



# On Photos and Drawings in Baby Books. A Comparison Based on Dining Scenes

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## Abstract

This article offers a comparative analysis of the aesthetic functions of photos vs. drawings in baby books. Baby books are understood as books for children between 0 and 3 years of age. Since the development of food intake and eating behavior is very important at this age, appropriate pictures of dining scenes can be found in many baby books. This article compares picturebooks for babies that show dining scenes, with two photo books, *Trine kan...* (1955) and *Se hvad vi kan!* (1964), and two baby books with drawings, *The Picturebook for BABY* (1950) and *I See* (1985). The null hypothesis is that photos tend more towards documentary, authentic, and objective representation, while drawings emphasize a stereotypical, expressive, and subjective perspective. Important intermittent factors are the concept of portraiture, expressed cuteness, and the position on a scale from avant-garde to kitsch. The analysis of the images and the accompanying texts (including the peritexts) shows that the representation of babies is subject to historical changes, which is related to different constructions of what it means to be a baby. In particular, the orientation towards parental or pedagogical ideals influences the respective representations.

**Keywords** Avant-garde · Baby book · Baby schema · Cuteness · Dining scene · Drawing · Kitsch · Photo book · Portrait

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## Introduction

Some baby books use photographs, some use illustrations, and some even use both art forms together. Yet there seems to have been no systematic reflection on what the specific aesthetic functions of these two modalities of representation are. In this article, we want to make a start by comparing four baby books. To render the comparison as systematic as possible, we focus on the pictorial representation of dining scenes.

To avoid terminological confusion, we will briefly explain what we understand by baby books. First, the notion of baby book can stand for “books for babies”. However, if we understand “baby” to refer to children up to 12 months of age, we get a limited set of books, including wordless picturebooks with images showing objects from the babies’ everyday environment. Second, “baby books” can also mean “books with pictures of babies”. Such books may be aimed at babies, but also at adults who like to look at pictures of babies, such as Anne Geddes’ popular books of baby photographs. Third, a definition of “baby books” as “books you can find in the ‘baby books’ section of the bookstore” is an obvious non-starter, because we do not know what motivated the selection (if there is such a selection at all).<sup>1</sup>

However, conceptualizing a “baby” as “a child up to 12 months of age” is not very helpful. It suggests a classification of book types according to age groups, such as books for babies (0–12 months), toddlers (12–36 months), preschoolers (36–60 months), etc. By contrast, Lian Beveridge applies a broad definition of “baby” “which includes toddlers approximately up to the age of two” (2017, p. 19). We, on the other hand, consider an orientation towards the typical content of these kinds of books for infants to be more appropriate. We therefore distinguish between early-concept books and concept books (Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer, 2005, 2015).<sup>2</sup> This distinction emphasizes the tight connection between the continuous conceptual development of small children and related book types and, most importantly, leaves open which age group actually uses these books.

We suspect that bona fide “baby books” such as *The First Picture Book: Everyday Things for Babies* (1930) by Mary Steichen Calderone and Edward Steichen or the early-concept books by Dick Bruna (such as the popular books about Miffy, 1960ff.) appeal to an audience beyond the narrowly defined group of babies. For this reason, we avoided the notion “baby books” in our previous publications on early-concept books and concept books. Thus, the comparative consideration of pictures of illustrated or photographed dining scenes that we undertake below involves both “baby books” in the narrow sense and books for children up to three years of age. The latter are conceptually related to the former inasmuch as they refer to dining

<sup>1</sup> In addition, there is also the widely used term “baby book” for homemade books which represent the development of one’s own baby (see Golden, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Early-concept books show typical objects from the child’s environment. The words denoting these very objects belong to the child’s early lexicon, also coined “early concepts”. Concept books, however, visually present objects that belong to conceptual classes, such as toys, food, clothes, animals, and vehicles.

scenes of babies and toddlers.<sup>3</sup> What we are more interested in is to explore the artistic possibilities that drawings versus photos offer in these specific books.

It is evident that the focus on dining scenes in these books is by no means arbitrary. The nutrition of babies is fundamental to their growth. And so, immediately after birth, many of parents' worries, medical checks and, not least, the food industry's hopes are tied to the right nutrition. From breastfeeding to formula feeding, but also in relation to digestion and the handling of tableware, nutrition is a crucial aspect of the lives of babies and toddlers. From the beginning, concepts of hygiene and proper eating habits play a decisive role. Infants are encouraged to learn specific rules of table manners, such as not spilling food on their clothes, and to handle plates, cups, and cutlery properly. Therefore, one can assume that dining habits are also represented in baby books.<sup>4</sup>

The images to be analyzed capture a situation organized by the situational script of eating and drinking (Stockwell, 2002, pp. 76–78). This requires certain props, for example a table and a chair, a tablecloth, cutlery and a bib, a plate and a cup or a mug, and last but not least the food itself, e.g., porridge or fruit. The script also includes certain procedures. The food is prepared, the child is placed in their chair, and the food is to be eaten in such a way that spilling is avoided as much as possible. Once the food is eaten, the table is cleared and the child leaves the dining area. An important question is whether the child is allowed to play during the meal.

From the props used and from the background of the illustrations, information about the social and cultural embedding of the respective scener can be inferred. For example, it makes a difference whether a cup is made of ceramic or metal, or whether a tablecloth is used or not. The addition or omission of such information plays an important role in the visual language employed. From an educational point of view, it is evident that eating, which still has to be learned by babies, is regulated by a series of norms. This concerns, for example, the norm of cleanliness or the norm of eating all the food on one's plate. Here, too, we may expect variations in the range of images, depending on social and cultural factors.

In order to narrow down our corpus, we selected four baby books. It goes without saying that such a small corpus does not allow for generalizations. However, we hope that the exemplary interpretation of images and texts can at least help to establish hypotheses with respect to our initial question. Although these books are historical and were produced at different times, their comparative analysis can shed light on the "baby book" subgenre and offer insights into the synchronic and diachronic variations of this genre. This is an important step for establishing research on baby books.

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<sup>3</sup> Note that it is not clear on the basis of which *visual* criteria we intuitively classify a child as "still a baby" or "already a toddler". Criteria such as "can already sit" or "can already handle a spoon" are also not entirely reliable.

