Whose pain? Childhood, trauma, imagination

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Citation for published version (APA):
Photographic images are stubborn survivors of death. Marianne Hirsh

When scholars and artists get personal, when (...) they offer their family photographs to public scrutiny, they blur the familial gaze. This process can be both exciting and deeply uncomfortable. Laura Levitt

The choice of the family album as framework of this chapter is indicated by My First Picture Book's turn from huisje (little house) to family members and their implicit relationships: vader, moeder, kindje (father, mother, little child). Through the transition from children's picture book to family album the learning of names inherent in the rhythmic phrase is emphatically placed into the frame of real life and autobiographic memories. Thus the change of frames helps to put into words the suggestion made by the art object that nouns or names have to be animated – provided with qualifiers – in order to reveal their relational capacity, their connectibility. Moreover, this lesson about encounters with the real world shows a hierarchy from simple to complex tasks, presenting family relationships as the top of complexity at the end of the sequence. The effect of the phrase is further enhanced by the visual presentation: by formal aspects as well as the use of a specific medium.

As learning process the series starts with the most simple and predictable interaction, that with an inanimate object (house). It goes on with a sentient organism without locomotion (tree) and then proceeds with a living organism that is defined by locomotion (animal). Finally, it arrives at the most complex interaction, that with the core human and social entity: the (nuclear) family. Significantly, these steps have been visualized in a way that reinforces as well as refines the graduation: there is a shift from the description of an object, to personifications – the tree resembles a human fist, the halo of the animal suggest a saint – to human characters. That is to say, the gradual transition to persons slowly guides the reading attitude from an objective distance towards a subjective, relational response. Moreover, the reality effect of the photographic medium denotes that real, living persons are at stake. Hence, the change to the family album is accompanied
by a visualized warning that the life at stake in MFPB refers to a lived family life whose reality is, at the same time, increasingly intricate and accordingly, increasingly difficult to control.

I recall once more that the turn to reality through the family album, that is, the turn to relationships dependent on real persons, does not entail a search for a lost family history. In my interpretation the turn to family life is mainly motivated by a far more basic search, which I call the need for reality testing – the necessary encounter with the concrete, bodily felt world implied in Peircean secondness. Not family history as such but being in touch with my start in the real world of family life is the point, a moving as well as motivating experience that is always framed by human relationships. As family album, MFPB indicates a need to bring all kinds of mental images of my/the family – memories, fantasies, dreams, illusions – in connection with an existence in the outside world. Moreover, I claim that the motor of this testing is the need to feel alive, to feel grounded in reality. Hence, an embodied presence in the world is at stake, which takes into account the vitality, the energetic potential of affects. Because this way of living can only be substantiated in a potential space, the reference to family history can be read as a longing for such space. Seen as such, the frame of the family album intensifies the working of that of the children’s picture book.

_Framed by Silence_

Touching takes place on the undecidable edge between inside and outside.

_Ernst van Alphen, Affective Reading_

Memory of course is all important, but mainly as a mediator, instrument, or channel for communicating representations of interpersonal relations; it is not important as a more or less truthful description of events. _Gemma Corradi Fiumara, The Mind's Affective Life_

At first sight, these photographs seem to defy categorization as family album because they do not fit in the two rooting traditions described by Hirsch. They do not resemble the photographic portraits that go back to Renaissance portraiture nor the family snapshots that were introduced by the box camera – the Kodak – invented by George Eastman in 1888, a device that brought photography from the studio into the hands of the family (1999: xv-xvi). Like _huisje_ the affective charge of the other photos invokes an overwhelming feeling of isolation. Moreover, this isolation seems to be
forced upon them rather than chosen. Conspicuously, the relationally defined items of father, mother, and child are also figured as separate persons. The series breathes forced separation.

The absence of connections is intensified by the compositions of the images, whose formal strategies I will specify in the course of the analysis below. At this point, I merely observe that this formally effected intensity makes the pictures work like concise statements, each indicating an absence of affective interaction. This general mood has different guises: the frozen atmosphere of *huisje* resonates through the mutilation of *boompje*, the entrapment of *beestje*, the death of *vader*, the immovability of *moeder*, and the dangling dependency of *kindje*. I do not merely interpret these guises as differentiations, but I see them first of all as variations on a theme; in other words, I do not so much emphasize the principle of difference at work in my initial semiotic act as I draw attention to its principle of sameness. Consequently, all items refer to the same traumatic pain: the same “aloneness” that defines the incapacity to form human relationships. Moreover, I read the intensity of the affective statements as revealing a force that, hiding a violent potential, can be turned upon itself.

Nevertheless, the belated, visualized repetition of this aloneness inevitably brings about different aspects. The two pictures following *huisje: boompje* (tree) and *beestje* (animal) can be interpreted as personifications. As such they lead to the anthropomorphizing and animating move that is the base of an empathic reading. From the two photographs, *boompje* is the most obvious personification. It resembles a human fist, while its (human) aliveness is accentuated by the texture of the bark – the skin of the tree-fist. As the image of a pollarded tree it figures a mutilation that not only reveals the violence of the act of overwhelming constraint, but also the reactive violence hidden in such traumatizing events. This simultaneous force of disempowerment and potential reactive destruction is formally enhanced by the centralized composition and the size of the tree, its position with respect to the horizon. The composition literally foregrounds a big, massive, thick tree, which turns into a weighty person who has been curtailed; this “person,” cut off from the possibility to grow in her own way, is deprived of freedom and power. The use of many gray tones in the field in which the tree stands – low contrast at the dark side of the tone scale – has a dissipating effect, as if the gloomy mood is slowly creeping into every blade of grass.

The picture of *beestje* (animal) is a special case of personification, because it turns an animal into a saint. Through its halo the animal ascends to that almost unreachable species of human beings who have become detached from the common world and its human misery. The spotlighting on the pale fur of the rabbit not only repeats the effect of the halo, but also makes
the divine intervention the focal point of the photo. At the same time, however, there is some strange passivity implied in a holy animal that seems to be incapable of taking advantage of the free space – freedom of moving around – that lies outside the hutch into which it has been seduced and forced to live. Hence, the idea arises that the animal is paralyzed or trapped, a thought that changes the rabbit’s innocence and caressability into numbness.

I have willfully chosen the verb “numbing” to characterize the disposition of the animal in the picture, because I interpret it as an exemplary instance of what is known as learned helplessness. Numbing links this disposition with the dissociation of affective feelings, a reaction to life-threatening danger and overwhelming stress. If maintained for a long time such dissociation makes persons helpless in the end, because they are prevented from connecting signals of danger with their own feelings of fear, feelings that should enable them to learn from the dangerous situation. Seen as such, dissociation can become as damaging as the traumatic occurrences that caused the mental disintegration.

Learned helplessness, a notion resulting from animal experiments, indicates that animals can be conditioned – taught – to forget their flight or fight instincts, by repeatedly being shocked while held in cages with closed doors. After having learned such helplessness, the animals will remain in their cages when they are shocked anew even if the doors are wide open.1 For the animal in my image the door is wide open indeed, but the rabbit has become too “holy,” too goody-goody, to notice possible danger and to develop the vital energy and aggression that is needed to productively cope with it. The surrounding environment of garbage cans is not very inviting either. Learned helplessness provides an insight into the effect of a dangerous, constraining education; family life can be terrorizing, even unintentionally. The two meanings of the word terror, as manifested in the active and the passive use of “to terrorize” – threat and fear – are in line with this conclusion.

The ironical use of the halo in beestje further complicates the genesis of this familial terror by highlighting a possibly unhealthy interaction between Roman-Catholic education and the cultural suppression of emotions. Being a saint, that is, being liberated from earthly temptations, is

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1. Bloom & Reichert 1998: 109-112. The writers also make a connection with the biochemical level of the brain and the influence of overwhelming terror on the internal, physical system of arousal. Hence their contention that: “Children who are exposed to repeated experiences of overwhelming arousal do not have the kind of safety and protection needed for normal brain development. They may never develop normal modulation of arousal. (...) Under such circumstances, children will understandably do anything they can to establish some level of self-soothing and self-control” (112; emphasis added).
like being numbed, that is, being taught to forget effective resistance to danger. This interpretation also opens up the possibility that the myth of the nuclear family – the ideal of the holy family – is the effect of a cultural history of abusing power relationships. Hence, *MFPB* is not so much a family album as it is a *critique* of the family album and, correspondingly, of the nuclear family implied in the conventional function of this album. In this way *MFPB* also becomes a textual comment with a defamiliarizing, resisting potential.²

My remarks on *boompje* and *beestje* bring to mind that the need for reality testing brought about by the framework of the family album, involves more than a merely indexical relationship with real life in *MFPB*. The affective load of these pictures indicates that this indexical relationship should be specified as an affective one. For, my interpretations suggest that the images present traces of affective interactions. It is the search for these traces of (my) reality that motivates the connection between the argument at hand and (my) autohistory. I claim that through this connection – another act of framing – the transition from personal traces towards intersubjective signs in *MFPB* is facilitated and, hence, opened up to further analysis.

