

See Frontispiece: The Flicker of Foucault’s “Las Meninas”



See Frontispiece

The Truth in Painting

What of shoes? What, shoes? Whose are the shoes?...what surplus value is unleashed by the annulment of their use value: *outside* the picture, inside the *picture*, and third, as a picture, or to put it very equivocally, *in their painting truth...*

Jacques Derrida

Can we, in fact, locate a *truth in painting*? Does painting show us a more truthful picture of truth? *Las Meninas*, by Diego Velázquez, is a multifaceted, oscillating picture that upends the notion of a binary correspondence theory of truth, where tit is for tat, and this stands for that. What *is* the truth of Velázquez's painting and why is it so elusive?

These are just a few of the many questions elicited by *Las Meninas* which has become the subject of "a staggering literature"¹ by art historians and philosophers of language. The Baroque painter Luca Giordano graced *Las Meninas* with the moniker "the theology of painting," and not long afterwards, Sir Thomas Lawrence, a 19th century English portrait painter, called the work "the philosophy of art."² It has inspired artists including Pablo Picasso, Boston painter Domingo Barreres, and

Figure 1 Pablo Picasso

video performance artist Eve Sussman, yet after three centuries the painting still fascinates us. Estrella De Diego, in her essay, “Representing Representation,” suggests that *Las Meninas* is much more than a painting. It has become a cultural icon. The painting, she offers, represents “us.” “For some obscure reason, ‘we’—as part of Western culture – belong there, in the surface of the painting. One could almost say it is a means to materialize our cultural ‘selves.’”³ And art historian Svetlana Alpers goes so far as to suggest that it is “surely one of the greatest representations of pictorial representation in all of Western painting.”⁴

Figure 2 Domingo Barreres

And yet... it continues to side step our ability to fully and satisfactorily explain it. Not that many haven’t tried. Those who have trained an analytical eye on this monumental work have argued about its meaning, its intended audience, whether or not it constructs a subject, its narrativity,⁵ its orthogonals,⁶ about power and sovereignty,⁷ the nature of classical representation, the location and number of its centers,¹ the claim to nobility of the artist, and the paradox that is or is not inherent in the painting,⁸ and much, much more. And while it is tantalizing to jump in and join the fray,⁹ I would like instead, to step back from this skirmish, mirroring the

movement of the painted painter himself and examine the ways in which Michel Foucault has utilized this work to illustrate, among other things, the imbrication of seeing and saying.

“Las Meninas,” the opening essay in Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, (1966/1972) serves as a gateway to Foucault’s archaeological exploration of epistemic structures: the ways in which we order our world. By insisting that we not only *read* his description of the work, but that we *look* as well at the replicated painting on the frontispiece of his book, he places us in the spot toward which the painting points. In this manner, Foucault underscores the necessity of an inherent oscillation, *the flicker-picture nature of representation*. The dance that the artist does as he chassés away from and then towards his canvas is emblematic, restoring a shimmering visibility to what has historically become a constrained, immobile tableau.

His essay, “Las Meninas,” now canonical in the study of the field of Visual Culture, can be found in countless anthologies; its arrival spurred a flurry of responses, primarily from art historians, who were eager to explain why it was that Foucault was almost certainly mistaken in his analysis of Velázquez’s masterpiece. Foucault, the philosopher, wandered brazenly into an art historical space and tread none too lightly on its practices.¹⁰ Because he was not constricted by the entrenched methods of the art historian, his archeological approach was considered “groundbreaking.”¹¹

In looking at what *Las Meninas* re-presents, Foucault articulates what becomes visible as he does so. Although he sees the painting wedged in the rift between epistemes, by simply seeing and saying, he is able to dislodge encrusted polarities or what he has referred to as “some of the oldest oppositions of our alphabetical civilization: to show and to name; to shape and to say; to reproduce and to articulate; to imitate and to signify; to look and to read.”¹²

In the pages that follow, I’m suggesting that among the many who have responded brilliantly to his *ekphrasis*¹³ (a description of a work of art in words), most have missed the importance, for him, of the juxtaposition of the discursive spaces of language and painting.¹⁴ Digging up the one true interpretation of Velázquez’s monumental portrait was not at all Foucault’s intention. In fact he is quite clear that to do so would result in the demise of the precise space he is attempting to enliven. “The death of interpretation is to believe that there are signs, signs that exist primarily, originally, really as coherent, pertinent, and systematic marks...The life of interpretation, on the contrary, is to believe that there are only interpretations.”¹⁵

In an attempt to keep the life of interpretation alive and well, I am offering several observations:

- *Las Meninas*, the painting *and* the essay exemplify an oscillation to which Foucault is pointing and which, in his performative writing becomes visible. We see in the way he is saying it, what, precisely, he is saying.