<sup>4</sup> On the role of food and tableware in children's literature, see Veryeri Alaca (2022).

	Photo	B&W	Text	Peritext
<i>The Picture Book for BABY</i> , 1950	-	-	+	-
<i>Trine kan...</i> , 1955	+	+	+	+
<i>Se hvad vi kan! Pegebog for de mindste</i> , 1964	+	-	-	+
<i>I See</i> , 1985	-	-	+	-

The four baby books are not narratives since they do not tell a story, but rather they provide information about what babies (can) do. In this sense, they are descriptive (informational) baby books. Basically, we compare two photo books with two books with drawings. One baby book includes black-and-white photos (+B&W). Three books contain accompanying texts (sentences) (+text). Finally, the two photo books have short peritexts that explain their aims.<sup>5</sup>

Our first objective is to describe these baby books in detail, with close analysis of the images showing babies eating and drinking. Among these books, only *Trine kan...* (*Trine Can...*) has gained some prominence in scholarly studies (Christensen, 2003; Druker, 2008). Our second objective consists in relating our descriptions to potential aesthetic achievements of photos vs. drawings in these baby books. As three relevant aesthetic concepts, we will discuss the notions of the portrait, cuteness, and the scale between avant-garde and kitsch. In addition, this article aims to embed the analysis historically by referring to eminent precursors and by making links to contemporary artistic styles.

## Photo Books

There is consensus in research that among the very first modern photo books for babies are *The First Picture Book: Everyday Things for Babies* (1930) and *The Second Picture Book* (1931) by Mary Steichen Calderone (later: Steichen Martin) and Edward Steichen (Bader, 1976, p. 100; Wattenberg, 2018; Le Guen, 2022). Due to the modernist design of the photos, which show the influence of the New Objectivity, the two books are even considered to be avant-garde (Pérez, 1998). While the first photo book shows photos of objects from the baby's surroundings, such as a ball, an apple, or a pair of shoes, thus complying with the category of "early-concept book" (Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer, 2005, 2018a), the second photo book

<sup>5</sup> While the systematic comparison of images in terms of their similarities and differences is an old and proven method in art history, the employment of this method in picturebook research is less common. The analysis of entire picturebooks (as a set of text–picture combinations) or the comparison of several picturebooks prevail in picturebook studies. In this regard, we take a step further and compare types of pictures by considering their respective contexts.

displays toddlers who are handling these objects, such as throwing the ball, biting into the apple, or putting on the shoes.<sup>6</sup>

How such photo books are to be used is not self-evident at all. Therefore, short peritexts have been added to explain the purpose of these books to adult mediators. Mary Steichen Martin's preface in *The Second Picture Book* connects the images in the book to the developmental stages of the small child (from more static and observant of her surroundings to more dynamic by running around and participating in her environment). This preface explains the absence of an ongoing story since babies are not able to "sustain interest through a volume-length story" (n. pag.), and it emphasizes the experimental nature of the book. Considering the latter aspect, Steichen Martin maintains that there are hardly any picturebooks that babies are really interested in. Accordingly, the environments in which the photo book is used (the home or the nursery school) are even referred to as "laboratories". An enclosed questionnaire is intended to support the development of comparable books in a scientific, systematic way.<sup>7</sup> By encouraging small children to create their own stories to match the photos presented, *The Second Picture Book* would also prevent "a loss of a creative ability", because, as Steichen Martin argues, "children are extraordinarily able to provide their own [stories], but so much is read to them almost as soon as they can talk that this ability falls into disuse" (preface, n. pag.).

By and large, both photo books follow the ethos of progressive educational practice by fostering small children's ability to observe and see. Instigated by ideas taken from child psychology, educationalists and other professional caretakers highlighted the significance of babyhood for the further cognitive and emotional development of children (Priem 2015, p. 27). This educational premise was on the agenda of the New York Bureau of Educational Experiments (BEE), founded in 1916 by Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Harriet Johnson, and others (Priem, 2015, p. 22), with whom Mary Steichen Martin collaborated when drafting the pedagogical concept of *The First Picture Book* and *The Second Picture Book*. In this regard, the two books not only introduce babies to (early) concepts (Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer, 2011), they also demonstrate the proper handling of the objects depicted, thus being in line with the material-sensory curriculum of progressive education of that time by placing particular emphasis on the growing cognitive and bodily skills of babies.

*The First Picture Book* and *The Second Picture Book* became models for subsequent photo books for babies, thus establishing a tradition which lasted until at least the 1990s. Corresponding exemplars can be found in many European and non-European countries from the 1930s onwards, with a slight preference for photo books that

<sup>6</sup> For want of space, a detailed analysis of these photo books is not possible here. Some preliminary work can be found in Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer (2005, 2018a, b) and Meibauer (in press). For a critical discussion of these photo books regarding criteria such as class, race, or gender, see Op de Beeck (2010, pp. 6–9).

<sup>7</sup> We were not yet able to determine whether this questionnaire which is mentioned in the preface was actually put into the book. Neither our private copy nor the exemplar stored in the Cotsen Library, Princeton, include such a document.

show everyday objects from the child's environment.<sup>8</sup> Among the few photo books that visualize toddlers handling the objects, two Danish books stand out due to the book design and the obvious reference to the pedagogical program of progressive education.

Both *Trine kan...* (*Trine Can...*) (1955), with a text by Thea Bank-Jensen and photos by Lis Lund-Hansen, and *Se hvad vi kan!* (*See What We Can!*) (1964) by Berndt Klyvare, focus on everyday activities of toddlers by emphasizing what they already can do. The book titles refer to these abilities, the first to a little girl with the first name Trine, the second to two toddlers who might be siblings. Interestingly, *Se hvad vi kan!* has the subtitle *Pegebog for de mindste* (*A Pointing Book for the Little Ones*), thus situating the book in the context of a pointing-and-naming game.