The connection with my autohistory can be divided into the two different moments of reading I mentioned in the Introduction. Firstly, *MFPB* can be seen as the result of the interaction between pre-text (my life) and artist (my professional self in 1988), and as such it contains materialized and textualized traces of my own life history as being “framed by silence.” Secondly, the present argument is the result of the interaction between *MFPB* and its analyst (my professional self in the process of analyzing and writing in 2002). These different moments will be described in the sections “Work as Labor” and “Work as Product,” respectively.

It is this temporally informed division of subject positions that has helped me recognize traces of familial silencing as signs of affective deprivation and a specific disability. This staged process – and especially my involvement in the work as product – has forced, and perhaps therefore in fact enabled me, to put the almost unnamable feelings involved in this felt absence into words. Thus, the distance between subject positions has given me a second chance. I am finally able to give myself the space and time needed for empathy with the self, including its (self-)reflective quality.

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² See also Hirsch’s critical position with respect to family photography (1997, 1999).
My argument will make clear that the present interaction with *MFPB* takes place in a potential space, while reinforcing that this space combines emotional availability, the integration of nonverbal and verbal experience, and playing with symbolization. This space has not been the result of my affective sensitivity and artistic creativity alone; it could not have come into being without theoretical thinking. Hence, three modes of semiotic behavior – feeling, imagination, and reflection – are involved in its production, i.e. the three conditions for embodied, integrated functioning. Most importantly, the three together also explain the numbing or dissociation of affects caused by traumatic occurrences in terms of a forced disembodiment. I will revert to this point in the last section.

Despite the involvement of my autohistory in this analysis, I am emphatically *not* arguing that only I could have analyzed *MFPB*. Other people could also have made *MFPB* their object of analysis, although the results would depend on their empathic abilities and their knowledge of and sensitivity to the specific problems of people traumatized during infancy. What I do argue goes in the opposite direction. My personal involvement has made it easier to grasp the enduring – obsessive but vital – force that has motivated my personal, artistic, and academic inquiries. I do argue, moreover, that my strong emotional investment in the process of reading underlines the adequacy and plausibility of my argument; I really feel supported by the many moments of searing insights that have occurred to me. Likewise, I also need to share those moments for these insights to become socially accepted knowledge. Finally, because this understanding has been personally as well as theoretically productive, it is another indication of the necessary interrelation of the specific or (inter)personal and the structural or transpersonal – social, cultural, general, public, and political.

As my “work as labor” and “work as product” are embedded in the general course of my life, I will introduce those different moments of production with a short auto-historical account. Normally, in the case of a chronologically structured autobiography, childhood precedes mature and professional life. But since childhood is too easily conflated with family life, this sequence implicitly reinforces the split between personal or familial (private) and social or professional (public) life. Because the premise and argument of my entire study concerns the inextricable interaction of the two areas, I will work the other way around, starting with my professional career, which is personal as well as social.
A Path to Be Traced

Reading between poetry and philosophy, always close to analysis, Cixous insists on the notion of a path to be traced, rather than that of the beautiful road, or the method to be applied.

Verena Andermatt Conley

At issue here is not an absolute truth but a sense of a coherent and a plausible storyline that makes sense of a life history and memories and a person's current senses of self. This is not to say any story is acceptable (...). Nancy Chodorow, *The Power of Feelings*

This section traces the path of my motivation, the force that kept me going, and deals specifically with the motor of my academic and artistic adventures. I start with my entry into university in the early 1960s, that is, years before the roaring political outbursts around 1968. My initial choice was history – looking for (social) origins – but that field of study disappointed me almost immediately. Retrospectively, I ascribe my feeling of utter boredom to the exclusion of my contemporary, sexual as well as emotional woman's life from historical inquiries. There was no place whatsoever for a "lived me" there. At the time I was so naïve, however, that I did not realize that gender had a lot to do with my feeling neither at home nor alive in the history department.

The change to history of art resulted in a second disappointment, which can belatedly also be explained as a symptom of academic life before feminist and other differentiating interventions. I could not become really involved because I was not allowed to look at art productively – to engage myself in the act of looking: at university we just talked *about* art, surrounding it with distancing thoughts. In other words, we did not relate to art objects, we did not put them in potential space; we could not feel addressed as responsible readers. Moreover, I did not accept the rigorous division of arts with respect to their mediality. Why was viewing pictures so different from reading books? And why was art so exclusive, so strongly separated from social culture, political history, and, significantly, from daily life? As a result, I did not finish my study, and, as did so many women students of the time, I left university prematurely.

In the meantime I married a family doctor, and, after a long period of hope, we had two children. However, it took me much longer – in fact until late into the 1990s – to make a connection between my unconscious deferral of family life, my recurring depressions, my patriarchal, Roman Catholic upbringing, my initially conventional way of living, my later, more creative explorations, and my very early childhood. In retrospect, I can do no more than record
that it was not only the complexity of my personal history, (bipolar) constitution, personality and personal fantasies that made my search for understanding so lasting and difficult; the ideologically informed assumptions about family, society, gender roles, and sexuality inherent in the theory held by the psychoanalytic institute where I looked for help and, even more importantly, its reluctance to acknowledge the possibility of an early trauma, also played their slowing roles.

An important turning point in my life – it felt as if I switched on another mental potential – was my decision to devote myself to photography. It was an impulsive act, because I had never seriously touched a camera before. Apparently, I was ready to actively make images instead of passively look at them. I was such an eager student – I still am – that I changed from amateur to professional courses. A personal anecdote may clarify my childlike, uncompromising eagerness: when I was leaving home to go to my first course in photography, my elder daughter, then seven years of age, obviously recognized my elation, for she wished me: “Have fun, Mom!” She thereby repeated the phrase I used whenever she went to some children’s party. I still cherish the memory of her intuitive feeling that I was doing something that I really liked; it was a gift from my daughter to me, akin to the first smile that gave me the chance to feel myself into motherhood.

Why photography? At the time it seemed a logical choice: I wanted to make things visible – I wanted to visualize – and had no talent for figurative drawing. The possibility of writing did not enter my mind in those days. Moreover, acknowledging my preference for associative thinking, I wanted to grasp many things at the same time and, preferably, in a very short time, a wish that could only be met by a camera. The technical aspect of photography also attracted me: the technique was both forbidden (because a men’s preserve) and mechanical, that is, not so difficult to master. I now believe that the most significant reason for my choice was the childlike wish to grasp, hold, test, and question traces of concrete reality. All things considered, I was exploring the subject-constituting function of photography.

Finally, the practice of printing my own photos provided me with an easily defended “room of my own,” at the same time making me more sensitive to the beauty of the specific formal abstraction implied in black and white imagery. The side effect was that I became addicted to the process of development – to the magic of patterns that slowly become visible on the picture plane in the developing tray, a process that begins in the darkest areas. Retrospectively, my addiction to this development yields an additional meaning considering the many moments of emerging insight that appear to have structured my autohistory. The process can also be seen as a metaphor that sheds light on the working of different mental registers.
Children were the initial focal point of my photographing practice. This choice of subject appears a form of displacement. I displaced my longing for the missing baby pictures of myself – I was not photographed before age three – on to picturing my own and other people's children.

In addition, my own children turned me into a photographing mother, who took the opportunity to simultaneously explore her own life – as both daughter and mother – and their lives. Maybe I used them because I needed them, but I could not use them without giving them specific attention and recognition in return: I appreciated and amplified their activities of play by honoring them with my camera. Apart from that significant interaction, I became especially interested in children from age six to twelve, who liked to disguise themselves in all kinds of clothes. As a result, *Playing with Identity* became the first serious, publicly presented project. The subjects of this initial inquiry: children, identity, play, gender roles, and the interaction as well as tension between individual and social components have remained recurring elements in my work.

During my photographic investigations I was never looking for the picture or a picture that was already there in my mind; my working method was, and still is, gathering impressions. Motivated by a mood engendered by the day or the place at hand, I exercised my looking and framing skills, my empathic imagination and my capacity for association; in short, I was constantly on a voyage of discovery by means of photographing. This process of collecting visual imprints of my moments of "being there" – I kept my camera at hand for a long time – was more intuitive than planned or staged. I tended to always leave some room for unexpected possibilities, a permanent alertness that hovered between fear and hope. To give an example of this game of chance: I intentionally chose a very misty day for my first photographic exploration of the outside world. To let things happen was, and still is, part and parcel of my working process, be it photographic or academic.

The many explorations have resulted in a huge image reservoir. This also entailed that I have seldom designed the series I made for exhibition beforehand, most of the time I assembled them out of already existing pictures. My preference for series was motivated by the discovery that I rarely found a single image to be self-sufficient. Just as my associative way of thinking is a

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3. In the course of my academic life I realized that this personal, home-made image reservoir could be enlarged with all kinds of visual images circulating in the outside world. In other words, apart from understanding the idea of intertextuality and interdiscursivity, I also became aware of the intersubjective aspect of (mental) imagination and the role of visual images in that process. Edwin Janssen, another artist working in the field of vision, and I explored together this intersubjective imagination by performing a visual dialogue through an exchange of images. See Lam 1999: 15-22.

