Whose pain? Childhood, trauma, imagination

Lam-Hesseling, J.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Since all writing is done by some-body for some-body, it is not merely permitted, but downright valuable (...) to re-member who you “are” as you write. Susan Suleiman

I suppose that everyone has a paramount interest, a deep, driving propulsion towards something. If one's life lasts long enough, so that looking back becomes allowable, one discerns an urgent tendency that has integrated all the various and varied activities of one's private life and one's professional career. D.W. Winnicott

Old-enough, Good-enough

Yes, I am old-enough now – I am fifty-eight, my children have left home, and my dissertation is coming to its end. Being old enough to look back, however, does not imply a simple, temporal logic; it is more than an evaluation of the past in order to envision the future. My self-reflective turn to age has to deal with its now, that is, to use Eliot's words, it has to allow for “a lifetime burning in every moment”:

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of death and living. Not the intense moment
Isolated, with no before and after,
But a lifetime burning in every moment

1. As in the opening epigraphs of this study and that at the beginning of Chapter 5, the title of the publication, Home Is Where We Start From, enriches the meaning of the motto. It is a reference to Eliot’s poem quoted below. In this study, a title's surplus value has directed my choice between including it in an epigraph or leaving it out.
Such a lifetime has indeed a before and after but is, at the same time, fully present as felt reality. Due to the fire implied in Eliot's figure of life, this now takes the form of a concrete, physical momentum defined by energetic potential. Similarly, my burning moments have an inherent force, an affective load, and a bodily presence that cannot but be translated into terms of vitality, value, and motivation. In short, my commitment to life is at stake, my sense of being good-enough.

In this and the following chapter I will deal with such a commitment to life and, more specifically, with the effect of early traumatization on the interpersonally as well as culturally defined motivation to live. I will make a case for my claim that the semiotic crisis inherent in this traumatization entails a subject who, besides being barred from the possibility to relate, is also handicapped with respect to the force or willingness to live. As I have argued, early traumatization cannot be defined in terms of a failure of verbal interaction but should be approached in terms of the motivational, evaluative forces that are substantiated in body language. The emphasis on the affective dimension of (inter)subjectivity thus foregrounds a subject who is, consciously or not, striving for well-being: for feeling real or alive, creative and dynamic. In approaching the failure of this affective semiosis as an incapacitation of the regulation of affects and their subject-constituting function, I try to do justice to the felt and forceful aspect of meaning and subjectivity. The disorganization of this vital dynamics also explains why psychiatrists define trauma as "overwhelming experience."  

As the act of looking back suggests, my own subjectivity is explicitly involved in the present argument: I will explore a process of traumatic overwhelming and incapacitation through an art object – a picture book – that I have made myself and that was prompted by my own life history. Hence, I will probe the traumatizing obstruction of "the affective force we live by" from within my personal experience, in the same move addressing the "deep driving propulsion" that has motivated my artistic and academic search in general. Presenting mijn eerste prentenboek (My First Picture Book, henceforth indicated as MFPB) as an object of analysis, I will argue that it gives form to a traumatizing acculturation.

2. See, for instance, Van der Kolk et al., Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society (1996). The phrase "overwhelming experience" indicates a discussion point raised by Van Alphen: the incompatibility of the terms "trauma" and "experience," manifested in his explanation of trauma as "a failure of experience" (1997: 42-45). As I have mentioned in Chapter 1, Van Alphen starts from the idea that experience depends on the narratability of memories. This idea, in turn, points to the debate about the mediated, discursive quality of experience and, correspondingly, about the impossibility of so-called "immediate" experience. (See also Scott 1992: 22-40.) Martin Jay wants to go beyond this opposition, i.e. beyond a "sterile choice between naive experiential immediacy and the no less naive discursive mediation of that experience" (1998: 78). I believe that my articulation of a nonverbal, felt, and enacted affective
The book consists of six photographs accompanied by six words (see inserted picture book). These words, forming a well-known Dutch phrase: *huisje, boompje, beestje, vader, moeder, kindje* (little house, little tree, little animal, father, mother, little child), sum up basic components of the nuclear family, for a child, her daily cultural environment. When I made this book in 1988, I did not present it as an autobiographical account but as an exemplary life story of a girl constrained by her entrance into a western, patriarchal, Catholic, bourgeois, white, nuclear family. Now I would use the term “autohistory” in order to indicate that both my own and comparable lives were at stake.

At the time I did not know that my entrance into the symbolic order had structural traumatogenic aspects, and I certainly did not know anything about an interaffective precursor of linguistic (inter)subjectivity. But, in retrospect I have become sensitive to the traces of trauma – traumatic pain – in this photographic picture book, and, more importantly, I realized that the main issue was the traumatization of an infant that could not yet make use of verbally mediated thought. It is the hybrid text form of the picture book – its specific combination of words and images – that has triggered my sensitivity to this early, developmental trauma. As I will argue, the book’s hybridity first and foremost refers to different – nonverbal and verbal – registers of experience and mental organization. Therefore, *MFPB* enables me to delineate the problem of infantile traumatization and to elaborate a nonverbal version of discursive silence and traumatic pain. As this story concerns an infant, this discursive crisis should be approached in terms of a development gone wrong through a failure of affective framing or holding. Through the focus on an infant’s trauma, I drive home the specific aspect of the discursive problems that can hamper traumatized subjects.

Claiming that *MFPB* addresses such a traumatizing start of (inter)subjectivity, I will read the picture book as being motivated by and, in turn, having motivated, my intense, often tested, thwarted, sometimes obsessive, sometimes gratified longing for an empathic understanding of my own and other people’s lives. This reading can be seen as a specific form of “autobiographical reading,” a method that is introduced by cultural analyst Suleiman in the book from which the first epigraph to this chapter has been taken. The term does not necessarily involve reading one’s own text. Suleiman thereby breaks a lance for a critical practice that is intersubjective *par excellence*.

discursivity not only helps to clarify the discussion on experience in general; it also justifies, in particular, the use of “overwhelming experience” with respect to trauma, because “being overwhelmed” indicates that traumatization has a felt aspect, an indication that is confirmed by the phenomenon of dissociation.

3. Because the word “infant” – unable to speak – is a reminder of not-yet verbally mediated “thought” or “imagery,” I make use of the term to underscore this aspect of experience. To say it once more, in the present study the term infancy indicates the developmental stage in which the transition from nonverbally mediated to verbally mediated thought takes place. Although the real infant I refer to was about fourteen months old and therefore had started to speak, according to Schore her “socioaffectively-driven expansion of language” did not use “private speech, that is, thought” but “imaginal dialogues that represent the child’s autobiographical
I see Suleiman’s autobiographical reading as strongly akin to the notion of reading I am developing and practicing, because she explains that such an autobiographical reading “consists of reading another’s story ‘as if it were [her] own.’ This could have been my story” (1994: 8; emphasis in text). Importantly, according to Suleiman, autobiographical reading is bound up with a writing that is not straightforwardly autobiographic, although it involves self-exploration. She therefore presents this kind of writing as “mediated autobiography,” stressing the relational quality of this practice by the consideration that the writing brings “the critic’s self into play, and into risk” (3 and 6).

Suleiman’s autobiographical reading-cum-writing – the two appear to be mutually constitutive – is particularly pertinent to my argument as she explicitly foregrounds motivation and action. Specifying the relevance of the notion of mediated autobiography, Suleiman formulates at the same time three “compelling reasons” for her writing: “self-recognition, historical awareness, and collective action” (3). Although Suleiman’s enterprise is fully contemporary – she writes about encounters with contemporary texts – this triad has a temporal pattern that emphatically links the past (historical awareness) and the future (collective action) with the present (self-recognition). This temporal organization makes the present both dynamic and uncertain: “being contemporary” is referred to as “an unstable condition, a process of movement toward an open future” (10). She indicates a force field in which motivation can lead to future action.

