic encounter in which Brigitte’s attitude towards other people is the issue. Including an actively participating therapist in the scene this time, the filmmaker figures an interaction between Brigitte’s fear of being wounded (again) and the empathic attitude of a therapist. The scene thus marks the tension between distrust and trust.

On the one hand, Brigitte’s drawing and comments enact the disruption of the potential space while highlighting a basic distrust in other people. The scene emphasizes Brigitte’s need for protection from traumatizing others and, at the same time, reveals how Brigitte herself stands in the way of the genesis of a potential space. On the other hand, the fragment also points out that images and words help Brigitte foster and articulate specific emotions – in this case a mixture of anger, disgust, and hatred. Because the therapist, through her questions, enables the channeling of Brigitte’s aggressive feelings into recognizable emotions, the scene also demonstrates how this therapeutic encounter provides Brigitte with the necessary holding and facilitating environment.

Brigitte’s drawing activity is interrupted by the answers and comments provoked by the female therapist. Although Brigitte has a big white board at her disposal, she uses only a little part of it, in the lowest third. There she draws a small circular shape, figuring an enclosed space of which the outline is fortified with many short cross lines. Her accompanying words, however, provide this apparent fortress with the features of a cozy corner: “A nice little chair... a cigarette...” The therapist, who points to the rest of the board and asks “What about all this?”, tries to widen Brigitte’s field of vision, encompassing the broader perspective of the outside world within her gesture.

But Brigitte immediately rebuffs this attempt by answering with contempt: “Who cares about them!” The substitution of the neutral “this” by the disdainful “them” acutely specifies Brigitte’s problem as being the result of human relationships gone awry, and brings in, through the back door, the topic of emotional relationships. The therapist tries again: “They can’t get in?” and
Brigitte angrily counters: "They don't need to!" The therapist then mirrors: "You don't want them?" Brigitte (whole-heartedly): "No!" Because the therapist does not give up, Brigitte is enabled to finally articulate her anger, disgust, and hatred even more precisely: the outside world is referred to as "pigsty" and "bitches." Finally Brigitte becomes so irritated that she expresses her revulsion about "them" by making the sounds and gestures of vomiting. Brigitte has made her point. She can only be safe once left alone, a situation that is actually played out whenever she takes up the role of Beach Girl.

With the help of this embedded drama the filmmaker not only provides insight into Brigitte's basic incapacitation of feelings of trust and the therapeutic strategies that make her aware of those feelings; he also makes her into an active participant of the articulation of her own story. Through this narrative construction, he makes it easier for the viewers to engage in Brigitte's confrontation with her traumatization, because he enables them to recognize and share some of her emotions. Allowed to look over the shoulder of the filmmaker, the viewers are presented with images of anger and contempt and are invited to empathize with them, that is, to use their feelings and emotion habits in their acts of interpretation. Hence, the fear of confrontation with traumatic pain – with the utter incapacity to relate – is channeled through recognizable, narratable, and sharable emotions and, correspondingly, the viewer's vulnerability or emotional availability can remain intact.

The embedded fragments in which Brigitte is the subject of her different alters can also be seen as attempts by the filmmaker to increase the public's understanding of the problems with which a severely traumatized subject has to deal. In the next section I will argue that his strategy to let Brigitte enact her defense, simultaneously clarifies the fear of being wounded (again) and the danger of being silenced (again).

_The Invisibility of the Silent One_

The way the filmmaker makes Brigitte's dissociated life socially accessible succeeds in avoiding the danger of spectacle, sensation, or obsessive fascination. Because the filmmaker maintains his role of invisible interlocutor in these scenes, he allows the viewers to share his supportive but non-intruding position. Correspondingly, his questions are not meant to elicit a description of what happened in the past by all means but to make the existential logic of Brigitte's survival behavior understandable: how to live with sexual, physical, and emotional abuse. The focal point is not the
“what” of the traumatizing events and not the performance aspect of the alters but the reason and function of Brigitte’s flight into the different personalities. The alter stories are clearly not designed to give the viewers a chance to be merely fascinated by the phenomenon of acting out, although the breathtaking metamorphoses inevitably have a surprise effect.

Moreover, by weaving fragments of dialogues with the non-dissociative Brigitte into the film story, the inter-viewer enables the main character to elucidate her recently acquired self-knowledge about her alters. They made it possible for her to deny the most threatening aspects of what she had been forced to undergo, because she could “leave her head” as “they took over.” The division of experience over several personalities appears to be an unconscious process; Brigitte had no control over the development of her respective alters. They just happened to function at a certain time and, in the beginning, were not recognized as split-off personalities. Before Brigitte entered into therapy she saw them as fast changing, different aspects of her self, as moods: “I always realized I had many sides, six moods an hour.” Her explanation reinforces the argument that the common task of the alters is to keep life bearable at all costs, even if the self is constantly put under erasure: “I could lose myself completely. There were feelings I couldn’t get back.”

In order to emphasize the difference between the personalities, the filmmaker provides the different characters with suitable, specifying spaces. In her introduction to narratology Bal uses the relationship between space and character in Denial as an example of how the aspect of space can produce meaning in a narrative text (1997: 138-139). She concludes her brief analysis of the “team of specialists” that supports Brigitte by stressing the stabilizing effect of these “spatialized” characters for the character Brigitte. Moreover, “ignoring that relationship would [be] a denial of how this film could be made into a narrative that we can process” (139). Structuring the filmic narrative, the spatialization of the characters thus also makes it easier for the viewers to “process” – a matter of embodied imagination – Brigitte’s way of coping with her traumatized childhood. The subjectifying function of the space in these scenes becomes even more evident when compared to the scenes in which the non-dissociative Brigitte acts as interlocutor: presenting her face in close-up against a dark background, these scenes show a Brigitte who does not need the stabilizing function of a surrounding, defining space.

Brigitte’s alters represent different ages, manifested in varying behavior and ways of talking. This distinction is not only reinforced by a change in environment but also by a variation of clothes. The Beach Girl, a stubborn teenager with red sweater and blue denim skirt above red tights, is offered the free space of an empty beach. Filmed while running, she enacts Brigitte’s wish
and need to be left alone. A second alter, wearing a long, loose-fitting coat, is the Lady; she acts out the role of Brigitte’s mother with the grandeur and severity of a Mother Superior who is in control because of her rank. This interpretation is suggested by the space that positions this character in the film story: the cloister of a Dutch cathedral (Utrecht). In line with the Lady’s respectable rank, the interlocutor addresses her by means of the Dutch personal pronoun “U,” the formal, polite version of “you” that does not exist in English.

