Most of the books available in the “Baby Books” section of my local bookstore are sturdy, short board books printed on durable cardboard stock. This format is not surprising, for they are intended for the youngest of readers/viewers, those unlikely to understand that books are not intended as substitutes for weapons or teething rings. Browsing in that section recently, however, I was surprised by something else that so many of them had in common. A lot of them consisted merely of images of babies, some in cartoons, but mostly in colour photographs. Why were so many adults interested in providing pictures of babies for baby readers, and why would they think that a baby might want or should want to look at pictures of other babies? Is there an assumption that babies looking at these books see someone like themselves, or is it that they see the other babies in the pictures as significantly other? Or is it somehow both at the same time?

A body of psychological research concludes that even very young infants have a special interest in faces. In 1998, Francesca Simion and her colleagues found that “in newborns there is a preference for facelike patterns over nonfacelike patterns” (1399). In the same year, Alan Slater and his colleagues suggested that “newborn infants have been found to learn about individual faces very rapidly,” and that “the newborn infant can come into the world with some innately specified representation of faces” (266). More specifically, according to Jon Bartrip and his colleagues in 2001, “We can thus conclude that neonates have learnt something about their mother’s head or head and face during the first few days of life” (220)—although I assume here that it is not specifically a mother the baby identifies but perhaps a frequent caregiver. In either case, however, logic might then suggest that the images baby books offer should be those of the caregivers that interest infants. In offering, instead, images of infants like themselves, these baby books might be in the business of encouraging and developing a new form of egocentricity—a move away from a self-centred but not
very self-aware concern for needing nurturing to a new and more conscious awareness of someone like oneself as an appropriate centre of attention and deserving nurture.

That, too, might accord with psychological research about the relationship between mirror images and self-awareness. According to Philippe Rochat and Tricia Striano in 2002, “Much research documents the emergence of behaviors by 14 to 18 months that indicate explicit self-awareness in mirrors or any other reflecting surfaces” (35). Studies of mirror self-recognition (MSR) confirm that, “by 4 months of age, infants showed signs of self–other discrimination in specular images” (Rochat and Striano 42), but intriguingly, a 2003 study by Mark Nielsen, Cheryl Dissanayake, and Yoshi Kashima also showed that “prior to the second year (i.e., before the onset of MSR) infants prefer to look at images depicting the faces of same-aged peers rather than images depicting their own faces” (214)—that is, at faces like the ones in these baby books. Rochat and Striano’s research supported their hypothesis “that 9-month-olds who begin to understand others as intentional agents of communication . . . would perceive the specular image of others as intentional and communicative, and, hence, as socially more engaging compared with the self” (42), whereas Nielsen, Dissanayake, and Kashima concluded that, while infants between four and nine months asked to look at mirror images of themselves and others “orient to the peer-image, . . . investigation did not find this preference in infants aged from 9 to 24 months. Rather, at 18 and 24 months the infants oriented to the self-image” (223). A further complication is the conclusion by Mary L. Courage and her colleagues in 2004 that “[c]hildren’s ability to identify themselves from an array of same age, same sex peers was later to develop than their ability to recognize their mirror images” (519). The business of self-recognition and its connections with, and difference from, recognition of others is complex—as complex, perhaps, as the relationship these baby books imply between the children in the images and the implied child viewer.

As André Vyt concluded in 2001, “Although visual self-recognition in the past two decades has become a standard and fruitful experimental paradigm for assessing self-awareness in the pre-verbal period, inferences from behaviour in mirror situations about the development of self-recognition and self-awareness must be made with caution” (185). Identifying one’s image does not necessarily mean that one has anything like a sense of oneself as a conscious entity.

Nevertheless, according to Nielsen and Dissanayake in 2004, “self-recognisors are endowed with a capacity for engaging in introspection and can thereby develop knowledge of their own mental and emotional states” (343), and Rochat and Striano claim that, while the self-discrimination they describe is
“primarily perceptual,” it is “the foundation from which children can eventually develop the conceptual and explicit sense of drawing on themselves expressed by the middle of the second year” (44). Courage, Edison, and Howe agree, referring to William James’s 1890 work *The Principles of Psychology*:

> This earlier developing sense of self-awareness is akin to what James . . . referred to as the *self as subject of experience*, or the “I” aspect of the self, a subjective, implicit sense of self that does not require the explicit or conscious idea of “me.” In this view, the development of the self is a continuous, incremental process and mirror self-recognition is nothing more than a step along the pathway—“me” evolves from “I.” (510)

In their provision of a variety of babies to look at and relate to and separate from a targeted baby reader/viewer, then, these baby books might well assist in a complex developmental process whereby youngsters transfer their interest from others’ faces—including those of baby peers—to their own, and embark on a process of becoming self-conscious, of evolving first into an “I” and then into a “me.”

