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**Vuksan Vuksanović**
*Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia*

# Foucault's Analysis and Interdisciplinary Perspective on Velázquez's Painting *Las Meninas*

**Abstract:** This paper examines Michel Foucault's interpretation of Diego Velázquez's painting *Las Meninas* (1656) which he uses to illustrate shifts in épistémès throughout history. After analyzing Foucault's interpretation, I extended his approach by employing an interdisciplinary perspective to relativize some of his concepts. The study incorporates various interdisciplinary methods, demonstrating that these approaches lead to a more profound understanding of the ontological, aesthetic, technical, psychological, and sociological dimensions of Velázquez's painting. This strategy demonstrates that artistic creations are dynamic and surpass simplistic dualistic frameworks, methodological relativism, and determinism. As a result, *Las Meninas* emerges as a self – referential artefact, continuously evolving in meaning through different epistemological and social frameworks.

**Keywords:** representation; Foucault; *Las Meninas*; épistémè; interdisciplinary analysis; self-referentiality.

## Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656)

The painting *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez depicts a scene in the painter's studio at the Royal Alcázar of Madrid, in one of the rooms of the Spanish King Philip IV's palace. The central figure is the five-year old princess Margarita Teresa, surrounded by her ladies-in-wating, dwarfs, and a dog. To the right of the princess stand the maids of honour, María Agustina Sarmiento and Isabel de Velasco, while on the left are the dwarfs Mari Bárbola and Nicolás Pertusato with Nicolás gently nudging the dog with his foot as if trying to wake it up. Behind them are the housekeeper, Marcela de Ulloa, and a bodyguard. On the left, Velázquez is painting on a large canvas, holding his palette and looking at the viewer of the painting. In the background, the reflections of King Philip IV of Austria and Queen Marianne are reflected in a mirror, but their exact location in the scene remains unclear: although the mirror presents them, it does not directly depict them. Also, there are two large paintings on the back wall which are showing scenes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In the upper right corner,

*Author's contact information: vuksan.vuksanovic.20184011@fmk.edu.rs

an open door leads to a staircase where Don José Nieto Velázquez, the queen's chamberlainis standing. His presence adds an element of uncertainty – we are not sure whether he is entering or exiting the room.[1]

## Foucault's Analysis of *Las Meninas*

Michel Foucault interprets Velázquez's *Las Meninas* as an exemple of "pure representation" illustrating the classical épistémè›s approach to visibility and boundaries in art.[2] He highlights Velázquez's detailed depiction of himself and his subjects including Infanta Margarita and her entourage, using traditional identifiers. The mirror plays a crucial role in revealing the unseen presence of King Philip IV and his wife Mariana; thus creating dual visibility that captures both the observed and the observers. Foucault notes, "The mirror allows for a metathesis of visibility that simultaneously affects the space represented in the picture and its character as a representation; It reveals aspects on the canvas that are invisible in the painting itself."[3]

In this Velázquez painting, there seems to be a representation of classical ideals and the definitions they reveal. The scene strives to capture every aspect – images, gazes, visible faces, and gestures that give it life. Yet, it is in this very dispersion, which the painting seeks to gather and present as a cohesive whole, that a profound emptiness emerges: the necessary absence of what this dispersion relies upon – the disappearance of the original subject, which it merely mirrors. Ultimately, liberated from this constraining relationship, the representation can exist as pure representation.[4]

According to Foucault, the subject (viewer or depicted) is excluded from this representation; although central to the process of viewing and depicting, the subject remains invisible within the complex web of relations within the painting. Ultimately, when freed from this constraint, the painting can become "pure representation" – a depiction without trying to fully portray reality.

This groundbreaking analysis is introduced at the beginning of *The Order of Things*, where Foucault emphasizes that the analysis is not aimed at describing knowledge in its pursuit of objectivity, but at exploring the "epistemological field" or "épistémè". He defines *épistémè* as "the totality of relationships that, in a given period, unite discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems."[5] Foucault undertakes the task of showing how different forms of empirical knowledge develop not as a result of increasing perfection but through

[1] Las Meninas was completed in 1656 while Velázquez served at the court of Philip IV, a position he had held since 1623. For more details about the painting, see *Las Meninas*, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Las-meninas, acc. on May 29, 2024; "Las Meninas by Diego Velázquez – A Spanish Painter Art Study," *Art in Context*, https://www.artincontext.org/las-meninas, acc. on May 29, 2024.

[2] Michel Foucault, *Riječi i stvari. Arheologija humanističkih znanosti* [The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences] (Belgrade: Nolit, 1971), 109.

[3] Ibid., 77.

[4] Ibid., 83.

[5] Foucault, *Riječi i stvari*, 65–66.

the historical conditions of their possibility, which he calls "archaeology"[6].