Remarkably, this future action is not an individual but a collective undertaking, which points out both a joining of forces and an intersubjective potential space. Hence, it is even more significant that for Suleiman collective action is essential “in the case of traumatic events such as war, forced emigration, or other experiences of radical loss” (8; emphasis added). It will come as no surprise, then, that the notion of autobiographical reading is developed in the chapter in which she addresses (her) memories of World War II.  

Suleiman presents herself in that chapter as “a voracious reader of Holocaust Literature and World War II Literature” (200), summarizing her method as a search for an autobiography that “tries to recover, through writing, an irrecoverable absence” (214). Apparently, as the word “irrecoverable” indicates, Suleiman realizes that a traumatic past cannot be recovered. However,
she also shows an insatiable desire for sharing experience and models of identification; Suleiman appears to be specifically interested in memories of Jews who, like herself, were young children in Europe during the war. She is motivated by the stubborn wish to understand what happened. Moreover, Suleiman admits that, willingly overlooking the textual quality of the writings, she forgets her position of literary critic. To use her words, her reading is “shamelessly, unsophistically, referential: What happened? When? Where? How did it feel?” Moreover, she measures the quality of her experience from her own breathlessness and the moments that make her cry (205). She concludes that her reading has nothing to do with literary appreciation and that she is merely focused on “autobiographical resonance” (206; emphasis added).

It is this resonance, and the longing for it, in which I am especially interested. Looking for such resonance, that is, for comparable lived experience, apparently need not be restricted to a search for conceptual content. The yearning for identification is not only about sharing verbalized beliefs and desires but also about sharing feelings. It is a desire to actually feel – to remember and know through feelings. In short, it is a desire for an embodied production of meaning.

“Autobiographical resonance” highlights an affective response from which feelings evolve, and it is the genesis of such feelings that generates the idea of sharing. Resonance thus hints at the “feeling into” aspect of empathy. This autobiographical reading is a performative, relationally defined production of subjectivity, which, as follows from earlier chapters, is comparable to the way a caregiver subjectifies a baby and, vice versa, to the way a baby motivates caregivers to take their positions as such. The term “resonance” clarifies that in these interactions joining forces and separately functioning do not exclude each other.

Accordingly, I would like to say that my embodied thinking explicitly joins forces with Suleiman’s argument at this moment, as it will do with other arguments in these two chapters. Nevertheless, my engagement with Suleiman’s text is not merely justified because I recognize myself in her autobiographical reading and want to value her notion of mediated autobiography by performing it through this text. My engagement is also informed by the fact that, using the word resonance, Suleiman implicitly draws attention to the nonverbally constituted level of experience.

5. Hirsch has mentioned a comparable reading experience with respect to her own childhood and youth as a Jew in Europe (1997: 219). She refers in a note to Suleiman’s “autobiographical reading.” I will return to Hirsch’s arguments about familial framing in the following chapter.

6. My ample use of epigraphs should be seen as a sign of such resonating practice.
that I want to foreground in this chapter. It is relevant to dwell on this experience and its failure because it points to an imaginative potential that has its roots in the time before linguistic competence.

Later on I will elucidate the trauma that lies at the heart of MFPB with the help of Stern’s ideas about non-attunement and Winnicott’s deliberations on the failure of basic provisions (the holding environment), primitive agonies, and the fear of breakdown. However, I will not only clarify that MFPB is an attempt to make an early traumatization representable; I will also exploit its theoretical, self-reflective potential. Interpreting the hybrid text form of MFPB as a reference to different registers of experience, I will bring in a crucial problem: linking feelings and words. My analysis of MFPB thus underscores the body-base of subjectivity as well as the integration necessary for an embodied functioning. More importantly, the picture book specifically foregrounds the problem of textualization of (an infant’s) nonverbal feelings and enactments, a process that, as I will argue, requires nonverbal imagination as well as verbal thought. This transposition of interpersonal, affective interaction to the transpersonal level of texts is further complicated by another problem: the interaction between imagination and autobiographical memory. The respective frameworks of children’s picture book and family album structure this problem, a structure that is manifested in the division into two chapters, as I will make clear below.

I here present my interpretation of MFPB as a mediated autohistory that feeds on Suleiman’s practice. Only, I work the other way around: whereas Suleiman reads another’s story as if it were her own, I will read my own story as if it were another’s, thereby making plausible that it could have been another person’s story. This interpretative move requires the meta-position and the mode of writing characteristic of a cultural analyst. This temporal splitting of my subjectivity is a form of play and creativity, resembling the pretend play that fuels all learning and especially the learning propagated by the picture book for children, the framework on which I will elaborate in this chapter. My intentional splitting of subject positions illuminates, rather than obscures, the interaction of nonverbal feeling and verbal (self-)reflection. Hence, it is the opposite of traumatic dissociation; it enables an imagination that empathizes with both self and other.7

7. See Alfred Margulies’ study The Empathic Imagination (1989). The argument of this psychiatrist, a theorizing based on clinical experience, supports my ideas about the subject-constituting function of empathy. Margulies also uses the phrase “feeling into” to underline the affective force implied in such a constitution. Arguing that empathy explains how the self “finds and defines itself through the other” (xii), he concludes his study by foregrounding “the space of play and caring” as the location where “symbol making” is situated (146). He thus reinforces the importance of the potential space, parenthetically, without referring to Winnicott’s concept or studies.
Being a cultural analyst, an artist, and, last but not least, a living person, I am “good enough” and “old enough” to do that.

How to Put Feelings into Words

(...) to assist young children in recognizing and naming objects. Front flap of
The First Picture Book: Everyday Things for Babies

The image offered us (...) now becomes really our own. It takes root in us. It has been given us by another, but we begin to have the impression that we could have created it.

Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space

To make you realize that empathic imagination is an activity in which both bodily sensitivity and affects guide the act of interpretation, I invite you to focus on MFPB as a material object. I ask you to amplify your acts of visualization with the senses of touch and hearing. This semiotic exercise may begin with the mental simulation of holding the object into your hands. Imagine first of all that it is a book: a palpable, manipulatable thing with a certain weight – about 1100 grams – and a surface that feels smooth enough though slightly coarse because it is made of black linen cloth glued to cardboard.

Perhaps surprisingly, the book appears to be a shallow, handmade box, resembling an old-fashioned, stylish cassette for a series of gramophone records. It is not square, however, but oblong: 29.5 (height) x 31.5 (width) x 2.3 (depth) in centimeters, imitating the format of a picture book for children. Its format thus enhances the effect of the title, although the solemnity of the black cover counters this impression.

The front and back of the box-book are almost alike: in both a small rectangle (8.5 x 11.5 cm) has been encased just above the center – feel the edge. The white labels that have been stuck in the rectangles are not centered either: they seem to be hanging from the upper edge, while the words printed on them – at the bottom – seem to be supported by the lower edge of the label. Apart from indicating a need for support this decenteration also suggests a field of forces in which tension and movement play their roles. Moreover, both the decentered title on the front label and the name and year on the back leave an empty white space, which strongly contrasts with the wide surrounding frame of black cloth.
On the one hand, the framing and embedding of the cover can be read as signs of narrative organization, referring to the layered and situation-dependent structure of the subject positions that make texts into narratives. The story of the book might reveal other stories, and every story might imply different points of view and frameworks. On the other hand, there are also signs – the blank spaces of the labels in combination with the title – indicating that images have pride of place in the book. The labels are ambiguous signs, however: while leaving ample room for pictures, they also leave the subject of those pictures open. In this way the cover of the book stresses that image space always involves mental imagination.