Just after the vomiting scene that ended the drawing session mentioned before, a third alter enters stage. An abrupt transition of shot, via a close-up of a bucket of soapy water and hands wringing a cloth, introduces the obsessive Clean-Woman. It is the daughter Brigitte who daily cleans her tidy rooms by order of the Lady. This character wears glasses to help her find every tiny trace of dirt that has to be wiped out with a wet towel. The Tough One, in leather jacket and acting like an eighteen-year-old boy, seems the only person who moves freely in public spaces: bars, pool halls, and train stations. Brigitte typifies “him” as the coach who has the task of cheering the others on or defending them. In contrast to this rough type there is also a little girl in brightly-colored clothes, the Crazy One, who is born crazy so that she cannot be driven mad anew. She enjoys swinging in a playground, while hiding her hands, because “hands are dangerous.” She cannot cry but does not mind.

Noteworthily, body language plays an important part in the differentiation between the alters; it ranges from posture, gestures, movements, and facial expression to the use of voice – pitch, intonation and pronouncement of words. The sight of the breathtaking alternation of authentic and complex bodily enactments unconsciously displayed by one and the same actor proves, first of all, the significance of choosing for the realistic medium of film. That is to say, the persuasiveness of the scenes mainly depends on their function as iconic and indexical signs of reality. On top of making Brigitte’s defense against a violated subjectivity painstakingly visible, they also emphasize that the nonverbal participation of Brigitte in the dialogues is not staged but real. The realistic medium thus makes the scenes into a demonstration of the semiotic and subjectifying force of nonverbal interaction. Nevertheless, the attention of the viewer is not allowed to dissolve into the spectacular effect of these enactments. The questions of the inter-viewer and the sharp answers of Brigitte underline that their acting out serves a vital aim.

When the inter-viewer gently probes the cause of Brigitte’s dissociative behavior – the painful subject of the abusive past cannot be totally avoided – it becomes clear that every alter contributes to the main task of keeping control over Brigitte’s life. In the course of her answering
the plain “who did what” question, Brigitte also brings the Silent One into the filmic narrative. Remarkably, it is the only alter that appears to be underexposed – in the literal and figural sense of the word. When the Silent One is almost casually referred to by Brigitte in her function of Clean-Woman, a medium shot taken against the light briefly figures her as a mere silhouette seen from behind; she is standing before the window while the rest of the room remains in the dark. The transition to a close-up of her head brings the Silent One nearby, but her face is still averted when the dry comment is heard: “She had no mouth, so she could not scream, so she took all the pain.” Unlike the other alters, this alter has not been characterized or stabilized with the help of a concrete space and specific clothes. Because she has no face either, the viewers are forbidden to look her in the eyes and, hence, to recognize and acknowledge her as a person.

The shot deprives the viewers from relating to the Silent One. It does more, however. The briefness of the scene, together with the lack of a face, exposes this alter to the risk of being overlooked. In fact, she has been overlooked in the reception of the film, as is exemplified by the text on the cover of the video box. Although this text refers to six alters, only five of them are named; the Silent One is not mentioned. Likewise, in Bal’s review and analysis of the film only five alters are foregrounded. Despite her otherwise caring attitude towards Brigitte’s predicament, she appears to conflate the Silent One with the Beach Girl, who is addressed as “the Silent Beach Girl” and “de Stille” (the Silent One) (1997: 139 and 1992: 13).

Showing how invisibility obstructs cognition, the film thus unwittingly demonstrates the effect of being a personality without a voice: it is difficult to acknowledge the existence of a character that is silent and invisible in a story. Nevertheless, Brigitte herself does not understate the function of the Silent One, presenting her as the one who has to endure the pain: “So she took all the pain.” As the word “so” indicates, Brigitte explains the existence of the Silent One by using a simple, causal logic: “having no mouth” is the cause, “taking all the pain” the effect. Seen as such it is a variation on the logic introduced by the Crazy One: if you are born crazy, you cannot be forced to become so later on in life. Both alters thus deny that in reality it was the other way around: the alleged effects were actually the causes: traumatization – apparently a form of madness and pain – forced Brigitte to present herself as somebody who has been “born crazy” and as a subject that “has no mouth to scream.”

However, Brigitte complicates the function of the Silent One in two ways. Firstly, this personality appears to be a privileged one, because Brigitte adds: “Apart from that [taking all the pain], we took turns whoever was there” (emphasis added). Setting apart “taking all the pain” from
the "turns" of the others, Brigitte makes a distinction: the task of taking all the pain differs from what the others have to do. Thanks to the Silent One the others need not take any "pain," they can live without those disturbing feelings. Because they are enabled to "live after" the Silent One, this alter has another status. Still, it is unclear what kind of pain is at issue and why this pain should be silenced. The second complicating factor, the impossibility of screaming, can bring clarification.

Because the Silent One has been deprived of a mouth and, hence, of the possibility of screaming, this alter turns into a sign of something that should but nevertheless cannot be screamed out. Because screaming is the natural effect of being physically hurt – and sexual abuse always also implies physical pain –, the fact that she cannot scream is striking. Consequently, something more, something other than mere physical hurt is at stake: something threatening but as yet indefinable. Hence, I suggest that the Silent One is the substantiation of an unbearable, unruly, inadaptable, non-specifiable affective situation. This personality might signify the existential agony and psychic paralysis that is implied in a discursive death that takes the affective dimension of (inter)subjectivity into consideration.

Seen as such, the Silent One becomes the embodiment of the specific aspect of traumatic pain. Foregrounding the bodily base of (inter)subjectivity in general, this personality particularly sheds light on the affective aspect of the impossible subject position implied in discursive silence. Being silent – a living dead – refers to a traumatized person who is not capable of feeling alive and expressing that aliveness in a nonverbal or verbal way. The Silent One marks not only the fault line between physical and psychic being, but also the actual breach. This trauma is given form by the impossibility of screaming.