This last possibility reminds me of what the psychoanalytical theorist Jacques Lacan calls the mirror stage: that key moment in psychic development when a baby views its image in the mirror and understands that the image is in some sense itself, but also in another sense not itself. Something similar might happen when a baby looks at pictures of people like itself but not itself. Might these books operate as restagings or variations of the mirror stage?

For Lacan, the mirror stage marks the original recognition of one’s self as “me,” as one looks in the mirror and understands that what one sees there is in some sense oneself but also not oneself, and in being bounded and apparently complete, superior to oneself—what Lacan calls an “Ideal-I” (2) or ideal ego, a perfect version of oneself that one takes to be superior to one’s actual and apparently less unified and less complete embodied self. Seeing that more perfect image of oneself is an act of misrecognition, for Lacan a “méconnaissance” that characterizes the ego in all its structures (6) and that establishes the discord between the idealizing image in the mirror and the chaotic reality of one’s body that dominates one’s psychic life ever after. As Karen Coats says in “The Role of Love in the Development of the Self,” an essay on Lacan and children’s stories, “Whereas the image is whole and coherent, he [the baby] experiences his body as fragmented and disconnected. Whereas the image appears in control of itself, he feels as if his body escapes his control. . . . Thus the image functions as an imago, an ideal image that he will thereafter strive to achieve” (59). The baby strives from that point on to emulate that ideal image—constantly tries, and
constantly fails, to achieve the supposed ideal. From that point, we never manage to be what we imagine we ideally should be.

After the foundational moment of identifying oneself in one’s mirror image, the fantasy image of oneself as Ideal-I can be replaced in later stages of development by others whom one may want to emulate: by anyone a person sets up as an idealizing mirror for him- or herself, or by various role models in later life, for instance. The fantasy image may also be replaced by representations of others, which may well include the images of other babies in baby books. What are the implications if they do?

As photographs of actual children, many of these pictures represent what most adult viewers take to be the most realistic representations of babyhood possible, the way babies actually look. Nevertheless, the most obvious characteristic of these photographs is how idealized they are. As products of the marketplace, they represent currently powerful cultural ideas about a perfect, utopian babyhood, and so do the equally utopian cartoon images of babies in some of the other books. As Coats argues in her book about Lacan and children’s literature, *Looking Glasses and Neverlands*, “the way the books look is the way the world should look, and if your particular world does not, then it is not the ideal that has failed, but your enactment of it” (44). Furthermore, conventional assumptions about how young readers “identify” with the characters in books—how they understand themselves in relation to the characters—support the idea that babies do see themselves in such images. More accurately, perhaps, the implied readers/viewers of these books for beginners are in the process of learning how to identify, being invited by the books and by the ways in which adults interact with babies in the reading and viewing of them to see the images as versions of themselves.
In other words, they are learning to experience a version of the mirror stage: to move from an earlier state of total egocentricity (or perhaps, total lack of consciousness of self) to an awareness of others’ ideas about who or what one is. If the images do operate as versions of an Ideal-I, then, they represent one of the earlier means by which cultural and mercantile forces enter the lives of young readers/viewers and operate to shape their desires and their sense of themselves, in the interests of powerful cultural and economic forces apparently far removed from the state of babyhood. They help make babies into citizens and consumers.

What, then, is there for a baby to see and to aspire to in these pictures of babies? What sort of imago or Ideal-I do they establish?

First (and perhaps least obviously for already educated adult minds prepared to take these images for granted as simple and straightforward), these images communicate as all images do—by means of a complex system of established signs. They engage a wide range of conventions of visual depiction that must be learned before beginners can understand them as experienced viewers do and, consequently, see themselves as being like the readers/viewers the images imply. In order for that to happen, viewers need to realize, for instance, that the figure of a baby in *Natural Baby: Eat*, floating on a white background near a figure of a cookie the same size as its head, is not meant to be understood as actually being as large as the cookie; nor is the lamb accompanying a baby on a double-paged spread in Sam Williams’s *Buggy Buddies: Wiggly Toes* smaller than the baby rather than just being further away from an implied viewer, as an established knowledge of the conventions of perspective might suggest (see fig. 1). And while the image of the lamb implies and makes most sense in terms of the standard conventions for representing perspective in visual art, the one of the cookie, while similarly using a white background, does not. It merely depicts objects of varying sizes at the same time without necessarily implying that they occupy the same space. Before arriving at something like the meaning of these images in the context of standard conventions, a viewer needs to understand that both these situations are possible and determine which one is in operation in any given picture.