When the box-book is opened, a second surprise awaits the reader: a pair of white gloves lies on top of the pages, lifeless as the crossed hands of a dead person. They hide the pages – the photographs as well as the words printed underneath them. For insiders to the world of visual art these gloves are immediately identifiable as a means to protect an original photographic print and its passe-partout from possibly dirty hands of viewers. In general, however, they put up a barrier that can also be understood as saying: take care, or take your time, or take some distance, or even, beware: something has to be uncovered.

Before satisfying your curiosity by exploring the content of the book, I would like to address another covering gesture: the object's disguise as a picture book for children, which is indicated by its oblong format, its combination of words and pictures and its title: My First Picture Book. Apparently, not just any (picture) book is indicated, but a very specific subdivision of this hybrid text form, presented as being "first" or the beginning of some process. At stake is the genre of picture books that inaugurate preschoolers into the world of visual representation, (written) language, imagination, narration, fantasy, and learning. Such picture books can be seen as the first aesthetic objects that accompany the acculturation of children. Correspondingly, Ellen Handler Spitz, a psychoanalyst who has argued the value of these specific objects for children's development, calls them "primary art objects" (1989). 8

The most pertinent feature of the genre for my argument is that the use of a children's picture book substantiates a potential space in more than one way. Firstly, its viewing presupposes

---

8. John Updike concludes his comment on The First Picture Book from which the initial epigraph to this section has been taken by stating that it is "a collection of glowing archetypes, a magic book of signs, a wordless primer of 'first affections'." That "first" picture book – merely consisting of photographs of objects familiar to the infant – has been made by the famous photographer Edward Steichen (1930). See the cover text and Updike's afterword (1991: 66) to the republication of the picture book, originally a collaboration of Steichen (photographs), his daughter Mary Steichen Calderone (physician; preface), and Harriet M. Johnson, director of a nursery school (introduction). The remake is published in London by Jonathan Cape, in association with the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Apparently the Art Institutional framework of the latter publication guided Updike's wording, as he refers to "the photographic genius of Steichen."
a holding environment, the necessary precondition for this relational space. This facilitating environment is especially manifested in the physically shared position of holding and sitting on someone’s lap. Although it is a supportive position, it is asymmetrical by definition. This asymmetry is reinforced by the fact that the book is designed for children who cannot yet read, hence the child needs to be read to by another person. Such a bodily – vocal, gestural, and postural – interaction is inevitably influenced by the emotional intelligence of the adult, manifested in facial expression and a capacity to attune his overall behavior to that of the child. The impact of the holding environment, then, depends on the adult’s “self-acceptance, emotional equilibrium and sense of humor” (Spitz 1988: 436).

Secondly, picture books stimulate playing, which according to Winnicott indicates the decisive capacity for living creatively. Moreover, playing marks a process of emotional maturation simultaneously manifesting and being manifested by the potential space. The children’s picture book contributes to the child’s playing because it helps her to compare inner fantasy life with outer reality. Picture books first and foremost provoke the play of imagination, which is connected to both fantasy (illusion) and pretend play (reality testing), and can be characterized as a process of make believe. According to Spitz this imaginative make believe is crucial for the lessons implied in picture books: “Imagination (make believe) is central to all learning” (1989: 363).

Thirdly, the potential space is also suggested by Spitz’s observation that picture books imply a confrontation with cultural conventions and myths. It thus explicitly turns into what Winnicott calls the space of cultural experience, that is, the mature successor of the transitional space. According to Spitz, possibly negative effects of this confrontation with the “nurturing matrix” of culture are avoided, because “the roots of cultural knowledge [are] pleasurably implanted” (1989: 367). The holding aspect of the reading situation I have delineated above thus is enhanced by a cultural convention that works as a safety belt: “The picture book depends crucially upon the working of convention to secure positive and meaningful experience” (Spitz: 1988: 436).

Another reason that makes the framework of the (children’s) picture book relevant for my argument is the fact that it makes use of a composite text: an interplay of words and images. As the word “interplay” suggests, the picture book undermines the traditional hierarchical opposition between the visual and the verbal. As a consequence, it also defies the idea that the development of children should be seen as a necessary “movement away from images and toward the preeminence of words” (Spitz 1989: 353; emphasis added). Interpreting the hybrid character of
the picture book as a reference to the existence of different but cooperating mental systems, I propose that the interplay of the visual and the verbal contributes to the developmental problem of how to put feelings into symbolic – visual or verbal – imagination and narration.

The focus on picture books for children makes clear that, eventually, such books accompany, facilitate, and frame not only children’s use of symbolic communication, but also their access to the reading and interpretation of semiotic objects; and these objects or texts are, by definition, mediated by different textual media. In this way picture books thus mark the transition from live, enacted communication into a transpersonal communication mediated by texts. Importantly, the fact that the textual enunciators are – for the time being – translated by live auxiliary interpreters, underscores that acculturation depends on the quality – mood, tone, light – of the holding environment. Hence, the function of picture books enhances the idea that empathic reading feeds on live understanding.

However, the specific object of analysis, MFPB, problematizes reading through the framework I have just outlined, for several reasons. Firstly, despite the connotation of a children’s picture book, the fact that it is an art object brings about a transformation of the communicative situation. Seen as such the object does not need two persons to make its meaning manifest. On the contrary, it proposes the communicative situation of a written book: it is handled in privacy, alone; other people might even disturb the concentration that is needed for reading this text. That is to say, the reading changes from a two-person into a one-person activity in which the production of meaning takes place mainly intrapsychically, albeit in interaction with the art object.

Secondly, the privacy of this mode of reading is reinforced by the rhythmic structure of the text: *huis-je, boomp-je, beest-je, vader, moed-er, kind-je* reads like a rhyme. Such a reading solicits comparison with the linguistic communication implied in poetry. Poetry can be seen as a specific language game substantiated in specific rules that define the (text-immanent) relationship between the enunciating subject and the reading instance (Van Alphen et al. 1996: 14-23). Most of the time the lyrical subject of a poem does not extend its role to other textual subjects (as in narratives) but performs a monologue that is not explicitly addressing another person (as in arguments). The intimacy of a lyrical monologue turns the reader into a more or less undesirable agent, who is only allowed to look over the shoulder of the lyrical subject.

Thirdly, instead of interpreting the phrase as a (nursery) rhyme it can also be seen as a lesson: a coherent sequence of nouns indicating basic categories of cultural knowledge. The presentation of the text as a first one enhances the educational thrust. In this way MFPB
resembles an alphabet primer: an “abc” of culture. So, what kind of cultural object is it exactly, art object, poem, or lesson? I consider MFPB as the material metaphor of the connection between these three cultural objects: as an aesthetic object it is either a lesson in acculturation in the form of a rhythmically structured text, or the other way around.

Fourthly, black-and-white photography is not the most appropriate medium for children’s picture books. On the contrary, such books are preferably provided with imaginative, colored images, usually drawings. For many artists picture books – especially the ones for older preschoolers – appear to be a challenge; they seem to invite artists to join the fantasy and play of the children they are addressing. In contrast, realistic, black-and-white photographs seem not to work for little children; photographic picture books have not been very successful on the children’s book market. Instead, I hold that, due to their high reality effect, photographs are more compatible with the presentation of MFPB as autohistory. The use of the photographs connotes a family album.

Finally, however, the suggestion of a family album is not fully satisfying either, because, at first sight, the highly idiosyncratic photographs do not resemble the family snapshots that normally fill such albums. Moreover, the photos are combined with unusual captions of over-general items. Hence, what could be a simple lesson is problematized by very specific imagery. The incongruence implied in the unusual, uneasy way of “assisting young children in recognizing and naming objects” is further enhanced by two other disturbing elements: the white gloves and the object’s appearance as a black box. They form an address that, on the one hand, warns the reader against the confrontation ahead and, on the other hand, points to the possibly decisive role reading can play. The text may contain the only traces that can lead to the explanation of a disaster.