The two photo books present photographs of real toddlers, i.e., children who once lived at a certain place and time. Therefore, these photographs can be considered as photo documents, although they may be "staged". We do not know the identity of these children, which is irrelevant to the purpose of the books.<sup>9</sup>

There is no internal order discernible among the eleven photographs in *Se hvad vi kan!*. In contrast, the 23 pictures in *Trine kan...* are arranged according to the different abilities related to hands, ears, mouth, nose, legs, and eyes. Activities related to eating and drinking are in the "What you can do with your mouth" section, and, most interestingly, also in the "What you can do with your nose" section, since two photos show Trine smelling an orange and a smoked herring.

While *Trine kan...* includes short sentences that describe Trine's activities on display, *Se hvad vi kan!* is a wordless picturebook. Both books contain a short afterword that is addressed to parent readers. The afterword by Thea Bank-Jensen and Lis Lund-Hansen in *Trine kan...* states that "the child is encouraged to 'find out for themselves'" (n. pag.) what the book is about. Moreover, the simple text accompanying the photographs is meant to stimulate small children to "read" the book on their own. This statement can probably be understood in such a way that the texts are to be read aloud first by an adult, and later on the infants may look at the book independently, thus being able to "read" it in this sense.

The epilogue of *Se hvad vi kan!* goes a step further, as it prompts parents to observe their own children. Accordingly, it highlights what toddlers between the ages of one and two can already do. This focus on development in a wide range of areas also includes the increasing ability of toddlers to talk about pictures in an elementary way. The epilogue concludes that knowledge of the development of babies and toddlers, for example motor or language development, is essential in order to be able to react appropriately to their needs.

<sup>8</sup> A complete list of these photo books is beyond the scope of this article. Two early examples are *Baby's First Book: A Picture Book Made by Photographing Things in the Baby's Own World*. Akron and New York: The Saalfield Publishing Comp., 1932, and Erich Retzlaff's *Das erste Bilderbuch* (The First Picture Book). Frankfurt: Wolfgang Metzner Verlag, 1949. The photographers Paul Henning and Tana Hoban created several photo books for babies in the 1950s and 1990s, respectively.

<sup>9</sup> We do not know whether Trine is the real name of the photo model in *Trine kan...*

## Dining Scenes in Two Photo Books: *Trine kan...* and *Se hvad vi kan!*

The particular importance of dining scenes can be seen in the context of the two photo books *The Second Picture Book* and *Trine kan...*, because the picture on display in the former book shows a toddler drinking from her cup while the cover picture of the latter displays Trine eating porridge (Fig. 1). Both pictures are intertextually related: the photo in *The Second Picture Book* refers to a photo in *The First Picture Book* that shows the props used, while the cover picture of *Trine kan...* corresponds to a photo inside the book that shows Trine in the same dining situation but looking in the direction of her spoon. The accompanying text is “Jeg kan spise grød” (I can eat porridge).

The cover photo of *Trine kan...* is surrounded by two horizontal yellow bars showing a floral pattern. In the upper bar, the title appears in an artistic typeface. The page format is 16.2 (w) × 21.3 (h) cm. Little Trine, a girl about two to three years of age and with a somewhat unruly hairstyle, directs her gaze at the viewer (as if she has been briefly distracted) while she pushes a spoon into her mouth. In front of her is a plate with porridge. She is wearing a summer dress without a bib. The photo illustrates that Trine is able to eat with a spoon without spilling her food like a baby. The title with its trailing ellipsis invites the reader to turn the pages in order to figure out what Trine can already do.

In *Trine kan...*, we find three other photos that depict Trine eating or drinking. Apart from the already-mentioned photo of Trine eating porridge, another photo shows Trine drinking milk from a cup. The third photo features Trine in profile licking an ice-cream cone while holding the large waffle cone with two hands (Fig. 2). She seems to be concentrating on not spilling the ice cream. A window blind and a radiator are visible in the background, indicating that the scene takes place at home.

The book cover of *Se hvad vi kan!* shows a color photo of a little girl washing her hands (or potentially another object) in a bowl that is placed on the seat of a chair (Fig. 3). Next to it is a small box with soap. The background is neutral, though a skirting board indicates a domestic area. The book title is written in blue and in a serif typeface, with the subtitle appearing in smaller capital letters. The square format, 15.5 (w) × 15.8 (h) cm, is particularly handy for babies.<sup>10</sup>

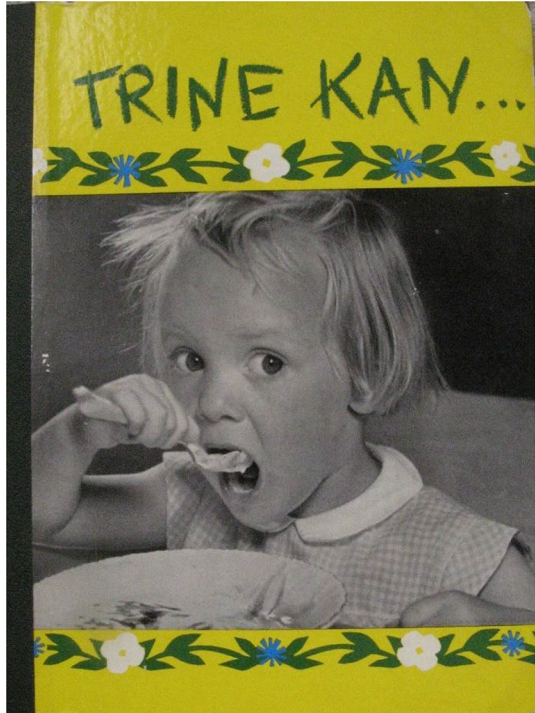
Inside the book, there is a photo of the same little girl drinking from a cup and a photo of a little boy eating porridge with a spoon, probably her brother.<sup>11</sup> The boy who is wearing a bib is shown in profile at the moment when he puts the spoon with porridge into his mouth. His gaze is lowered so that he can control the movement

<sup>10</sup> Apart from that, the choice of smaller book formats may also be motivated by economic reasons.