"This archaeological survey revealed two significant discontinuities in the *épistémè* of Western culture: one that marks the onset of the classical era in the mid-17th century and another at the beginning of the 19th century, marking the threshold of our modern age. The order on which we base our thinking does not have the same mode of existence as the order of classicism."[7] Foucault emphasizes that these changes indicate fundamental shifts in the way society organizes and understands knowledge. "This does not mean that thought has progressed, but rather that the mode of being of things and the order by which they are arranged and offered to knowledge has undergone profound changes."[8] Changes in knowledge result from changes in the order and the way things are organized, suggesting a distinction between language and actual reality.

"However, it seems comforting and deeply reassuring to think that man is a recent discovery, a figure that is less than two centuries old, a mere crease in our knowledge, who will vanish as soon as this knowledge finds a different form."[9] This suggests that the concept of man is relatively new within the *épistémè*, supporting the idea that our definitions and concepts are tied to specific historical and epistemological frameworks, and can change as these frameworks change. Within these frameworks lie fields of knowledge and power that are inseparably linked and shape social actors.[10] Therefore, he rejects the belief that knowledge can be reduced to mere vocabulary and insists on the importance of historical structures and norms that shape discourse.[11] In doing so, he critiques the modern notion of power, opposing traditional hierarchical models that fail to detect its dynamic and pervasive nature.[12]

Expanding to a broader context, Foucault argues that our concepts of subject and identity are products of historical and social discourses, with *Las Meninas* reflecting on epistemological changes. He states: "The project of a general science of order, the theory of signs that analyzes representation, the arrangement of ordered tables of similarities and differences: thus, in classicism, the space of empiricism was constituted, which did not exist until the end of the Renaissance and would be condemned to disappear by the early19th century."[13] The classical "épistémè," he argues, relies on a specific organization of knowledge, where "the relationship between the signifier and the signified is situated in a space where no intermediary figure ensures their encounter: within the framework of knowledge, this relationship is merely a connection

[6] Ibid, 66.

[7] Ibid., 66.

[8] Ibid., 67.

[9] Ibid., 67.

[10] Ibid., 92–95.

[11] Ibid., 63–67.

[12] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 98–101.

[13] Foucault, *Riječi i stvari*, 135.

between the idea of a thing and the idea of another thing."[14] This perspective highlights the absence of mediators between ideas, defining the classical structure of representation.

Foucault identifies a "precarious game of metamorphoses"[15] between the viewer of Velázquez's painting and the depicted model; he continues from an epistemological perspective, avoiding analysis of the painting's political context, or the aesthetic and interpersonal relationships within the royal court, as these are not his focus.

## Expanding Foucault's approach to analysis

The aim is to continue from where Foucault left off and explore how interactions with works of art like *Las Meninas* continuously generate new interpretations and how the painting can evolve through different 'épistémè', discourses, and systems of power. In this context, representations illuminate the interaction between language and power, demonstrating how discourse shapes our understanding of the world and implying that individuals are shaped by external factors. Judith Butler's critique of Foucault suggests that identity formation involves more than external discourses; it is actively constituted through performative acts.[16] However, Velázquez's painting does not simply reflect reality; it participates in the construction of meaning as a metapicture.[17]

Perhaps, using Foucault's cautious tone, the "emptiness and disappearance of the subject" in the painting symbolize a creative space where meaning is continually generated and redefined through interaction with the viewer. Representation is a process of creating meaning and shapes our perception of reality, with the order of things always constructed by discourse. However, "thrownness into the world" (Geworfenheit)[18] and the body are the meeting points of the subjective and the objective, playing a fundamental role in shaping meaning and perception; the body is the primary place of world understanding, and our sensory experiences shape our understanding of reality.[19] This means that perception is not only a cognitive but also a bodily process. This idea, developed in the works of researchers George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, emphasizes that our understanding of the world is connected with physical interactions.[20] The painting *Las Meninas* transcends being merely an artistic entity serving also as a profound metaphor for the intricate interplay among the artist, the subjects,

[14] Ibid., 131.

[15] Ibid., 73.

[16] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 73.

[17] See W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 35.

[18] See Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 135–37.

[19] This interpretation is informed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's discussions in *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 1962), 112, 212.

[20] This concept is discussed in George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

the viewer, the epistemological frameworks and the broader cultural context. The layers of meaning within this painting uncover connections that unmistakably illustrate how both the artwork and our perception of it are deeply embedded in an ontological network of relationships and specific strata. Art akin to perception is not static but inherently dynamic: enmeshed in ontological structures. This is equally true for the individual elements of the painting which possess epistemological, aesthetic and ontological dimensions thereby enriching our comprehensive understanding of the artwork. *Las Meninas* exemplifies how art can operate within a multifaceted ontological network where meaning is continually produced across different planes of interpretation. This leads us to an integrated approach to understanding and prompts us to ask a philosophical question: is there a clear distinction between epistemology and ontology? These two dimensions are often intertwined determining. Art makes us question these boundaries because epistemological elements (our knowledge and perception) inevitably shape our ontological reality (existence and reality) and vice versa. This relationship shows a paradox that Foucault might have overlooked; the distinction between epistemology and ontology is unclear. Trying to separate these areas may be misguided, as understanding one requires understanding the other. This calls for a metasystem that Foucault does not address, as his framework tends to reduce ontic and aesthetic aspects and focuses on networks of external power rather than on the layers and values of ontology. This paradox implies that the distinction between knowledge and existence might not be absolute; they are intertwined parts of a unique and interdependent web of meaning, serving as reflections of both meaning and existence.