4. An exception to this rule is the series *My Mother, My Self* (1990). After my mother had died and her house had been emptied, I withdrew into the place to make a series of self-portraits, disguised in my mother's clothes.
never-ending story, one image seemed never enough to meet my inexhaustible need of narration and interaction. This also explains my later predilection for combining words and images.

However, the use of words to accompany my photographs also has a more specific motivation. I slowly became aware of my focus on processes of acculturation, and hence, of the fact that becoming a woman is more than a matter of visual models of identification. Linguistic mediation could not be left out. It is this specific line of my photographically informed thinking that engendered the need for theoretical support. Following my intuition that reading literature could offer a model for reading images, I discovered the existence of semiotics. I still can recall the feeling of sheer intellectual exhilaration when I found out that there appeared to be a huge body of theory addressing the problems with which I had been struggling.

Not surprisingly, I also became acquainted with the work of my current mentors, Mieke Bal and Ernst van Alphen, a discovery that resulted in still more excitement and empowerment. Their work motivated me to go on. I went back to (another) university, finished my study in history of art, which I could luckily re-read with the help of feminist and postcolonial critics. I specialized in the history and theory of photography and comparative literature, which resulted in *Reading a Book of Photographs*, a thesis in which I analyzed Nick Waplington’s *Living Room* (1991) as a critique of the nuclear family. This plea for what I then called “dynamic subjectivity” and “dynamic family” is the predecessor of the plea for a more radically relational subjectivity I am articulating in this study.

Through an invitation to participate in a team project about the “limits of representation” with respect to the Holocaust in art and literature, the idea occurred to me to investigate the interrelation between childhood and trauma – both being discursive border areas – through the analyses of artistic texts. Unfortunately, the overall project was cancelled, but a scholarship from ASCA made it possible to pursue my specific subject of study. And here I am, writing my dissertation about childhood, trauma, and imagination, while engaging my picture book as well as my autohistory in a theoretical enterprise aimed at contributing to cultural analysis. All points of interest of my former, photographic as well as academic, investigation come together in the interaction of the social and the individual in children’s development, while I put the problem in the framework of trauma theory. However, what precisely motivated me to connect *My First Picture Book* and my autohistory with the critical limits of subjectivity implied in the notion of trauma? To answer this question I will focus on the coming into being of *MFPB*.
Work as Labor

The identity between the work and its subject – between work as labor and work as product – is not unified. Mieke Bal

Thus the subject as nonsubject is reintroduced with existential overtones, not as full nor as divided subject but as one that (...) is constantly in the process of having birth and helping others have their birth. Verena Andermatt Conley

In 1988, the year of birth of MFPB, before I re-entered university, my work with photographs consisted of two separate activities: taking pictures and constructing series. The former resulted in a reservoir of images that became the resource of the latter, although the activities were not necessarily related to each other. My method thus had a built-in interval, which I like to call an incubation or latency period, thereby indicating that it gave room for the unconscious processes that precede conscious reflection. On purpose I created a space-in-between to take into account the suspension of meaning production implied in every work as labor. This play for the production of meaning is comparable to the later playroom generated by the split between work as labor and work as product. The different phases of the genesis of MFPB constitute these spaces of suspension and change, that is, their semiotic potential.

I did not relate MFPB to trauma at the moment I made it. Nevertheless, the conception of the picture book left an indelible memory. The specific, unconscious force that brought about the idea made me realize that a painful subject was at stake, yet this pain was indefinite, unnamable. The idea for the work was born in one of those moments in the early morning when, awake but motionless, I hover between sleep and bodily activity. I have learned to recognize this experience of being in-between – half-asleep, half-awake – as creative moments of playing with associative thoughts. At that moment my play was structured by the phrase: huisje, boompje, beestje, vader, moeder, kindje. I don’t remember how that common phrase came to mind; I only remember that photographs from my own memorized archive gradually accompanied the words.

Without any hesitation the right pictures appeared before my eyes; I was not aware of any act of choice, the images just happened to be there: they were immediate as well as significant. Moreover, their coming into my consciousness was completely disconnected from the moments
of photographing. Suddenly, in a flash of insight that took me by surprise, I realized that these pictures summarized my life story. This was all the more remarkable as the pictures were no family snapshots; they were not even pictures of my own father, mother, or myself. After rising, I did not directly feel the need to analyze or explain the images: they just had touched me as very pertinent and to the point, visualizing something that I could not (?) or did not yet want to (?) express in words. The idea for MFPB, then, was not the result of conscious planning. Only retrospectively am I able to confirm that it was the start of a long process of (affective) discovery and (emotional) insight, in which different registers of consciousness, memory, experience, and the different kinds of interpretants that inhabit those registers, complicated the semiotic events.

Working out this specific combination of phrase and photographs was a far more conscious process. This second phase began with my admission that the series about my childhood was not suffused with a very cheerful spirit. My history was imagined by a desolate, closed house; a beheaded tree; a trapped animal; a dead father; a monumental, immovable, (sexualized) mother seen from behind; and lastly by a dangling child, oscillating between playing and being hanged. At the time, I connected this depressive mood with my education into girlhood, that is, with my forced position of inevitably second best gender, in which process personal problems seemed to be reinforced by cultural constraints. Although feminist critiques made me realize that I was not the only girl to be hampered by abusive learning processes, I could not connect this cultural exclusion with trauma, because I was as yet ignorant of both cultural analysis and trauma theory. I saw it only as another confrontation with the complex interrelation of the personal and the social.

Because the process of acculturation implies learning, I chose the form of a book for figuring my childhood, although the book actually is a cassette containing six separate pages. My First Picture Book intentionally became an object meant to be handled as well as “read.” Importantly, despite the self-evidence of their contents, the words below the pictures were as significant as the pictures themselves, although I could not explain exactly why. Likewise, the use of italics was not

5. I still remember my disappointment and hurt when people did not understand why I found the words — in italics — so important; a common comment was that they were superfluous. The fact that I could not convincingly counter the critique — I did not find the right words — was one of the reasons that triggered my desire for more theoretical background. Another reason for further study was my discovery of semiotics, which made me incurably interdisciplinary.
an arbitrary choice; as I have explained, it simultaneously refers to writing as exercise – learning as doing – and to auto(bio)graph(y).

Having finished my artist book, with professional help for the cassette and the printing, it took another seven years before I took the next step: in setting up my dissertation I presented *MFPB*, in line with Felman’s argument mentioned in Chapter 1, as a figuration of the traumatizing genesis of female (inter)subjectivity, at least, for women of my generation and my patriarchal background. I thus presented it, first of all, as a case of structural traumatogenic components. I could not have drawn this conclusion without the theoretical knowledge provided by the academic education that I started after I had made this photographic text. In other words, my imaginative, visual work was ahead of my theoretical thinking, or conversely, my academic work is a belated understanding.

Naturally, this retrospective understanding also took its time. I slowly realized that my ideas about affective, relational subjectivity and the potential space not only had implications for the structural and specific aspects of trauma, but I also sensed that these ideas could explain the affective silence of *MFPB*. My first attempt to tackle this problem was an unpublished paper entitled “Self-Reflection Through the Other,” in which I introduced Winnicott’s predecessor of Lacan’s mirror: the face of the mother. However, I had difficulty in making the link between the affective aspect of relational subjectivity and my own life history. It was only after a breakdown, a severe depression, and some therapeutic (mis)encounters, that I became aware of the traces of an early trauma implied in my picture book.

This awareness came about in the space of reflection made substantial by the analysis I am performing by means of this writing. Accordingly, it is the transition to this space of reflection that enabled me, and is still enabling me at this moment, to approach my work as product and to disentangle the nested constellation of the specific and structural silences addressed in *MFPB*. In the next section I will further explore these silences through my analyses of the last three pictures – the family members – in which analysis the major focus remains the nonverbal aspect – imagery – implied in infantile traumatization.

6. Despite her use of the word “code,” Bucci’s theory is not semiotics-oriented. She presents her study as a contribution to metapsychological thinking. Anthropologist Roberta Culbertson’s article about the discrepancy between bodily memories and telling – she describes her traumatic past in terms of memories of different levels of experience – is supportive of Bucci’s argument as well as mine. Culbertson introduces an illuminating distinction between two “silences” that hamper the traumatized subject; she speaks of an “internal silence” that refers to the suppression [dissociation] of recollections, and an “external silence” substantiated in both the inability of the social environment to “hear what is said” and the incapacity of the traumatized person to “make the leap to words.” What Culbertson calls “the paradox of the distance of one’s own experience” thus has both intrapsychic and interpersonal aspects. Moreover, she links the phenomenon of
First, however, I introduce a theoretical framework that explains and specifies the creative process inherent in my work as labor. Delineating the existence of different intrapsychic systems of information processing, this theory shows how the genesis of MFPB can be clarified as staging the transition from affectively defined, bodily feelings to verbal thought. It is a theory that emphatically takes the functioning of different mental registers into consideration. Hence, this framework is not only pertinent to this particular argument about infantile traumatization but also to trauma theory and embodied (inter)subjectivity in general.