In order to make the ambiguity and intricacy of MFPB productive for the exploration of infantile traumatization, I take the initial category, huisje (little house), as my starting point. Beginning with a house and ending with family members (father, mother, little child), the items of the program of acculturation in its entirety suggest both a distinction and a connection between the space implied in a concrete place and the space implied in personal relationships. These two

9. According to Spitz such abc books are the “historically oldest and developmentally earliest type of picture books” (1989: 356).

10. With respect to the picture book made by photographer Steichen, Updike suggests that the limited success of the book might have been connected to its use of the medium of photography: “photography, for all its contemporary abundance, still plays a minor part in the vast world of children’s illustrated literature” (66).
meanings of space, which mark the difference between spatial interactions (with a non-human object) and relational interactions (with human subjects) respectively, define the term “home,” the house as lived place.

Interpreting *huisje* as home, I can lay out two facets of the nonverbal mental imagery that accompanies the genesis of intersubjectivity. To begin with, I will draw attention to the complexity of the bodily experience on which embodied imagination is based. Differentiating between the sensorimotor (spatial) base and the affective (relational) base of mental organization, I argue below that affective interaction cannot be understood without sensorimotor experience. I clarify this interrelation of spatial semiotics and affective semiotics by interpreting spatial organization *in terms of* affective interaction with the help of the idea of force field.

Furthermore, the notion of “home” introduces the connotation of holding environment and the possible conflation of family and house. In the framework of the children’s picture book, which structures the rest of the present chapter, this conflation highlights the difference between the fantasy (ideal home or family) and the reality of the home that is at stake – its lack of holding. By means of this failure of holding the item of *huisje* also functions as a prelude to the change of framework – from picture book to family album – that constitutes the transition to the next chapter. Because the framework of family album foregrounds a specific family history, in that chapter the connection with (my) autohistory will be made explicit.

It should not be forgotten that *huisje* is signified in two ways in *MFPB*: as word and as photo. To avoid the trap of a word-image or verbal-visual opposition, I will first embed the constative meaning of the word in its paralinguistic frame of sound. This framework foregrounds the possibility of formally enacted affective feelings; I will subsequently make this performative way of meaning production useful for my analysis of the photograph of *huisje*. The picture book thus supports the argument that putting feelings into words – a case of learning conscious symbol use – is mediated by imagery, that is, by mental, nonverbal imagination as well as textual figuration.

---

11. In *Fiction in the Age of Photography* Nancy Armstrong argues that the ideology that conflates family – private life – and material house is facilitated by photography. Making the visual field “suddenly and radically portable,” photographs reproduced and circulated houses, gardens, and interiors that “could contain and give comfort to a single family” (1999: 116-118). This last phrase emphasizes how easily the house is provided with a “holding” function. Generally, Armstrong makes plausible that the “realism” deployed in Victorian novels is informed by photography to the extent that such fiction “sees” reality through/as photographs: in their eyes the world resembles a collection of photographs instead of the other way around. This idea also offers an explanation of the growing power of the field of vision in both mental imagination and textual figuration.
Home Is Where One Starts From

huis-je

Trauma reveals the ways in which one's ability to feel at home in the world is as much a physical as an epistemological accomplishment. Susan Brison

The ambiguous term home links a concrete place with the life it houses. Home specifically conveys a feeling of belonging, a feeling that implies a relationship with a place: you call a place home because you feel you belong there. Moreover, you feel you belong there, usually because that is where your family lives. In short, in the concept of home, place and family are easily conflated.

This self-evident aligning of family and place has several implications. On the one hand, it underlines that the family is an institution, a social norm that gives society and its individuals a hold: it structures social life. Because norm and ideal are interconnected, cultural myths about the family and its material environment always resonate in the meaning of home. On the other hand, the term home also refers to the house of a specific family. It makes that specific house or place into an inhabited space, indicating the environment that holds the family together and, by indexical extension, the holding function of that specific family. The term home, then, reveals a (western) ideology that is liable to cultural as well as personal fantasies and, significantly, this ideology implies a conflation of place and personal relationships.¹¹

Introducing this section with the home from where one starts, I purposefully accentuate the lived space implied in every house, using the word space to keep the ambiguous, spatial and affective, meaning of home intact. My emphasis on the idea of home should make it apparent to you that (almost) every subject's history starts as a family story and that this family story is always embedded in a concrete environment that holds and holds together. The term home not only suggests that family, house, culture, and subjectivity constitute each other, but also that somewhere in this constitution a holding environment participates or, at least, should participate.¹²

¹² The complexity and ambiguity of the concept of home is also explored by artist Ania Bien in her installation “HOME.” in the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam, September-November 1993. Confronting “HOME,” as concept (indicated by the use of the period) with three photographs of street homes – the (non-)homes of homeless people – Bien addresses “homelessness” as a “being in exile from being.” She thus comes very close to my explanation of traumatization as a disruption or absence of potential space. The reference to the potential space is intimated by the article written by Liesbeth Levy, who incorporates the ideas of Levinas in her argument. (See the catalogue accompanying the installation.) Levy summarizes Levinas when she states that people cannot lead a fully human existence “without an intimate space where [they] can be happy” (no page numbers). I will elaborate on that happy, intimate space below.
However, the process of acculturation imagined in MFPB does not start with the word "home" but with "huisje" (little house). Because the qualifying diminutive applies to the concrete object, not to the institution, the term stresses the material form of the environment in which human subjects come about. Moreover, the meaning of huisje is complicated in several ways. First, the use of italics is a hint that there are different ways of learning involved in socialization. Italics, referring to slanted handwriting, link printing with writing, a process that refers to bodily skills. This letter style indicates that the entry of a subject into the cultural space is through learning to write. It emphasizes that imprinting cultural patterns is more than a verbal, conceptual understanding: it also involves skills and habits. Furthermore, handwriting is a reference to a specific, writing person, it signifies autograph, and hence, autobiography; in this way the italics also point to the life of the author and, hence, to lived experience.

Second, the employment of the diminutive "huis-je" makes the content of the word anything but a dangerous or imposing environment; it rather turns the house in the direction of coziness and closeness, a move that enhances the meaning of holding and safety. Third, the vocal aspect of the word is particularly important. As the accent and hyphen in the notation huís-je marks, the word should not only be read in silence but also be spoken or heard. When spoken and heard the trochaic meter acquires the added formal dimension of sound and, thereby, highlights the aural experience of accentuation and raising, then falling of tone (high-low). This aural aspect is enhanced by the repetition that marks the entire sequence.¹³

The vocal, musical aspect of the spoken text makes the framework of motherese (or parentese) relevant. According to Keith Richardson, a lecturer in education, motherese indicates the melodic sound stream implied in babytalk; it facilitates the social interaction that results in learning one's mother's tongue. With the help of motherese Richardson clarifies how a caregiver constrains interactions by enabling a baby to focus on what matters most. Motherese, then, has nothing to do with the content of the talking but merely effects preferential attention. I use the notion of motherese as the key for my own preferential attention to the nonverbally mediated experience addressed by MFPB.¹⁴ Richardson argues that:

¹³ As I will explain later the aural experience of repetition, accentuation, and fall in tone can be translated into other sense modalities and bodily behavior with the help of the constants implied in them, that is in this case, the respective constants of rhythm, intensity and shape.