- The painted painter himself is emblematic of the ceaseless movement Foucault sees as inherent in the construction of what we know-the flicker picture nature of representation- and which up-ends the familiar Cartesian project.
- Foucault gives us painting as a discursive space.
- His treatment of *Las Meninas* paints a portrait of his methods: the practice of excavating interstitial spaces, in this case, the gaps between the seeable and the sayable.
- Reading the essay *and* looking at the painting offer the reader/viewer the experience of a functional calligram
- Foucault's vision of Velazquez's much disputed mirror, shows us not a reversal, but instead a rupture, and thus becomes a model for changes in epistemic structures.

By opening his book, *The Order of Things*, by straining epistemological strata through a painting, Foucault dismantles crumbling disciplinary walls and contributes to an idiom that, by not being strictly art historical, disrupts and destabilizes our habitual point(s) of view.¹⁶

Stepping Back

The painter is standing a little back from his canvas.¹⁷

Foucault begins his essay with this sentence, foregrounding the importance of the painter who Velázquez has inserted into his royal portrait and at the same time calling our attention to the fact that at the very moment that is being immortalized,

the painter has moved. He has taken a step back away from his work: the enormous and enigmatic canvas that dominates the left side of the painting. In this step back, we find a kernel of the reflective and reflexive nature of representation to which Foucault is both pointing and exemplifying.

Tagged to the end of his opening gambit, we find a footnote. The only note in the entire chapter, it says simply, “See Frontispiece.” With this small addendum, we see that for Foucault it was critical that we, his readers (and by implication, viewers), have a firsthand visual experience of the painting around which his opening chapter was drawn.

We must assume that Foucault’s decision to begin *The Order of Things* with “Las Meninas” – both the essay and the image – was calculated, as were his instructions to look. If we take a step of our own back and flip to the Foreword to the English edition of *The Order of Things*, Foucault comes clean.

This foreword should perhaps be headed ‘Directions for Use’. Not because I feel that the reader cannot be trusted—he is of course, free to make what he will of the book he has been kind enough to read. What right have I, then to suggest that it should be used in one way rather than another? When I was writing it there were many things that were not clear to me...So I said to

myself: this is how my ideal reader would have approached my book, if my intentions had been clearer and my project more ready to take form.¹⁸

In his Foreword Foucault's intent is clear. It is important to him *how* we approach his work. And in the particular case of the footnote in "Las Meninas," he is suggesting that we partake of his thinking by reading his words *and* by looking at the painting for ourselves. Before we enter the archaeological site, we are offered some advice as to how to proceed, where to step, what to be careful of, and what to be on the lookout for. He apologizes for telling us how to read this, but nonetheless he tells us.

Secondly, we might note in the paragraph above, that Foucault models a method of taking his own step back. Here he revisits his work after a temporal gap¹⁹ across which he perhaps has a clearer view and can see the ways he might have improved the earlier project. By acknowledging a lack of clarity or preparedness, he unfixes his words and shows that by employing an archaeological approach, "Frontiers are redrawn and things usually far apart are brought closer, and vice versa;..." Allowing for the fact that there are questions that even still remain unanswered, he invites us to read this work "as an open site."²⁰

Lastly in this Foreword, Foucault explicitly discusses his methodology. He suggests that due to the complexity of discourse in general, we would benefit from a multiplicity of approaches at multiple levels. However, here he excludes from these

valued approaches a phenomenological one—“historical analysis of scientific discourse should, in the last resort be subject, not to a theory of the knowing subject, but rather to a theory of discursive practice.”²¹ And while this may be a disguised criticism of Merleau-Ponty’s method, as Gary Shapiro suggests,²² it seems to me that specifically in this essay, at least, his archaeology embodies a kind of stratified phenomenology. He sits with the painting, tracing what his eye has found with his words, and allows the unfolding of the visual and verbal, subject to his theory of discursive practice.²³ If we bring this same archaeological attention—a variation on close reading—to his writing, it may tell us something important about what we know and how we know it, what we can see and how we can say it.

See Frontispiece

Why use a painting of a painter painting a painting to begin looking at how we make and think about order? By placing the work, not as an illustration, embedded within the chapter in which it is excavated, but as “frontispiece” to the entire book, Foucault suggests that his archaeological approach is not limited to exclusively unearthing questions about the history of science, but may in fact provide an armature for an analysis that has broader applications. And in the wider net he casts, Foucault has caught painting. In the strata of the work of art—the pigment, the texture, the light, the shapes—are embedded the “latent discourse of the painter; one can try to recapture the murmur of his intentions, which are not transcribed into words, but into lines, surfaces, and colours; one can try to uncover the implicit philosophy that is supposed to form his view of the world.”²⁴ Here

Foucault points to the artist that philosophizes, the painting that consequently discloses what the painter was given to think.

