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Publication details:

Continental Philosophy Review

v. 46

Chapter No. 2

1387-2842 (ISSN)

Publication Date:

2013

Publisher DOI:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11007-013-9257-x>

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The Cornered Object of Psychoanalysis: *Las Meninas*, Jacques Lacan and Henry James

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Abstract

Long recognised as a painting ‘about’ painting, Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* comes to Lacan’s aid as he explicates the object (a) in Seminar XIII, The Object of Psychoanalysis (1966-1967). The famous 17thC painting provides Lacan with a visual mapping of the ‘ghost story’ he discovers in the Cartesian cogito, insofar as it depicts the unravelling of the Cartesian representational project at the moment of its founding gesture. This article traces Lacan’s argument as he turns to art, linear perspective and topology to model how the object (a) persistently eludes the grasp of scientific knowledge. Following a discussion of distance-point perspective in Renaissance Italy and the role this innovation played in enabling distorted depictions of objects in space, I propose Henry James’s ghost story, “The Jolly Corner,” as the sequel to Lacan’s reading of *Las Meninas*. In James’s tale, we obtain a narrative account of what the figures in Velasquez’s painting might ‘see’ as they return our gaze towards us.

Key words: Jacques Lacan, Descartes, Henry James, distance-point perspective, object (a), anamorphosis, desire, drive, phallus

1 Introduction

Following on from his elaboration of the “crucial problems of psychoanalysis” of the previous year, in Seminar XIII (1965-66), Jacques Lacan devotes himself to the task of identifying the object that is unique to psychoanalysis. His starting point is his observation that, ever since the birth of modern science, which for Lacan—following Alexandre Koyré—obtains its inaugural moment with Descartes in the 17th century, the object has continuously failed to present itself to knowledge except in the form of a lack, a hole in our understanding of the world. According to Koyré’s influential account, in the 17th century modern science broke profoundly with Aristotelian science, with its ‘fantasy’ as Bruce Fink has described it, of a pre-existing harmony between *nous* and the world, to embark upon a voyage of discovery.¹ The twin cynosures guiding this voyage were the suppositions that there was nothing in the world that could not be brought under knowledge’s

1 Fink (2002, p. 168).

domain, and that this world of objects (and along with it, the objects of scientific knowledge) is infinite. Nevertheless, as Lacan will go on to explore in some depth in this seminar (and indeed throughout this period of his teaching), the very ‘objectivity’ by which modern science purports to view the world paradoxically causes the object itself to disappear. What is more, this vanishing act emerges directly as a result of the mathematical premises upon which the whole enterprise is founded. Despite the ever-increasing accumulation of facts that science furnishes us with about the world, then, our knowledge of its object is, as Lacan puts it, an “amputated knowledge.”²

The task Lacan sets himself in this seminar is thus the unenviable one of making this object, excised from the grasp of scientific knowledge, *appear*. This will take him away from his Fregean discussion of the logical foundation of the subject from the previous year and into an in-depth engagement with topology, as well as with Blaise Pascal’s famous wager, prehistoric cave painting and, finally, the famous painting by Diego-Rodriguez Velázquez, *Las Meninas*. The thirteenth seminar is thus striking for its unusually heavy focus on art and the aesthetic. It seems that, in order to make what is involved with the object of science—which it turns out, will be the same object as that of psychoanalysis—emerge, Lacan feels he must turn away from number, despite its great utility to him in structuring the different dimensions of lack the previous year. In its place, he turns to projective geometry and to art.

Now, at one level, this turn should not surprise one too much, since from a certain perspective art does nothing other than set itself the task of making something appear (even if this “something” is the nothing itself). Yet Lacan has repeatedly stressed that his employment of topological figures (and, I am going to surmise here, of artistic ones as well) are not exemplifications of the relation of the subject, the object (a) and the Other. Rather than *illustrating* this relation, topology (and art) *articulate* it, modelling it for us in spatial and temporal form as bodies in three-dimensional space. But why should Lacan concern himself with the qualities of the object (a) in space at all? The answer, I believe, is that despite its formal status as a logical object, the (a) must be shown to have a bodily presence in the world. The reason for this is that it is always as something embodied that the subject encounters the analyst, insofar as he or she occupies the position of the (a). The (a), then, needs to be shown to be an *embodied* lack.

2 *Las Meninas*

Demonstrating the existence of a body such as the object (a) that is strictly non-intuitable in space-

2 Lacan (1965, lesson of 8 December).

time is no mean feat but, surprisingly, Lacan will find in Velázquez's master work an aesthetic object that is fit for the task. Long a subject for art history's iconology in which it has been widely recognised as a painting that is at some level "about" painting and representation, *Las Meninas* needs little introduction. Hanging in the Museo del Prado in Madrid, the painting famously depicts a scene of a painter—usually taken to be Diego-Rodriguez himself—standing before a large easel whose image is turned away from the viewer. Figured alongside the painter in this, the principal room of the apartments formerly belonging to the Infante Baltasar Carlos (the deceased heir to the throne), are a number of personages historically identifiable from the Spanish court: in the center is the Infanta Margarita, the daughter and now sole child of the Spanish King and Queen, Philip IV and his second wife, Doña Marianne of Austria. Two maids of honor, the kneeling Doña María Augustina Sarmiento and Doña Isabel de Velasco flank her on either side. In the front right are two figures, Maribárbola, the adult dwarf, and a child midget, Nicolás Pertusato, who seems to be about to kick a sleeping dog. Behind this first group stand a man and a woman, the *guarda damas*, or lady in waiting, Doña Marcela de Ulloa in widow's weeds, and what appears, as far as I can tell from the historical tradition, to be an unidentified male escort. At the far end of the painting, framed and seeming to shimmer in a ghostly, silvery light are two figures, usually interpreted to be the figures of the royal couple who are reflected in what we presume to be a mirror on the back wall. Finally, in the back corner of the room, pausing on some steps and framed in an open doorway is a dark-clad man, identified in the critical tradition as another Velázquez, a certain José Nieto Velázquez, chamberlain of the queen's household, who evidently played a role in the painter Diego-Rodriguez Velázquez's promotion to position as 'Aposentador of the King.'

The mystery of Velázquez's painting, as well as the key to its unlocking, lies in the riddle, what is the picture that the painter is painting? Lacan's answer is that the picture "Velázquez" is painting is the very image we are looking at.³ The painter has evidently performed a clever trick and, seemingly impossibly, painted himself painting the painting, which now mysteriously proceeds out to the front and across to the side of him. The effect is as though Velázquez has succeeded in isolating the exact point on a Möbius strip where one of its surfaces turns into its obverse, and then laid this point down on his canvas.