In her study *Psychoanalysis and Cognitive Science* (1997) Wilma Buccki develops a “multiple code theory.” She constructs an integrative theory of mind, combining psychoanalytical theory with recent views from cognitive science, while being supported by clinical and experimental research. As Bucci’s major aim is to develop a “new model of emotion and cognition that is applicable to psychoanalysis,” she forcefully incorporates the subject of emotion into her theorizing (124).

Bucci’s central notion is “the referential process,” by which she means the “linking of feelings and words,” the crucial problem of her argument (214-228). With the help of this process Bucci highlights the primary role of the physically experienced, affective interaction and the prototypic imagery of “emotion schemas” into which these feelings are manifested (195-213). Bucci’s major theoretical contribution is that she complicates the intrapsychic working of the mind by specifying the nature of affective interaction as being dominated by what she calls “subsymbolic processing.” Hence a subsymbolic register of experience surfaces that predates language acquisition, remains at work during the entire life span and can never be fully integrated in linguistic experience. This brings Bucci to the radical conclusion that “emotion and speech have different roots,” which in turn suggests the existence of different kinds of thinking (222).

Bucci’s model of the mind is linked to developmental subjectivity, because she explicitly acknowledges that processing affective interaction, a process that is defined by “interaction of perception, action and visceral experience,” is rooted in early infancy, “in the context of the mother-infant interaction” (138). However, although this affective interaction is predominantly processed in a subsymbolic way, it does not follow that symbolic codes are necessarily absent in infancy.

7. Bucci’s views are compatible with that of evolutionist theorists who hold that the capacity for affectively defined adaptation of behavior predates that for linguistic communication and is, therefore, not species specific. As Bucci makes clear, “emotions function primarily to mediate response to current situations rather than to evoke situations in their absence. They mediate between the constantly changing situations that impinge on an organism and its behavioral response, permitting flexible adaptation of the organism to the environment” (216). She thus emphasizes the enacted aspect of affective feelings. Her terminology is somewhat confusing, to the extent that she does not make the distinction between affects and emotions in the way I do. Nevertheless, I maintain her term “emotion schema,” because it refers to that form of mental organization I have called “emotion habits.”
The difference between symbolic and subsymbolic codes will clarify this. Bucci generalizes that "the representation of entities in their absence, in image or word, is the domain of the symbolic; immediate response based on intuitive, implicit processing is the function of the subsymbolic mode, operating in human adults and infants, as in other species" (216; emphasis added). Seen as such, subsymbolic processing can be understood in terms of the automatic affect exchange – the contagion – implied in Kumin's intermodal exchange of affective signals and feeling states. Put semiotically, subsymbolic processing foregrounds the innate, non-conscious working of Peircean iconicity and indexicality to which I drew attention in Chapter 4.

Bucci characterizes the subsymbolic process, which is not mediated by language, as defined by a way of processing that functions without explicit intention or direction. As she argues, "We carry out this processing without being able to specify the basis on which the judgments are made" (174). Such processing – like tasting or smelling – is called analogical or continuous and has to be distinguished from the categorical processing that is manifested in the discrete, separate entities or symbols of symbolic experience.

The analogically working, intuitive immediacy is decisive for the distinction:

The essential feature of subsymbolic processing is not that it is nonverbal, although it usually is; not that it is automatic, unconscious or implicit, although it may be; but that it operates without the parameters of an action or task having been explicitly defined, without discrete elements being identified, or explicit processing rules being required. (214; emphasis added)

The possibility to differentiate between continuous and categorical processing starts at birth, or perhaps even in utero (140); moreover, it is not specific to human beings. As a consequence, subsymbolic codes cannot merely be seen as the developmental predecessor of the symbolic; and symbolic codes should not be conflated with verbal symbolization either.

In Bucci's argument subsymbolic codes have two kinds of symbolic counterparts: nonverbal symbolic codes (symbolic imagery) and verbal symbolic codes (words) (174). It is this distinction

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8. Analogical processing implies that the triggering of one element activates an entire network of associated information; it does not work through simple linear or serial connections. For an explanation of analog and digital schemes and systems in terms of density and differentiation, see Goodman 1976: 159-164.
that compelled me to separate nonverbal language from verbal language. Bucci summarizes the nonverbal symbolic imagery as "the pivot of the emotional information-processing system," because it mediates between affective feelings and verbal language (266). As mentioned, this mediation takes the form of emotion schemas, which refer to that specific kind of memory schemas resulting from interpersonal, affective interaction that Sroufe calls "schemata of relationships" or "emotional constructs" and Stern refers to as "Representations of Interactions that have been Generalized (RIGs)." To transpose this to the terms of the present study: symbolic imagery – manifested in conceptions of emotion habits – mediates between (bodily) feeling and (verbalizable) emotional content. It also matters that Bucci's symbolic imagery does not necessarily refer to visual images. Bucci's own conclusion is that she replaces Freud's bipartite system (primary and secondary process) into an at least tripartite system that consists of subsymbolic and different kinds of symbolic – nonverbal as well as verbal – codes. Moreover, this hybrid system works in both parallel and sequential ways.

The transposition from subsymbolic to symbolic codes is the task of the referential process, which Bucci specifies as "the function of integration of the multiple, diverse components of the human information-processing system, connecting the disparate, modality-specific representations and processes of the nonverbal system to one another and to words" (178; emphasis added). When Bucci explicitly describes this process with respect to verbalizing affects and emotions, a process that is central to human (inter)subjectivity, she divides the cycle of transition into three stages: 1. The subsymbolic arousal: the activation of an affect, which can operate within or outside awareness, that is, with or without conscious intentions, actions, subjects and/or objects. In this stage (nonverbalized) affective feelings tend to precede conceptual knowing. 2. The symbolizing phase, which can be divided into: a) the construction of prototypic imagery or emotion schemas [i.e. prototypic self-other relationships implying a need or wish and (re)actions related to this] and b) narratives of prototypic images and episodes. According to Bucci these narratives can take the form of “memories, including screen memories, fantasies, dreams, or events of current life” (218). 3. The reflection phase: understanding and verification; in this stage emotions are categorized and identified by means of (inter)subjective and interpersonal understanding.

It is relevant to the present argument that referential activity starts with affective arousal, that is, with a Peircean feeling interpretant. Such a beginning indicates that motivational forces – feelings pertaining to action readiness – come first, which justifies my emphasis on motivation. The motivational function of this initial arousal is further clarified by "the referential cycle of
discovery." This process elucidates the (intrapsychic) production of innovative meaning in “both creative scientific work and in the arts” in terms of referential activity (223). On the basis of this process I can say that the genesis of MFPB was set in motion by the need to link affective feelings with words, and in this process emotion schemas play a crucial role.

Bucci argues that the referential cycle or spiral of discovery is also determined by four phases, specifying them with the help of the terms used by mathematician Hademard as preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification (224-226). These four phases perfectly match the steps I described above with respect to my work as labor: 1. The preparation was the more or less arbitrary gathering of images (and other information); 2. the incubation was the waiting time inherent in the “reservoir of images” as being not (yet) series; 3. the illumination was the unexpected coming into being of the word-image connection: the (verbal) rhyme and the (visual) photographs; it also was the emerging of the idea that the affective load revealed by this connection pertained to my own painful life history; 4. the verification involved the materialization of the idea as well as the resulting reflection, analysis, and theorizing.

The way in which Bucci elaborates on the different phases of this process of discovery augments their importance for my argument.9 With respect to preparation Bucci stresses the need for “a ‘back-translation’ movement from verbal-symbolic to subsymbolic forms,” which generates a specific creative potential that is not known but felt: it is a working “without direction, ‘in the dark’” (224). I see my intuitive gathering of visual impressions as a form of such preparation.

Explaining the importance of incubation, Bucci underlines that “the subsymbolic search occurs to a large extent outside awareness and without intentional control” (224). I interpret this incubation as the period in which the schematic imagery can be formed that facilitates the later verbalization. Such a process is unmistakably implied in the silent existence of my image reservoir, which I have indicated as creating an in-between space. Strikingly, the decisive feature of illumination is described by Bucci as “the connection that has been sought appears as if coming from outside” (224). Its relevance to the birth of my idea: the linking of images and words in half-awareness as well as the connection with my autohistory, stands out. Finally, the articulation

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9. Because I had already formulated my working method before I read Bucci’s study, my account cannot have been (un)consciously motivated by the wish to fit the frame.
of what Bucci calls reflection and verification needs no further explication either, because it is presented as making the results precise, which means making them understandable: sharable, usable, controllable, plausible, and lasting – in short, intersubjective.

As affective arousal and emotions depend on interpersonal, affective interaction, the frame of the family album becomes even more relevant. So far, I have emphasized the need for reality – the need for any relationship whatsoever – triggered by the family album. In the next two sections I will deal with the way in which this picture book makes visible that the nuclear family has played a decisive role in that need, and hence, in my infantile “aloneness” or traumatization. For this argument I am indebted to Hirsch’s distinction between “familial gaze” and “familial look,” a differentiation that makes it possible to specify the familial terror already signaled in *beestje*, as an absence of constitutive familial looking.