In *Las Meninas* we find a painting that steps outside of itself to comment on the practice it exemplifies, what we might call a meta-picture.²⁵ While we are all familiar with the practice of extracting pictorial metaphors residing in what we say, the flipside—where we discover a discourse on the nature of representation inhabiting a picture—is a stranger space.

Figure 3 *Artist Drawing a Nude in Perspective* Albrecht Dürer

Las Meninas is certainly not the only painting to philosophize about the nature of paintings. A quick survey might bring us to Dürer's etching, *Artist Drawing a Nude in Perspective*, in which the 16th century artist critiques the wondrous science afforded by the *Lucinda*, a gridded device used to create the illusion of pictorial depth; to *The Treachery of Images*,²⁶ Magritte's didactic, show and tell effort to comment on the nature of representation, both visual and verbal, as seen through a surrealist lens;

Figure 4 *The Treachery of Images* Rene Magritte

to a popular New Yorker cartoon depicting *Egyptian Life Class*, by Alain, in which the simplified, stylized look of an ancient art, subject to the art student experience,

Figure 5 *Egyptian Life Class* Alain

is being lampooned. Although here we are just skimming the surface of these meta-pictures, which upon closer examination have much to reveal, it is clear is that each image makes visible the discursive context coincident with its episteme.

Foucault tells us that it (painting) is discursive practice “embodied in techniques and effects.”² Transgressing the rigor that was, at the time this essay was written, art historical practice, he suggests that it is not a question of extracting the meaning of the painting by explaining what it is that we see, through whose hands the painting has passed, or in which historical documents it is referred to.²⁷ Instead, what we might be seeking is whether in the very construction of the work—where shape meets shape and forms a border, in the depths of the pictorial space, in the tension created by light and shadow, and in the intensity of the palette—the discursive practices of the period under consideration could be thought, could be enunciated.

It is instructive that in his articulation of how discourse can reside in the space of a painting or in the gesture of the painter himself, Foucault brings into relief an aural metaphor. He alludes to the *murmuring* of the artist, to the ways in which the painting can *name*, can *question* or can *consider* the discursive practice it reveals. By turns he sees painting as silent and speaking, just as he uses, in his description of *Las Meninas*, language that “shows” us what Velázquez has painted.

We find in his short collection of essays, *This Is Not a Pipe*, a fascination with the play of the border between what paintings may tell us and what pictures our words may paint. In particular, as he dusts off shards of the paintings of Magritte, Klee and Kandinsky, his articulation see-saws between sound and silence, between the visible and the sayable.

Let a figure resemble an object (or some other figure), and that alone is enough for there to slip into the pure play of the painting statement-obvious, banal, repeated a thousand times yet almost always silent. (It is like an infinite murmur-haunting, enclosing the silence of figures, inventing it, mastering it, extricating the silence from itself, and finally reversing it within the domain of things that can be named.) “What you see is *that*.”²⁸

(Emphasis added)

The simple spark of recognition, seeing the “that,” slides the painting to opposite end of the teeter-totter and back again, rendering it painting-statement. Repeated, but silent. Again we see/hear the murmur—the continuous sound, soft but insistent, telling us, pointing towards, naming, the “that.”

When Foucault directs us then, in his opening footnote, to “See Frontispiece,” he is insuring that in the reading of his essay, we are engaged in a process that mirrors

this teeter-totter. In the juxtaposition of the experience of reading and the experience of looking, the distinction becomes apparent. We insert our finger in the page where *Las Meninas*, the painting, opens his book like an engraved pediment and we flip back and forth between his description and what we can see. His words not only “show” us the painting, but serve as a playbill. One of the delights of the book. You can keep flipping back to check out what he tells us he sees, precisely what he is pointing out for us, in order to measure it with our own eyes. When he tells us that a vertical line which divides the canvas in half passes between the Infanta’s eyes, we flip back to the painting to see if this is really so. Ah yes, look at the light streaming in from the window! The little girl is dead center! No matter how precise his description may be, we need to see it for ourselves. The seeing is always discrete from the saying and always connected to it.