Not only must viewers possess a wide range of competences in order to be able to understand these images in the conventional way, but those competences carry significant ideological implications. Even the most basic skills required to understand the conventional sense of a picture in a book are inherently ideological, in that making use of them not only allows one to understand that conventional sense, but in doing so also conveys ideas about normalcy. For instance, learning how to hold a book in the usual matter, so that what is meant to be up is in fact higher than what is intended to be down, allows one
to share with the other people in one’s life a sense of one’s orientation to things. It offers, in other words, an entry into a shared social space in which everyone agrees that, normally, heads are higher than feet. This is true not just physically, but symbolically: we are creatures whose heads play a more significant part in our understanding of who and what we are than do our other parts, and for whom what we think and feel defines us more centrally than what we stand on (or eliminate with).

In that shared space, we all agree that what we most significantly look like—what most identifies us as the individuals we are—is our faces, and then, secondly, the side of our bodies those faces appear on. The developmental researchers I referred to earlier all simply took it for granted that face recognition is what matters. None tried to test infants’ recognition of, say, their kneecaps or their toes. And it is hard to imagine a parent pointing to a picture of the back of a baby’s head or of its kneecap, and saying to a baby reader/viewer, as they would in response to a picture of a baby’s face, “Look! A baby! Just like you!” Not surprisingly, then, the vast majority of the pictures in these books are of babies viewed from what we identify as the front and, most often, from the neck up. In the mirror of these images, young viewers learn the relative insignificance of their backs in their ideas about who they are.

To find the baby in these pictures, one has to know how to distinguish between a figure and its ground. Some of the creators of these books seem to understand that inexperienced viewers might not yet know how to do that, and offer either pictures of figures against empty backgrounds or else very close-up shots of babies’ heads with almost no background behind them. Almost always, also, the baby is front and centre, the most important and often the only thing (except the background) in these pictures. When other objects do appear, they tend to be smaller in size and otherwise less obviously attention-getting than the baby. The giant cookies in Natural Baby: Eat are an obvious exception.

Another exception occurs in Michel Blake’s book Baby’s Day, in which the focus is more on the objects babies use than on the babies using the objects. Nevertheless, the standard assumption that babies like or need to look at babies like themselves seems to require that, in order for viewers of this book to focus attention on other objects, the babies and backgrounds depicted have to be in what conventional pictorial dynamics would suggest is a less immediately attractive black and white than the brightly coloured objects they interact with (see fig. 2). As well, the babies are often located toward the edge of the pictures. Presumably, baby readers/viewers would otherwise not even notice the objects—or perhaps merely should not notice them if, as the concept of the mirror stage suggests, the books are teaching or confirming the importance of the
reader/viewer’s egocentricity.

There are, of course, many other baby books whose purpose is to focus attention, not on babies but on objects babies can look at: books such as Peter Linenthal’s *Look Look!* and Denise Lewis Patrick’s *What Does Baby See?* According to Coats, these books also play into an infant’s developing self-consciousness: “what matters is the emergent sense of the not-me” (*Looking Glasses* 43), of that which is separate and nameable and thus not oneself, and which thus helps to define the borders of what is oneself. In many of these books, furthermore, what is not oneself is often defined egocentrically, as what belongs to oneself. There are a number of books called something like *Baby’s Things* or *Baby’s Toys* or *My Toys* or *I Love My Toys*, and many others imply a similar proprietary relationship between child and objects simply by depicting objects in “baby” books, that is, books that babies and others are meant to understand belong to them. As a result, the development of self-awareness builds on a proprietary relationship between the self and what it separates itself from. What baby sees as separate is what baby owns.

But what happens, then, when what baby sees is a baby? In this case, the “not-me” objects that define “me” are also, somehow, “me.” “Herein,” says Coats, “lies the paradox of the mirror stage: The child has come to understand in the time of looking that representations of things make up the not-her, and yet here she is confronted with a representation that is both her and not-her. And if she can be split, that is, in two places at the same time, then she must not be whole in either place—she must be lacking” (*Looking Glasses* 47). Nevertheless, what is lacked is what she possesses—the other that is her and not her is, also, hers: her image. The sense of oneself as yet another object to be looked at then both diminishes one and makes one’s sense of self a proprietary one of mastery—one as a viewer and owner of objects, including oneself as the most prized and most important possession of all.