Furthermore, through the intervention of the impossible scream, "Silent" can also be read as "Silenced," a meaning that connects this alter with both a violating other and the need of an empowering other. Put differently, being silenced both indicates the disruption of a potential space and asks for the creation of a new one. This ambiguous dependency on others explains the different status of the Silent One, an explanation that is enhanced by the difference in function between the Silent One and the others. Unlike the Silent One, the other alters act as more or less self-supporting agencies that cope with life by denying traumatization. The Silent One, however, cannot deny what has happened, because it has been reduced to a personality that suffers for all the others and is not allowed to give voice to that pain.

Despite the ambiguity implied in the Silent One, the film story in its entirety makes this personality into the sign that most tellingly hints at the way the annihilation of subjectivity can
be undone. By characterizing this personality as the embodiment of traumatic pain, I give the existential need implied in the Silent One’s existence the meaning of the need for re-connection, for the holding gestures of others, and for intersubjective sharing. Thus acknowledging the reality of the silence, I wish to make the (in)visibility of this alter productive.

Brigitte’s Silent One demonstrates how traumatization results in a crisis of subjectivity that cannot be undone – as Brigitte’s other alters act out – by merely being tough or clean or authoritative or crazy or freed from others. It does not suffice either to unmask the denying personalities or to bring them under the aegis of one personality. The specific position of the Silent One makes clear that another aspect of the traumatized subject deserves preferential attention, that is, the personality who is (again) reduced to the situation of an overwhelmed, non-speaking in-fant. This in-fantile subject, which is certainly there when cumulative traumatization has been started early in life, should be enabled to make a new start in life. Because a re-start after traumatization requires a relationship comparable to the one that facilitates the nonverbal genesis of an intersubject, the Silent One confirms the idea that traumatized persons, at least the victims of chronic abuse, first and foremost need a (good-enough) “mother.”

If the non-screaming, invisible Silent One is read as a symptom of that basic need, this alter can become more productive than the other ones in the end, because it is the only one that does not distract the viewer from the problem by showing diversionary action. It is the only one who “really” needs the responsiveness and responsibility of others. Nevertheless, the filmmaker’s narrative suggests, by visually enacting the absence of a mouth, that this personality defies representation. Paradoxically, the relevance of the concept of traumatic pain and my search for traces of that pain in semiotic objects is supported by a textual strategy – or is it a textual lapse? – that emphasizes how ungraspable the traces of that pain are. The suggestion that the filmmaker possibly missed a chance of giving the Silent One due attention in the film requires some explanation. I claim that the evasiveness of the Silent One highlights a tension inherent in the position of inter-viewer, that is, a tension between “telling about” Brigitte and “telling with” the main protagonist of the film story. At the end of this chapter I will return to this tension.

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7. As the short presentation of the theory of structural dissociation in Chapter 2 made clear, the EP is a function of the emotional system – I would call it affect system – that controls the defense of the individual in the face of major threat. See the next paragraphs for further explications. Oral communication with Professor Van der Hart made me realize that the analysis of Denial and especially that of the Silent One, which I drafted before my knowledge of structural dissociation, could benefit from an interaction with this theory. Van der Hart suggested that the scenes that are the subject of the coming section could be read as an intrusion of an EP and an attempt to overcome its damaging effect.

8. The page numbers refer to the text in the reader of a course on *Psychosomatic Therapy for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders*. Driebergen (the Netherlands), 18-19 May 2001.
Here, I put forward the idea that the briefness of the Silent One’s introduction in comparison with the attention that is paid to the spatialization of the other alters, in combination with the fact that this scene is the only one of its kind in the entire film, opens the possibility that forces other than imaginative or rhetorical ones keep the Silent One at bay in the film narrative. Brigitte herself might have prevented the filmmaker from further exploring this specific alter; consequently, the filmmaker’s handling might give evidence of his consideration for Brigitte’s fear of a confrontation with her traumatizing past. This explanation is compatible with the idea that Brigitte’s Silent One refers to a so-called “emotional personality” (EP) who represents the one who has been hampered by a severe, life-threatening attack on her subjectivity, the traumatizing attack that resulted in dissociation. This implies that those whom Brigitte calls “the others” make life livable because they prevent the traumatic past that is “kept” by the Silent One from intruding into daily life.7

In “Structural Dissociation of the Personality: Traumatic Origins, Phobic Maintenance,” Nijenhuis et al. offer the model of structural dissociation as a heuristic tool for the understanding of trauma-related dissociation (2001 and in press; English original by the authors).8 This theory explains the failure of experience inherent in traumatization in terms of mutually exclusive forms of behavior. These different behavior patterns are connected with the working of different, evolutionary-derived, “emotional operating systems” (Panksepp 1998), which control all, more and less complex functions of life. The starting point for the authors was the ongoing alternation of re-experiencing traumatic events and being detached from them manifested by many traumatized persons. These two kinds of behavior have a complexity that exceeds the idea of simple states, for re-experiencing can “encompass states such as fleeing, freezing, being in pain or being analgesic” and detachment does not “exclude being joyful, ashamed, sexually aroused, or curious at times” (1). In case of severe threat, dissociation between the defense system and the other systems can occur, resulting in the coming into being of the “emotional personality” (EP) who remains stuck in the terrifying threat, and the “apparently normal personality” (ANP) who tries to go on living. Because of the dissociation the threatening experience cannot become integrated.9

9. Integration not only implies “synthesis,” i.e. the formation and adaptation of mental schemas, but also the link of those schemas with a self, and, moreover, a self in relation to both the environment and to past, present, and future. Following Janet (1928), the latter activity is called “personification” and goes together with the forming of episodic (autobiographic) memories. Dissociation can thus be characterized as a subject’s “failure to synthesize and personify terrifying experiences” (Nijenhuis et al. 2001: 28). These ideas, which form the basis of the phase-oriented model of trauma treatment the same authors also propose (Steele et al. in press), are informed by the pioneering work of psychiatrist Pierre Janet, a contemporary of Freud. Because the dissociation primarily takes place between a system that is directed at individual survival and systems that are directed at the interaction with the environment and the survival of the species,
The memories of the emotional personality that defy integration are strongly different from autobiographical memories that have, eventually, processed traumatic events. The latter memories are "verbal, time-condensed, social and reconstructive in nature," while the emotional personality is caught in the here and now by "hallucinatory, solitary, involuntary experiences," consisting of "visual images, sensations, and motor acts, which engross the entire perceptual field" (7). For the one who has to undergo these experiences they breathe "timelessness and immutability." To avoid the pitfall of a simple opposition it should be borne in mind that "although the EP's traumatic memories include reproductive elements, they are not exact replications of overwhelming events." Like normal memories they are prey to fantasy, misperceptions, and exclusions (7). Nevertheless, the traumatic memories of the emotional personality are mainly encoded as sensorimotor and affective experiences without linguistic components. Hence, they are often remembered as sense perceptions or enactments.