Various suggestions have been offered as to how Velázquez accomplished his visual trick. In

3 There are three main schools of thought on this question which, in addition to Lacan's reading, include the proposition that the painter is portraying the little princess, or the likeness of the King and Queen. For a discussion of the merits of these various interpretations (see Umberger 1995, p. 99).

Seminar XIII, Lacan initially refers to the widely-held theory that the Spanish artist painted the whole scene in front of a mirror, but he just as quickly debunks this idea. For one thing, as Lacan notes, there is no indication in the historical record of Spanish art that Velázquez was left-handed, which he would have had to have been if the painting of the painter with his brush in his right hand is a mirror image of the man painting. For another, and more significantly, the theory fails to account for the presence of the two figures at the back who appear to be *themselves reflections* in a mirror. The problem is that, had these figures been mirror reflections, we should see (the backs of) their originals somewhere in the foreground in the tableau. The absence of their ‘originals’ somewhere in the painting thus seems to shatter the mirror theory, for it implies the King and Queen occupy another space than that inhabited by the painter, the Infanta and the rest of her entourage. Lacan underlines the paradox: “either it is a mirror that is here, or it is the king and queen. If it is the king and the queen, this cannot be the painter, if the painter is elsewhere, if the king and queen are there, it cannot be the painter who is there.”⁴ Then finally, in a last and fatal blow to the mirror theory, Lacan observes that the physical dimensions of the two figures on the back wall are, furthermore, incompatible with what we ought to see if the theory held true. For as mirror reflections of something presumed but unrepresented in the foreground, their distance should be twice as ‘far’ from the central stage of the painting as that of the man in the doorway, and consequently their size *twice* as small. Yet in *Las Meninas*, the figures appear to be more or less the same size as the ‘other Velázquez’ on the back wall, meaning that Velázquez’s perspectival calculations must have gone seriously awry—a somewhat unlikely scenario for this master painter.⁵

For Lacan, then, the representational riddle that is *Las Meninas* cannot be solved simply by hypothesizing the presence of an imaginary reflecting surface such as a mirror in the place where the viewing audience stand. In simply reversing the viewing positions—i.e., we, the viewers reflecting back to the painter what it is of himself that he ‘sees’—this hypothesis is unable to account for certain peculiarities in the representational space, not least among which, as I have said, are the ghostly figures who appear in what should, according to the theory, simply be the reflection

4 Lacan (1966, lesson of 11 May).

5 See Joel Snyder and Ted Cohen’s analysis of the vanishing point of the painting. According to these critics, it lies not at the centre of the painting, as many commentators - from Foucault to John Searle and Leo Steinberg - have tended to assume, but towards the right, near the elbow of the ‘other Velázquez’ in the doorway (Snyder and Cohen, 1980, p. 434). George Kubler has also noted the optical impossibility of the mirror image reflecting the view of the King and Queen of themselves across the room (Kubler, 1985, p. 316).

of one mirror (i.e. the mirror at the 'surface' of the painting) in another mirror which hangs on the back wall. In order for this theory to have credence, an infinite play of empty mirror reflections ought by rights to ensue. So where have these mysterious figures suddenly sprung from?

Lacan's intriguing answer is that what we perceive hovering in the silvery backdrop of Velázquez's painting is nothing other than the "ghost" of the subject insofar as it has been released by the Cartesian revolution and permitted to roam free in the brave new world of the age of scientific reason. The painting of *Las Meninas*, that is, depicts the moment of a certain unravelling of the Cartesian representational project in the very act of its founding gesture. For even as it inaugurates a world of rational certainty—an "all-seeing, all-knowing subject situated at the center of quantifiable matter" as the *res cogitans* has been described⁶—the Cartesian cogito simultaneously lets something loose upon the world. And what is more, this 'something' will seem to be underpinned by a form of support other than the omniscient and omnipresent God of Descartes. In Seminar XIII, Lacan variously identifies this support as a structural "distance," a "slit" and also as a "montage" which, he remarks, creates a "disarray" at the heart of the Cartesian subject.

3 From Mirror to Window

One way to index this moment is in terms of a shift in the conception of representational space that can be detected in the changing theories of vision from the medieval to the Renaissance periods. In his celebrated (if historically questionable) essay, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, Erwin Panofsky (1991) has tracked the emergence in the 15th century of a conception of an infinite, continuous space centered in a vanishing point that finds its apotheosis in single-point perspective.⁷ Leon Battista Alberti's famous "grid," a painting device that enables one to accurately establish the correct mathematical proportions of the receding planes in a checkerboard pattern as they are represented in reducing segments vertically up the picture plane, is usually cited as the definitive moment in *perspectiva artificialis*'s emplotment of this substantial, measurable world, whose chief characteristics henceforth will be homogeneity and indivisibility. Accordingly, as this story usually is told, while in the pre-Renaissance world-view, the world might appear as a reflection (a mirror of God's mind), post-Alberti, the predominant perceptual metaphor becomes that of a window. And it is through this perspectival 'window' that the Cartesian subject will be thought to apprehend the world, peeping out from an interiorized space onto an external world whose measure is no longer

6 See Massey whose magisterial book I am deeply indebted to in the discussion that follows (Massey, 2007).

7 Panofsky (1991). For a critique of Panofsky's historical method, see Damisch (1994).

God but the human subject. Mankind will be the yardstick through which extension is measured, and this shift becomes possible thanks to the representational event known as the Cartesian cogito.

To recall briefly, since this story is also exceptionally well known, in order to ground knowledge on some kind of firm foundation, Descartes asks the readers of the *Meditations* to exercise a radical methodological doubt. Everything that we think we know must be put to the test and only that which resists our attempts to doubt it can be regarded as knowledge. Having successively peeled away the seeming certitudes proposed by intuition and belief, Descartes then pauses on what seems to be indubitable: his own doubting thought. Insofar as I doubt, I must exist, Descartes concludes, and it is from this conviction that he can begin to rebuild the edifice of knowledge. But, crucially, from this moment on, reality will be conceived as a *representation* of reality, whose source and origin lie in the rationally constituted subject.