**Work as Product: in Search of the Familial Look**

A human being could not become a person, in any of the diverse senses of the term, were she or he not in “second person” contact from earliest infancy. Lorraine Code, *What Can She Know?*

I would like to suggest that photographs locate themselves precisely in the space of contradiction between the myth of the ideal family and the lived reality of family life. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames*

The analysis of my work as labor brought about a moment of illumination in which I realized that six photographs invoked by six words conveyed my autohistory, while at the same time indicating how that autohistory could take form. The moment thus suggested how the felt traces of my familial reality, could become a sharable text, though in the guise of an as yet unnamable pain. However, only the materialization of this idea as a concrete product, in which the necessary cooperation of images and words was effected, made it possible to get hold of that pain – to turn the images and words into possible signs.

So far, the ungraspable, unverbalizable reality of that pain has already become more concrete – more liable to (empathic) imagination – by the recognition of the motionless
inhabitability implied in *huisje*, the mutilating constraints of *boompje*, and the nimbus-informed numbness of *beestje*. However, the pain appears to receive its most radical articulation in the picture of *vader* (father), which shocks the viewer through a confrontation with real death, albeit by means of a photograph. That is to say, the turn towards the real family members of the family album starts with an embarrassing address: the viewer has to face an almost space-filling corpse, which gives the picture plane the function of a coffin. The absolute condition of this death, its reference to finality, is formally enacted in the horizontal position of the man lying dead, a leveling down that is enhanced by the horizontal lines of the brick wall. This horizontality aligns immobility with powerlessness. Furthermore, the strong, blocking wall – right behind the corpse, leaving no space between corpse and wall – materializes rigidity, which inscribes the opposite of dynamic vitality as well as a ban on trespassing. As in *huisje* and *beestje* the enclosed space refers to entrapment instead of security. Lastly, the closed eyes of the dead man state that there can be no exchange of looking whatsoever. Thus, the image of the dead father gives the absence of a mutually constructive affective interaction the decisive load of concrete, dead matter. Physical death seems to have the last word and thus signifies the utteraloneness implied in the incapacity to relate.

It is impossible for me not to go into the ambiguity of this monument for a dead father or this death of a monumental father. In particular, the dead body is still waiting for the final laying out in a coffin and thus brings a waiting room, a space for the suspension of meaning, to the fore. When my own father died, I was an adolescent who was not capable of mourning. I tried to work through this problem many years later by intentionally engaging myself in photographing – being present with, consciously looking at – my ill, then dead father-in-law, who had given me his generous consent to do this. My self-inflicted will of “being there” helped me to be present, to feel involved. During this process of belated mourning – which continues in this act of writing – I was finally able to differentiate between my hatred of the patriarchal culture that so utterly wronged me and the sympathy for my father(s), who had also been trapped by culture and history, though in a totally different way.

Hence, this image of a dead father – of dead fathers – also signifies the aloneness implied in a hierarchical, destructive opposition between (female) weakness and (male) power. Moreover, it is not only my fathers’ aloneness that is imaged but also my own or that of any empathic viewer who might feel affected. To repeat once more, this reciprocal production of meaning is not a matter of identification, nor of projection, but is implied in an empathic act of reading. It is empathy,
then, that creates the relational space in which the relationship and its constitutive elements are generated at the same time. Importantly, in this case, this empathic act does not resolve my father's aloneness or mine; it only creates the sharable space in which the traumatic pain of discursive silence can be located. Nevertheless, this space, which enables the pain to become connected with a traceable wound, does not make that pain curable by definition. The death in the picture of vader indicates that this pain is irremediable, imaging, explaining as well as justifying why I present "discursive silence" as "discursive death."

The image of moeder (mother), which figures the other adult in the nuclear family, also makes it difficult to leave out my personal memories. Like the genesis of MFPB the act of photographing was a moment that I will probably never forget. I took this photograph during a holiday, in a very fast, very intuitive instant, in which my only thought was: this is the most important picture of my holiday. It was. It also was a nearly impossible undertaking due to a suddenly arising fog that forced us to retrace our hiking steps some minutes later. The experience thus is another example of an image simultaneously coming out of the dark and being endangered by foggy circumstances. Moreover, my own mother was a big, fat woman.

The mother in the picture is not signified by the visible presence of her child, although her towering position presupposes a little child, looking up to her back. That back is as conspicuously present as her face is absent. Again, centrality and size are supportive of the woman's powerful position, which is reinforced by the massiveness of her body. Moreover, she stands on two strong legs, although the high heels might jeopardize her posture. The mother's gender is embodied as fully-fleshed sexuality, but this sexual exposure has the appearance of a forced act, because the mother is taken from behind. Due to this intrusive act, which makes her faceless at the same time, she has been put in an unfair position. Hence, the strength of her back turns into a sign of vulnerability, a change of meaning that aligns the mother with the invisible child. The mother is not merely not-looking, she has also been prevented from looking.

In this way, the power-without-a-face becomes a sign of disconnection from other people, an aloneness that affects both mother and child. Again, as in the image of vader, an empathic act of viewing makes room for the reverberation of the aloneness that is visualized in this picture. Both images thus present – make present – the mutually isolating effect of the absent looking, while, at the same time, they give the opportunity to put that absence into a shared space. In this space the connection with reality can be found. This is the connection I have been looking for with the help of the family album. Paradoxically, it starts as a space of shared aloneness.
There is still another aspect of the mother image that asks for attention; it has to do with the overall grayness of the picture, which heightens the uncertainty about the mother’s activity. What is she doing, for heaven’s sake? Moreover, what is that other (faceless) person doing in the background? Is there a contact between the two or not? Significantly, this is the only picture in which a second person figures, although as a hardly visible extra in the background. What makes the picture still more revealing, however, is that another unclear person functioned as primary caregiver in my life. As I mentioned at the end of the previous chapter, a young woman played an important role during the first fourteen months of my life, replacing my mother in many respects. She left our home after the war, and I was supposed to have been too little to remember. Now I know that I was not able to cope with the anxiety or overwhelming stress at that time, because the distress was not attuned to: I learned – was conditioned – very early that I was alone, and this lesson had a great impact on my life.

It should not come as a surprise, then, that the kindje (little child) figuring in the last picture of the book is alone, apparently not in the presence of another. Thereby, this picture refers to Winnicott’s precondition for playing and creativity, albeit in the negative. Seen from this perspective, the dangling child emphatically misses the terra firma of a real, enabling relationship. The image thus seems to be in line with all foregoing ones, at first sight at least. Correspondingly, I interpret the desolation of the playground as a sign of the absence of potential space. The aloneness implied in this desolate space is matched by the amorphousness of the child – she is enwrapped in a black, formless cloak, which indicates that she cannot normally differentiate herself into a subject with varied adaptive possibilities.

The isolation is enhanced by the drabness of the space, which is not only abandoned by the sun but also by other playthings and playmates. Nobody is there to look at her, a lack of eye contact that is amplified by the fact that her own eyes and face are hardly visible. No wonder, then, that the swinging activity resembles a hanging, an obvious association in the Dutch language, because the “knot” in the rope – in Dutch “knoop” – is a part of the Dutch verb “op-kno[0]p-en,” by means of which the acts of “hanging oneself” as well as “being hanged” are named.

10. The severity and duration of the effects of the loss of a primary caregiver, an event that makes a child vulnerable to traumatization, fully depends on the way such a loss is emotionally and socially framed. Hence, the problem of “split motherhood” or “co-mothering” as addressed in Suleiman’s study that I introduced before, is a subject that deserves attention in every critique of the myth of the nuclear family and in every society that cares about child care (1994: 13-63). Maternal splitting forms the core of the film La Balia (The Nurse) made in 1999 by the Italian director Marco Belloccchio after a novella by Luigi Pirandello. The film is particularly relevant for my study as it explicitly appeals to the affective sensitivity of the viewers by means of formal enactments. Audio-visual elements play a decisive role in the way the film engages the empathic imagination of the viewer; moreover, the film specifically calls for an analysis of the use of interactive (familial) looking.
The environment of this child is conspicuously not the playground inherent in the potential space. Correspondingly, it signifies the "irremediable aloneness" forced upon a person who has to struggle for life without the safety belt – trustworthiness – of a holding environment. Nevertheless, like the other images in MFPB this one is also open to a more complex interpretation. For, the suggestion of a playground remains at work, after all, which alludes to the need for playing. Moreover, there is some movement in this picture; the child is swinging. And what about her age? This is not an infant; the girl seems old enough to go to school and to learn other than familial lessons.