The attempts of the apparently normal personality to perform the tasks of daily life are hampered by the intrusions of the emotional personality. Because these intrusions interfere with her apparent normality, the behavior of the former personality is characterized by amnesia, anesthesia, and lack of personification with respect to traumatic memories. The apparently normal personality's device thus is avoidance: "the ANP is prone to develop phobia of traumatic memory." As Janet already has argued, it is this phobia that maintains the dissociation, and this phobia might even extend into a "phobia of normal life" (19; emphasis in text).

The complexity of dissociation depends on the intensity of the stress implied in the threat, the duration or repetition of the threat, and the age of onset. DID, the dissociative identity disorder that enabled Brigitte to survive the chronic traumatization she was forced to undergo, represents the most complex form: tertiary structural dissociation. This disorder does not merely imply a splitting between the emotional personality and the apparently normal personality (primary structural dissociation); it also involves more than the fragmentation of the emotional personality into subsystems, a process that can be sequential or parallel (secondary structural dissociation). Tertiary dissociation implies both the emancipation of the fragmented emotional personality which both imply sociality, I suggest that the theory of structural dissociation also yields more insight into the tension between the autonomous and the relational aspects of subjectivity.
personality and the *fragmentation* of the apparently normal personality (41, table 1; emphasis added). The emancipation implies that an emotional personality may come into being that “has synthesized and personified (aspects) of the trauma into its limited range of memories, thus into its personality,” although this personality will be “unable to adapt to present reality” (9). The fragmentation of the apparently normal personality is the main feature that characterizes tertiary dissociation because it is only set in motion after enduring threat and stress. The fragmentation enables the traumatized person to avoid the intrusion of the emotional personalities; it can be seen as a reaction to the “inescapable aspects of daily life [that] become associated with past trauma” (16).

A fragmented apparently normal personality, i.e. the phobia-induced occurrence of different alters, thus indicates that a chronic, cumulative process is at stake.

Structural dissociation explains the tension between the Silent One and “the others” as caused by the mutually exclusive working of an emancipated emotional personality and a fragmented apparently normal personality, respectively. This tension is further enhanced by the “devilish dilemma” implied in the caretaker-induced trauma concerned; because the persons who should take care of the child are the same ones who cause the dangerous threat, the dilemma induces a dissociation between the defense system and the attachment system (15). This conflict between two operating systems can lead to dissociation from very early on. Hence, the attachment problems signaled in the previous chapter might result in dissociative behavior. This dissociation, in turn, hampers the emotional development of the child, because the child was not yet a fully integrated personality before the threat started. As a consequence, the psychic organization of the developmental child might be permanently influenced by chronic violation, emotional abuse, and neglect.

The theory of structural dissociation thus underscores the importance of the affective dimension of subjectivity and the working of different registers of experience. It also explicates an intrapsychic aspect of what I have called specific disablement, that is, the dissociation resulting from early abuse by caregivers, whether emotional, sexual, or physical. Additionally, Brigitte’s alters show that the defense they enact is also structurally set, as it is influenced by the intersubjectively shared means of representation that constitute subjectivity. Whereas their coming into being points out the working of a specific disability, the forms these alters take demonstrate their structurally defined formation. Moreover, if they are understood as signs that try to make sense of a situation while avoiding any pitfalls, they demonstrate an awesome inventiveness, which can be used for social criticism. The critical potential is exemplarily represented by the
Crazy One when she confronts the viewers with the question who is mad: she or we?

The filmmaker contributes to this criticism by the way he makes Brigitte’s story a matter of public interest. I will not further elaborate on the political statements implied in the film story. Instead, I will draw attention to a therapeutic moment, an attempt to make contact with Brigitte when she is intruded upon by an emotional personality, because this scene is emblematic for the affective constitution of subjectivity. I will argue that Brigitte has been given the opportunity to “re-connect” by means of an affective holding that mirrors the subjectifying function of a primary caregiver. An explicit reference to the empowering function of a “mother” is made during the therapeutic group session involved. In this specific scene the two therapists help Brigitte to make the transition from physical (self-)mutilation to affective and emotional feelings. For me, it is one of the most moving scenes of the film, and it gains in significance when read through Winnicott’s interpretation of “the mother’s face.”

**The Precursor of the Mirror is the Mother’s Face**

Giving the floor to the actors of the therapy session concerned, the role of the inter-viewer coincides with the activity of the camera. This camera, going back and forth between medium shots and close-ups, constitutes a triangulation between Brigitte and her two therapists. Brigitte is seated on the floor while the male therapist is sitting before her; he is seen from behind in a three-quarter view, his back filling the right side of the screen. On the left side sits the female therapist – mostly seen in profile – who acts as mediator, that is, as both co-operator and translator (Dutch-English). At the end of the scene she even “mediates” Brigitte’s affective feelings, thus enabling Brigitte to feel primary trust. The main focus of the camera is on Brigitte’s face and the interaction of hands.

The issue of this therapy session is Brigitte’s compulsion to self-mutilation; she appears to regularly pinch herself or hurt herself with sharp cutting devices. In an earlier fragment the

10. For such a critique, see Bal 1992.
invisible interlocutor asks her why she cuts herself, whereupon Brigitte explains that bleeding enables her to experience that she lives. With another example of the logic implied in her dissociative behavior, she spells out: “when I see blood then it hurts and I do feel pain. Pain I recognize and then I know that I exist.” This arid rationalization – through blood as visible sign of hurt – indicates that Brigitte, or probably, her fragmented emotional personality, has dissociated bodily sensations as well as feelings: she does not feel hurt in an immediate, bodily way but she becomes aware of hurt by seeing blood. Put differently, it is not the act of cutting – implying the sense of touch and hence referring to proximity – but the seeing of blood – indicating the more distancing sense of sight – that makes her aware of her existence. Still, the knowledge produced by the sight of the tangible substance of blood remains emphatically body-oriented, because it is a physical sign that leads to her sensation and recognition of pain and to her subsequent knowledge that she lives. Brigitte’s self-mutilation indicates that for her only signifiers of physical life mark the borderline between feeling alive and feeling dead. The artificiality of this borderline at the same time emphasizes, however, that for non-dissociative subjects bodily and psychic suffering is far less easily split.