The apparent parallels between the self-knowing, self-certain subject of Descartes that sits outside the represented world and the external viewpoint implied by linear perspective have proved irresistible to many scholars. In her well-documented, alternative account of the history of perspective, Lyle Massey, however, urges caution to anyone who wishes to see the Cartesian subject as the philosophical “fulfilment” of Renaissance theories of perspective.⁸ For one, as she points out, as one of our sense impressions, sight, too, must be rigorously subjected to radical doubt. Furthermore, the visual sense is particularly deceptive, as Descartes himself observes in his *Dioptrics*. It is possible to ‘see’ things that are not before our eyes, as in dreams or delusions caused by “certain vapours.”⁹ Due to this tendency towards deception, sight—and by extension,

8 In fact, if one wishes to go in search of analogies for the cogito, there is one that offers itself even closer to home: in Descartes’ influential mathematical discoveries. One could argue that Descartes’ cogito performs a function that structurally parallels his major mathematical advance, which has come to be known as Cartesian analytical geometry. In his *Geometry* of 1637, which appeared as one of three essays in an appendix to the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes introduces what Jones calls a “new tool” into geometry: algebra. Allocating letters to represent unspecified line lengths in geometry, Descartes was able to represent geometrical diagrams as algebraic formulas. In permitting the “infinite production of mean proportionals” by means of algebraic equations in this way, Descartes’ analytical geometry enables one to transfer proportional relations across different lengths of space while still recognizing them as graspable unities. Similarly, the thinking “I” of the cogito, in standing in for the subject’s being, enables Descartes to “work” with something that remains at some level fundamentally unknowable. See Jones (2001).

9 Descartes (1954).

perspective—must fail as a “metaphor for the power and scope of the *res cogitans*.”¹⁰ But although there are thus good reasons to be suspicious of any simple correspondence between perspective as a branch of geometry and the *cogito*, there is one aspect in which they can be thought to converge, namely, in the idea that this representational distance can be given a mathematical value. Massey explains that the discovery in the 15th century of what comes to be known as “the distance point” is a crucial moment in the development of perspective.¹¹ Like much in the history of perspective, the distance point is a contested development but our art historian traces it back to two different traditions, the workshop tradition and medieval optical theory deriving from Euclid’s theorems.¹² By the time Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola published his ‘two rules of practical perspective’ (*Le due regole*) in 1583, the distance point method of perspectival construction had been well established as an alternative method to Alberti’s “centric-point” system.

Very schematically (and for those who wish to follow the development of this innovation in more depth I refer you to Massey’s excellent discussion), the distance point determines a lateral point, that is, a point on ‘our’ side of the picture plane which consists of the mirror image of the vanishing point. Representing the theoretical distance from which the painting is ‘intended’ to be viewed, the distance point enables the painter to determine the rate of diminution of the squares in a chequerboard pattern and, hence, represent figures on the picture plane in what appear to be perceptually accurate sizes.

10 Massey (2007, p. 35).

11 Massey (2007, p.44).

12 Massey (2007, pp.45-51).

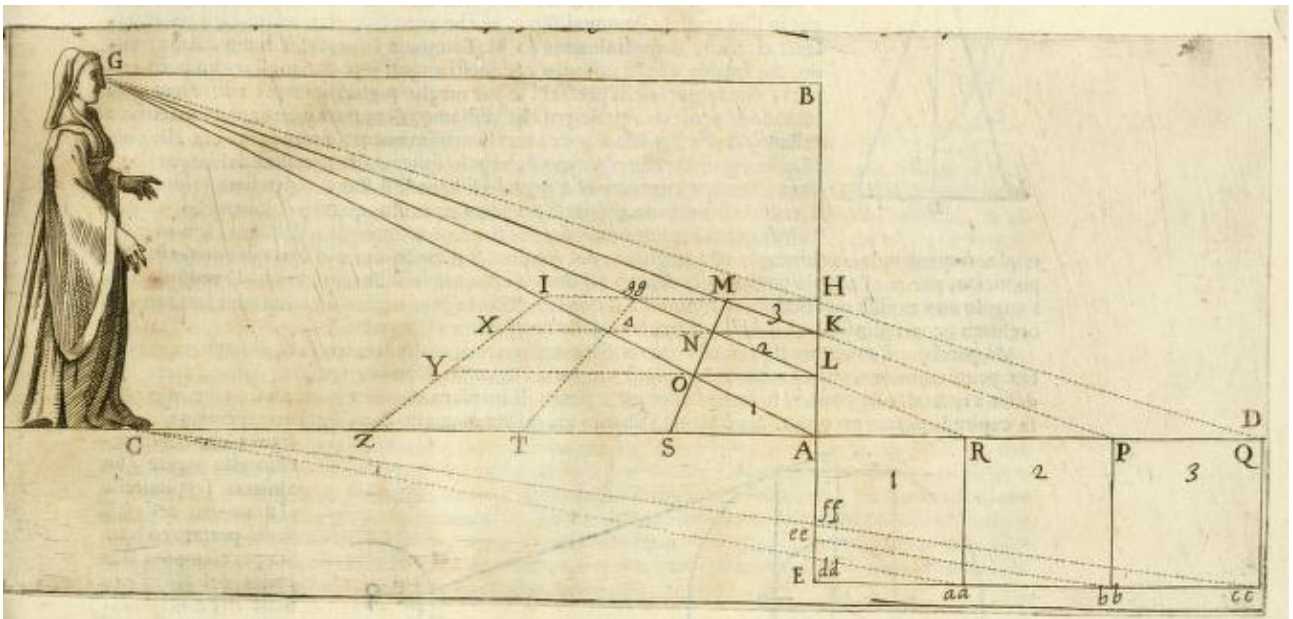


Figure 1. Vignola (Giacomo Barozzi), *First Rule*, *Le due regole della prospettiva pratica*. Rome, 1583 (as reprinted in the 1682 edition).

Differently from Albertian, single-point perspective which, as figure 1 demonstrates, still retains the idea of an external viewpoint, an Archimedean position ‘outside’ the representational space, distance point perspective includes the viewer within that space, projecting it into the visual field (figure 2).