But the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation.... It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other’s terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying;²⁹

We flip forward again to read about the “great volute that runs around the perimeter of the studio,”³⁰ and we return to the painting and trace, for ourselves,

the spiral that sends our eye from one corner of the painting to the other: from the point of the brush to the eyes of the painter, to the paintings and mirror that hang in shadowy recesses of the hall, to the silhouetted man in the doorway, who may be entering or may be leaving, to the side wall of the salon, which is rendered in such a skewed perspective that all we are able to discern are hints of the frames hanging there, to the flood of light from the window at the front right edge of the painting illuminating the scene in the canvas before us and by inference, passing through the boundary of that surface and brightening the space in which the spectator might stand; gliding over the entire entourage and across to the painting which conceals itself from us and returns us to our painter's palette, where we begin again.

This alternately reading and looking, flipping back to the Velázquez and forth, again to Foucault's description, suggests the essay as functional calligram. An image

Figure 6 Calligram Ant Inky La Reve (<http://inky-la-reve.deviantart.com/art/Calligram-Ant-41565962>)

constructed entirely out of words, a calligram offers us both the experience of looking and reading, but never at precisely the same moment. As Foucault notes, "It lodges statements in the space of a shape, and makes the text say what the drawing represents."³¹

When we take a step back we see the shape: the object formed by the edges created when this group of words is ordered, a typographical arrangement. When

we attempt to read the text that comprises the image, we lose the sense of the whole; we shift into a temporal mode, where one word follows the next and we are privy to the meaning of a string of words, but the coherency that held the picture together is lost.

When we read “Las Meninas” in the way in which Foucault would like us to, we slip and slide from one end of the seesaw to the other. We read his words or we look at the painting by Velázquez, but we cannot do both at once. In his book *Foucault*, Gilles Deleuze suggests that there is no tangible bridge traversing the space between seeing and saying.

Of course, there is no link that could move from the visible to the statement, or from the statement to the visible. But there is a continual relinking which takes place over the irrational break or the crack.³²

The break or crack or gap across which this relinking occurs, like Foucault’s discontinuities or ruptures among strata, is a space constitutive of what it is possible to see and one that the painter, in his movement towards and away from his canvas, shows us.

After describing in detail what he sees in Velázquez monumental canvas, Foucault deigns to name the members of the Infanta Margarita’s entourage, the shadowy

man who is either coming or going in the recesses of the painting, and names Velázquez as the painter we see. But he just as quick to point out that these names are “merely an artifice.” He suggests that while they enable us to point and say, “Here, look, there is young princess Margarita!” that as soon as we do so, we close down the infinite possibilities inherent in the task of slipping from seeing to saying and back again.

But if one wishes to keep the relation of language to vision open, if one wishes to treat their incompatibility as a starting-point for speech instead of as an obstacle to be avoided, so as to stay as close as possible to both, then one must erase those proper names, and preserve the infinity of the task.³³

To stay as close as possible to both, we inhabit the place of the painter, at the neutral center of oscillation. There, suspended then, over the archaeological crevasse created by the irruptions of entrenched Cartesian correspondences, is where Foucault has placed us and to where he would like us to turn our attention as we read his opening essay.

In the In-between

We read on:

The painter is standing a little back from his canvas. He is glancing at his model; perhaps he is considering whether to add some finishing touch, though it is also possible that the first stroke has not yet been made. The arm holding the brush is bent to the left, towards the palette; it is motionless, for an instant, between canvas and paints. The skilled hand is suspended in mid-air, arrested in rapt attention on the painter's gaze; and the gaze, in return, waits upon the arrested gesture. Between the fine point of the brush and the steely gaze, the sense is about to yield up its volume.

But not without a subtle system of feints.³⁴

We have noted that Foucault's first sentence posits the painter's oscillation. By necessity the painter moves; and while we have caught him here in stillness, we are aware that this point of suspension between reified polarizations is artful, bracketed by his movement towards and away from his work. We know—and Foucault's language points to this explicitly—that he is in an *in-between*. In this opening paragraph, as elsewhere, we become aware of the language of suspension that places us along with the painter "at the neutral centre of this oscillation."³⁵ *Perhaps*, Foucault offers, the painter might be either coming *or* going. His painting arm, his brush, are *suspended*, his activity, *arrested*. The painter's gaze *waits*, his hand's attention *rapt*. *Between* brush and eye, meaning is pregnant.³⁶

If the painting *Las Meninas* is in fact a representation of representation, then it is not the representation of Descartes, nor is it Rorty's mirror of nature. Instead, *Las Meninas* reflects the flicker-picture nature of representation. A both/and proposition, we are forced to inhabit that gap between what we can see and what, momentarily, will become invisible. Now the painter is clearly visible in this snapshot moment of poised action, but Foucault warns that in the next moment, the artist will step towards the large painting on which what is painted is not available to us and he will become hidden by it. "As though the painter could not at the same time be seen on the picture where he is represented and also see that upon which he is representing something. He rules at the threshold of those two incompatible visibilities."³⁷

The artist represented in the painting in turn represents levels of seeing and being seen, shades of visibilities and invisibilities to which we are all subject. As he looks out of the canvas, the "dotted line" of his vision joins us to him, fluxes the space within and without the border of the painting. Instead of a "stable gaze," one that totalizes and bounds what it is that we see, Foucault offers us a "ceaseless exchange," one in which "subject and object, the spectator and the model, reverse their roles to infinity."³⁸ Even this endless movement to which Foucault points, oscillates between itself and the still, monolithic back of the unseen canvas.