More typically, then, the babies in these books appear alone, without other objects, front and centre, and centrally important, the only or only truly attractive object—although even then they are depicted in ways that might confuse inexperienced viewers. In Richard Steckel and Michele Steckel’s *My Teeth*, for instance, convention would suggest that the two babies who appear each on one side of a double-page spread, are not in fact together but in two quite separate spaces, whereas the baby and the lamb that appear on a double-page spread in *Buggy Buddies: Wiggly Toes* occupy the same space (see fig. 1). In order to understand the difference between the solitude of each of the two babies in the first case and the togetherness of the baby and the lamb in the second, a baby reader/viewer must have knowledge of both possibilities and use it to distinguish between them. In learning—mostly
through experience, I assume—to make such distinctions, young
readers/viewers must develop a certain degree of analytic skill, most
likely without even being aware of it. They must become observers
who consider the implications of what they observe in order to make
sense of it—something made most apparent in images like the ones
in Roger Priddy’s *Happy Baby Colors* showing a baby surrounded
by objects. These images are a form of puzzle: how do all these
separate objects relate to each other? The solution is the largest word
on each double-page spread, which of course the implied preliterate
viewer cannot read: for a spread showing a swan, a glass of milk,
and a sheep, for instance, the word “white” appears as the answer.
Not only are these objects separate from oneself, they are related to
one another, as oneself is separate from but related to them—and, in
understanding their relationships, with mastery of them.

In observing in this way, babies inevitably begin to develop a
less carefree and spontaneous kind of responsiveness—not just to
pictures, I assume, but to the world around them in general. The
reinforcement by pictures of this sort of analytic observation is cultural
and ideological simply in that it is restricted to societies that produce
pictures, that make them available for babies, and that allow the
pictures to make use of a range of differing interpretive possibilities.
Such societies inherently privilege an analytic frame of mind.

Even when people other than babies appear in these pictures,
they tend to be marginalized or even cut off, and the centrality of the
centre is confirmed by the number of babies stared at adoringly by
the adults who accompany them in many of the pictures. If there are
adults in the picture, they usually seem to be there expressly to gaze
lovingly at the babies (see fig. 3). The baby is the centre of attention—
the centre of its universe. Perhaps that is exactly what makes it so

The sense of oneself
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both diminishes one
and makes one’s sense
of self a proprietary
one of mastery . . . .
To be viewed adoringly by its father or mother, the baby must be at some distance from the parent—the distance that allows appropriate viewing, that allows, for instance, a baby to look at and understand the images of babies in baby books. One cannot understand what a picture is showing if one's nose is pressed up against it. These pictures of babies most obviously replicate the foundational experience of the mirror stage both in the ways in which the act of looking at them demands separation and some distance from their implied viewers and in how they replicate that separation in their distanced depictions of babies. In the mirror as in these pictures, the baby sees something like itself but also something outside that being like itself—an empty space, perhaps, but a space empty of the baby itself or full of something not the baby itself, an other it must then be isolated from, but also in the context of (and therefore related to), that other. The mirror stage prepares an infant for its entry into the next stage of development postulated by Lacan: the entry into the symbolic, an immersion in language and its grammar of relationships that ties an “I” to other words and to the concepts and people the words represent. Indeed, puzzle books like Happy Baby Colors, discussed above, encourage that entry. The relationship to an Ideal-I is the first of an ongoing network of complex relationships that both establish the centrality of one's subjectivity and define its dependence, its standing, and its significance on forces outside itself.

The world the babies in the pictures occupy is an ideal one—a fit environment for an Ideal-I or a more perfect version of oneself to occupy. It is a bright, happy world: the shadows in it are minimal and the colours in it tend to be bright, cheery ones. Even when a picture depicts an unhappy moment, as does the one in Margaret Miller's Baby Faces, accompanied by the text “boo hoo!”, it seems to imply more bright cheerfulness than distress, perhaps because of the warm pink background on which the text appears, perhaps because the image evokes a response to its subject’s vulnerable cuteness. I will say more about that later.

Meanwhile, while baths are shown frequently in these books, dirt is non-existent or invisible. The only diapers on view are clean ones. In the twenty or so books I looked at, there were very few babies whose clothing didn’t look brand new, and those, including an especially happy-seeming one in an apparently hand-me-down ill-fitting shirt, all occur in a book by Global Fund for Children called Global Babies (see fig. 4) that insists more centrally on the significant otherness of its infants than more typical books.

It is the lack of hardship or even much pain that makes these pictures into an ideological statement about what should, in fact, be understood as utopian—about what a baby’s world ought ideally to
be and what a baby ought ideally to be. For parents and other adults who look at books like these, the images establish or confirm an already-existing model of the sort of idealized environment they ought to create for their infants, an impossible ideal they must inevitably fail to reach and then need to feel guilty about. If Lacan is right about the mirror stage and if I am right about these books replicating it, then for infants these images take part in the construction of an inevitable and ongoing sense of failure and inadequacy that must be culturally or economically useful—a sense of lacking. The utopian nature of the utopia confirms the inadequacy of the reality from which it differs and, presumably, encourages adults to make their children’s lives more utopian—for instance, by spending money on things like these utopian books themselves.