<sup>11</sup> The little girl in *Se hvad vi kan!* directs her gaze into the cup with two handles that she holds in her hands. She is seated at a table with a dotted tablecloth. The cup is decorated with an amusing scene; together with the plate, which is also decorated, it forms a set. This adds another element to the scene. Besides eating and drinking, looking at pictures also plays a role. On the one hand, the pictures can be an incentive to eat, on the other hand, they can also distract from it. The little girl is wearing a wide bib with a checkered pattern and a wooden table can be seen in the background. All in all, the photo displays a contemporary everyday scene, where the modern Danish design makes a considerable contribution to a relaxed dining atmosphere.



Fig. 1 Cover of *Trine kan...*



of his hand. His left forearm rests on the table. In front of him are a plate and a cup with decorations aimed at infants (Fig. 4).

How is the reader addressed? In *Se hvad vi kan!*, the reader is only spoken to in the imperative. In *Trine kan...*, however, direct address is a core feature, since every unit describing the abilities of Trine ends with a question to the reader: “Jeg kan drikke mælk af en kop. / Jeg kan slikke is. / Jeg kan spise grød. / Jeg kan blæse sæbebobler. / *Hvad kan du med din mund?*” (I can drink milk from a cup. I can lick ice-cream. I can eat porridge. I can blow soap bubbles. *What can you do with your mouth?*). This direct invitation as well as the reference to appropriate motor and sensory skills of infants aptly capture the essential issues of progressive education which had played a key role in Scandinavia since the 1950s (Blossing et al., 2013; Strandgaard Jensen, 2017).

## Two Baby Books with Drawings: *The Picture Book for BABY* and *I See*

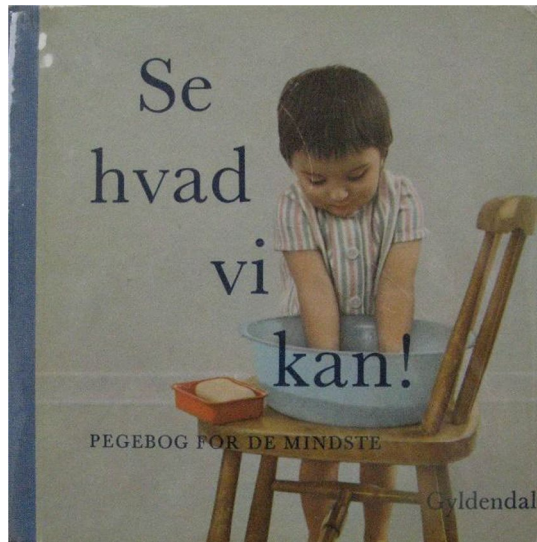
We assume that drawings hold different aesthetic potential than photos due to the differing conditions of their production. Typically, baby books have realistic drawings, although gradations of abstract drawings can also be found, as in *Little Blue*





Fig. 2 Double-spread from *Trine kan...* "Jeg kan slikke is."

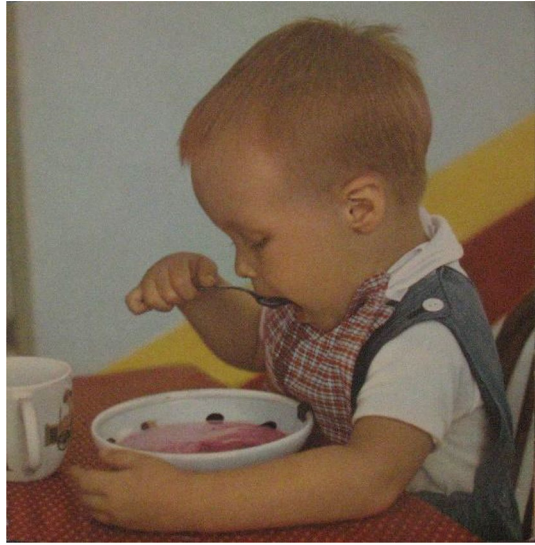
Fig. 3 Cover of *Se hvad vi kan!*



and *Little Yellow* (1959) by Leo Lionni and the *Miffy* books by Dick Bruna.<sup>12</sup> However, these kinds of baby books tend to depict anthropomorphized characters rather than "real" human figures. Realistic drawings can be stereotypical and expressive,

<sup>12</sup> Abstract photographs do not seem to be found in the domain of baby books, though a certain degree of abstraction does seem to occur in the two photo books by the Steichens (see Meibauer, in press).

**Fig. 4** Page from *Se hvad vi kan!* Little boy eating porridge



and even show traits of caricature, among other things. Our picturebook examples refer to the first two categories.

E. M. Dawson's *The Picture Book for BABY* (1950), in the format 21 (w) × 25 (h) cm, combines features of several baby-book genres. Accompanied by captions such as "I eat my breakfast", "Mummy puts on my clothes", "I play with my toys", "I ride a bus", and "I say goodnight", there are pictures of objects (accompanied by explanatory sentences, e.g. "Here is my watering-can") on the left side of each double-spread, while a specific scene (e.g. a baby watering the flowers) is displayed on the right-hand side. However, not all items shown on the left side are presented in the scene. The book also contains encyclopedic elements (pictures of flowers and animals with their names printed below) and informs the reader about the alphabet and numbers. Moreover, it considers the environment of the baby, for instance, when Mummy takes the baby to the farm or shopping.<sup>13</sup>

The cover shows a smiling baby, her eyes and mouth wide open, holding a teddy bear in her right hand, and looking at something that piques her interest (Fig. 5). With its pastel colors, the picture conveys a cheerful, optimistic atmosphere. The baby has a healthy complexion and an open, curious look. Her depiction corresponds to an ideal image, especially in the postwar period with its shortages (such as the rationing of food). Such stereotypical images were also taken up in advertising, for example, for powdered milk. The striking typeface of the title with the combination of red italics and the emphasized word *BABY* in large letters with a checkered

<sup>13</sup> See Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer (2015) on the different picturebook genres aimed at children aged 0 to 3.

pattern and a yellow border also fits with advertising aesthetics.<sup>14</sup> The style of E. M. Dawson's illustrations is typical of Anglo-American illustrations of the 1950s and can be found in many books of the *Ladybird Series* (Johnson and Alderson 2014) and the *Golden Book Series* (Marcus 2007).