Straddling the seesaw of these dichotomous extremes, a simple shift of weight, a change of focus, up-ends the intrinsic opposition.

There are thus two centres around which the picture may be organized, according to whether the fluttering attention of the spectator decides to settle in this place or that.³⁹

Employing his own series of feints, Foucault lays the figures of a cross and that of an arc atop the surface that Velázquez painted, articulating moving centers. Both Leo Steinberg in his essay “Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*,” and Amy Schmitter, in her essay “Picturing Power: Representation and *Las Meninas*,” locate (at least) three centers in the painting: a compositional center, a geographical center, and a center described by the vanishing point. The dispersal of these locales “de-centers” the painting, and throws the viewer off center as well.⁴⁰ The flutter of our movement from center to center, reinforces the shimmering nature of what we see and transforms a stagnant trope—that of the totalizing gaze—that has for centuries come to stand for *the* visual paradigm. The designation of multiple centers connotes fluctuation and results in the site of Foucault’s archaeology remaining open.

The painted artist ponders his work: Is it almost complete? Is it just an under painting? The answers to these questions elude us. We can’t know precisely what the artist is seeing or thinking, but we do know that his moving away from the close

work of his brushstroke bespeaks the need for a larger view. We have all seen the painter “stepping back” from her work. When she works up close to the canvas, she is immersed in a world of color patches and mark making, a micro-world. But as she steps back, a smear of titanium white becomes the brilliant light reflected on the rim of a teacup. The practice of the painter parallels Foucault’s archaeological process. In order to “see” an ‘epistemic structure’ it is necessary to have perspective, to step away from it.⁴¹

By stepping back, the painter creates the distance necessary to see. His retreat creates a gap. And yet. No matter how many paces backwards she takes, the artist can never step out of the experience that has led her to this moment. Velázquez’s “painter” exemplifies this notion. He may step away from the large unseen canvas, move backwards in the cavernous hall in which he paints, but he can never step out of the painting in which he is represented. He stands, instead, on the threshold of incompatible visibilities.

We step back in order to see. But we can never completely step out of what we are given—by our experience, by the era in which we live—to see. In the same way that the painting, *Las Meninas* is literally bound by its framed edges, we, spectators in our lives and times are bound by what is illuminated for us, by what is has been made seeable. We turn away from what is hidden by our worlds, by our times in much the same way that each member of the Infanta’s entourage is turned toward

the light—toward what is happening in front of them. “[T]owards the bright invisibility bordering the canvas, towards that balcony of light where their eyes can gaze at those who are gazing back at them, and not towards that dark recess which marks the far end of the room in which they are represented.” It is toward these dark recesses that Foucault, as philosopher and historian, has turned his attention, and in the process of doing so, has made visible.

Velázquez’s Mirror

Foucault painstakingly guides us through Velázquez’s courtly space, pointing to what we *can* see—the artist, the light, the paintings on the rear walls, the young girl and her courtiers— and to what we *can’t*—the large canvas in the painting—we see only its back, its frame, its supporting structure. We can’t see who or what is the subject of this grand work. He suggests that we notice what is lit and what is in shadow, that we follow the directions of the gazes of those portrayed in this tableau, and most importantly, that we become aware of a “slender line of reciprocal visibility [which] embraces a whole complex network of uncertainties, exchange and feints.”⁴² This complex network that Foucault traces in the painting is reminiscent of saccades, the brisk, discontinuous movements of the eye, without which we could only stare blindly. And as we follow his eye movements we are able to see the effects of the aim of his seeing. As John Rajchman has noted in his essay, “Foucault’s Art of Seeing,”

Seeing is important in Foucault's work as philosopher and historian in this sense: as an art of trying to see what is unthought in our seeing, and to open as yet unseen ways of seeing.⁴³

Following the spiral of his words, Foucault shows us what had been unthought, with regard to the painting, *Las Meninas*, and the nature of representation it re-presents. Just as *Las Meninas* straddled the threshold between the 16th century and the classical age, "Las Meninas," the essay, opens a caroming and reiterative space in which modernism slides into post-modernism and our understanding of the nature of representation is beginning to flicker.