Taken together my analyses of vader, moeder, and kindje lead to two seemingly contradictory points. On the one hand, the pictures drive the meaning of MFPB home by highlighting the conspicuous absence of constructive human relationships, thereby emphasizing the powerlessness and isolation implied in the deprivation of the capacity to relate. Although the common denominator – aloneness – is differentiated by three kinds of powerlessness: death, facelessness, and dependency, respectively, this differentiation appears, at first sight, solely to amplify the meaning of affective deprivation. Moreover, the incapacity to relate turns upon all members of the nuclear family involved. Consequently, MFPB, seen as family album, not only makes the traumatizing acculturation of my own past visible, it also exposes and unsettles the ideology of the nuclear family.

On the other hand, the mere fact that my reading has made a connection between my own infantile aloneness and that of the parents in the pictures has created some relational space, which is most concretely indicated by the playground of the last picture. Put differently, my analyses have also traced the ways in which the pictures, despite their emphasis on isolation and powerlessness, did more than outline one traumatizing emotion schema: as figurations that implicitly address empathic viewers, they appear to create a space for a paradoxical shared aloneness, in which, at the same time, reflection about differences can take place.

I will further explore the seeming contradiction implied in this space with the help of Hirsch's "familial look." As the terminology suggests, this notion points to an entanglement of "familiality" – Hirsch's term – and the field of vision. By putting Hirsch's familial looking in the framework of the affective dimension of subjectivity or interaffectivity, I wish to draw attention to the decisive role of the face in the mutual, familial acts of looking. In the following section, I will present the familial look as an empathic reading attitude that can provide the absence of such looking in MFPB with its necessary felt dimension. The emphasis on the face not only yields
insight into the semiotic and subject-constituting potential of familial looking in general; it also makes visible the traces of the traumatic pain that is implied in what I have called a specific discursive disability or specific silence.

**Looking as Facing**

(...) for the face of the other requires me to respond and enter into a relationship, but a relationship that I cannot fully control, that neither of us can fully control.

Jonathan Cole, *About Face*

Something happened and came from without, but in order for it to be personally meaningful, it also must be created from within at the same time. Nancy Chodorow, *The Power of Feelings*

The interpretation of family photographs and their manifestations in “meta-photographic imagetexts” is the central subject of Hirsch’s *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (1997). I invoke this study, and the volume Hirsch has edited, *The Familial Gaze* (1999), because Hirsch complicates the construction of the (nuclear) family by means of photographs through a distinction between the familial gaze and the familial look. The former is manifested in the dominant, culturally confirmed, family rites and romances, while the latter refers to the interaction of looks that is bounded to subject, place, and moment and that defines specific family relationships. In Hirsch’s own formulation:

The *familial gaze* situates human subjects in the ideology, the mythology of the family as institution and projects a *screen* of familial myths between camera and subject. Through this screen the subject both recognizes and can attempt to contest her or his embeddedness in familiality. The looks family members exchange, on the other hand, are (...) local and contingent; they are mutual and reversible; they are traversed by desire and defined by lack. (...) A *familial look* is thus an engagement in a particular form of relationship, *mutually constitutive*, mediated by the family gaze, but exceeding it through its subjective contingency. (1997: 11; emphasis added)
At first sight, this passage seems to be somewhat confusing. The familial gaze is explicitly linked to the making and reading of photographs – Hirsch speaks of “a screen of familial myths” that is projected between camera and viewer. The familial look, in contrast, is defined as an exchange between family members, an activity that can refer to all kinds of familial interaction and, hence, exceeds the interaction between photograph and viewer. Nevertheless, through this apparent incongruity, the quote hints at the inequality of the two concepts. This inequality, which makes the concepts so difficult to compare, is also implied in Hirsch’s observation that “the field of the look,” which suggests a force field, might replace “the regime of the gaze,” which suggests strict rules (15).

The familial gaze as ruled by a screen of projections, is best understood when mediated in objectifiable, visible imagery. To the extent that the family album is a common, socially approved substantiation of familial memory and history, it primarily materializes the familial gaze. Because it visualizes as well as objectifies the family, the photographic album is one of the foundational contributors of the institutionalization of the (nuclear) family. One can even contend that the ideology of the nuclear family involves a family that has been photographed. Nevertheless, according to Hirsch, the cultural embeddedness that is made visual through this screen can be contested, and therefore she stresses the role of the viewer with respect to family photographs and the family album, a function that needs verbal mediation – imagetexts – to become transpersonal knowledge. Moreover, arguing that “families’ are shaped by individual responsiveness to the ideological pressures deployed by the familial gaze,” Hirsch suggests that such a viewer should make use of familial looking (10; emphasis in text).

In contrast to the familial gaze, the familial look is by definition not objectifiable, because it is reciprocal, which implies that subject and object of looking cannot be separated. In Hirsch’s words: “I am always both self and other(ed); both speaking and looking subject and spoken and looked at object; I am subjected and objectified” (9). Furthermore, because the familial look is “traversed by desire and defined by lack,” a motivated looking is at stake, which implies a personal, intrapsychic dimension that cannot make sense without autobiographical memory, fantasy, and bodily experience. To further clarify this looking I will put it in the framework of interaffective subjectivity, an act of framing that underlines the vital function of holding. The frame of interaffectivity is made plausible by Hirsch’s own formulations. When she describes familial looking as “mutually constitutive” she hints at the relational, subject-constituting aspect of interaffectivity; “subjective contingency” fits the person-bounded and felt aspect of affects, and the “mediation by the gaze” can be interpreted as discursively defined or culturally shared.
The affinity between the familial look and the affective dimension of subjectivity is also indicated by Hirsch’s analysis of the reading practice elaborated by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, with which she opens *Family Frames.* One point is especially pertinent to my argument, because it also supports the idea that a looking for felt traces of reality motivates the use of photographs in *MFPB.* Through Barthes’ meta-photographic text Hirsch draws attention to the role of presence in photographs, a presence that she connects with affectivity. For example, Hirsch not only states that Barthes’ *punctum* embeds the photographic image “in an affective relationship of viewing” (4), she also observes that “Barthes – via the metaphor of umbilical cord – makes photography akin to the very processes of life and death” (5). Hence, Hirsch’s conclusion that “reference, for Barthes, is not content but presence” (6). Because the notion of presence cannot become meaningful without bodily sensations and feelings, the reading of photographs turns into an embodied practice in which looking affects a living subject. Seen in Peircean terms, familial looking generates feelings that motivate bodily action as well as imagination and thought processes, a semiosis that is mediated by emotional, energetic, and logical interpretants.

Hirsch makes an explicit connection between the familial look and nonverbal interaffectivity, when she characterizes “the ways in which the individual subject is constituted in the space of the family through looking” as a “nonverbal form of familial relationship” (1997: 9). At the same time she admits, however, that “we have no easy access to these nonverbal exchanges which nevertheless shape and reshape who we are” (9-10; emphasis added). I contend that Hirsch’s notion of familial looking itself gives access to that nonverbal exchange, if it is approached in terms of “facing.” In other words, the face is the common denominator of familial looking and nonverbal relating.11

Developing an eye for a reciprocal facing, Hirsch’s argument hints at the preponderance of facial expression in affective interaction. As I have argued, the sense of sight and the musculature of the face have pride of place in emotional development, although touching, vocal expression, and gestures also support facial interaction. It thus is the major role of the face that further justifies my amplification of Hirsch’s familial look with interaffectivity, and especially with the nonverbal, interaffective looking through which (inter)subjectivity can come into being. Moreover, seen

11. Hirsch’s remark about the lack of easy access to nonverbal exchanges might also explain her observation that Winnicott “confites the mother with the mirror” and that in his account “looking is unidirectional and specular” (157). As I have argued, Winnicott’s ideas resonate better with a reading that takes the early affective development of (inter)subjectivity into account, a theorizing that does justice to the fact that Winnicott offers the face as a predecessor of the mirror.

12. I believe that the decisive role of the face in subject constitution might add to the meaning of the concept of “facing” developed by Sasha Vojkovic in her dissertation *Subjectivity in the New Hollywood Cinema* (2001). She argues that facing – giving and acquiring a new face – plays a decisive role in “fathering,” that is, in the eventual reconstruction of the father, an integrative process that appears to counter the deconstruction of subjectivity implied in the narrative strategies of the
through that frame, the face becomes a clue for the reading of MFPB. The photographs of vader (closed eyes; dead) and moeder (no visible face) confront the viewer with a conspicuous absence of the familial, mutually constitutive looking. Both parents cannot be taken “at face value.”

In the case of the dead father this absence is absolute, as irreparable as the term discursive death suggests. In the case of the mother the absence also seems to be irremediable because her back is turned to the viewer. However, the emphasis on the back also indicates that looking depends on the front of the body: it is a function of the face and the eyes. Therefore the image also leaves room for hope: she might turn around. Nevertheless, both the dead father and the faceless, immovable mother first and foremost indicate the absence of a holding environment, which prevents the infant from becoming a separately functioning human being that can creatively live and enjoy life. The failure of empowering forces results in the powerless dependency that is made visual by the dangling child in the last picture.