*The Picture Book for BABY* displays a drawing of a dining scene (Fig. 6). On the right-hand page, a baby is sitting in a mobile baby chair against a monochromatic background. The baby is eating with a spoon from a plate, with a cup next to it, but most importantly she is holding up the spoon with food so that the dog sitting nearby is invited to reach for it. The toys decoratively arranged around the dining scene—a rabbit doll, building blocks with pictures and letters, a wooden steam locomotive, and baby slippers—indicate that the baby comes from the upper middle class. This scene is described by the sentence “I eat my breakfast” which is printed in a frame on the left. Individual objects relevant to this dining scene, such as a plate, an egg cup with an egg, a mug, a spoon, and a bib, are depicted on the left-hand page. Each object is described by a first-person sentence expressing the baby's ownership, for example “Here is my plate”. Rather than representing a portrait of a baby (see the next section), the picture displays the contemporary ideal image of a well-fed and friendly baby who lacks nothing.

The cover of *I See* (1985) by Rachel Isadora shows a toddler pointing and looking to the right. She has a friendly, interested expression on her face (Fig. 7). The background of the watercolor illustration shows leaves and blossoms, suggesting a scene in nature. The title “I See” is printed in capital letters. It is obvious that the depicted toddler is the referent of the first-person pronoun.<sup>15</sup> The sequence of episodes depicted in the book represents the everyday life of a toddler, from waking up in the morning to going to bed in the evening. The short texts, alternately positioned on the left or right side of the double page, describe what the toddler sees. These texts follow either the pattern “I see my ball. I throw.” or the pattern “I see my slide. Whee.”, thus emphasizing the combination of two units of information.

The image of the toddler eating breakfast—sitting in a high chair in the kitchen and bringing a spoon to her mouth—conveys the friendly atmosphere of an everyday, ordinary situation, supported by the addition of kitchen furniture and the kitchen floor (Fig. 8). The color scheme and the impressionist style of painting are typical for many picturebooks of the 1980s which attempted to capture the particular mood of specific situations, thus adding an expressive note.

As a whole, the drawings in both books aim to convey a certain ideal of a baby, pointing to the stereotypical image of a well-fed smiling baby on the one hand, and the image of a baby at rest, contentedly exploring herself and her environment in everyday life, on the other hand. The colorfulness of the drawings most likely supports this stereotypicality. In addition, drawings allow for reinforcing or

<sup>14</sup> These references should be examined more closely, since advertising for baby food is a cultural-historical phenomenon that requires further research (cf. Golden, 2018; Cesiri, 2022).

<sup>15</sup> Gressnich and Meibauer (2010) discuss the representation of first-person narratives in picturebooks and how this strategy may enhance readers' linguistic and narrative competencies.

Fig. 5 Cover of *The Picture Book for BABY*

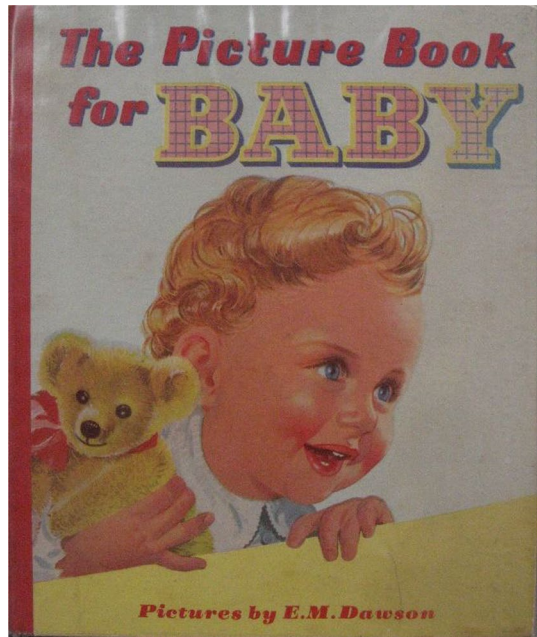


Fig. 6 Double-spread from *The Picture Book for BABY*



Fig. 7 Cover of *I See*

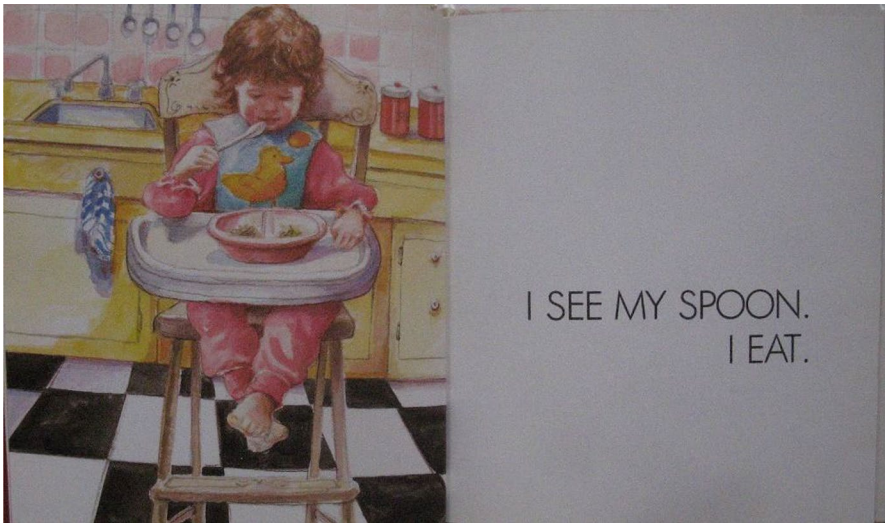
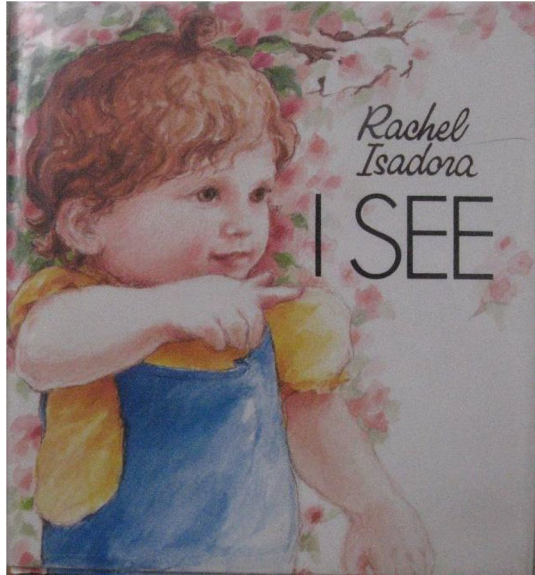


Fig. 8 Double-spread from *I See*.

omitting information that seems disturbing with regard to the intended aesthetic purpose.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> However, this statement cannot be generalized, since black-and-white as well as color photographs, and possibly even black-and-white portrait drawings, can also convey a stereotypical image of children.