The world of these pictures is more perfect than real life, but it is also less than real life—smaller, less complete, less complicated. It is a basic pictorial competence to understand that the figures in these images—while much smaller than ourselves, with only two dimensions (no depth, no behind), and stuck in just one position, removed from the passage of time, and sometimes not even complete, with tops of heads or other parts sliced off—are in fact representations of people like us. But in learning that competence and accepting these lesser things as being in some sense what they are or what they ideally ought to be, viewers experience a diminishment, a sense of their ideal self as something smaller than what they already are, with the utopian delicacy of a miniature. While not surprising, it is telling that not a single baby in any of the pictures in all the books I considered has visible genitalia—not even the ones with no clothes on. The orderly world of the Ideal-I can be perfect simply because it is less messy, less complex, less uncertain about who one is or what one is or what one’s relationships with other things and people are. These books are, then, an invitation to accept a specific, more limited, and more readily socially recognizable and conformist subjectivity than the roiling sea of possibilities within us, to see something less as something more and more desirable.

The diminished version of babyhood found in these books is one that many adults find appealing. Many of us like to think of children as endearing exactly because they are smaller, less complicated, less knowing and less uncertain, than we are ourselves—and as I argue in The Hidden Adult, a central purpose of a lot of the literature adults provide for children is to persuade child readers that they are in fact, or ought to become, or to pretend to be exactly the less knowing, less complex creatures children’s books propose as identifiable with versions of ideal childhood: “children’s literature might be best characterized as that literature that works to colonize children by persuading them that they are as innocent and in need of adult control as adults would like them to believe” (163). We
Figure 2: Baby’s Day. Copyright © 2007 by Walker Books Ltd. Reproduced by permission of the publisher, Candlewick Press, Somerville, MA.
Figure 3: Welcome Song for Baby: A Lullaby for Newborns.
Plush Studios/Blend Images/Getty Images
whatever they feel,

Where is the choo-choo train?
Is it in the tunnel?

Figure 5: Beep! Beep! Peekaboo! Copyright © Dorling Kindersley Ltd, 2009.
Figure 6: Marlene Dumas, *Die Baba (The Baby)*, 1985, oil on canvas, 51 3/16 x 43 5/16
Courtesy Galerie Paul Andriesse
adults tend to reward children most when they most arouse in us what essayist Daniel Harris calls “maternal feelings for a mythical naivete. . . . Their cuteness suggests guilelessness, simplicity, a refreshing lack of affectation” (2–3).

Cuteness. The babies in these pictures are, above all else, cute (see fig. 5). They ooze that peculiar quality we identify as cuteness. I suspect that few adults (or even well-trained children and babies) could deny that their first response to them isn’t something like “Oooh, isn’t that a cute baby!” So what is this thing called cute?

According to the philosopher of aesthetics John Morreall, cuteness originated as a survival mechanism for the young: “in the evolution of our mammalian ancestors, the recognition and appreciation of the specialness of the young had survival value for the species. And so certain features evolved in the young which got them noticed and appreciated; these features constitute cuteness” (39–40). Among those features, Morreall lists a “plump, rounded body shape . . . short, thick extremities . . . soft body surfaces which are pleasurable to touch [and] . . . behaviour indicating weakness and clumsiness” (40). For him, “Because babies’ thoughtlessness and inability to fend for themselves are seen as attractive rather than as an imposition on adults, we are much more likely to be patient with them, and that is essential in our willingness to spend the time we must spend in teaching them such skills as language” (42).

But is cuteness merely a quality inherent in cute things, such as babies? The cultural theorist Sianne Ngai suggests that it is, in fact, a quality imposed on objects by means of a special way of looking at them: “a special kind of attention paid solely to an object’s appearance or ‘aspect’ (as opposed to its origin, identity, or function) accompanied by an appraisal based on the positive or negative feeling that its apperception elicits” (813). These feelings or values are then “objectified’ or projected back into the object, treated ‘as if’ they were one of the object’s own properties” (813). Cuteness, in other words, is a way of seeing things rather than a way of being. It does, though, require the presence of certain characteristics in the appearance of the objects it views as being cute: “the formal properties associated with cuteness—smallness, compactness, softness, simplicity, and pliancy—call forth specific affects: helplessness, pitifulness, and even despondency” (816).