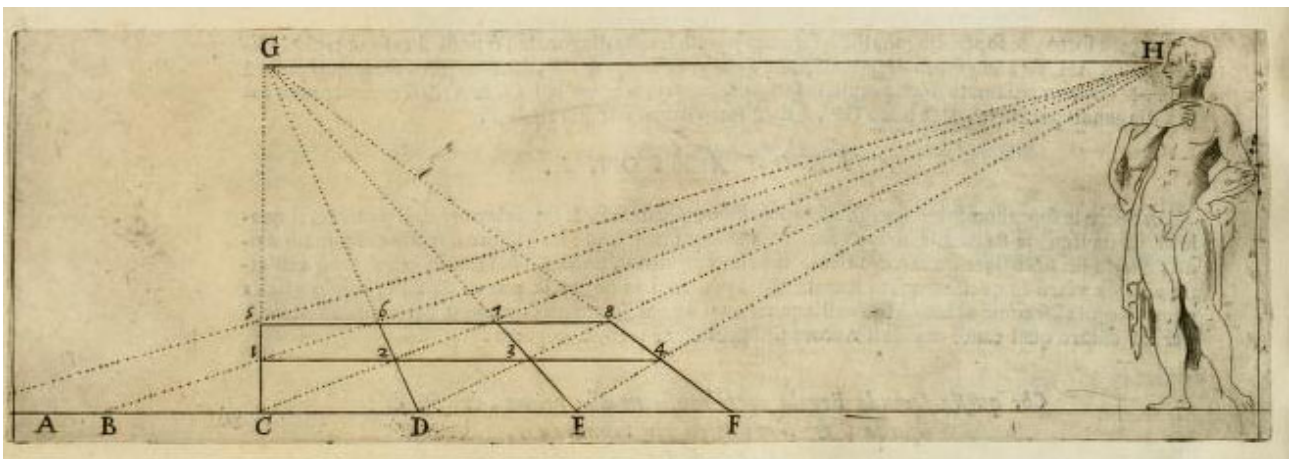


Figure 2. Vignola (Giacomo Barozzi), *Second Rule*, *Le due regole della prospettiva pratica*. Rome, 1583 (as reprinted in the 1682 edition)

As a result, perspectival space becomes organized around a point that lies *internal* to the painting itself. The link to a transcendental viewpoint, an outside, has been severed.

The chief benefit of this advance to the emerging geometrically justified theory of perspective, as Massey explains, was a new flexibility. In combining both the centric point (the traditional

vanishing point underpinning Albertian perspective) with a second, lateral vanishing point (common in the workshop tradition in the construction of foreshortened tiled floors), distance point perspective produces “a simple abstraction of the principles illustrated in the first (Albertian) rule.”¹³ Yet despite its clear value in enabling the production of mathematically precise images, this “simple abstraction” of linear perspective also appears as a double-edged sword for, in addition, it now allows the painter to manipulate the distance point in order to produce dramatic effects of distortion (prompting Leonardo da Vinci, as Massey notes, to “warn against the dangers of too much distortion”¹⁴). If one places the distance point either closer to or further from the edge of the painting, for example, it produces dramatic effects of vertical height or dizzying drops (exploited much later to marvellous effect by de Chirico), and opens up the way to the strange form of pictorial space known as anamorphosis.

The chief interest for Lacan of distance point perspective’s “other eye,” as he calls it in Seminar XIII, lies not so much in the alternative that this bifocal way of seeing offers to what Martin Jay has called the interpellating “monocular, unblinking fixed eye” of single-point perspective.¹⁵ For Lacan, the interest lies in how this development enables us to accurately model the “topology” of the split subject.¹⁶ For with the two vanishing points instantiated by distance-point perspective, two points of infinity become introduced into the representational field: the infinite point on the horizon line and a new point of infinity now occupied by the perceiving subject. What results, Lacan explains,

is that we have two subject points in every structure of a projective world or of a perspective world, two subject points, one which is any point whatsoever on the horizon line, on the plane of the figure, the other which is at the intersection of another line parallel to the first, which is called the fundamental line which expresses a relationship of the figure plane to the ground plane with the line to infinity, in the figure plane.¹⁷

Thus it seems that perspective may indeed offer an analogy for the Cartesian subject or “subject of modern science,” but this lies less in the conception of space they share than in the way (distance point) perspective articulates the relation of the subject to its representational identity. The relation

13 Massey (2007, p. 52).

14 Massey (2007, p. 44).

15 Jay (1993, p. 54).

16 Lacan (1966, lesson of 4 May).

17 Lacan (1966, lesson of 11 May).

of the (infinite) perceiving subject to the represented image (of infinity) in a perspectival drawing or painting, in Lacan's reading, will be found to be structurally isomorphic to the two "I"s of the Cartesian cogito, "I think, therefore I am." One could think of the viewer, the painting and its vanishing point as the three-dimensional model, as a sort of standing cardboard cut-out if you like, of the Cartesian formula in the act of suturing being to thought (i.e. being's representation).

Nevertheless, it is also worth noting at this point that, just as there are far-reaching representational implications of introducing this second vanishing point into perspective, the same can be said for the rational subject. Perspective's Latin name, *perspectiva artificialis*, testifies to the way it has long been recognised how the move to flatten three-dimensional space in two-dimensional form onto a plane invariably causes something of the natural world to get lost in the translation. In the parallel conceptual move that is the Cartesian equation as it stitches the two infinite points of the subject (cogito, sum) together in the "ergo," something equally is caused to slip from the result.

Yet whatever this something is—as we saw, Lacan earlier called it the "ghost" of the subject—it evidently never falls away too far from its source. Instead it circulates in the representational world as a testament to the fact that, despite its totalizing claims, representation fails to represent everything. Not everything that is in the world can be depicted by representation, but rather something inevitably falls out. In earlier lessons, Lacan describes this something as a "hole" in knowledge,¹⁸ but it also features later in the linguistic/numerical "enigma" that emerges as the effect of every effort of formalization.¹⁹

18 Lacan (1966, lesson of 15 December).

19 See the lesson of 20 April, 1966 and then again in the second session of Seminar XIV, The Logic of Fantasy where Lacan refers to a trick taught by Franckel who, having inscribed the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4 on the board, asked one of his students to "write the smallest whole number that is not written on the board" beneath them. The trick, as Lacan explains to his bemused audience, lies in the directive - Franckel was not asking the student to write down the numerical answer but the sentence itself on the board. Once you write on the board the sentence "the smallest whole number that is not written on the board," one enters into the "enigma" of writing, making it impossible to 'solve' the problem. For from the moment that the above sentence is written on the board, the answer to the problem (i.e. the number 5) is "excluded," Lacan observes, by being already written on the board (in the form of the linguistic statement). Lacan continues, "You have only to search, then, whether the smallest whole number which is not written on the board might not, perchance, be the number 6, and you find yourself with the same difficulty, namely, that from the moment that you pose the question, the number 6 as the smallest whole number which is not written on the board, is written on it and so on." As an example of the paradox of formalization, Franckel's trick enacts, as it were, the very thing it is talking about. Lacan (1966).

As a result of this, and staying with the image of the Cartesian cut-out for a moment, it transpires that what should be a simple reversible line (or viewpoint) connecting the two infinite points of the subject in the representational gesture turns out to have a twist contained in it. The connecting line (or viewpoint) is a Möbius strip that circles around some never-to-be-discovered turning point.