Against this backdrop, the typical aesthetic achievements of photos versus drawings in baby books need a more in-depth theoretical analysis. In this regard, we relate the baby books to three aesthetic concepts: portrait, expression of cuteness, and the scale between avant-garde and kitsch.<sup>17</sup>

## Portraits

Cynthia Freeland defines a portrait as a “representation or depiction of a living being as a unique individual possessing (1) a recognizable physical body along with (2) an inner life, i.e., some sort of character and/or psychological or mental state” (2010, p. 5). As a third condition, she adds that “the subject consciously presents a self to be conveyed in the resulting artwork” (p. 17). This way of presenting oneself is also called “posing”.

Hans Maes discusses a number of problematic cases for the notion of portrait sketched above. In particular, he mentions “portraits with a high degree of abstraction; portraits drawn from memory; portraits of people caught unawares; deathbed portraits; ‘faceless’ portraits; jumping portraits; portraits of fictional characters or imaginary subjects; portraits of people who are not depicted as posing; allegorical portraits; and the ‘portrait historié’” (2015, p. 319). He proposes the following definition:

Some object  $x$  counts as a portrait only if  $x$  is the product of a largely successful intention to create a portrait. The maker of the object intends that  $x$  is a portrait only if (a) they have a substantive concept of the nature of portraits that largely matches the substantive concept held by a group of prior portrait makers, if there are any, and (b) the maker intends to realise that substantive concept by imposing portrait-relevant features on the object. (p. 315)

Thus, Maes incorporates a pragmatic and historical perspective, because he refers to group-specific knowledge about portraiture and certain historical traditions of portraying.

What is special about photo portraits in photo books? Is it the relation of the photo portrait to (a) other photo portraits in the same book, (b) other non-portrait photographs within the complete photo story, (c) related photo portraits outside the book, i.e., other prototypical portraits in the tradition of “childhood photographs”, and last but not least, (d) the comments on them provided by an accompanying text?

The first criterion of Freeman, *recognizability*, is fulfilled by the photos in the two photo books, as they represent recognizable individuals. “Recognizable” does not mean that the depicted person is identifiable. Nevertheless, the viewer trusts

<sup>17</sup> These aesthetic concepts may also be fruitful for the analysis of other baby books and picturebooks in general. To our knowledge, no such investigation has yet been undertaken.

the photo since she assumes that the children shown are potentially identifiable individuals.<sup>18</sup>

The second criterion of Freeman requires that an inner attitude or emotion of the sitter be conveyed on the basis of the portrait. This is a tricky criterion, because it can be argued that a face naturally conveys such an inner attitude or emotion. This is true even if the sitter chooses a maximally neutral facial expression. For this reason, Maes rightly refrains from a corresponding psychological criterion in his definition and focuses instead on the reference to a number of other images that qualify as “portraits”.

The third criterion is also problematic, as Maes rightly notes. After all, one does not want to exclude photos that are taken as “snapshots” and have gone unnoticed as portraits. What lends them credibility is precisely the fact that no posing can be detected, and the photos therefore appear “natural” and “authentic”. Nevertheless, this does not exclude the possibility that certain photos are actually posed, but the viewer can hardly assess this.

Considering this discussion, the photos of babies in the two photo books can be classified as photo portraits. The observation that the babies are usually shown in action is not an argument against this assumption. Moreover, the fact that certain props appear in the photos does not question their status as portraits either. Especially the series of photos of identifiable children in *Trine kan...* and *Se hvad vi kan!* seems to justify this assumption. Thus, the addition of single photographs renders a more complex “portrait” of the children. This opens up the hypothesis that the functions of these books may consist in introducing child readers to the photographic format of the portrait. It goes without saying that these considerations can be applied to portrait drawings too. However, in *The Picture Book for BABY* and *I See*, the recognizability of the babies is diminished and it is not even clear whether authentic models served for them. What catches the eye, however, is that the drawings of the babies seem to elaborate on a specific kind of cuteness rather than on providing a realistic portrait.

## Notions of Cuteness

In the following, we distinguish different types of cuteness and apply them to baby books. We presume that a small child's interest in looking at other children the same age in drawings (or even in photographs) might be related to an early interest in cuteness. First of all, we introduce Cuteness<sub>1</sub> as biological cuteness which is based on the baby schema and the potential to evoke a certain reaction or attitude on the part of the observer. A certain configuration in a baby's face is likely to trigger this reaction (e.g., the need to protect the baby) or attitude (e.g., regarding the baby as lovable).

<sup>18</sup> Mary Steichen Martin also points to the significance of recognition in the preface to *The Second Picture Book*: “He [the child] likes to recognize what he knows; it's a little triumph for him. It's also a comfort and a pleasure, the recognition of old friends” (1931, n. pag.).



Experimental studies by Melanie Glocker et al. (2009) and Marta Borgi et al. (2014) support the hypothesis that 3 to 6-year-old children are already sensitive to the baby schema. Konrad Lorenz (1940) characterized the baby schema as a set of facial features (e.g., “large head and a round face, a high and protruding forehead, large eyes, and a small nose and mouth”, Borgi et al., 2014, p. 1), linked to an “innate releasing mechanism for caring and affective orientation towards infants” (ibid.). These facial characteristics are shared by both human and animal faces. Borgi et al. tested sensitivity to the baby schema in relation to a group of 3 to 6-year-old children who were presented with pictures of humans, dogs, and cats. These images were manipulated for high vs. low infantility. Two procedures were used, namely eye-movement patterns, on the one hand, and cuteness ratings, on the other hand. When asked what they understood by “cute”, the children responded employing near-synonyms such as “pretty, nice, small, fluffy and adorable” (p. 5). In addition, there were adult control groups. The main result was that “in children, the baby schema affects both cuteness perception and gaze allocation to infantile stimuli and to specific facial features, an effect not simply limited to human faces” (p. 1).