As a result, viewing something or someone as cute might be an act of sadism or even violence. Ngai suggests that, “in its exaggerated passivity and vulnerability, the cute object is as often intended to excite a consumer’s sadistic desires for mastery and control as much as his or her desire to cuddle” (816). Harris agrees: “The process of conveying cuteness to the viewer disempowers its objects, forcing them into ridiculous situations and making them appear more
ignorant and vulnerable than they really are. . . . Although the gaze we turn on the cute thing seems maternal and solicitous, it is in actuality transformative and will stop at nothing to appease its hunger for expressing pity and big-heartedness, even at the cost of mutilating the object of its affections” (6). Even more negatively, he adds:

Far from being content with the helplessness of our young as we find them in their natural state, we take all kinds of artificial measures to dramatize this vulnerability even further by defacing them, embarrassing them, devitalizing them, depriving them of their selfhood, and converting them, with the help of the visual and sartorial tricks at our disposal, into disempowered objects, furry love balls quivering in soft fabrics as they lapse into withdrawal for the daily fix of TLC. (9)

From this point of view, the pictures in baby books might well be one form of this defacement, and the babies in them models for the disempowered objects they work to make young human beings become.

There might, however, be some question about whether or not becoming cute is merely and only disempowering. In my quotations from their work to this point, Harris and Ngai have been describing cuteness from the viewpoint of its observer—as something we impose on the objects we view as being cute. They say nothing about the person being observed other than what the observer chooses to see of him or her. What happens if we try to understand how someone observed as cute might respond to it?

Harris’s assumption is that the observed cute one simply accepts the observation as true. I suspect it is more complicated than that. For one thing, the diminution of being cute, of accepting these images as forms of an ego ideal, might also be viewed as an expansion—a growing process. Coats insists that, “Because he is identifying with someone outside of himself, the child becomes more than what he was, that is, he develops” (“The Role” 58–59). While the development may be into a narrower, more cohesive, but more constrained sense of self, it nevertheless adds something that was not there before to what nevertheless continues. An Ideal-I is something to aspire toward and, possibly, to grow toward.

There is also a performative aspect to cuteness. Once a child is aware of the pleasure being cute gives adults—as, for instance, when an adult looks at a typical picture in a baby book and says, “Oh, look—a cute little baby, just like you!”—then the child understands the profit to be gained by appearing cute and acting, consciously or unconsciously, in ways that will satisfy the demand of others for cuteness. My own response to many of the pictures in the books I considered is often a sense that the babies in them realize how cute they are and are making as much
... the pictures in baby books might well be one form of this defacement, and the babies in them models for the disempowered objects they work to make young human beings become.

of it as they can. My sense that the image of a crying baby in *Baby Faces* accompanying the text “boo hoo!” is surprisingly cheerful might derive from my awareness of how very performative the theoretically sad face is, how very much it seems a stereotype of sadness that the child depicted appears to have learned to ape so well, how very unconvincing the sadness therefore is, and how very cute the image therefore is.

The possibility that a baby might be in any way aware of how much it is performing a cuteness it does not actually feel completely committed to suggests, first, that its cute facade might be an unattainable Ideal-I and the cause of feelings of inadequacy, but, second, that it might instead or also represent a way for a child to gain back the power from others that the idea of its cuteness seems to rob it of. Indeed, Ngai speaks of “a crucial aspect of what we have come to call cuteness—the ability of the object to withstand the violence its very passivity seems to solicit” (830), and argues that “it is possible for cute objects to be helpless and aggressive at the same time. One could in fact argue that this paradoxical doubleness is embedded in the concept of the cute from the start” (823).

Assuming this is so, how might the cutified object or person fight back? Speaking of the demands made on a child by the adult world, Jean Baudrillard says:

Children are simultaneously required to constitute themselves as autonomous subjects, responsible, free and conscious, and to constitute themselves as submissive, inert, obedient, conforming objects. The child resists on all levels, and to a contradictory demand he responds with a double strategy. To the demand of being an object, he opposes all the practices of disobedience, of
revolt, of emancipation; in short, a total claim to subjection. To the demand of being a subject he opposes, just as obstinately and efficaciously, an object’s resistance, that is to say, exactly the opposite: childishness, hyperconformism, total dependence, passivity, idiocy. (85)

Rethinking this shrewd comment in terms of the concept of cuteness, I arrive at this: to the demand of being cute, passive, helpless, a child rebels by being disobedient, but the disobedience inevitably expresses itself, for adult eyes, as childishness, inadequacy, cuteness—a cuteness that then represents a defiance of and opposition to the demands of responsible growth, development, and adulthood. In other words, cuteness becomes an act of rebellion against the reason and responsibility of growing up, which is why adults enforce it and enjoy it: it disempowers by insisting on its objects’ lack of power. Being cute in ways that adults admire might also then be a way of remaining free from the constraints and responsibilities of adulthood.

That possibility seems most obvious in circumstances in which children reveal their cuteness by trying unsuccessfully to behave like or dress like adults. I can read a picture of babies holding a spoon improperly, as in *Natural Baby: Eat*, as being cute because I am aware of a different and preferred way of holding a spoon—an adult, responsible, socially approved way. “Cute” here means mostly being triumphantly unsuccessful, endearingly clumsy or inadequate in one’s efforts to act like an adult.