Later in the seminar, this turn becomes reconfigured as a gap or distance, then as a slit, a view, a look and a window.²⁰ Lacan explains, “It is in so far as the window, in the relationship of the look to the seen world is always what is elided, that we can represent for ourselves the function of the object, the window, namely, just as much the slit between the eye lids, namely, just as much the entrance of the pupil, namely, just as much what constitutes this most primitive of all objects in anything concerned with vision, the camera obscura.”²¹

We will come back to this reference to the camera obscura a little later but in the meantime we should observe how Lacan’s conceptual refashioning of the object (a) as a window in this seminar not only provides a useful model of the (a) in its role as the support for the fantasy: the desiring “scene” that the subject invariably sees as it looks out into the world, and whose contours and aspect will be dictated by the mathematical ‘values’ that make up the (a)’s distance from the subject which was established in the original suturing act of representation, the cogito ergo sum. As a ‘window,’ the object (a) invites the idea of a two-way look, and it is this aspect that Lacan will emphasize in his discussion of the Velázquez painting insofar as this painting, for him, represents—makes appear—the relationship of the subject to the object (a).²²

As mentioned earlier, we should not mistake this two-directional look as the look of the subject into a mirror (as Lacan repeatedly emphasizes, the object (a) is non-specularizable). Nor could it ever be the look of another subject. The look in question, what turns and peers back at the subject through the open window of the slit or the frame is a look that, strictly speaking, does not see. A couple of years earlier, in Seminar XI, Lacan identified this look in the form of the blind winking light of the sardine can in the sunlight which was brought to his attention during a youthful fishing adventure by a certain Petit Jean.²³ But now, it seems for Lacan, that this unseeing look—the gaze—has found in Velázquez a painter adequate to depicting it.

20 Lacan (1966, 11 May).

21 Lacan (1966, 11 May).

22 Lacan (1966, 11 May).

23 Lacan (1981, p. 95).

4 Anamorphosis

How are we to understand this? The key to Lacan's reading of *Las Meninas* lies in the interplay of looks he identifies taking place among the represented figures. Lacan notes how in fact each of the "personages" in *Las Meninas* are there only insofar as they "are not at all representations but '*en representation*'"—that is to say, in the act of representing. This strange circulation of looks Lacan draws our attention to in his lesson of 11 May, 1966 and again on the 25th May, highlights what could be considered vision's meta-representational function, for none of the personages meet each other's eye but their gazes criss-cross one another in a play of "inter-vision" as he puts it, to become representations of looking.

At this point, one should note how in Lacan's teaching, it is not only sight but rather each of the so-called 'natural' objects (the look, the cry, the breast, the faeces and the penis) that can and do undergo this transformation into becoming a representative of themselves. This transformation occurs when an "assembly" or "mounting" of a pressure, experienced at the surface of a bodily orifice, enters into representation by being given a name. But, according to the narrative we have been tracing, we know that whenever anything enters into representation, something will inevitably fall out, in this case, some of the original pressure is left over after the satisfaction of the body's (named) needs—the demand is always for something more than what can be given at the level of need. Lacan will famously define desire as the difference separating need from demand, once need has been subtracted from demand. Desire is thus what is left over, what drops out from the circle of demand, need and satisfaction. Now, to the extent that this 'difference' can be represented, it is in the form of the representatives of representation, the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanzen* which comprise the partial objects (the gaze, the voice, the (a) and the phallus). These second-order or meta-representational objects, that represent not the pressure but the failure of the object of need to satisfy, populate the subject's fantasy-scene as the object cause(s) of desire: the infinitely receding points towards which the 'orthogonal lines' of the subject's desiring history will invariably point.

A considerable amount of critical attention has been paid to these 'infinite' objects as the object causes of desire but what has been less commented on, however,—and this is, I believe, the fascination and function of Velázquez's painting for Lacan as he seeks to explicate the 'object of psychoanalysis'—is the way these representative 'objects,' these representatives of representation, also have the capacity to "look back." And once again, the construction of distance point perspective can be employed here to help us understand this point.

Returning to the previous discussion, we learned how, with the introduction of the second vanishing

point, a new flexibility is introduced into perspective, giving artists the freedom to raise and lower the viewpoint to produce singular effects of distortion. The most dramatic of these effects is that known as *perspective curieuse* or anamorphosis. Anamorphosis describes images depicted under such extremes of distortion that it is only possible to make visual sense of them by viewing them from a particular physical angle (such as with one's eye placed close to the surface of the paper or seen from the side). As Massey relates, Leonardo da Vinci's explorations of distortion indicate an early interest in the possibilities of anamorphosis, but it is not until the 17thC that the Minim friar, Jean-Francois Niceron, formalizes a method for creating anamorphic images.²⁴ In his treatise, *La perspective curieuse* (1651), Niceron shows how a trapezoidal grid can be used to manipulate the relation of the principal vanishing point and the distance point such that a drawing of a chair will appear distorted (figure 3). In this figure, the distance point (R) has been dragged across the picture to sit alongside (rather than opposite) the centric point (Q), resulting in an image that is profoundly elongated unless viewed from a tilted position to one side of the page.