In the fragment under scrutiny the therapists try to breach the destructive vicious circle of feeling alive through damaging the body. They intend to reconnect Brigitte with her psychic feelings and to let her discover that such feelings need not be harmful or overwhelming. First the male therapist gently leads her self-pinching fingers away from her arm towards the hand of the female therapist and encourages Brigitte to squeeze this hand of another person. By allowing and even provoking her “to squeeze” another person the male therapist helps Brigitte to overcome the anxious feelings that are triggered when she is confronted with physical touch. Moreover, Brigitte is enabled to discover that the female therapist will not object to holding (hands), even if the touch is painful. At the same time, the male therapist explicitly stresses that he is an emotionally available other, by using the word “us” while trying to give Brigitte confidence: “Let us try... it is a big risk.” First Brigitte trembles and shakes her head, but she does not let go of the hand: “Now squeeze... feel it.”

Gradually the male therapist draws her attention away from her hands to her head: “Now your head is going to do it...” And then from the head towards the eyes: “Look in those eyes...” (The therapist points to the eyes of his colleague, who is holding Brigitte’s shaking hand.) The persistence of Brigitte’s avoiding look makes clear how difficult and anxiety-raising the confrontation with the eyes of others is for her, but both therapists continue to support her:
“Now feel that energy... from your eyes (the therapist accompanies his words with gestures)... to those eyes... from her eyes to her heart... down this arm... to this hand... up to your arm to your heart...” Meanwhile the other therapist assures Brigitte with a very soft voice that this relational circle will work. And it does work: suddenly Brigitte dares to look into the eyes of the other; she starts laughing and after a while cannot stop looking anymore. She continues looking in a steady, intense way, revealing an immense longing for an affirmative other. Both therapists now reveal that their feelings are completely in concert with this precious moment of affective confirmation and understanding: the one sheds tears, the other finds words to value it. Neither tears nor words are necessary for this nonverbal understanding, although they do confirm and amplify the interaction.

Because the therapist develops the circular relationship of body parts – from the head towards the heart via eyes, hands, and arms – by naming them, the therapist seems, at first sight, to make these body parts into metaphors of emotional feelings. As the film fragment tellingly shows, however, the chain of body parts is more than a visible substitute for otherwise unrepresentable mental processes, as it is also more than an exposition of ritual acts. Seen from the perspective of the affective genesis of subjectivity, the signifying force of the body language involved, including the tone of the therapist’s voice, cannot be overlooked. The scene is a demonstration of a nonverbal, performative therapeutic practice, whose meaning does not simply depend on the content of the words that are used. It is the other way around: the words gain additional meaning because of the exchange of affective feelings. Seen as such this scene clarifies that, like in early infancy, it is not (verbal) language that structures affectivity but, on the contrary, it is affective interaction that structures the acquisition of language.

The performative aspect of the therapy is manifested in the emphasis that is laid on the eyes, which, although they are part of the head, are used as the starting point for a relational look. The verbal communication underscores the indexicality of looking and the eyes' working at the level of secondness: “Look in those eyes... now feel that energy... from your eyes... to those eyes...” The eyes, then, partake in a process in which energy – the capacity to do something – goes from one person to another: the therapist’s act of looking affects Brigitte. This affective force is supported by

11. Neurophysiologist Jonathan Cole’s study About Face (1998) explores the social importance of facial expressions through analyzing the experiences of people with failures of expressiveness resulting from blindness, autism, or other neurological impairments. The absence of what Cole calls “facial embodiment” appears to be very damaging for emotional understanding and social interaction. Observing that
the actual touch of hands and by the enclosure of the heart in the connecting gestures. The latter body part is the only one in the circle that has strong metaphorical overtones, in addition to the indexical relation between heartbeat, rhythm of breathing, and the unspecified affective tone of an interaction.

The eyes, however, are not solely instruments of directing and connecting; they partake in facial expression. Highlighting them as means to signal and respond without words – an exchange of energy is involved – the therapist exemplifies that facing each other is what makes sharing of feelings and mutual understanding possible. As I have argued, it is not the eyes as such but their embeddedness in the face and their communication of affective feelings that define their major function: they constitute an interpersonal relationship. The relationship between Brigitte and her therapists, then, is constituted by an affective communication in which the nonverbal aspect appears to play the decisive role; “literal” body language gives the conceptual content of the words “head,” “heart,” and “energy” affective resonance. As a consequence, the paralinguistic elements of the verbal utterance, the tone and intensity of the words, whether or not reinforced by gestures, are as important – if not more – as the content of the words.

Because both tears and words of the therapists produce meaning performatively, a meaning manifested in a relationship, both utterances can be seen as holding, enabling gestures that offer Brigitte the possibility to participate in a Winnicottian space. The male therapist makes the comparison with the transitional space of early infancy easier, when he clarifies the function of the eyes with the help of the image of a caring “mother.” Amplifying Brigitte’s affective connection with the female therapist, he hints at the preverbal interaction between a “mother” and her baby: “Babies know about it... real mothers know about it; every time you pinch yourself you long for it...” Brigitte nods her head in ongoing understanding and, starting to acknowledge the enormous implications of her discovery, finally asks with the voice of a little child: “Do mothers do that?”