Amplified with its affective dimension, Hirsch’s notion of familial looking thus clarifies that the reading of MFPB as a figuration of a specific disability – to be distinguished from a structural one – is highly plausible. Through an emphasis on the incapacity to look, the interpretation makes traces of a traumatic pain visible that should be explained in terms of the inability to adequately relate. However, because the lesson implied in MFPB also teaches readers and viewers that every life starts as a family life, it leads to the sad conclusion that family life in general is potentially traumatizing when familial looking fails to be productive. Moreover, the danger of such a specific traumatogenic environment becomes the more threatening when the structural negligence of the function and expression of emotions is taken into consideration. That is to say, a developmental subject hampered by a specific emotional abuse that is embedded in structural emotional ignorance or constraints is confronted with a twofold discursive silencing. Both constraints severely endanger the integrative capacity of this subject in becoming.

This interpretation underscores that MFPB is not a family album nor an autobiography in the proper sense; it functions primarily as a work of art, the critical and theoretical potential of which is suggested in the present study. Exceeding the frame of a particular history, i.e. functioning as

...
autohistory, it turns into the imagination of a failure of holding or familial framing in general. Besides elucidating a specific traumatogenic environment, Hirsch's notion of familial looking helps to formulate the critique of the nuclear family implied in MFPB as a critique of the ideological conflation of family and emotional holding. This critique reinforces the interpretation of huisje and the ideological conflation of home and family. However, as the family does not automatically provide the precondition for emotional maturation, familial looking as such cannot automatically contest the regime of the familial gaze. Only if familial looking is "good enough" can it produce the potential space in which playing with meaning and subjectivity can take place.

I therefore claim that Hirsch's plea for an intensification of the indexical relationship with photographs as inspired by Barthes' reading practice, entails the assumption that life stories require the resonance of good-enough (old-enough), empathic readers and viewers. Because they can feel real and alive, they are capable of holding as well as taking risks. Hence, the interpretation of family photographs or photographs that otherwise refer to family life -- and by extension, every practice of cultural analysis I would add -- has to be put in a potential space. The intensification of Hirsch's familial look with the affective dimension of subjectivity, then, embeds looking in a force field that exceeds the field of vision and embodies the subject of (nonverbal) looking.

In the final section I will return to MFPB as an imaginative picture book that is characterized by its interplay of imagination and reality. By foregrounding the mediating function of (symbolic) emotion schemas in the process of linking feelings and words, further insight is given into infantile traumatization. In this way the present argument underscores and clarifies the developmental account of subjectivity I have elaborated in Chapter 4, because it demonstrates how traumatogenic emotion schemas that are dissociated, can still take form. The focus on MFPB as the figuration of maladaptive experience also makes evident that the driving force behind an (inter)subject's motivation to live is the regulation of affective forces with the help of other human beings. Hence, through attention to infantile trauma, traumatic pain can be reduced to its core, to the primary agony that threatens a subject's basic vitality and results in a basic aloneness.

13. The so-called "sensorimotor psychotherapy for PTSD," as developed by Pat Ogden for instance, also makes use of a distinction between sensorimotor and affective aspects of experience, offering it as a means of support to mere psyche-oriented therapies. It is relevant to my argument as far as it makes the working of the more general physical agent visible, by differentiating between the merely physical sensations (for example, the way of breathing) and the affective charge (the specific feeling and emotional content) of bodily behavior. This differentiation enables a traumatized person who is caught in traumatic (re)living to make a distinction between her bodily agent that belongs to the traumatic (past) events and her subjectivity that lives her non-traumatic (present) life. In other words, a traumatized person's awareness of the physical aspect of her reactions makes it possible for her to take distance from that merely physically engaged agent. It thus
By means of this renewed emphasis on the imaginative potential of MFPB, I will mend the analytically motivated division into two chapters, which provisionally made the split between spatial (sensorimotor) organization and relational (affective) organization visible. My integrative move thus counters the dissociation enacted by the splitting of chapters and promotes the idea that an affectively and discursively defined, embodied (inter)subject cannot function without the support of a more general, physically defined agent. This mending will demonstrate anew the productivity of the skin as the interface *par excellence* between self and other as well as between inner and outer world. Therefore, it is the most adequate metaphor to signify the complex in-between quality of the potential space. Nor will it come as a surprise that I will finish the present text, as my picture book does, by drawing attention to a playground.

### A Skin I Share

In the beginning there may be the word, but there is also the wordless.  
*Christopher Bollas*

Only in the context of this meta-photographic textuality and in this self-conscious contextuality can photographs disrupt a familiar narrative about family life and its representations, breaking the hold of a conventional and monolithic familial gaze. *Marianne Hirsch*

To take full advantage of the semiotic potential of MFPB I make a last analytical move. Returning to Bucci’s concept of referential process to address the problem of dissociation involved in MFPB, I will present the images of MFPB as figurations – externalized symbolizations – of a particular kind of mental imagery, i.e. as pathological, maladaptive emotion schemas that are resistant to change (1997: 200-207). Precisely because they are not open to change these schemas differ from adaptive ones. Bucci describes emotion schemas in general as “prototypic representations of the self in relation to others, built up through repetitions of episodes with shared affective states” (195).
As mentioned, Bucci problematizes the dominance of linguistic thought by drawing attention to a different mental register, which she calls “emotional thought.” She also foregrounds two different ways in which the nonverbal aspect of this information can be processed: first, there is a **subsymbolic, continuous** processing, which remains at work during the entire life span and functions mostly automatically, outside of awareness; second, there is a **symbolic, categorical** processing that is manifested in prototypical imagery or emotion schemas. These schemas are not rooted in language, and they function independently from verbalization, although they facilitate the transposition of feelings (affects) into words. Since *MFPB* refers to traumatizing events, I will focus on Bucci’s argument about “pathological” emotion schemas, later amplifying her theorizing with Winnicott’s “fear of breakdown.”

Though Bucci does not explicitly deal with trauma theory, she establishes a causal link between the formation of pathological emotion schemas and an increased vulnerability to PTSD (207); moreover, she underscores the relevance of affect attunement by observing that in case of inadequate affect attunement “the referential process itself will not develop, and the construction of emotional meanings will be blocked” (208). She also acknowledges the operation of dissociation, characterizing it as a situation in which “the connections between the subsymbolic and the symbolic components of the schemas are cut” (202). By emphasizing that the subsymbolic core of pathological schemas that are dissociated is the most difficult to link with words, she does more than offer an explanation for the disintegration implied in dissociation; she also helps to explain why a specific disability entails a problem of translation, which interferes with changeability. As she puts it, it is “the dominance of certain types of subsymbolic input [that] has the potential to make the emotion schemas particularly resistant to change.” When she attributes this resistance, in turn, to the fact that the content of emotion schemas is basically defined by “sensory and somatic components,” she points out the bodily felt aspect of this dissociated experience (198).

Bucci’s work thus suggests that coping with early traumatization is complicated by the fact that (repeated) mis-attunement leads to fixed, somatosensorily defined mental schemas that are not easily liable to change, precisely because of their subsymbolic bodily base. Her theorizing clarifies

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14. I do not suggest that the difference between emotional thought and linguistic thought can be explained by the existence of two hemispheres of the brain. As Bucci and others observe, the working of (embodied) cognition as well as the brain cannot be reduced to the simple duality of analytical, verbal as opposed to visuospatial, emotional.

15. See Winnicott 1992: 87-95 and his account of a baby’s trauma in *Playing and Reality* (1991: 97); see also Abram 1996: 263 et passim. It should be kept in mind that in Winnicott’s writings the term “trauma” was not yet framed by the separate pathological category of PTSD; moreover, although he emphasized emotional development and although his idea of “mutuality” is akin to Stern’s affect attunement (Abrams: 71), he did not yet explicitly take the regulation and
how cumulative and prolonged emotional abuse reinforces dissociation and, as the theory of structural dissociation indicates, might develop into a permanent division of experience, manifested in different kinds of personalities. The view of trauma as generating a specific disability thus has to take the dissociation of threatening emotion schemas into consideration. This disability implies the absence of adequate schemas as well as the difficulty in forming new ones. As a consequence, the primary means to counter the devastating effect of trauma as breach is not so much finding words as the constitution of renewed or new emotion schemas; and because this process depends on the formation of new emotion habits or skills, repetitious doing (the performative aspect of utterances) is as important as gaining insight (the constative aspect).

The focus on emotion schemas heightens MFPB’s relevance to understanding infantile traumatization. For, the images, presented as six variations on the general theme of aloneness, make still more sense if they are seen as figurations of what Winnicott calls “primitive agonies” in the context of his articulation of the “fear of breakdown.” This latter concept elaborates the deprivation of fundamental provisions, which I discussed in the previous chapter. Winnicott argues that the fear of breakdown, a fear that can also be disguised as a fear of death and feelings of emptiness or non-existence, is in fact a defense against a breakdown that has already happened, although it has not yet been experienced. Winnicott even concludes that a psychoanalytic therapy hampered by such a fear cannot end “unless the thing feared has been experienced. And indeed one way out is for the patient to have a breakdown (physical or mental) and this can work very well” (1992: 92; emphasis in text). The concept thus points to those hidden agonies that explain “psychotic” symptoms as “disintegration, self-holding, depersonalisation, primary narcissism, autistic states etc.” not as symptoms of illness but as symptoms of a defense against an “unthinkable state of affairs” (88; emphasis added). It is specifically this unthinkable state of affairs that forges the connection between Winnicott’s ideas and my semiotic approach of trauma theory.