Seeing such images as cute is, of course, the response of an adult—and there is no question but that much of what happens in these baby books is in fact there for adults to respond to. Still, a baby is being addressed—and the babies who respond to these books are not merely learning to be cute or to have their existing cuteness reinforced. They are also learning to observe cuteness themselves—to become the observers who then create it.

Speaking of how many toys for children are cute baby dolls and baby animals, Harris says, “The child is thus taught not only to be cute in himself but to recognize and enjoy cuteness in others, to play the dual roles of actor and audience, cootchy-cooing as much as he is cootchy-cooed” (13). Books like the ones I am investigating here invite babies to think of themselves the way adults think of babies—as someone smaller and more vulnerable than their observing selves for whom they need to be responsible. Indeed, this is exactly the mechanism that the mirror stage introduces: the process of seeing oneself as deficiently dissimilar from an exterior image of oneself other—often older—people admire and reinforce. The baby as observer of its own babyhood has both accepted the inadequacy it observes and escaped its own inadequacy in the act of observing it.
Baby books most obviously confirm that duality—the need to be an active and responsible observer of one's own observationally engendered cuteness, passivity, inadequacy—in the ways they invite baby readers/viewers to think of their relationships to the babies in the books they depict. For all their invitation to a mirroring form of self-regard, these are not actually pictures of oneself. In books like the two I looked at, both called Baby Faces (one by Miller, one by Harriet Ziefert), each page shows a baby—“just like you,” an adult reader/viewer might inform a child. But each baby is different from the others, different enough to imply a significant difference from oneself, for one cannot be exactly like all these unlike babies.

Indeed, the books insist on unlikeness, on difference. There are enough conventional clues—colours of clothes, kinds of toys—to create a balance of boys and girls. The subjects of the photographs have been carefully selected to represent a spectrum of racial and ethnic groups—as indeed do the babies in almost all the books I looked at. In each of the books, there is at least one child representative of conventional ideas about the appearance of African, Asian, and indigenous groups of people, and three of the books locate their babies in differing places around the globe—most logically in the book called Global Babies, but also rather weirdly in two books by Steckel and Steckel, Go Baby (“How do kids around the world learn to move? JUST LIKE YOU!”) and My Teeth (“How do kids around the world show off their teeth? JUST LIKE YOU!”). It is instructive, furthermore, that a baby book I found in Germany, Klapp Mal Auf! Mein Körper, represents the same racial balances. But this book is in fact a translation of one originally published in English as All About Me! On the other hand, Alle meine Gefühle, an original German publication, appears to contain only white babies, perhaps suggesting that the multicultural focus on difference relates to ideological concerns about multicultural awareness of greater relevance in some markets than in others.

Nevertheless, this insistence on representative differences seems to be absorbed by the overriding logic of the images as Ideal-I’s: despite their important differences from each other, these different babies are all similarly representative of you, the reading/viewing baby, and most importantly, the same as each other and the same as you: “JUST LIKE YOU!”

There is, then, an obvious message of racial and gender tolerance in all these books. In one way or another, they all say, we are all, in our different neighbourhoods and houses here and around the world, babies equally and together. In order to make this point, the pictures in Global Babies present their babies wearing costumes emblematic of their places—costumes that represent stereotypes of the varying cultures represented rather than the internationally similar made-in-China clothing that most babies in those cultures surely nowadays wear most often (and
do in fact wear in *My Teeth*). These are not just random Peruvian or American aboriginal babies, but ones emblematic of their significant differences from each other. At times, in fact, these books seem to be in the process of teaching and insisting on an awareness of racial and ethnic differences in order then to deny their significance.

The book called *Baby Buggies: Wiggly Toes* reveals how the placement of oneself as similar to an Ideal-I marked by difference works by showing it at work internally, within the book itself. Each picture shows a baby and something else, a toy or an animal, that might equally be described by the words of the text; thus, both a baby and a bear have pink ears, and both a baby and a dog have brown eyes. This arrangement on the page sets up an intriguingly complex circuit of paradoxical considerations of sameness and difference. You, baby reader/viewer, are like the baby in the book. Therefore you are like the dog in the book because the baby and the dog have the same eyes, but you are clearly not a dog. Nevertheless, there is a connection between you and the dog, despite the obvious and obviously important difference that nevertheless does not prevent you from being in an important way (important enough for the text to single out) the same—and so on and so on.