The scene brings to mind Winnicott’s idea about the mirroring function of “the mother’s face.” Film text and theory reinforce each other here. In Playing and Reality Winnicott starts the chapter entitled “The Mirror-role of the Mother and Family in Child Development” with a firm
statement: "In individual emotional development the precursor of the mirror is the mother's face" (1996: 111; emphasis in text). He thus complements Lacan's mirror stage with a relationally defined, preverbal ancestor. Parenthetically, by taking "infants who have sight" (111) as his explicit starting point, he also hints at the problematic lack of the "facial embodiment" that is analyzed by Cole (see note 11). Specifying his initial statement later on, Winnicott hints at a subject constitution that almost seamlessly fits in the developmental framework of this study:

What does the baby see when he or she looks at the mother's face? I am suggesting that, ordinarily, what the baby sees is himself or herself. In other words the mother is looking at the baby and what she looks like is related to what she sees there. I am asking that this what is naturally done well by mothers who are caring for their babies shall not be taken for granted. I can make my point by going straight over to the case of the baby whose mother reflects her own mood, or worse still, the rigidity of her own defences. In such a case what does the baby see? (112; emphasis in text)

This fragment can be interpreted as a relational constitution of subjectivity manifested in an empowering, asymmetric looking. In the first part of the fragment the mother uses her powerful position in a positive way: a baby is allowed to "see himself or herself," that is, to become a subject-in-relation. Her productive look enables the baby to become a responded and, hence, responding subject. I would like to call this constitutive act of looking a nonverbal "gift of love" that is also an "act of meaning."12 Despite the affective charge of this productive looking, the fragment first and foremost points out the baby's dependency implied in this relationship: the baby's response is implied in the "mother's" way of looking, it is to be "seen" — which is not the same as "reflected" — in her face: "what she looks like is related to what she sees there" (emphasis added).

The danger of a counterproductive look is articulated in the second part of the text, in which Winnicott acknowledges that a mother's looking need not be directed at the coming into being of the subjectivity of her baby. By drawing attention to the possible negative effects of a

12. The two terms respectively echo Silverman's argument concerning the "active gift of love" (1996: 73-81) and the title of Bruner's study (1990) about the "prelinguistic readiness to meaning" (72) and "enactive knowledge," a learning through action (85). Linguist and cognitive scientist Bruner argues not only that children "do meaning" before they can "tell about," but also that production of meaning in general is a narrative activity.
mother's "mood" or "rigidity of defences," Winnicott proposes that the gift of subjectivity can be facilitated as well as threatened by the (lack of) affective capacity in primary caregivers. He thereby hints at the problems of attunement and attachment that interfere with a child's development.

In interaction with the film scene, the entire fragment clarifies that the analogy between a baby and a traumatized person relies on the same existential need: both are dependent for their well being on relationships with caring or productively-looking others.

The film fragment figures the affective force implied in the cognitive content of Winnicott's fragment. Supported by the male therapist, the caring look of the female therapist, who opens herself – her hand, her eyes, – to Brigitte, allows Brigitte to feel trust and, hence, to realize, to know what it is like to trust another person. The Silent One is offered the opportunity to fuel her capacity to relate. Not surprisingly, the interaction of film fragment and Winnicottian theory brings me back to what I have indicated as the relational and intersubjective space par excellence, the potential space.

This chapter in its entirety has suggested that the precondition for this space is the holding environment, because only such an environment brings about the emotional development that leads to the basic trust and, hence, to playing and feeling alive. Developmentally seen, this trust needs to be internalized – a matter of forming emotion habits – before the potential space can come into being for the baby. In Winnicott's words: "The potential space happens only in relation to a feeling of confidence on the part of the baby (...) confidence being the evidence of dependability that is becoming introjected" (1996: 100; emphasis in text).

For the infant the potential space thus "happens" only after having been enabled to actively participate in an affective, subjectifying interaction and to form the mental representation of that relationship. However, for the good-enough caregiver, i.e. an emotionally mature adult who has developed (self-)confidence, the space "happens" when she presents herself as the emotionally available and responding other. By creating a relationship with her baby she actually invites her baby to enter into her (a) potential space at that moment. In other words, the capacity to (emotionally) relate as manifested in responsiveness and the existence of the potential space are intertwined. This does not mean that this capacity cannot be jeopardized. A subject's encounter with traumatized others will put pressure on her position as responsive listener and, consequently, on the potential space. As I have argued, becoming vulnerable to a traumatized subject puts the self seriously at risk.

It is the notion of empathy that best contributes to the understanding of the capacity to relate, in the sense of being able and willing to create a space in which (inter)subjectivity can come
about and be negotiated. For empathy, which is not the same as sympathy, takes into account that this willingness and the risk of self-loss it includes, also has a nonverbal dimension. As the meaning of “feeling into” already indicates, empathy bears, to begin with, on the ability to feel into the affective state of another person. Thanks to this specific, nonverbal aspect of empathy, affective contagion can be part of the empathic communication between persons.

However, empathy is more: whereas the capacity to feel into another leads to a sharing of feelings or “feeling-with,” empathy only works in combination with the capacity to pretend play – doing and imaging “as if” – and, subsequently, to realize and verbalize “how it is to be like.” In other words, affective sensitivity should always be complemented with (embodied) imagination and verbalized narration as well as (self-)reflection. Only then can feelings turn into narratives of emotionally defined experiences and only then can self and other function as both separate and related, both different and similar subjects.

The notion of empathy brings to the fore that the potential space I am articulating is a relational space that is based on affective encounters and emotional relationships between people. It is a space that presupposes a sociality that, above all, is manifested on an interpersonal level, an interaction that is mediated by nonverbal and verbal communication. Although the interaction with other human beings is decisive for the understanding of the relational quality of the space, it can also function on a transpersonal level. That is to say, sociality can be complicated by a subject’s interaction with semiotic objects – this film, for instance – that appeal to this subject’s potential for “playing” with meaning and subjectivity.

Winnicott’s theorizing helps clarify how the potential space I have in mind – the location of embodied, relational (inter)subjectivity – combines the qualities of a holding environment, a transitional space, and a space for playing or creative living. A semiotic space emerges that implies, firstly, emotional availability (manifested in trust as well as self-confidence), secondly, the capacity to integrate nonverbal and verbal experience (manifested in emotional “literacy”), and, thirdly, the capacity to play with symbolization (manifested in the enjoyment of that playing). The latter emphasizes that the affective quality of the space also bears upon vitality and the motivation to live.