After pages of description we arrive finally at a pivotal detail of the painting: the small mirror centered on the back wall of the great hall in which all of this activity is taking place. "Of all the representations represented in the picture this is the only one visible; but no one is looking at it."⁴⁴ Not the painter, no one in the hall. Only those of us who stand outside of the painting, in the spot designated for viewing the entire scene, are compelled to attend to this reflection. Our own intimate experience with mirrors suggests that the mirror will re-present an exact double of what we see, but in reverse and from the backside. Yet Velázquez's mirror reflects nothing of what we might expect. Not the back of the painter standing in front of it, nor the little girl and her entourage.

We have in this peculiar metaphoric mirror,⁴⁵ not the “perfect duplication,” albeit, in reversal, but a break, a rupture with reality, that mirrors Foucault’s model for changes in epistemic structures. This mirror breaks with our expectations of what it should reflect and shows us something entirely other.

Instead of surrounding visible objects, *this mirror cuts straight through the whole field of the representation, ignoring all it might apprehend within that field, and restores visibility to that which resides outside all view.* [Emphasis added]⁴⁶

Not only does the mirror cut through the painting and land outside the boundaries of the given pictorial space, but the painter’s gaze outwards— toward the space in which, if it were possible, his model, the spectator, and the artist, Velázquez, co-exist—confronts that essential void at which Foucault is attempting to point. We are told by Foucault and others that in Velázquez’s mirror we see the reflections of King Philip IV and his wife, Mariana. It is they who are improbably reflected in this mirror, and it is they who are occupying one of the multiple centers of this canvas, and we imagine, that they are the subjects of the painting that we cannot see, the object of the gaze of this painted painter, and the entire group of courtiers.

...in the depths of the mirror there could also appear – there ought to appear—the anonymous face of the passer-by and that of Velázquez. *For the function of that*

reflection is to draw into the interior of the picture what is intimately foreign to it: the gaze which has organized it and the gaze for which it is displayed."⁴⁷ [Emphasis added]

The mirror brings our attention back to the spot that we, the viewer, and Velázquez co-inhabit. This mirror, unlike Rorty's mimetic mirror of nature, directs us to the fact of our own complicity in what we behold; it shows us ourselves as viewer, and at the same time it reminds us that we stand where Velázquez stood, conceived of and executed this image; painted a painting in which he is considering the complex construct of representation.

This mirror, then, which brings to mind what is not seen, is also a perfect metaphor for Foucault himself. It is Foucault who has attempted to restore visibility—to the insane, to the imprisoned, to the ill, to the homosexual—to those on the margins who for many reasons are invisible to us. It is Foucault who draws into the interior what is outside, what is foreign to it. It is not that the marginalized are truly invisible. Rather it is the structures within which they exist and the discourses that define them, much like the painting space defined by its framed edges and criss-crossing gazes, that keep them from being seen, except, perhaps reflected in the mirror of their marginalization. Foucault, like Velázquez's mirror, directs us to see them, standing as they do, outside of our epistemic picture.

Foucault concludes his essay with a paragraph that alludes to Velázquez's painting as the representation of Classical representation.

And indeed, representation undertakes to represent itself here in all its elements, with its images, the eyes to which it is offered, the faces it makes visible, the gestures that call it into being. But there...is an essential void: the necessary disappearance of that which is its foundation – of the person it resembles and the person in whose eyes it is only a resemblance. This very subject...has been elided.⁴⁸

The subject to which the entire image compositionally is directed, is not there.

Foucault posits this image and its myriad gazes to articulate the absence of “man” as a subject prior to modernity. And yet, in this painting, one can’t help but notice that all elements lead us back to ourselves, standing outside the painting, looking in.

Without our gaze, without our perspective there is no one to ponder what “subject” we might see if we could peer around the corner of the painting portrayed. Nor would there be anyone to puzzle the meaning of this meta-picture. We are both, as Derrida might suggest, necessary to and impossible in that pictorial space.

Conclusion

Towards the end of *The Order of Things*, Foucault returns to “Las Meninas” one last time to articulate the break between what he has identified as a Classical notion of representation and the arrival of the modern subject. Foucault shows us a break in our modes of understanding by pointing to the way in which Velázquez’s painting articulates a complex altering in the order of things and consequently the moment

when a blurry fluctuation gave way to the sharp divisions of a traditionally dualist approach.