¹⁴ Richardson elaborates an ecological systems view of developmental psychology. The interactions between human organisms and their environment are defined by an ongoing production of new "invariances" or ordering structures of the interactions. Invariant structures should not be seen as static givens; they are usually dynamic as far as they are liable to change and refinement. Moreover, more specific systems do not replace more general systems, but the former are embedded in the latter; hence the interactions of the infant and its environment have a "nested hierarchical nature" (2000: 10-11). For example, the specific
Neonates detect and preferentially attend to the regular use of exaggerated rise and fall of tone of voice (invariances of prosody) used by "mothers," apparently everywhere, called "motherese." The "motherese" is an undifferentiated, generic form of communication, and its effects are pretty undifferentiated, as they do not specify any specific facts [that] will be learned, but the preferential attention to "mother" does typically ensure that learning about how prosodic features relate to other aspects of mother's behavior, and to the infant's feelings, about how prosodic features co-vary with words, etc. does occur. Preferential attention to 'motherese' constrains learning in that attention is focused on these limited aspects of the world, not on others. (11; emphasis added)\(^\text{15}\)

Although Richardson suggests that motherese has a function in the integration of different kinds of preverbal interaction (168), he does not explicitly connect it with affective interaction but, first and foremost, emphasizes the aspect of attention. Consequently, the dynamic invariances involved – motherese signals should be obvious, repetitive, limited in number, and attention getting (171) – are primarily presented as evolving differentiation of sensory information, pertaining to the sense of hearing. He specifies these invariances as "exaggeration of tone of voice, loudness change, frequency extremes and speed variation" (169).\(^\text{16}\) Nevertheless, because the preferential attention highlights the mediating role played by the mother, I make a connection between the constraint of learning Richardson pinpoints and the genesis of interaffectivity and (inter)subjectivity.

Therefore, I contend that the invariances implied in the vocal expression of motherese do not function apart from invariances implied in facial expressions and the entire bodily behavior. Correspondingly, invariances not only structure attention but also affective communication and feelings. I will explicate this contention by connecting the working of motherese to that of the affect attunement as described by Daniel Stern (1985: 138-161). Stern's attuning implies an affective interaction, in which the behavior of the primary caregiver not only imitates but also amplifies, grades, and differentiates the infant's bodily behavior. Attunement, then, is a matching and recasting of behavior – Stern's terms – that makes sharing and differentiation of affects possible by means of enactments. Because this attunement involves a transposition of facial expressions and vocalizations with the ideas of Kristeva about the semiotic and the symbolic (not to be confused with the Peircean terms). According to Kristeva these two modalities of signification, together partake of the one signifying process that constitutes language. The semiotic is connected to the pre-oedipal primary processes, of which "the endless flow of pulsions is gathered up in the chora (from the Greek word for enclosed space, womb)" (Moi, 1986: 12). The semiotic precedes the establishment of the symbolic interaction between a baby and the face of a primary caregiver is embedded in the more general interaction with physical gravity.
or linguistic sign, because “the chora precedes and underlies figuration (…), and is analogous only to vocal and kinetic rhythm” (94). Silverman also acknowledges the pre-oedipal, even uterine, traces of this model for identification with the mother, when she presents the “acoustic mirror” as the audile counterpoint of the Lacanian mirror. However, she stresses the retroactive, symbolic re-working of this audile imagery (1988: 150).

16. David S. Miall presented a paper entitled “The Poetics of Babytalk” at IGEL (Internationale Gesellschaft für empirische Literaturwissenschaft) in Toronto in the summer of 2000. By comparing the formal aspects of babytalk – verse pattern, metrical structure and phonetic variation and contrast – to those of poetry, he argues that this early “talk” initiates the necessary “defamiliarizing process” that helps to put in question stereotypic emotional and cognitive schemas. According to Miall this “dehabituating” is also central to literary experience. Although his argument does not point out a specific affective dimension of (inter)subjectivity, it is consistent with my elaboration below of motherese through Stern’s affect attunement, a process that is both familiarizing and defamiliarizing.

17. I make a difference between intermodality, as referring to the interaction of the different (sensory) modalities involved in bodily experience, and intermediadly, as referring to the interaction of different formal aspects of a text as related to the different senses. The concept of intermediadly invokes a reader who willfully engages her embodied experience in the process of interpretation. The term “intermediadly” I have borrowed from the dissertation by Sonja Neef (2000). In contrast to my study, in Neef’s study the intermediadly of texts and the sensitivity of the reader do not explicitly take an affective dimension of subjectivity into consideration. For the discussion about the relationship between feeling (lived experience) and form (in text or art object), Stern’s notion of “vitality affects” is also relevant (53-61 and 157-161). Inspired by philosopher Suzanne Langer’s exploration of “forms of feeling,” Stern draws attention to feelings that cannot be properly qualified as sense perceptions or as basic affects; nevertheless, they are experienced (in self and others) as “forceful.” These feelings of vitality – think of the experience of breathing, for instance – pertain to the “momentary changes in feeling states involved in the organic processes of being alive” (156). Vitality affects are “captured by dynamic, kinetic terms, such as ‘surging,’ ‘fading away,’ ‘fleeting,’ ‘explosive,’” ‘crescendo,’ ‘bursting,’ ‘drawn out,’ and so on” (54). For example, in the phrase “burst into laughing” a vitality affect specifies the force – the explosive character – of the affect joy.

18. This distinction between visibility and visuality differs from that made by Jonathan Crary (1990). In his study about a historically defined transformation of seeing, “visibility” refers to a model of representation that is based on “natural” visual perception (through the eyes), while “visuality” refers to a model of imaging mediated by technological, optical advances. The latter model explains how the use of optical instruments not only changes the appearance of pictures but also the way of seeing and, hence, the way “reality” looks like. (For this summary of Crary’s argument I am also indebted to Armstrong 1999: 76-77.)
into other behavioral aspects, such as gestures and postures, it contributes to the development of affective body language. In light of the developmental semiotics elaborated earlier, it can be said that affect attunement bears upon the iconic and indexical learning implied in preverbal communication.

According to Stern, the intersubjective matching and sharing of affective states through bodily behavior requires the assumption of "amodal properties," which he summarizes as intensity, time (rhythm, duration), shape, motion, and number (1985: 152-154). These amodal properties can be seen as invariances or constants that explain how intermodal matching of behavior – in one person – and crossmodal matching – between persons – can occur. Stern thereby suggests that the innate, non-consciously working grounds that make the use of nonverbal iconic and indexical communication possible are accompanied by a mental organization that makes use of invariances. The supposition of invariances gives an explanation for the way in which bodily behavior can signify affective feelings.

Most important for this argument, these invariances also suggest how feelings might be figured in texts in a non-verbal, non-constative way. Hence, with the help of Stern's amodal properties I can demonstrate how the phenomenological tone of affective feelings can take the form of qualitative and quantitative differences without conceptual content: how they can be enacted by forms. Consequently, a possible connection between intermodal experience and the (inter)mediality of texts (semiotic objects) surfaces, a connection that is mediated by mental processing of nonverbal experience. As I will argue, further exploration of this connection will yield insight into both embodied imagination and infantile trauma.17

Because the object under study is a picture book, I limit my focus to the field of vision and the problem of visualization. In my argument, visuality differs from visibility in that the former specifically refers to textual figuration whereas the latter is a feature of every object of looking.18 My limited concern is the transposition of visible affective signals into visual images, and, conversely, the reading of these images or figures as signs that refer to an affective quality. To give a simple example: an angry face and an angry rising outburst of sound express a feeling of anger. The anger becomes more visible when the cry is matched and enhanced, amplified, by a sudden, forceful upward gesture. The integration of face, cry, and gesture crystallizes the affective meaning of the latter: the gesture per se becomes angry or threatening. A forceful, upward thickening, and heavy pencil stroke, in turn, can visualize this gesture. The matching of gesture and stroke can be explained through constants of intensity, movement, and shape.
It is, in the first place, by virtue of Peircean iconicity that the similarity between rising voice, gesture, and pencil stroke makes sense. As one of Peirce's examples of the icon – the diagram – demonstrates, the icon does not provide a realistic, mirror image of its object but reveals its characteristics, even if such object does not actually exist. Hence, for Peirce the icon is "the basis of all learning" (Muller 2000: 52). Through my interpretation, an icon contributes to the figuration of affect, because an icon can be understood as enacted affect: the gesture enacts the affective load of the vocal expression by resembling its exploding quality as well as its rise in tone, and the visual pencil stroke enacts the load of the gesture by resembling the forceful movement. Both enact their affective quality and force through a formal resemblance, that is, through a performative production of meaning. Moreover, because the gesture is a manifestation of body language, it can be seen as body-based semiosis. Hence, the visual pencil stroke can be seen as a sign that produces meaning through the register of experience on which embodied imagination is grounded.