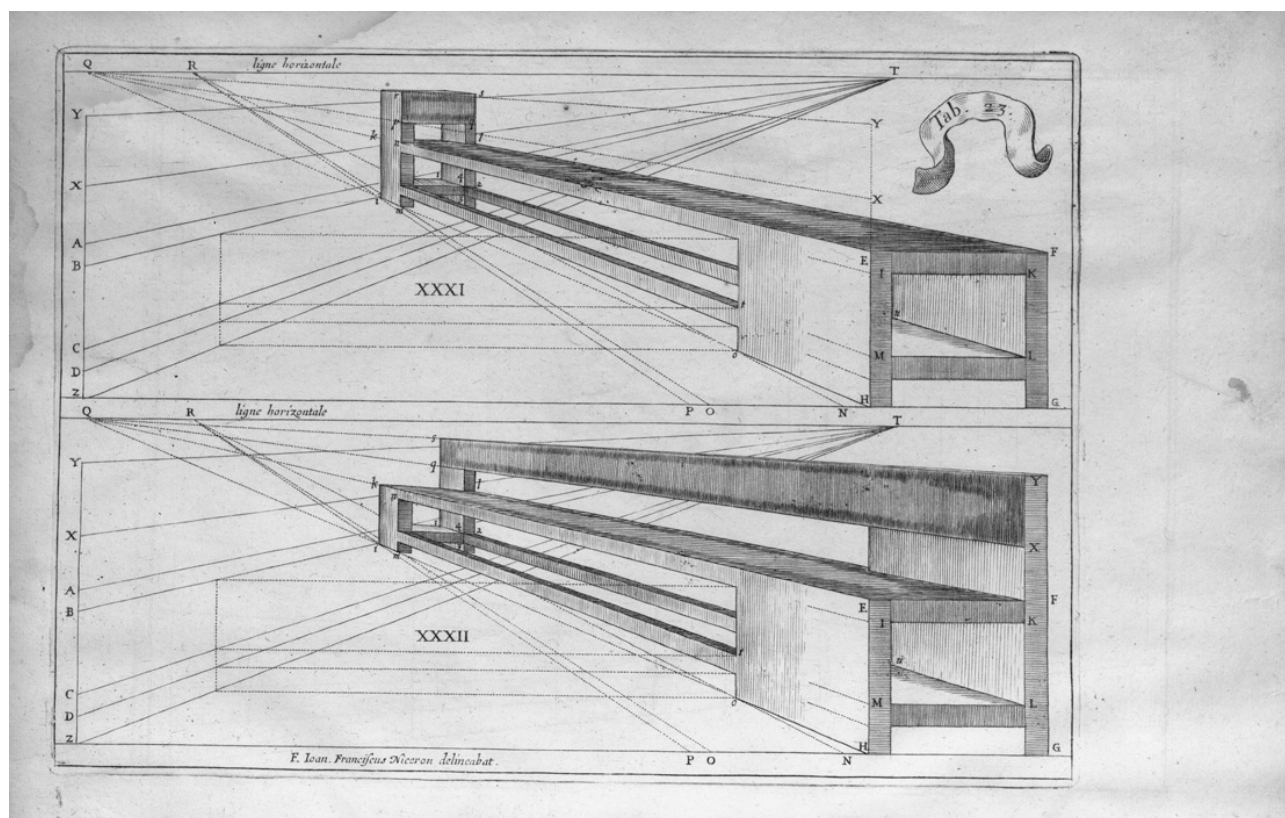


Figure 3 Jean-Francois Niceron. A chair in anamorphic perspective, *La perspective curieuse*. Paris, 1965

Crucially, as Massey explains, in anamorphosis, the projection of perspective is reversed: “the picture no longer recedes away from but rather extends toward the viewer,” with the result being that the object can be “understood as situated between the eye and the picture plane.”²⁵

Keeping this in mind, we can understand Lacan’s enigmatic statement that *Las Meninas* is a “trap for the look” as follows: ²⁶ through his use of what, at first glance, appears to be single-point perspective, Velázquez solicits the viewer into the painting by the geometric conventions of linear perspective. But in a sudden twist, upon registering that “we” are the ones being painted, the relation of subject and object becomes reversed. Rather than being the viewing subject, we discover we are ourselves the object of the look. Yet this turn-around is not a simple reversal for the reason that, as many critics have noted, there is *more than one vanishing point in the painting*. This multiplicity of centric points disrupts what should be a closed circuit of the exchange of looks. In their rebuttal of John Searle’s analysis of the Velázquezian “paradox,” for example, Snyder and Cohen locate the ‘true’ (i.e. linear) vanishing point in the crook of the left arm of the figure gracing the back doorway.²⁷ But as others, not only Searle, but also such luminaries as Leo Steinberg, W.J.T. Mitchell and Michel Foucault, have variously noted, a second vanishing point clearly seems to impose itself upon us in the central figures of the King and Queen, whose paradoxical presence in the painting has already been noted.

These presence of these (at least) two vanishing points reveals, in Amy Schmitter’s words, the absence of any “punctilinear and immobile viewing position.”²⁸ The effect is a viewpoint that is intrinsically “mobile.”²⁹ While I agree with Schmitter’s thesis, I would locate this “mobility” not in ‘our’ viewing position as it “shifts across the vanishing area from here to there on the canvas’s surface,” as she puts it. Rather, the mobility surely belongs on the side of what Lacan calls the “tableau vivant.” For can we not see the strange multi-directional looks that Lacan highlights as the key to *Las Meninas* as belonging to figures who peer at an image that is not immediately ‘readable’ to them. Turning their heads this way and that, they seem to be trying out different positions from

25 Massey (2007, p. 56).

26 Lacan (1966, lesson of 25 May).

27 Snyder and Cohen (1980).

28 Other critics have identified no fewer than three central points in the painting. See Umberger (1995, pp. 94-117 ; 98).

29 Schmitter (1996, p. 260).

which to view “us.” If so, the painting will have constructed us as an anamorphic object, one that, like the chair in Nicéron’s diagram, “jumps out” at them into the space between the painter and his picture, and requires a certain angle from which to be properly seen.

Although I indicated earlier that Velázquez appears to have painted a Möbius strip, perhaps we can now refine this by saying that what we have in front of us as we look at *Las Meninas* is a cross-cap. The huge, near life-size scale of the canvas which, as critics have observed, seems to suck the viewer into the representational space,³⁰ initially pulls us into a circuit of desire: like the little Infanta, into whose mouth Lacan puts the insistent words “let me see,” we want to be allowed to see what’s on the painting whose image is turned away from us. However, as we have seen from the above, representation is never a simple matter of disclosure, as if all ‘Velázquez’ needs to do is turn the image around to its front to show us. As Descartes discovered, in the one and the same gesture of looking, the viewing subject also becomes the object of a look. We are also always seen from another place, albeit, as Lacan puts it, “you do not see me from where I am looking at you.” Each time we complete the circuit of the painting that seems to look back at us, then, another look is simultaneously in play, coming at us from a different angle and viewing us from a place where we cannot see it (i.e. the angle of anamorphosis or, in Lacan’s terms, of the Other’s demand). One might conceive this second look as the effect of our line of sight becoming ‘condensed’ or ‘coagulated’ in some manner (the metaphor Lacan uses is that of a super-saturated crystalline solution³¹), infused with some form of ‘body’ that has dropped out from the line of single-point perspectival viewpoint. This second look hovers just outside our representational field, tracing a circuit around (what is now revealed to be) a three-dimensional line. It is a look that *looks at the look*, as it were. Thus what we believed to be a simple, punctilinear line of sight is in fact a torus around which two circuits are traced where we believed there to be only one.³²

5 Henry James and temporal perspective

I am going to leave more detailed explanation of Lacan’s topological models to others who are better fitted to this task and rather turn, in closing, to the question of what we might see if it were

30 Alpers (1983, p. 31; Umberger 1995, p. 99).

31 Lacan (1966, 25 May).

32 See Lacan’s discussion of desire and demand in his lesson of 5 January, 1966 where, discussing the figures of the torus, the Möbius strip and the cross-cap, he states “a desire always presupposes at least two demands and a demand always presupposes at least two desires.” Lacan (1966).

given to us to see what “they” (the figures on Velázquez’s canvas) see when they look at us in all our anamorphic glory.³³ To answer this, I can think of no better figure to turn to than Henry James. From a certain angle, James’s entire oeuvre—but certainly that of his later period—can be regarded as an ongoing exploration of the compositional complexities attending our modern world as a world of representation. And in fact James’s fiction is rife with figures of painters, sculptors and writers, not to mention ghostly mediums, seeking (with greater or lesser success) once and for all to cast aside the veil of representational illusion and grasp not merely “The Real Thing” (to name the title of one of his tales) but, even more hopefully, “The Real Right Thing” (to name another of his tales). Appropriately enough, it is one of James’s own ghost stories I wish to draw your attention to here. “The Jolly Corner” was published in 1908 in Ford Maddox Ford’s newly founded *The English Review*. It tells the story of Spencer Bryden who returns to his native New York after thirty years abroad and encounters his double lurking in his old childhood home. Thus although it is not explicitly a tale about art, “The Jolly Corner” is nevertheless very much concerned with the problem of perspective, albeit in this case, of temporal rather than spatial perspective.