Winnicott connects the fear of breakdown with the agonies – the term anxiety is not strong enough for him – that result from very early events. Like Stern, he allows for a form of bodily agency that is somehow aware of these early events: “It is surprising how early (even before birth, differentiation of the basic affects into consideration. In fact, Winnicott’s explorations of the deprivation of basic provisions and primary agonies were made in the framework of psychosis. Max Hernandez, a psychoanalyst who stresses the importance of Winnicott’s notion of “fear of breakdown” for trauma theory, describes this fear as “an implicit demand for an understanding at once urgent and inaccessible.” He specifies this remark further as “both the belatedness of an urgency that comes from a past unacknowledged as such and the inaccessibility of an event that, although belonging to the past, is subjectively placed in the future” (1998: 137). It was Hernandez’ article, published in the special issue of Diacritics about trauma, that drew my attention to the relevance of Winnicott’s ideas for trauma theory. Hernandez also presents Winnicott’s transitional space as an extension of Freud’s protective shield.
certainly during the birth process) awareness or a premature ego can be mobilised" (95). That these early events may be interpreted in terms of non-attunement is indicated by Winnicott's description of early traumatization (196a: 97). He there observes that the distress of a baby becomes traumatizing if the stress that is suffered surpasses the coping ability. To give an example: an event is traumatizing if a caregiver remains absent for too long. Transposed in affective terms this means that the baby is overwhelmed: she cannot adapt to this extremely stressful situation, because she is not yet a subject of mature memory and experience. Nevertheless, Winnicott holds that such primitive agonies leave their traces: they become manifest as defenses against these feelings of annihilation. The feelings behind the defenses can come into being in analytical encounters and are described by Winnicott as "a return to an unintegrated state; falling for ever; failure of indwelling; loss of sense of real; loss of capacity to relate to objects" (1992: 89-90; emphasis added).

I interpret these descriptions as verbal, imaginative transpositions of nonverbal, dissociated emotion schemas. Although they can become meaningful through this verbalization, the extremely painful content of this meaning, which can only be understood with the help of empathic imagination, also makes clear why these nonverbal schemas were dissociated to begin with. Winnicott's last two formulations, in particular, match the "aloneness" that is visualized in MFPB. This observation suggests that the images in MFPB are mediating imagery: they visualize a dissociated primary agony. This interpretation is supported by the overall isolation invoked by the images, an isolation that, most importantly, embodies a static immo(va)bility that enacts the absence of a dynamic, affective force field. Paradoxically, it is the static aspect of these stills of life that hints that bodily life is not immune to traumatic pain. The respective inhabitability of huisje, constraining mutilation of boomje, numbness of beestje, death of vader, and immo(va)bility of moeder reveal a persistence of theme that signifies the resistance to change of the primary disastrous, disempowering events. Not so much the differences between the images as their relation to the overall static aloneness is decisive: they all mark the deprivation of the movement without which no connections can be made. Only the dangling move in kindje seems to indicate a possible escape, a possible connectibility.

Winnicott's agonies, then, foregrounding the incapacity to relate and the entailing incapacitation to feel real, underlie my theoretical explanation of infantile traumatization as a deprivation of affective holding and, in its wake, of potential space. Moreover, my articulation of the affective dimension of subjectivity, which through Bucci's theorizing is refined with an additional mental register of symbolic imagery, provides an explanation for the storage of affective
deprivation – dissociated affective experience remains subsymbolic. Put alternatively, the affective dimension brings with it the understanding that primitive agonies can leave bodily traces, which, if they are recognized as traumatic pain, signify the nonverbally mediated discursive silence that has been explained as specific disability. Apparently, there are possible signs that refer to a traumatizing absence that merely bears on the capacity to nonverbally relate to other people; it is the involvement of this precondition for (inter)subjectivity that makes an infantile trauma “specific” par excellence. Infantile traumatic pain thus underlines that subjectivity is fundamentally relational. In light of this, MFPB’s theoretical potential results from its figurative force, i.e. from its potential to affect a sensitive reader by its figuration of irresponsiveness to an (inter)subject’s most basic need.

Finally, my own lived experience, especially the feelings triggered by both my work as labor and my work as product are in agreement with this theorizing. Winnicott’s concept of the fear of breakdown not only provided me with the terms to make (my) infantile traumatization subject of meaningful thought; it also enabled me to articulate the circumstantial evidence that further supports this argument. It was in realizing the affective load implied in the pictures that I relived an unnamable silence that often hampered my writing. While suffering from anxieties (fear of death; depersonalization), I first and foremost struggled against an increasing feeling of not being able to make any comprehensible point. Never before have I had such strong feelings of becoming overwhelmed, shattered by the abundance, the inextricable complexity of my argument and the futility of the attempts to make my pain – “the unthought known” and “the wordless” – recognizable (Bollas 1987). Never before have I so desperately longed to be empathically understood. Now, at this moment of near ending, I am aware of the impossibility as well as the need of a real closure.

To simultaneously conclude my argument and prepare for a new start I would like to re-introduce the image of the umbilical cord Barthes used in Camera Lucida. Barthes’ imagetext not only beautifully suggests that being in touch with reality is a matter of embodied subjectivity; his deployment of metaphors also clarifies that the semiotic playroom he offers is inherent in

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16. This kind of absence or deprivation indicates an unconscious that cannot be defined in terms of repression and neuroses that merely refer to conflicts and compromises between wish and defense.
his relational viewpoint. In the quote under scrutiny Barthes explores the triangular relationship between a photograph, its referent (a person), and its viewer. An empathic act of looking is conveyed: the response to an affective impact that, in my view, brings a potential space into being.

As narrator and focalizer of the text, Barthes articulates it as follows:

A sort of *umbilical cord* links the body of the photographed thing to my *gaze: light*, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, *a skin I share* with anyone who has been photographed. (1981: 80-81; emphasis added)

Three different metaphors – umbilical cord, (impalpable) light, and skin – are deployed to substantiate the semiotic encounter with the photographed body; together they specify the affective character of this event. The umbilical cord not only emphasizes the bodily nature of the address, but also invokes a relationship of lived proximity: a touchability that has an affective resonance. Subsequently, the narrator elucidates this address by focusing on the light that mediates the encounter, calling it a “carnal medium” and “a skin I share.” I interpret this light – this impalpable but nevertheless carnal medium that entails the feeling of sharing – as another reference to the affective quality of interaction.

Because the narrator approaches looking in terms of light, he does not highlight the guiding act of focalization but a precondition for looking. It is an enabling light, which not only outlines the subject of looking but also stresses the relationship between the viewer and the referent. Hence, a space of interaction is opened up, which simultaneously produces a relationship and its participants.

Moreover, because that light is shared like a skin, not only bodily sensations but also affective feelings are at stake. As I have argued, sharing affect initiates the semiotic events that constitute (inter)subjectivity: it is affective forces that move and motivate us to live; to be more specific, while serving interest and well being, affects define the direction and intensity of motivation. Approaching this semiotic force in terms of an umbilical cord – the embodiment of both sharing and separating life – Barthes’ text clarifies how meaning and subjectivity occur in alternating movements of sharing and separating. Correspondingly, the metaphor gives insight into the sameness and difference implied in interaffectivity, an alternation that in Stern’s terminology is indicated as matching and re-casting affective behavior. It is the play between sharing and separating that characterizes the creativity of the potential space – its semiotic
potential – in relational terms: creativity is the capacity to make different connections. Creativity is connectibility per se.

The metaphor of the skin, then, marks the turning point as well as the end of my argument. It makes me recognize that the meaning of playground in the last photograph may overrule the meaning of threat, being hanged or hanging oneself. Now I am able to make the ambiguity of the picture productive, as I (and others) might do with the first five images as well. Although all pictures are variations on a single theme, the differences between them also reveal a possibility for change. The fact that the picture of kindje is a photograph of my own younger daughter, has certainly contributed to this positive turn. When I made the photo, I was not consciously projecting my past onto her life. Retrospectively, I used her, her image, to enact and work through a hidden aspect of my personal history. However, being my daughter, she also reminds me of a daughter’s potential of familial looking: I have daughters who can make me feel, that is, who have made me and will make me feel a good-enough mother. Life or love is not a linear, causal, one-way enterprise, but an intricate web of intimacy, in which history is lived and narrated from within the present.17 I photographed my two daughters, and they made me realize myself. As a form of self-reflection through the other that mirroring, amplifying, and creative practice helps me understand that life can start anew and can go in many directions. I owe them a lot.

17. This thought is inspired by Catherine Lord’s dissertation The Intimacy of Influence (1999). She demonstrates, while enacting her point with her writing, how a destructive interaction with texts that feeds on anxious rivalry can be transposed – and has been transposed, in fact, by many women writers – into a textual companionship that gives way to the intimacy characteristic of the debates and disagreements between friends.