However, the inversion of the process described, that is, the interpretation of a visual pencil stroke as an icon that enacts anger, is more problematic. This visualized gesture can only be read as a sign of anger if the sign is read with the help of a bodily code, a habit, and from within a frame that justifies the expression of anger. The viewer of the sign thus has to connect, on the one hand, the movement of the pencil with force – an act of embodied imagination – and, on the other hand, with the plausible choice of a frame that connects that force with the expression of anger. Consequently, if the viewer of a visual image embodies her acts of looking and puts this imagination in a context that validates its affective load, the visual forms and space of a text can gain affective meaning. In this way the two-dimensional surface of the image of huisje and its illusive, three-dimensional space can become fields of affective forces, in which viewing becomes a practice motivated and evaluated by affects.

The framework of motherese as extended to affect attunement, then, has resulted in the specification of what I have called an empathic mode of reading. However, the detection and exploration of signs of affective feelings and action readiness in the formal features of a (visual)

---

19. In their chapter on "Orientational Metaphors" Lakoff & Johnson summarize several examples of the verbal metaphors we live by as: "sad is down" or "happy is up." They thereby clarify how the spatial orientation implied in "up-down, in-out, front-back, on-off etc.," which structures our thinking, is based in physical experience (1980: 14-21). Although in opposition to the suggestion implied in these examples, Lakoff & Johnson only implicitly take into account an affective dimension of embodied experience, they nevertheless indicate how spatialization also works at the word level of written texts. Importantly, the use of verbal, spatial metaphors also helps to point out that such metaphors are not necessarily visual, although visualization would be an almost self-evident means of representation to translate the meaning of the words into nonverbal signs. Instead, such metaphors trigger mediating, visual imagination.
text not only embodies the act of looking but also anthropomorphizes the visual image. It turns the visual space into a visualization of the affective force field that is implied in all relationships of human subjects and the outer world. But, empathic imagination does even more: it widens the force field by generating an affective relationship between viewer and (visual) text, a relation that is triggered by the concrete, material aspects of the text, that is, by its formal aspects. This formality thus highlights the transpersonal space of interaction in which the relationship between texts and viewers/readers is located. It is in this potential space – to be situated neither entirely outside nor entirely inside a subject – that the concrete (visual) object can appeal to the nonverbal register of experience of the interpreter. Only on this level of experience can forms affect – move and touch.

In order to fully explain and justify the connection between forms and feelings, however, one must take into consideration the complexity of the mental processes – the chain of interpretants – that mediate signification. One must realize that the processes that convey meaning to feelings require more than the constants I have mentioned up to now, that is, Richardson’s invariances or Stern’s amodal properties. These constants are embedded in the emotion schemas that pertain to primary emotional relationships and that I have presented as the mental schemas that represent emotion habits. Stern calls these prototypical images or schemata: “representations of interactions that have been generalized” or “RIGs” (1985: 94-99 and III-123).

Finally, it is the connection of constants with emotion schemas or habits that has been of great help in my search for traces of affective experience, as yet not conceptualized but felt, in the photographic images under scrutiny. For instance, this framework enables me to read the general theme of immo(va)bility – the absence of a force field – in terms of a basic anxiety and the deprivation of affective relationships. As a result, the spatial and relational organization of the photos helps me to explore their affective mood. Formal aspects enable me to feel myself into the affective quality that is enacted. I will support these first intuitive interpretations by an exploration of the images as descriptions of situations or narrative moments.

20. A radical anthropomorphizing perspective is suggested by Elkins, when he starts his study *Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis* with the telling sentence: “Every picture is a picture of the body” (1999: 1). I find it remarkable that Elkins succeeds in almost completely leaving out the role of affects and emotions in his argument.
That with which I have dealt here, has led up to the notion that a reading attitude that makes it possible to differentiate between feelings without and with verbal content, is especially relevant for the interpretation of traumatic pain. Although this concept refers to an experience that lacks conceptualization by definition, it does take the existence of nonverbal traces of traumatic experience into consideration. Therefore, empathic reading is especially pertinent to the interpretation of *MFPB*, a work through which I investigate the traumatic pain of an infant. Because this pain is induced by a developmental period that lays the foundation of emotional competence, my analysis brings about a prototype of what I have called specific disability.

**Little House**

A house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space. *Gaston Bachelard*

Paul Klee described the act of painting in similar terms: "not to render the visible, but to *render visible*" — that is, to render visible forces that are not visible in themselves. *Daniel Smith*

First of all, the photograph points out that a house is a building: leaving out any reference to people, it emphasizes the material object and its location. *Huisje* thereby is the item *par excellence* that foregrounds the role of spatial organization — a sensorimotor agent — in embodied imagination. In order to read this house as the visualization of (my) affectively defined preverbal intersubjectivity, several moves are necessary. To begin with, I have to anthropomorphize the picture: I must place the picture into an affective force field that can invoke (nonverbal) affective feelings in its viewer. Further, to make my (felt) response to the photo sharable, words are required. This remark seems to state the obvious, but is aimed at underlining the less obvious reversal that putting affective feelings into words requires imagination. To trigger such an empathic imagination a language is needed that invokes a concrete, lived, recognizable world.

Writing down my first, rather undifferentiated and associative response to the overall mood of the photograph, I use words like: cold, black, static, uninviting. The first three adjectives do not directly refer to basic affects or their derivatives, but to sensation, color perception, and locomotion,
respectively. Only by deploying the frame of human relationships – the anthropomorphizing move implied in the term “uninviting” – can I interpret the lack of warmth, light, and aliveness as involving a lack of affective interaction. This interpretation highlights the difference between affective and other physical experiences as well as their inextricable interrelation; it shows that the verbal meaning of affective interaction is a metaphorical extension of an imagination that feeds on all kinds of physical experience.

The composition on the two-dimensional plane also performs the affective mood of this picture. Formal aspects make the photo static and almost centralized: a (black) square – an emblem of fixed movement in itself – also functions as the main focal point, a compositional device that arrests; moreover, these effects are enhanced by the use of a strong contrast between black and white. The impact of these formal elements can be grasped by engaging the entire body – feeling, sensing, and moving – in the mental activity of looking. Through such looking the want of warmth and safety – of home – is intensified by the absorbing force of the black square in the near center of the picture plane: as an attention-structuring element the house freezes the act of looking. The movement of the look gets jammed, as it were, in the focal point of the picture. The centripetal force of the picture thus enhances its immobility: the look is entrapped in a circle, an environment that locks up its center. In terms of human relationships the circle visualizes an ego-centric force field, in which a self automatically excludes others: the self is entrapped in its immobile position. The circle is the opposite of an ellipse, which makes room for two focal points and, accordingly, for a relationship. I therefore see the ellipse as the emblem of relational subjectivity.