Thus, when presenting baby photos or drawings of babies in picturebooks, one can generally count on this early interest and one is well-advised to choose those pictures or photo models that optimally correspond to the baby schema. But the difference between a human being who corresponds to the baby schema and a photo/drawing (pictorial representation) of a human being with a baby schema must always be kept in mind.

In distinction to this type of cuteness, we understand *Cuteness<sub>2</sub>* as a concept of what adults conventionally consider to be “cute” at a particular time in a particular place. These attitudes are subject to historical change. We can therefore also expect considerable variation in the respective viewers’ judgments. Finally, *Cuteness<sub>3</sub>* can be regarded as the attitudes of children, whether babies, toddlers or preschool children, at a particular time in a particular place to what they consider to be “cute”. Here, too, one may expect inter-individual variation.<sup>19</sup>

*Cuteness<sub>2</sub>* and *Cuteness<sub>3</sub>* are thus grounded in *Cuteness<sub>1</sub>*, but they are subject to social determination conditioned by, among other things, the visual culture of a society (i.e., the total amount of culturally transmitted baby imagery). Adults may tend to project their notion of *Cuteness<sub>2</sub>* onto babies, but babies can also initiate (or slowly propagate) change. Of course, when looking at picturebooks together, adults’ evaluation of babies as “cute” may influence babies to regard themselves as being cute and thereby gain social advantage. This idea is potentially supported by the toy industry, whose products predominantly apply cute patterns.

Comparing the representations of babies in the four baby books, we can safely say that all of them can be categorized as cute in the sense of *Cuteness<sub>1</sub>*. The babies comply with the baby schema, which is additionally stressed by their hairstyle and

<sup>19</sup> It is possible to add *Cuteness<sub>4</sub>* as another category, in the sense of an aesthetic concept. For instance, Sianne Ngai characterizes cuteness as the “eroticisation of powerlessness” (2012, p. 3) and she claims that “aggression is central to our experience of objects as cute” (p. 23). How this can be attributed to *Cuteness<sub>1</sub>*, however, is not clearly explained.

clothes. Regarding the latter aspects, one may presume that they rely on Cuteness<sub>2</sub>, that is, how adults—the artists and the consumers—view babies and small children and the activities they are involved in. The decoration of the clothes and the dishes include “cute” motifs, thus attracting the child audience (both the babies depicted and the child beholders), which could be regarded as a reference to Cuteness<sub>3</sub>. However, the presentation of cute babies in general and of babies in dining scenes in particular is not something that is contestable *per se*; rather, it addresses a visual need of many viewers.

On closer consideration, the gradation of cuteness apparently differs between the baby books. Although the photo portraits in the two Scandinavian photo books rely on cuteness, they do not exploit this concept but rather focus on rendering an authentic impression of babies. By contrast, the two baby books with drawings use cuteness to an extensive degree, thus exaggerating certain elements regarded as prototypical for babies, such as a high forehead and small nose and mouth. If this happens, cuteness may turn into a form of kitsch as a kind of aesthetic that has an indifferent attitude towards aesthetic norms. Assuming that cuteness is a scalar concept, one could posit the following hypothesis: the higher the degree of figuratively expressed cuteness, the greater the probability that it is kitsch. Kitsch, as a normative aesthetic term, is of course not unproblematic. Nevertheless, it is an everyday concept and can be operationalized. Typical kitsch images depict roaring deer at sunset, the “first kiss” of a child couple, crying little girls with a puppy in their arms, sad clowns, dolphins merrily leaping through the water, pandas in trees, etc. In such depictions, cuteness and the emotions associated with it play a major role.

In order to calibrate the functions of cuteness in photo books versus picturebooks with drawings, we will elaborate on the position of the concept of cuteness between two aesthetic poles: *avant-garde* and kitsch. In the following step, we will discuss the effects of these opposing items regarding the depiction of babies in dining scenes.

## The Avant-Garde—Kitsch Continuum

There are numerous definitions of the notions “*avant-garde*” and “*kitsch*”. In attempts to define kitsch, the following criteria, among others, have been applied: (a) kitsch works with standardized emotions which can trigger a state of being touched, (b) kitsch is simple and quickly recognizable, it dispenses with all ambiguity and vagueness, (c) kitsch renounces the stimulation of intellectual debate or enrichment, (d) kitsch presents itself as if it were merely seeking individual contemplation and satisfaction, without claiming recognition from artistic experts, (e) kitsch tends toward embellishment and has a penchant for decoration (cf. Botz-Bornstein, 2015;

Dadlez, 2021).<sup>20</sup> Critics of kitsch have argued that kitsch is tasteless, pseudo-art, a poor copy of an original style, and an expression of consumerist mass taste.

Avant-garde, by contrast, is related to the idea of being ahead of one's time, advanced and progressive. Used as an umbrella term for different art movements of the twentieth century that turned against bourgeois culture and scrutinized the traditional concept of art, avant-garde is revealed to be a heterogeneous phenomenon. By and large, the avant-garde aims to push the boundaries of what is accepted as a norm. Consequently, it aspires to "achieve an eradicated renewal of artistic forms as well as to establish a completely new conception of art and its position within the society" (Druker and Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2015, p. 1).

Based on these assumptions, Stefan Ortlieb and Claus-Christian Carbon (2019) developed a social-psychological, functional model that contrasts kitsch with avant-garde art where the concept of cuteness plays a key role. In this model, it is assumed that there are two poles: self-efficacy, related to kitsch, and autonomy, related to the avant-garde. Both are connected with certain goals or aesthetic preferences. One pole has "to maintain and protect knowledge" as a "prevention goal": this goes hand in hand with the search for "relatedness and safety". Accordingly, the aesthetic preference is "familiar, benign, unambiguous stimuli which allow for fluent processing". Ortlieb and Carbon argue that kitsch supports easy processing and a feeling of relatedness. The other pole has the demand to "reshape and extend knowledge" as its "promotion goal" (p. 10), which aligns with a need for "arousal" and a tendency to reject "safety", thus pointing to key issues of avant-garde art. According to this schema, cuteness is linked to a liking for safety and relatedness, thus making a connection to kitsch, while avant-garde artworks tend to subvert (or ironize) cuteness as an essential kitsch factor (p. 12).