13. See Feagin for an exploration of the difference between empathy and sympathy. Her ideas about the process of simulation as necessary to imaginatively feel into the affects of a fictional character are also relevant to the understanding of embodied thinking (1996: 83-142). The term “empathy,” a translation of the German “Einfühlung,” refers to a notion developed in the nineteenth century by the psychology-informed field of German Aesthetics (Wispé 1987, Van Mechelen 1993). According to James Elkins, however, empathy is originally “an Enlightenment term”; it was used by Pierre-Louis Moreau de Maupertuis “to describe the effect of a mother’s emotions on her developing fetus.” (1999: 24) My approach to empathy is indebted to Carl Rogers’ client-centered psychotherapy – his idea of “as-if-
Finally, defined as it is by the willingness of a self to let another (a subject as other) and otherness (new meaning) come about while this self is put at risk, it is the space where the borderline between meaning and meaninglessness and the limits of (inter)subjectivity can be investigated.

The intertwining of empathy and potential space explains how the “devilish dilemma” that brought the Silent One into being pertains to the specific aspect of discursivity, that is, to the capacity to function as an integrated subject and to form mature emotional relationships. Being deprived of an empathic environment, Brigitte has been deprived of the capacity to trust her caregivers and, hence, to inhabit a potential space. However, by giving this incapacitation a name, she provided “us others” – therapists, filmmaker, public, you and me – with a possible sign. To give meaning to that sign – to see it as a sign of traumatic pain – a potential space is needed. Because Brigitte cannot create that space herself, we have to do it. In the last section I will argue how the film story, and especially its end, demonstrate that this potential space is the result of a joint venture that exceeds the interpersonal field. I will also argue that the invitation to enter into our potential space does not assert Brigitte as a victim; on the contrary, offering her this relational space implies that she is enabled to be alone in the presence of (many) others.

Room to Play

After the crucial scene analyzed in the previous section the filmmaker rather suddenly moves to a close-up of the Beach Girl who is absorbed in her play on the seashore. She is carefully drawing and modeling in the sand: having outlined a space with one finger, she divides it into two by means of an intersecting line. Subsequently, the interrelated spaces are raised into modest piles, the surface being flattened with the palms of the hands, both spread out over the sand. In this way the hands expose their vulnerable but agile surfaces to the raw material, which is transformed into a recognizable form. Apparently, hands need not be instruments of harm and pain anymore: they can make a space that is whole and divided at the same time.
By connecting as well as separating two "worlds" the hands appear to give form to precisely that space that gives them the force to become instruments of connective touch and feeling. However, it is not only Brigitte's modeling activity that produces the meaning of potential space. Because this shot follows the one just analyzed – the affective breakthrough – Brigitte's activity on the empty beach can also be read as the figuration of the capacity to be alone, in the internalized presence of another, and the implication of that capacity: playing and creativity. Seen as such, the image of Brigitte becomes a sign of hope: the traumatic pain maintained by the Silent One gives place to the capacity to play with symbolization. The positive meaning of this interpretation is further enhanced when I link this image to the poetic line from Tagore quoted by Winnicott in *Playing and Reality* to introduce his chapter "The Location of Cultural Experience": "On the seashore of endless worlds, children play" (1996: 95). In this chapter he most explicitly formulates the need for a potential space "between the individual and the environment," as he formulates it (103).

Read as visual complement of Winnicott's text, the use of this shot at this time in the film narrative thus suggests that Brigitte has been given the opportunity to play. But who precisely has offered Brigitte this opportunity? Who has created the potential space in which this activity can take place? The foregoing scene gives the impression that the therapists made the invitation with the help of their holding gestures. However, it is the filmmaker's way of telling that makes the connection between those gestures and the enabling space visible, and it is my interpretation of these images that makes them into explicit signs of a potential space. Because Brigitte's encounter with her therapists is embedded in the film story that is, in turn, embedded in my analysis – imagine three concentric circles – the idea of the potential space as layered or embedded constellation becomes thinkable.

The idea of one complex space, first of all, underscores that Brigitte is the center of the concentric circles. It is *her* life. A real person thus is the center of attention of therapist, filmmaker, and analyst. The concentric circles further indicate a certain increase of complexity as far as the therapists are mainly interested in supporting Brigitte in her attempts to survive; the filmmaker has a combined interest in Brigitte, her therapy, and his task as public story teller; and I, the cultural analyst, add a theoretical framework and reflection to the preceding interests. This increase of interests need not imply a decrease of empathy for Brigitte, although it does indicate a transition from personal to transpersonal – public and general – interest.

The final film fragment demonstrates how the filmmaker gives Brigitte herself the opportunity to resolve the possible tension between personal and public interest. He thereby
makes a statement not only about Brigitte’s competence but also about his function as filmmaker and the function of the viewers. It is no coincidence that this final shot of the film is also the only one in which Brigitte directly addresses the viewers: she more or less winks at them. This immediate and intimate address, however, is at the same time a message through which Brigitte gets the viewers to understand that they are not needed anymore. Thanks to a change of position in the narrative – she appears to be upgraded from embedded to main focalizer – Brigitte can make public that, from now on, she is aware of the possibility to make her own choices.

Significantly, the force of Brigitte’s look is fed by a tremendous rage, indicating that the borderline between self-destruction and self-estimation can be fragile for traumatized people. During the moments that precede the final, light-hearted shot Brigitte confronts the (male) therapist in a desperate way. Violently crying, she lets out her anger, while trying to convince him that it should be her right to choose whether to commit suicide. Instead of focusing on the destructive aspect of her rage, the therapist enables Brigitte to turn that same anger into an empowering force. In other words, he helps Brigitte to understand that her fight against utter powerlessness – as he says to her, she “never ever, ever, ever” has had any “real choice” in her entire life – can also be seen as a sign of strength, because it reveals the justified wish to be in control.

The transition from negating dependency to relative autonomy implied in this moment is adequately and beautifully given form by the final scene of the film. A woman next to Brigitte offers her a handkerchief to wipe away her angry tears. Brigitte loudly blows her nose in it and then presents the filled snot rag to the spectators with a gesture that tells the public something like: “Blow you, I don’t care what you think of me. From now on it is my life.” Because everyone starts laughing, the story is transposed into a playful tone. The last shot pictures the “winking” Brigitte who rubs the tears from one eye, while the other eye defies us; her mouth is laughing. The ambiguity of this concluding look – one eye open, one eye closed – signifies the half-way state she is in: a transition into new life might be actualized, eventually. Half-crying and half-laughing, she casts a glance that is as direct as it is ironic, indicating both the possibility of confronting the outer world anew and the difficulty in taking distance from her traumatization.