The meaning of entrapment is indicated in still other ways and can be made explicit by extending the two-dimensionality of the picture plane to the three-dimensional illusion implied in the photographic medium. The black square works like a wall, a barrier that, by its sheer materiality, forces movement to a standstill. Furthermore, the insertion of the strange, gray shape into the black square, which suggests some depth, indicating an interior, at the same time obstructs the entrance into that interior. Door and window only exist as traces that disappear into the monolithic presence of massive concrete, which blocks, again, any movement. There is no door and no window; hence, there is no way in and no way out. The house that is visualized not only freezes all movement, it also makes the relationship between inside and outside impossible; correspondingly, it problematizes the coming into being of that space in which self and other – intrasubjectivity and intersubjectivity – are interrelated. It blocks the potential space.
Through the interpretation of the previous paragraph the peculiar visual ambivalence of this house is brought to the fore: its hovering between the picture surface – a reference to children's drawings – and the depth effect inherent in photographs. This ambivalence complicates the ambiguity implied in the entire object MFPB, by adding another frame of reference to those of the children's picture book and the family album, the frame of children's drawings, to which I will return below. For now, I connect the three-dimensionality of the photographic illusion with narrativity or rather, with description, a device often used in narratives to focus the reader's attention on the appearance or specific characteristics of the object of focalization.

The imaginary move into three-dimensional space and its corresponding frame of real life helps to connect the movements of my viewing actions with real objects. Therefore I will now explicitly deploy the realistic mode of reading that the medium photography solicits. For instance, the photograph does not show a typical house, not even a typical building; not only are door and windows missing, but the house also lacks a protecting roof. Rather, the roof seems to be cut off, revealing a neat, clear cut, which presents a contrast to the organic, detailed, shaded mountain in the background. Moreover, the top of a mountain is visible, a circumstance that transposes the whole scene onto a higher level: it positions the house on top of the world, above everything else, disconnected from the world below. Nevertheless, there is some flat space around the house, where the asphalt conveys the suggestion of trespassing and traffic. Hence, the place in its entirety does not stand outside the cultural structure, although the house in it appears to defy the meaning of a living room for human beings.

The ideas of structure and culture also foreground the solid post to the right, which seems to appear out of the blue. If the picture plane is extended to the real world, the post points to the existence of some wider constellation, an as yet invisible construction, perhaps even a roof. Within the picture frame it is, however, a loose part, separated from the black square by its position. Significantly, its separate position is enhanced by formal aspects: the post differs from the house, as a line differs from a plane, a line indicating connection – a force – in contrast to a plane, which is enclosed in itself. How can they interact?

As a result of these visual aspects, the house signifies simultaneously entrapment in itself and being disconnected from others, in fact, entrapment as disconnection or vice versa. This entrapment has taken the form of centrality, immobility, and lifelessness: of uninhabitability. Huisje, then, signifies anything but a holding environment. By stressing a lack of dynamics the picture emblematically visualizes that the affective force through which we live is blocked. I will
clarify later why Stern uses the term “aloneness” for the psychic state – the traumatic pain – invoked by this house. For now, it should be kept in mind that this form of aloneness does not refer to a feeling of loss, but indicates that the absence of potential space is manifested in an incapacitation to relate.

The analysis of huisje appears to be the opposite of “the images of felicitous space” or “the space we love” explored by philosopher Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (1994: xxxv; emphasis in text). The opposite of what makes huisje uninhabitable is the “domain of intimacy” to which his study is devoted (12). As the word intimacy – closeness, familiarity – indicates, Bachelard’s interest is directed at the inhabited space, the space that turns a house into a home. In light of the absence of holding capacity that characterizes the image just analyzed, the imagination of inhabited space around which his study pivots – Bachelard calls these investigations “topophilia” – can be approached in terms of holding environment (xxxv). Observations like “we live fixations, fixations of happiness” and “we comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection” support this view (6).

The term “holding environment” as such is especially relevant to an analysis of intimate space as it combines affective and spatial parameters, underscoring the body-base of the experience that is at stake. Bachelard turns the house into the site of intimacy *par excellence*, presenting “the house image” as “the topography of our intimate being” and elaborating a “poetics of the house” as starting point of his argument (xxxvi-xxxvii). He justifies this specific focus by highlighting that “the childhood home” is the entity that is “most firmly fixed in our memories” (30) and claiming that “a great many of our memories are housed” (8). By introducing his objects of analysis as “eulogized space[s]” or “images that attract” instead of “hostile spaces,” Bachelard indicates that it is not the spatial but the affective aspect of these “housed” memories that matters most (xxxv and xxxvi; emphasis in text).

The relevance of Winnicott’s notion of holding environment to the idea of the (inhabited) house becomes most explicit when Bachelard draws attention to experience – “human being” – before conscious life and, moreover, to a positive start of life: “Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house” (7). The house thus becomes the emblem of an intimacy that is manifested in feelings of well-being and safety. The holding quality also resonates through words like “vital space,” “first universe” (4), and “cradle” (7). The Winnicottian flavor of Bachelard’s argument becomes even stronger when he speaks about “the maternal features of the
house" and an "enveloping warmth [that] welcomes being" (7). Bachelard's house images, then, have the facilitating function of a good-enough mother.

However, Bachelard is not so much interested in the subject-constituting aspect of these sites of intimacy as in the space of imagination, that is, the location of the poetic play he calls "daydreaming." This idea is most clearly articulated when he sums up "the chief benefit of the house" as "the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (6). The house even becomes the precondition for imaginative power as such, when he claims that the house is "one of the greatest powers of the integration for thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind," an integration that is enabled by the "binding principle" of daydreaming (6). Housed memory thus produces a space of imagination that, thanks to its holding function, can be understood as a mental disposition that fuels the integration of nonverbal and verbal imagination.

Read through a Winnicottian frame, Bachelard's poetics of the house legitimates, first of all, the reading of a house image in terms of an affective state. Moreover, it makes understandable that it is not the spatial that determines the affective, but the other way around: the space can become a sign for the affective quality of an enabling relationship. Semiotically seen, the analysis of a house image in terms of home can be explained by means of the indexical relationship between the affective and the spatial environment on which early, nonverbal infancy is based. Hence, the feelings of trust and confidence that substantiate the good-enough quality of primary relationships can be transferred to the spatial environment. The safety applied to a home, in turn, iconically and indexically refers to the safety of secure attachment. Because this semiosis can take place before the entrance into language, it points out a nonverbal, bodily process of signification. As I will argue in the next chapter, this bodily semiosis leads to the nonverbal symbolic imagery that facilitates verbal thought and narration. Seen as such Bachelard's "housed memory" is the symbolization of an emotion schema.21

Furthermore, because Bachelard's argument demonstrates the way in which the function of a personal relationship is shifted to a concrete environment, it also provides an explanation for

21. The idea that a surrounding space becomes a sign for a holding relationship brings to mind Winnicott's remark that the (function of) primary caregiver can be "represented (...) by a cot or a pram or the general atmosphere of the immediate environment" (1990a: 30).
the conflation of house, safety, happiness, primary relationships, and family implied in the notion of home. The argument thus clarifies that affective forces feed both the personal fantasy and social ideology that turn the home into the space of the happy family, while also foregrounding the cooperation of fantasy and memory. However, because Bachelard merely addresses the intimate and not the familial aspect of the lived space, he keeps the house and the family more or less separated, thereby stressing the difference between the two. This difference indicates that a holding capacity does not depend on family relationships alone. Family relationships do not have a monopoly on the production of the feelings of safety and the entailing potential space, although the family has a powerful position with respect to its genesis. As will be clarified later on, my own traumatization can be explained – at least partially – as an overlooking of the importance of non-parental, primary care. This example also underscores that family as such need not imply happiness, an observation that solicits a critique of the ideology of the happy family.

It now becomes clear that the image of a house that is specifically presented as a childhood home but defies functioning as a “space that attracts” turns into a sign of basic unsafety or unhappiness. The latter point is underlined by the counter example to intimacy that Bachelard offers at the end of his chapters about the poetics of the house. Significantly, it concerns children’s drawings. Bachelard brings in the work of psychologist Françoise Minkowska, who organized an exhibition of children’s drawings made by Jewish and Polish children after World War II (1949). Minkowska describes unhappy houses that reveal traces of “distress” in terms of “motionlessness,” “rigidity” and a lack of “kinesthetic features” in contrast to houses that are “lived-in” and “inviting,” that is, houses with walkways and knobs on the door, so that they can be reached and opened (Bachelard 1993: 72-73).