As if, in that vacant space towards which Velázquez's whole painting was directed, but which it was nevertheless reflecting only in the chance presence of a mirror, and as though by stealth, all the figures whose alternation, reciprocal exclusion, interweaving, and fluttering one imagined (the model, the painter, the king, the spectator) suddenly stopped their imperceptible dance, immobilized into one substantial figure, and demanded that the entire space of the representation should at last be related to one corporeal gaze.⁴⁹

When we join Foucault in stepping back from the image of *Las Meninas*, we meet him at the meta-level where he is pointing at a painting that points at painting. Here he shows us that Velázquez's mirror reveals the moment in time when the inherent motions of our seeing were captured and imprisoned in a sovereign point of view. During the "enlightened" period that followed, we lost the interweaving and fluttering of imagination and were locked into a univocal, rigid gaze. It only when we embrace the emblematic dance of the artist as she steps away from and back towards her canvas, that we can restore a shimmering visibility to what had become a constrained, immobile tableau.

Foucault began his examination of *Las Meninas* with an oscillation, a moving to and fro which ultimately undoes the hard edges of our black and white categories of inside and outside, viewer and subject, center and margins. John Rajchman reminds us that the word 'evidence,' is derived from the Latin, *videre*, to see.⁵⁰ We seek evidence as proof of what is really true. But it is Foucault's particular focus that brings him to look at what we consider to be self-evident; what is almost *too* obvious to even consider. Examining how we see (or have seen) madness or delinquency or our sexuality or medicine or the ways in which we order our thoughts, he asks why it is that we see these things in these particular ways. He asks what is it that makes these concepts visible in the ways in which they are visible. He asks us to look again.

Why does it matter how we see *Las Meninas* or what we say about it? It matters not because we are aiming to find the one true correct representation, the clear reflection in the mirror of nature that Rorty found so problematic. Through the oscillation of Foucault's performative essay, we discover instead the flickering function of the calligram and the excavation of the discursive space of painting. In this interstitial space, our looking and seeing is inextricably linked to our knowing and our acting. It is for this reason that the notion of transforming our intrinsic ways of seeing is not a frivolous matter. If we can change the way we see, we can, as Foucault suggests, "free our vision from the dominant way of looking at things,"⁵¹ shattering what had formerly seemed simply self-evident. By doing so *Las Meninas*,

the painting and “Las Meninas,” the essay point us toward the possibility of ultimately opening up of the site of representation.

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Endnotes

¹ Snyder, Joel and Cohen, Ted, "Reflexions on Las Meninas: Paradox Lost," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Winter, 1980), pp. 429-447, The University of Chicago Press.

² Honour and Fleming (1982), *A World History of Art*. London: Macmillan, p. 447.

³ De Diego, E. 2003, "Representing Representation: Reading Las Meninas Again" in *Velazquez's Las Meninas*, ed. S.L. Stratton-Pruitt, Cambridge University Press.

⁴ Alpers, S. 1983, "Interpretation without Representation, or, the Viewing of Las Meninas", *Representations*, Vol. 1.

⁵ Biberman, E. 2006, "On Narrativity in the Visual Field: A Psychoanalytic View of Velazquez's *Las Meninas*", *Narrative*, Vol. 14, No. 3, October 2006, pp. 237--253.

⁶ See Snyder, Joel and Cohen, Ted 1980, "Reflexions on *Las Meninas*: Paradox Lost", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, No. 2 (Winter), pp. 429-430-447, Snyder, J. 1985, "Las Meninas and The Mirror of the Prince", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 11, No. 4, pp. 539, and Schmitter, A.M. 1996, "Picturing Power: Representation and Las Meninas", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 54, No. Summer, 1996, pp. 225--268.

⁷ Schmitter, A.M. 1996, "Picturing Power: Representation and Las Meninas", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 54, No. Summer, 1996, pp. 225--268. and Steinberg, L. 1981, "Velazquez's Las Meninas", *October*, Vol. 19, No. Winter.

⁸ Searle, J.R. 1980, "Las Meninas and The Paradoxes of Pictorial Representation", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 6, No. Spring.

⁹ Like Kenneth Clark, who wrote, "[One] cannot look for long at Las Meninas without wanting to find out how it is done." (See Clark, Kenneth, 1960, *Looking at Pictures*, London: John Murray), I long to diagram the set up in which Velázquez must have stood to actually paint this painting of himself—did he use a mirror? Where did he place it?--the Infanta and her entourage—did they pose for him? They must have done!-- the Alcazar, the king and queen!

¹⁰ De Diego, E. 2003, "Representing Representation: Reading Las Meninas Again" in *Velazquez's Las Meninas*, ed. S.L. Stratton-Pruitt, Cambridge University Press.