Taking these reflections into account, we can now ascribe the two photo books more to the avant-garde pole, while the two baby books with drawings show a preference for kitsch—*The Picture Book for BABY* to a greater degree than *I See*. As already pointed out, the drawings of the babies and their environments show a tendency to apply stereotypical ideas of babies which is evident when contemplating the complexion of the faces, the color scheme, the arrangement of props, and the setting. All these elements serve to evoke tenderness and affection as positive emotional reactions (cf. Kulka, 1996). By providing this emotional gratification, the longing for simplicity and familiarity sought by many naive consumers is satisfied.<sup>21</sup> The aesthetic appeal of kitsch lies in its reassuring function, generating a

<sup>20</sup> Botz-Bernstein and Dadlez point to a parallel between kitsch and bullshit in the sense of Harry Frankfurt (2005). Bullshit means that a speaker is indifferent to the truth. The speaker wishes to commit herself neither to the validity of a fact (as in an assertion or lie) nor to the non-validity of this fact. However, she would like to deceive the addressee about this, as she does not want to be immediately recognized as a bullshitter. Kitsch can therefore be regarded as aesthetic bullshit. The relevant norm is not epistemic but aesthetic. Kitsch would then be a kind of art that is indifferent to aesthetic norms.

<sup>21</sup> Botz-Bernstein (2015) regards these people as "victims" who simply enjoy kitsch naively without having an explicit concept of it. Insofar as children are such victims, the moral question arises as to whether adults are entitled, for example in the course of aesthetic education, to combat this innocent enjoyment of kitsch (see Morreall and Loy, 1989).

spontaneous affective response. It is no wonder, then, that the baby schema which can so easily be used and altered to elicit positive emotions is a core feature of kitsch images.

The two photo books may well show a baby schema, because the photo models correspond to it, but this feature has not been exploited at the expense of rendering an authentic portrait of babies. Following in the footsteps of *The Second Picture Book*, the primary interest is to show typical ordinary situations and to demonstrate the infants' abilities (e.g., handling a spoon). The anchoring in the environment contributes to the impression of a "factual" everyday portrait, referring to the aesthetic program of the New Objectivity. Although this vanguard movement emerged already at the end of the 1920s and inspired the photo books of that time, including the Steichen books, the trend continued well into the postwar period and was particularly present in Scandinavian photo books of the 1950s and 1960s (Druker, 2008). While the two photo books thus aim to render a genuine representation of babies' daily routines, the idealized and stereotypical portrayals of babies in the two picturebooks with drawings tend to offer a distorting picture of reality.<sup>22</sup> This impression is achieved by the exaggerated cute depiction of the baby characters and their environment, which is meant to evoke feelings of tenderness and affection rather than emphasizing the cognitive and motor abilities of the babies depicted.

## Conclusions

Our analysis of dining scenes in four baby books has shown that this very subject can be employed for various reasons. First and foremost, depictions of babies in dining scenes may serve to introduce the child viewer to proper table manners, thus visually representing correct behavior with respect to eating and drinking, for instance, to avoid spilling food or playing with one's food altogether. The type of food presented, the props involved, and the settings additionally provide an insight into the domestic sphere and provide information about the societal and cultural background of the babies. Apart from that, the portrayal of the baby characters differs, depending on the artistic styles and the techniques preferred by the artists. The key question is whether there are any essential differences which refer to the dichotomy of photo versus drawing. By applying the aesthetic concepts of portrait, expression of cuteness, and scale between kitsch and avant-garde, we extrapolated that cuteness is an essential differentiating feature, albeit to a varying degree. The representation of the baby characters relies on the baby schema (Cuteness<sub>1</sub>) but obviously also on adults' conceptualizations of cuteness (Cuteness<sub>2</sub>), potentially even on small children's own ideas of cuteness (Cuteness<sub>3</sub>). Accordingly, the viewer is encouraged to develop

<sup>22</sup> This critical stance can also be found in an article by Perry Nodelman (2010) on contemporary photo books with baby photos. Nodelman rightly criticized the depiction of babies in a certain idealized (or "utopian") way, characterized as a "diminished world of babyhood" (p. 5). The idealized presentation could also be aimed at adults, so that these photo books actually address a double audience.

positive emotions towards the babies depicted.<sup>23</sup> Yet, the four baby books deal with this concept in different ways. While the photo books aim at rendering authentic photo portraits of babies and their everyday activities, the picturebooks with drawings refrain from this approach by employing stereotypical and idealized images of babies whose cuteness is overemphasized. Pursuant to these observations, we may speculate that the latter books are not so much interested in conveying a true picture of a baby's everyday life but rather communicate an ideal picture of babies, thus highlighting their stereotypicality rather than their individuality. Finally, owing to the artistic styles and traditions that influenced the four books in question and considering the opposing scale of kitsch vs. avant-garde, the photo books can be attributed to the avant-garde pole, while the picturebooks with drawings more or less tend to the kitsch pole. Due to our small corpus, we cannot make any generalizations, but we are confident that this scale is useful in order to categorize other baby books, particularly those that show baby portraits and visual depictions of babies' everyday lives.

At the very end, we would like to stress that cuteness, even in its contribution to kitsch formation, is by no means to be rejected. It makes sense to respond to small children's interest in the baby schema and thus to create a feeling of relatedness and safety. Few parents would give their babies so-called "challenging picturebooks" that contribute to "arousal" (Ommundsen et al., 2022). We aver that aesthetic education should encourage potential critical reflection on kitsch, but we also respect the widespread need of parents and children of whatever age to create a domestic atmosphere of family connectedness and safety.

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<sup>23</sup> There is hardly any information or experimental study on the reception of these baby books, for instance, the ways in which they potentially affect the viewer.

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