On his return to New York to look out for his property—two houses whose rents have financed his long sojourn in Europe—Bryden finds himself taken over by the question of what he might have become had he not left his metropolitan hometown at the age of twenty-three. This question, which quickly develops into a full-blown obsession, arises as a result of his discovering that he has an unexpected, albeit unused, aptitude for business. This discovery sparks the idea that he might have been different, might have become a billionaire, might have—as his eternally-waiting, deeply perceptive, oldest, dearest and most ironic friend, Alice, delicately puts it—“had power.”

It was mere vain egoism, and it was moreover, if she liked, a morbid obsession. He found all things come back to the question of what he personally might have been, how he might have led his life and ‘turned out,’ if he had not so, at the outset, given it up.³⁴

Bryden gets carried away by this fascinating idea, becoming convinced that his alter ego—the man he might have become had he chosen to devote his life to the profit motive rather than to art, that is to say, to *jouissance* rather than to desire³⁵—is lying low in the little house on the eastward corner. Increasingly, he finds himself ineluctably drawn to the house on “the jolly corner” and he begins to

33 See Vandermersch.

34 James (1999, p. 954).

35 “Profit” is one of the possible translations for Lacan’s concept of *jouissance*.

haunt the property. He starts to visit it at odd hours to creep through the numerous rooms and ante-rooms, through “nooks and corners, in closets and passages, in the ramifications especially of an ample back staircase over which he leaned, many a time, to look far down.”³⁶ After several nights on the prowl, Bryden becomes convinced of being “definitely followed, tracked at a distance carefully taken.”

He was kept in sight while remaining himself—as regards the essence of his position—sightless, and his only recourse then was in abrupt turns, rapid recoveries of ground. He wheeled about, retracing his steps, as if he might so catch in his face at least the stirred air of some other quick revolution.³⁷

Chasing the “presence” down mazes of crooked passageways, up rickety stairways, in through open doorways and around sharp corners, always just at the point of catching him in focus before he dissolves, Bryden at last senses victory: “He's *there*, at the top, and waiting—not, as in general, falling back for disappearance.”³⁸ “I've hunted him till he has ‘turned’; that, up there, is what has happened, he's the fanged or the antlered animal brought at last to bay.”³⁹ Yet what he sees, once he has finally caught the image of his other self in what we might call its ‘correct’ perspectival angle, is enough to make him faint. It is not the regal, powerful, enhanced reflection Bryden has been dreaming of, but a horrific and depraved “somebody”: “it loomed, it gloomed, it was something, it was somebody, the prodigy of a personal presence.”⁴⁰

Initially, the ‘other’ Bryden is seen protectively covering his face with his hands—of which, adding to Bryden’s revulsion, two fingers appear to have gone missing, “as if accidentally shot away.”⁴¹ But once the figure opens and then drops his hands, Bryden confronts the full face of his ‘object.’ It is all too much for poor Spencer:

No portrait by a great modern master could have presented him with more intensity, thrust him out of his frame with more art, as if there had been ‘treatment,’ of the consummate sort, in his every shade and salience. The revulsion, for our friend, had become, before he knew it, immense [...]. Horror, with the sight, had leaped into Bryden’s throat, gasping there in a sound he couldn’t utter; for the bared identity was too hideous as *his*, and his glare was the passion of his protest.

36 James (1999, p. 961).

37 James (1999, p. 962).

38 James (1999, p. 963).

39 James (1999, p. 963).

40 James (1999, p. 973).

41 James (1999, p. 974).

The face, *that* face, Spencer Brydon's?—he searched it still, but looking away from it in dismay and denial, falling straight from his height of sublimity. [...]. Such an identity fitted his at *no* point, made its alternative monstrous. [...] Then [...] sick with the force of his shock, and falling back as under the hot breath and the roused passion of a life larger than his own, a rage of personality before which his own collapsed, he felt the whole vision turn to darkness and his very feet give way. His head went round; he was going; he was gone.⁴²

Leaving aside the question of what kind of 'art' might be involved in producing this remarkable vision that seems to leap literally from its frame, James strikes me as unsurpassed here when it comes to giving voice to the abject horror that confronts the subject faced with the image of its own enjoying being. With his typical acuity, James discloses the catastrophe that would result if we could see ourselves from the point of view of the Other, that is, as anamorphic objects angularly jutting out onto 'this,' the 'wrong' side of our representational window. For, as James implies with Bryden's emphatic fall from consciousness, to see ourselves as the Other sees us would inevitably bring about the complete collapse of the perspectival (desiring) fantasy, the very fantasy that is quite literally the subject's support in the representational world.

In her reading of *Las Meninas*, Svetlana Alpers makes an intriguing suggestion which seems related to my discussion, and offers another way of thinking about the relation between desire and the drive. For as it transpires in the penultimate lesson of the seminar, it is this relation that Lacan's discussion of *Las Meninas* has been circling around all along.⁴³ Alpers proposes that the Velázquez painting essentially depicts the two modes of representation that have been central to Western art. Interestingly, she tropes these two modes in terms of a window and a surface. The first, which she identifies as "Albertian" conceives of the artist as a viewer who is "actively looking out at objects" from the viewer's side of the picture surface (which is then reconstructed onto the picture plane by the conventions of linear perspective). The second mode of representation, however, is conceived as a surface onto which an image of the world "casts itself." As she describes it,

In place of an artist who frames the world to picture it, the world produces its own image without a necessary frame. This replicative image is just there for the looking, without the intervention of a human maker.⁴⁴

42 James (1999, p. 973-4).

43 See the discussion of 8 June, 1966, where he introduces another "object," linked to the object of the look, called the "voice." He says "we should ask ourselves about the object through which the subject is involved in the dialectic of the Other in so far as this time it does not respond either to demand or to desire, but to *jouissance*." Lacan (1966).