That this pattern reveals the assumptions underlying all the depictions of babies of differing races and ethnicities becomes clear in a picture showing the two different possessors of “wiggly toes.” Unlike the other pictures, which include a baby and something clearly different, the other here is, strangely, another baby. But this other baby seems less pink and more brown, and so seems to represent a racial otherness—which is, apparently, equivalent to the other othernesses described elsewhere in the book.

Once more, the concept of an Ideal-I helps to account for the complexity of the relationship implied here. You are significantly different from what you see in the mirror—less than it and more than it—and you are significantly similar to it, an inferior or superior version of it in the process of trying to become like it and trying to be free of it. That might, in fact, help account for all the bewildering ways in which human beings relate to otherness—develop subjectivities constructed in relation to what we define as separate from, yet connected, to ourselves, become individuals in relation to other people like and unlike ourselves.

The comparisons between self and other found in *Baby Buggies: Wiggly Toes* appear also in two books by Vicky Ceelen, *Baby! Baby!* and *Baby Nose to Baby Toes*. Both contain images of babies (and parts of babies) set beside images of animals (and parts of animals). The point, once more, is how the two, while obviously different, are nevertheless similar; the way a baby looks as it makes “cranky, crying baby howls”
is a lot like a lion cub looks as it makes “grumpy grouchy lion cub growls” (n.pag.). I might read these books as uplifting and ecologically sound celebrations of our human connections with the animal world. But I resist doing so, primarily because these images are, once more, cute. They diminish animals by insisting that all of them, of whatever age, are equivalent not to human beings generally, but to immature babies specifically—creatures who need our care, not fellow and equal inhabitants of our planet. In turn, then, the images diminish babies by insisting that, for all their supposed humanity, they are in fact similar to less evolved and more vulnerable species—including a number of domesticated and controlled household pets. These books, early precursors of a vast literature for children that invites them to see themselves in and as animals, imply a surprising degree of inadequacy for babies to ape and to aspire to.

Fortunately, and despite the sizeable number of these books and our apparently unquenchable thirst for images that depict infancy in that way, real babies are not in fact as inherently cute or always as cute as the ideologies we take for granted so universally insist. As evidence of that, I suggest the least cute picture of a baby of which I am aware: the broodingly malevolent infant in the painting by Marlene Dumas called Die Baba [The Baby] (see fig. 6). According to the Saatchi Gallery’s website,

Bathed in sickly blue-yellow light, Marlene Dumas’s baby is almost repellent. Instead of an instant love affair, Dumas paints an alien encounter, the unnerving presence of an “other,” the realisation of an individual with a will and determination of his own. Marlene Dumas confronts the reality of motherhood, with all its natural and terrifying implications. (Saatchi Gallery)
A more interesting world than the one we actually live in might produce baby books about and for babies with pictures like this one.

The closest they actually get to doing so occurs in one small group of the books I have come across while working on this project—and unlike Die Baba, unfortunately, these books operate in ways that reaffirm and magnify the mirroring process rather than move past it. Two of these books, Picture Me Cuddly as a Bunny and Picture Me Cute as Can Bee, show photographs of babies in conventionally cute costumes, dressed up as animals, bees, and flowers. But these babies have no heads, and the die-cut hole that takes the place of their heads all the way through the book reveals a photograph of a baby’s face on the inside back cover—a photo viewers are instructed to remove and replace with one of their own child: “Baby is a cute as can be when you insert his or her photo inside the frame provided. Whether pictured as a fuzzy bunny or a busy bee, baby will be delighted to be part of the fun” (Cute as Can Bee back cover). Two other books, the German Alle meine Gefühle—which is noticeably about “alle meine gefühle” [all my feelings], not theirs but mine, not those of the babies in the book so much as those of its reader/viewer—and David Ellwand’s The Big Book of Beautiful Babies take this process even further. Each includes a portrait of its viewer in its gallery of babies by actually providing a mirror inside the book. The Big Book of Beautiful Babies offers this explanation:

From bold to bashful, bewildered to beautiful, this book is bursting with first expressions that will entrance both young and old alike. With its invitingly simple, rhythmic text and stunning images of adorable infants, readers will want to keep turning the pages from beginning to end. And on the last page, they will find a child-safe Mylar mirror and see the baby they know best.

This book is not so much staging the mirror as insisting on it. The real baby outside the book becomes the constrained one inside it; even Marlene Dumas’s scarily unconstrained infant would be diminished in these mirrors. These books are about “me,” the reader/viewer—but “me” as adorable, othered, idealized, diminished, made cute, and carefully placed in context, “me” as what the mirror shows me.
Note

1 In addition to the baby books discussed in this essay, see Beck and Croydon; Fitch; Patricelli; Reiser; Rescek; Sirett, Baby Talk; Sirett, Beep! Beep!; Sirett, Daddy Loves Me; Van Camp.

Works Cited


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