The description of such a motionless house not only seamlessly matches the absence of motion and emotion in the image of *huisje*; it also supports the idea that the holding environment and potential space should be seen as dynamic force fields in which the body in motion and the affective body cannot be easily disconnected. Seen as children’s picture book, *MFPB* thus teaches the viewer to use her affective sensitivity or empathic imagination for the interpretation of the

---

22. This conflation also hints at the possibility of affective displacement; that is to say, the lack of a holding relationship can turn into the affective investment of a place to compensate this lack and the entailing feelings of anxiety (and perhaps rage).
photograph. This lesson emphasizes that the word 
*huisje* cannot convey meaning without lived experience and that nonverbal imagination predates and facilitates the use of words. As Bachelard puts it: “the image comes *before* thought” (xx; emphasis in text). This claim will be further elaborated when, below, I address infantile – specific – traumatic pain.

**Irremediably Alone**

Her little daughter is irremediably alone. No sustenance is offered. *Mieke Bal, All in the Family*

And being together is the chaotic adventure of subjectivity. *Kelly Oliver*

With the help of the phrase I cite in the subtitle Bal puts the affective charge of a relationship between a mother and her child into words. She draws attention to the emotional deprivation of the little child in the photograph by observing that the mother “refuses to allow familial affection to be inscribed in the photograph.” This reference to a lack of affective interaction is a reminder that the photograph of *huisje* refers to the absence of interaffective, familial looking. The qualification “irremediably” keeps resonating with the aloneness implied in this absence. Because a failure of interaffectivity is at stake, I call again upon Stern’s study.

Arguing that a successful attunement is indispensable for intersubjectivity to emerge, Stern also emphasizes that its failure is “disastrous” for the infant (1985: 207). Even though Stern does not explicitly deal with trauma theory, I read disastrous as traumatizing; it pertains to what I labeled a specific disability, because it involves a deprivation of the holding environment that enables the sharing and differentiation of feelings and the emergence of mature emotional relationship. As a consequence, the severe failure of attunement or the mis-attunement that Stern calls “non-attunement,” characterizes traumatization as a particular form of “aloneness” (204-207).

23. See Bal 1999b: illustration 5. The little child who poses with her mother is a photograph of Bal’s own mother and grandmother. Bal describes the affective impact of the photograph as follows: “The latter [the adult], beautiful as she is, repulses me. There is no relation between the adult and the child. However hard I try, I do not see anything of the ambivalences of the familial in the picture. All I can see is the one side of it: the authority that looms over the child like a shadow of a power that can break. The grandmother I never knew refuses to allow familial affection to be inscribed in the photo. Her little daughter is irremediably alone. No sustenance is offered. Here begins the sadness that marks the glamorous studio portrait” (241). This studio portrait is a portrait of her mother as “marriageable girl” (231; illustration 3).
This aloneness does not simply refer to an effect; it rather pinpoints a becoming subject who is by definition barred from adequate, intersubjective sharing. In other words, Stern’s aloneness should not be conceived from within a relationship, in terms of a wish. It rather refers to the absence of a basic need, i.e. the capacity to creatively relate; nevertheless such an incapacitation has a bodily felt aspect that, retrospectively, will often be interpreted as a feeling of being disconnected from other people. In the following statement this specific form of aloneness is indicated by the use of the word “never”:

It is clear that interpersonal communion, as created by attunement, will play an important role in the infant’s coming to recognize that internal feeling states are forms of human experience that are shareable with other humans. The converse is also true: feeling states that are never attuned to will be experienced alone, isolated from the interpersonal context of shareable experience. (151-152; emphasis added)

Later on, differentiating “aloneness” from “loneliness,” Stern not only goes further into the feeling of aloneness but also implicitly addresses the distinction between trauma and severe loss: “We would anticipate a pervasive feeling of aloneness – not loneliness, because the child would never have experienced the presence and the loss of subjective sharing” (207; emphasis added). Aloneness thus refers to a feeling to which the idea of sharing has no relevance at all: there is no possible intersubjective experience. Loneliness, on the contrary, includes the possibility of a sharing other: although such others are presently absent, their past or future existence remains an option. The idea of aloneness, then, points to a vacuum that is both relational and temporal. It refers to the absence of the dynamic, affective force field implied in (inter)subjectivity.

This vacuum does not indicate a conceptual negativity; instead it is experienced physically as a “pervasive feeling of aloneness.” It is precisely this bodily dimension that justifies the use of the negative, thereby indicating that some feeling of deprivation is at stake. The aloneness described by Stern highlights a form of felt experience that is not bound to (inter)subjectivity. Stern explains such non-(inter)subjective experience by delineating bodily agencies – he calls them “emergent self” and “core self” – that precede the (inter)subjective self. In sum, aloneness takes into account an already existing, bodily-subjected agency, which is barred from (inter)subjective sharing.

The failure of attunement that Stern describes can be compared to Winnicott’s “failure of basic provision.” According to Winnicott these failures are the more damaging to the infant because
there is not yet a subjectivity that can predict and hence deal with such a failure. Therefore, these failures “result in the annihilation of the individual whose going-on-being is interrupted” (1990b: 256; emphasis in text). Stern’s notion of aloneness matches Winnicott’s notion of annihilation. Both aloneness and annihilation point to traces of deprivation that defy subjectivity but nevertheless are bodily felt, that is, connected to some bodily agency.

In my interpretation of *huisje* such traces of deprivation are primarily signified in spatial terms, but I have linked kinesthetic and organic signs – lack of movement and lack of warmth – with meaning produced by an affective force field, that is, with feelings that motivate action, feelings of vitality, and creativity. This integrative interpretation has revealed that *MFPB* starts with outlining a non-holding environment, a non-potential space, in short, a non-inhabitable space. *Huisje*, then, refers to a place that explicitly does not invite playing; it defies feeling alive.

The “little house” that has been photographed marked a high frontier between Austria and Italy: no trespassing was allowed when I was there in the winter of 1984. The place took me by surprise, I was caught: I had to make photographs.

My entry into the world was a cold one too: I was born in the most severely freezing night of the winter of February 1944, during World War II. It was a period of fear, (emotional) exhaustion, shortage of fuel, and (breast) food. However, frost was not the only cold. A young woman who became my primary caregiver in the first year of my life supported (replaced?) my (depressive?) mother. She left when the war was over. Up to recently it was never acknowledged that her departure might have had a strong impact on me: “she” was not my mother after all...

There are no photographs of the first three years of my life.

Through these observations I make a connection with my life history. This move introduces the change of frame that parallels the change of chapter. However, the transition from children’s picture book to family album does not simply indicate that the interpretation of *MFPB* needs the support of my life story to be understood. On the contrary, the significance of the familial frame is first of all suggested by the picture book itself; it is the major lesson implied in the art object. Hence, that lesson sheds light on my autohistory of traumatizing acculturation instead of the other way around.
Putting my argument into the frame of the family, I will set out the reasons why the failure of affective framing signified by MFPB is visualized as an absence of familial looking. This specific absence of affective framing foregrounds anew that the failure of nonverbal interaction, manifested in specific discursive silence or emotional isolation, is the pivot around which my interpretation of MFPB turns. The emphasis on affective body language and, accordingly, on the figuration and verbalization of affective feelings makes empathic reading indispensable for my practice of cultural analysis. In the next chapter I will therefore argue that realizing and remembering who you "are" (Suleiman) cannot occur without lived relationships with other human beings; I thus take into account both the annihilation and the creativity implied in familial framing.

Finally, the theoretical partition into two chapters also makes visible that dissociative and integrative forces have contributed to the coming into being and the analysis of MFPB.