In the same move, however, the viewers are “shut–out” by Brigitte’s direct gesture and look. Consequently, they can take distance too. By means of the playful last shot the filmmaker not only empowers Brigitte, he also helps the viewers to end their engagement in a traumatic history without negative, numbed, or destructive feelings. They can “go home” with an intact vulnerability, which makes it possible for them to use their empathic imagination for further reflection.
Moreover, by having withdrawn himself from the scene, the filmmaker intimates that, eventually, the film story is a matter between Brigitte – and the many others like her – and her “public.” Not being able to look over his shoulder anymore, the public cannot hide behind him either. Brigitte’s story has definitively entered the transpersonal space of social, cultural, and political responsiveness and responsibility.

I felt myself addressed by Brigitte’s look both as a person, a moviegoer, and a cultural analyst. Correspondingly, my response concerned a living person, a character in a film story, and a traumatized subject. Nevertheless, I found it difficult to draw explicit borderlines between my different relationships with “Brigitte”; the analysis of this film confronted me with the intertwining of lived experience, the working of art texts, and theoretical thought. Not surprisingly, it was a documentary that reminded me of the necessary implication of lived experience in the practice of cultural analysis. For, this genre is characterized by the inherent tension between real life and fiction or imagination, a tension that entails the issue of “genuineness” as the opposite of deception.

The two concluding points I wish to bring up for discussion bear on Denial’s status as documentary film and this tension. The first one concerns the presentation of the Silent One in the film story and the imaginative and rhetoric force that is needed to save this alter from being neglected. The second point pertains to the therapeutic scene in which Brigitte discovers the power of feeling; the scene raises questions about the alleged genuineness of the (unconscious) working of body language and my response to that scene.

With respect to the figuration of the Silent One I leave aside the filmmaker’s possible lack of awareness of the specific significance of this alter. Here, I merely draw attention to the underexposure of this alter – through the briefness of the scene – as a textual shortcoming that undervalues the reason for or meaning of its hidden existence. The persuasiveness of the film story might have been greater if the specificity of the Silent One had been more clearly outlined. I use this critical note only to clarify that the documentary film, in particular, is subject to a difficult and delicate power relationship, that between a filmmaker who functions as the primary organizer of the film story and a Brigitte who is a “live” main character. I claim that the balance is best sustained if the filmmaker purposefully complements his position of empathic listener with that of a mirroring listener who, by using his own words (images) to “repeat” what he has heard (seen), makes it easier to find a common ground for mutual understanding.
This mirroring way of “telling with” is demonstrated by the scenes in which the other alters figure. By more or less “staging” the scenes of the other five alters, the filmmaker, performing another aspect of his task of inter-viewer, amplifies what Brigitte is telling us by means of her alters. However, all these scenes show personalities who are able to speak. Thus underscoring the logic of speaking and responding, the filmmaker at the same time foregrounds the existential need of someone who is not able to speak. Hence, there is all the more reason for the filmmaker to function as an auxiliary, engaging subject of semiosis. Put differently, whereas Brigitte affirms the reality of this alter by naming her “Silent One,” she needs the imaginative power of an amplifying listener to make this embodiment of “discursive silence” productive for the story. That such imaginative intervention can make use of simple but effective means is indicated by the opening credits of the film, in which the blackness framing the title pictures Brigitte’s emotional and social isolation. This blackness can retrospectively be interpreted as a reference to traumatic pain. In that meaning, it is aligned with Perec’s rhetoric of gaps and, most tellingly, the “(...)” on a blank page, through which he made an “impossible scream” conspicuously visible.

The second point of discussion concerns my own reaction to the scene in which Brigitte makes eye contact with the female therapist, who starts to cry. When I viewed the film for the first time, I cried like the therapist. Although it was an act of empathy, including its openness to contagion, I did not empathize with the therapist or with Brigitte separately, but with the relationship. Steered by the camera movements that focused on Brigitte looking at the therapist, I was moved both by Brigitte’s immense involvement in the nonverbal interaction and the therapist’s demonstration of being affectively touched by this precious moment. I thus became doubly involved in an interaction that felt crucial, transformative, positive, and, perhaps most importantly, genuine. Why?

I give several reasons. To begin with, because I knew it was a documentary, the foreknowledge that the characters were real persons who did not perform a play influenced the starting position of my viewing. Hence, I took the realness of the characters’ existence and the genuineness of their behavior more or less for granted. The general tone of the film convinced me, moreover, that this scene was not part of a pervasive tear-jerking rhetoric or other deceiving manipulation. The idea of genuineness was further enhanced by the emphasis on body language in this specific scene, the working of which was optimized by the iconicity implied in the medium of film. Because even very good actors cannot purposefully perform the subtlety of unconsciously working body language, the latter reason seems the most relevant.
Nevertheless, since the idea of genuineness can only become manifest in my own feelings and thoughts, not the genuineness of the characters’ behavior, as such, but my belief in their realness as related to my own feelings and ideas is decisive. The foreknowledge that I witnessed real persons made me sensitive to the genuineness exhibited by the characters of the film and, hence, to the adequacy of their behavior. That adequacy, in turn, affected me, or, to be more precise, the scene really changed me: it made me feel and believe that real people do communicate and relate in a nonverbal way. What counts, then, is this combination of feeling and knowing; together they contributed to my reality, to my realization that not only in fantasy but also in real life persons can genuinely relate and trust each other. While this scene has provided me with this valuable insight, the scenes after this one help the viewers bear in mind that for Brigitte herself only one short moment of relief had as yet been made visible.

When, later on, I cried my eyes out about the film, I became aware that it was not a contagious or empathic response to the story anymore but a reaction concerning my personal past. In the next chapters I bring this belated impact of the film into relation with my own intense longing for affective understanding, thus drawing attention to the possible resonance of infantile, dissociated emotion schemas. There, the tension between lived experience and imagination is put in the framework of the formation of autobiographic memories, an activity that cannot take place without the integration of different levels of experience.
huisje
boompje
beestje
moeder
kindje