¹¹ Gresle, Y. 2006, "Foucault's Las Meninas and art-historical methods", *Journal of Literary Studies*, p. 1.

¹² Foucault, M. 1982, *This Is Not a Pipe*, University of California Press, p. 121.

¹³ Mitchell, W.J.T. 1994, *Picture Theory*, The University of Chicago Press, p. 152, and Shapiro, G. 2003, *Archaeologies of Vision: Foucault and Nietzsche on Seeing and Saying*, The University of Chicago Press, p.247.

¹⁴ One notable exception to this is Shapiro, G. 2003, *Archaeologies of Vision: Foucault and Nietzsche on Seeing and Saying*, The University of Chicago Press. Shapiro digs deeply into Foucault's essay, examining implicit references to Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology, and his writing on the painting of Cezanne.

¹⁵ Foucault, M. 1982, *This Is Not a Pipe*, University of California Press.

¹⁶ Bryson, N. (ed.) 1988, *Calligram: Essays in New Art History from France*, Cambridge University Press, p. xiv.

¹⁷ Foucault, M. 1970, *The Order of Things*, Random House, New York, p. 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁹ *Les Mots et les choses* was published in 1966; the English edition, *The Order of Things*, in 1970.

²⁰ Foucault, M. 1970, *The Order of Things*, Random House, New York, p. xii.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. iv.

²² Shapiro, G. 2003, *Archaeologies of Vision: Foucault and Nietzsche on Seeing and Saying*, The University of Chicago Press, p. 217.

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- ²³ Foucault, M. 1970, *The Order of Things*, Random House, New York, p. xiv.
- ²⁴ Foucault, M. 1972, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & the Discourse on Language*, Pantheon, p.193.
- ²⁵ See Mitchell, W.J.T. 1994, *Picture Theory*, The University of Chicago Press.
- ²⁶ Not incidentally, Foucault has also written a treatise on this and other paintings by Magritte, Klee and Kandinsky, Foucault, M. 1982, *This Is Not a Pipe*, University of California Press.
- ²⁷ Foucault, M. 1972, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & the Discourse on Language*, Pantheon.
- ²⁸ Foucault, M. 1982, *This Is Not a Pipe*, University of California Press, p. 34.
- ²⁹ Foucault, M. 1970, *The Order of Things*, Random House, New York, p.9.
- ³⁰ Foucault, M. 1970, *The Order of Things*, Random House, New York, p.15.
- ³¹ Foucault, M. 1982, *This Is Not a Pipe*, University of California Press, p.21.
- ³² Deleuze, G. 1988, *Foucault*, University of Minnesota Press, p.65.
- ³³ Foucault, M. 1970, *The Order of Things*, Random House, New York, p.9.
- ³⁴ Foucault, M. 1970, *The Order of Things*, Random House, New York, p.3
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ De Diego, E. 2003, "Representing Representation: Reading Las Meninas Again" in *Velazquez's Las Meninas*, ed. S.L. Stratton-Pruitt, Cambridge University Press, p.150.
- ³⁷ Foucault, M. 1970, *The Order of Things*, Random House, New York, p. 4.
- ³⁸ Ibid., p. 5.
- ³⁹ Ibid., p. 13.
- ⁴⁰ Schmitter, A.M. 1996, "Picturing Power: Representation and Las Meninas", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 54, No. Summer, 1996, p. 263, and Steinberg, L. 1981, "Velazquez's Las Meninas", *October*, Vol. 19, No. Winter.
- ⁴¹ Spivak, G.C. 1974, "Translator's Preface" in *Of Grammatology* The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London.

⁴² Foucault, M. 1970, *The Order of Things*, Random House, New York, p. 4.

⁴³ Rajchman, J. 1988, "Foucault's Art of Seeing", *October*, Vol. 44.

⁴⁴ Foucault, M. 1970, *The Order of Things*, Random House, New York, p. 4.

⁴⁵ Clearly the mirror painted by Velázquez was not intended to reflect as mirrors do. The arguments of Snyder, J. 1985, "Las Meninas and The Mirror of the Prince", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 11, No. 4, with regards to angles of reflection and angles of incidence notwithstanding, even if the mirror were reflecting the painting upon which Velázquez's painter is working, it cannot bypass the painter himself, who clearly stands in the line of fire.

⁴⁶ Foucault, M. 1970, *The Order of Things*, Random House, New York, p. 8.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

⁵⁰ Rajchman, J. 1988, "Foucault's Art of Seeing", *October*, Vol. 44, p. 93.

⁵¹ Levin, D.M. 1999, *Sites of Vision: The Discursive Construction of Sight in the History of Philosophy*, The MIT Press, p.17

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