44 Alpers (1983, p. 37).

It is the representational mode of the camera obscura, a notion of representation which, as she puts it, assumes the world “is prior to any human presence” that might measure and frame it.⁴⁵

Although Alpers’ chief interest in introducing these two representational modes is to make a case for a political reading of *Las Meninas* (that is, Velazquez’s concern about the nature and condition of the bankrupt social order of 17thC Spain), her suggestion nevertheless strikes a chord with what I have proposed above. But we could go further still to say that every instance of the first mode of representation (the window, linear perspective, human desire) presupposes the second mode (the surface, anamorphosis, the inhuman drive). The very possibility of seeing a world of order, of reason, of the centrality of man—in short, the suppositions of Renaissance humanism as they undergird the modern scientific method—leans on another possibility with which it is inextricably linked. Crossing in silence in front of the representational plane—as Lacan phrases it, “an angel has passed”—this other mode of seeing continues to haunt the first as its unconscious truth.

6 Conclusion

In James’s tale, Bryden eventually comes to, but only in the embracing pillow of Alice Staverton’s lap. Subjectively reconstituted by her enframing arms, Bryden is thankfully brought back “to knowledge, to knowledge—yes this was the beauty of his state.”⁴⁶ Lacan, too, in his lesson of 8 June, the final lesson of the seminar, comments how before its jouissance, “the subject is embarrassed,” before going on to explain how the barrier the subject erects before its jouissance is “very precisely desire itself.”⁴⁷ Evidently, there is something protective in knowledge/desire that shields the subject from its truth, allowing us to look through (rather than at) the frame that supports us. It is therefore interesting that Lacan will claim in his lesson of 25 May that the artist renounces the representational mode that is the window in favor of something he calls “the picture.” What is the “picture” Lacan speaks of? It is the “transmutation” that occurs in the work of art. But in what does this transmutation consist?

It is once more a question of the representative of representation, of this meta-representational or

45 Alpers (1983, p. 39).

46 James (1999, p. 975). The question of Bryden’s sexual orientation has been the subject of some critical debate. See, for example, Savoy (1999). My point here, however, is not to argue for a normative, heterosexual reading of the tale but to suggest that desire tout court - both hetero- and homosexual - is implicated in the mode of representation Lacan calls the window.

47 Lacan (1966, lesson of 8 June).

formalizational move whose ghostly effects we have been tracing. What is being represented in this second-order way by means of art? It seems to be desire itself, but only to the extent that desire is itself already a representative of representation. Art, Lacan appears to be saying, performs a further representational transformation but this, for once, does not cause the object to drop out, but rather envelops it in a peculiar way. To explain this, let us turn to Lacan's lesson of 25 May. Here he refers to what he calls a little "physics-for-fun" trick, Henri Bouasse's inverted bouquet illusion which in the *Écrits* was employed to show how the subject forms an ideal ego, the illusion of a bodily image.⁴⁸ In this schema, an optical illusion is created when a vase, glued upside down to a board, is placed in front of a spherical mirror and a bouquet of flowers is placed above it. Reflected in the spherical mirror, the flowers appear to be in the vase which, in an optical illusion, now appears upright. Although as I said, this optical illusion was previously used to demonstrate the subject's "virtual image," Lacan now employs it in a new way to explain how the Other supports and envelops the object (a). Comparing the Velázquez painting and Bouasse's optical trick, he explains,

what resembles more this sort of secret object, in a brilliant garment which is on the one hand, here, represented in the bouquet of flowers hidden, veiled, taken, encompassed, around this enormous dress of the vase, which is both a real image and a real image seized in the virtual due to the mirror, than the clothes of this little Infanta, the illuminated personage, the central personage.⁴⁹

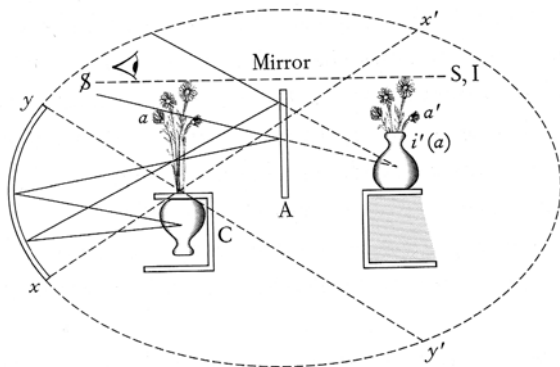


Figure 4. Lacan. *Second Optical Model of the Ideals of the Person*. *Écrits*. New York, 2006

It seems that in the gap left by the object (a) as it falls out of representation, something else may

48 Lacan (2006, p. 675).

49 Lacan (1966, lesson of 25 May).

appear which is held in place by the blind vision of the Other. This something is what Lacan calls “the picture,” which stands staring at us in plain sight, in the center of the painting where the two lines that divide up the picture cross. It is the figure of the little Infanta. Encompassed by her golden raiment, the “enormous dress of the vase” as Lacan puts it, the Infanta is an object that “[we] analysts know well.” She is there, he maintains, as a reminder of the “meeting point” that is the end of an analysis. It seems there is a point where the circular dialectic of desire and drive around the fallen object can acquire a positive form, and this form is the phallus insofar as it has been given its own “positive stamp” (as James would say) by the subject. The transformation of the (a) into the phallus with its own positive stamp is one definition of what occurs in the traversal of the fantasy. Like some fantastic ballooning animal, the window is sucked through its own aperture and spreads out in a billowing, enveloping, golden sphere.

It is not just the artist, then, who performs this “renunciation” of the window in favor of the picture but it is performed “by every one of us” insofar as we manage to create a master signifier that functions as our Archimedean point. The phallic signifier is, if you like, the ‘first’ work of art, an original creative act that gathers into a single open stem the efflorescence of all our partial objects. We could say that art’s phallic transformation presents to us the gift of the (a) in a wrapper, as long as we remember that the wrapping ‘is’ nothing other than the (a) turned inside out or turned around, pulled through a Klein bottle to spread out like a golden field at our feet.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my fellow Circle for Lacanian Ideology Critique members Thomas Brockelman, Dominiek Hoens, Bruno Besana, Emiliano Battista and Leon Linotte for their insights when we read Seminar XIII at the Jan van Eyck Academie from 2007-2008. Much of what I present here draws on those sessions (any errors in this interpretation of Lacan are of course my own). Figures 1 and 2 are reprinted courtesy of the Research Library, The Getty Research Institute, from the Internet Archive. Figure 3 is reprinted under Creative Commons license NC-ND 2.0 France, courtesy of Bibliothèques Virtuelles Humanistes. Figure 4 is reprinted with permission from *Écrits: the First Complete Edition in English by Jacques Lacan*. Translated by Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg. Copyright © 1996, 1970, 1971, 1999 by Editions du Deuil. English translation copyright © 2006, 2002 by W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

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