The mirror in the painting serves as a crucial element in understanding the concept of representation, as it "allows for a metathesis of visibility and simultaneously encompasses the space depicted in the picture and its nature as a representation; it allows one to see on the canvas what is doubly invisible."[21] The mirror in the painting is an ontological element of the nature of reality and perception and on the other hand, a building block of art itself. In this case, the depiction of the royal couple in the mirror as the only representation of their presence in the painting can be understood as a self-referential imprint. This restructuring of the meaning of the painting and the mirror raises questions about the essence of perception, indicating that representation can be more powerful or "real" than reality itself. In this context, *Las Meninas* functions as an interactive artwork with the viewer becoming a part of the painting or the artwork, thus continuing the process of the artwork's self-realization in line with the ontological nature of art.

"At first glance, the position [of the painting] seems simple; it is a matter of pure reciprocity: we look at the painting in which the painter, in turn, looks at us."[22] This concept of meta representation and the complexity of the relationship between reality and reflection remains within the bounds of fiction that Foucault defines with the

[21] Foucault, *Riječi i stvari*, 76.

[22] Ibid., 83.

term "pure representation". Foucault considers Descartes a key representative of the classical "épistémè" of representation[23] which differs from the Renaissance "épistémè" of similarity. He believes Descartes' universal mathematical method prioritizes order and measurement over the mathematics of nature. However, Descartes' mathematics is not a representation of a pre-existing ontological reality but a construction of the human intellect, or imagination, rather than a "pure" representation, which culminates in Foucault's concept of "void".

Foucault points out that the "void" in Las Meninas comes from the absence of a clear subject. Yet, every time we look at the painting, Velázquez, as both the creator and a part of the scene, adds to its meaning. This interaction shows that the meaning and significance of the artwork aren't static; they change with time and different viewers. When we experience the painting in its purest form, it touches on deeper, metaphorical levels that shape how we think, act, and perceive.[24]

A metaphor is a way to see one thing through another. Therefore, imagination plays a crucial role in the interpretation of art and texts, allowing us to see beyond literal meaning,[25] and opening up space to understand Foucault's representation as a symbol, perhaps with archetypal significance. Archetypes in their noumenal form are complex and multifaceted, existing beyond direct perception; they are the underlying patterns that manifest through representations.[26] Their phenomenal equivalents are symbols that give shape to these archetypes. To distinguish an archetype from an ordinary symbol, it needs to be individualized, starting with its *representation*. Symbols transform into representations when contextualized through specific environments, moods, and scenes, thereby becoming clearly defined. The founder of archetypal psychology, James Hillman, suggests that representation has a "body".[27]

"Pure representation" may contain a paradox: within the "void" lie layers of meaning that go beyond the superficial epistemological structure and can be linked with the imaginary elements of the mythical and metaphorical. Metaphors enable perception and a sense of existence and language providing a unique creative perspective. Representation is always a product of imagination; through it, it is impossible to see anything other than what is within the relationship with the imaginary. Imagination reveals and conceals meaning making representation an active participant in the formation of consciousness. Representation is a symbol, a catalyst for imagination, a window through which creativity and interpretation emerge.[28] This paradox holds

[23] Ibid., 109.

[24] This idea is discussed in George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 102.

[25] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 171–73.

[26] James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 82.

[27] Ibid., 62.

[28] This interpretation is informed by James Hillman's discussions in *The Dream and the Underworld* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 66. See also James Hillman, *Archetypal Psychology: A Brief Account* (Dallas, TX: Spring Publications, 1983), "Image and Soul: The Poetic Basis of Mind", 6, and "Archetypal Image", 11–16.

the key to understanding how symbols can both enrich and impoverish our perception of reality or lead to relativism. Therefore, understanding imagination within the framework of archetypal hermeneutics can offer an alternative that integrates subjective and collective aspects of meaning, surpassing purely linguistic constructions. Consequently, "pure representation" can be seen as part of an ongoing process of self – definition within the artwork, involving both internal and interactive meaning; in this context, representation is continuously renewed through interaction.

"On the contrary, the lines that run through the depth of the painting are incomplete; each one lacks a portion of its length. This absence is caused by the lack of the king – a trick played by the artist."[29] This trick reveals the play of presence and absence: the viewer is aware that the king constantly appears and disappears. This ontological uncertainty, or paradoxical dialectic, reveals how power discourses shape the perception of reality and identity in the artwork and create a network of meanings that invites the viewer to constantly reconsider their position and role in the interpretation process. Foucault emphasizes the irreducibility of language and image at several points, arguing that what is seen cannot be fully expressed in words and vice versa. He also highlights the role of proper names in transitioning from the space of speech to the space of seeing but suggests that maintaining an open relationship between language and the visible requires erasing proper names and using an anonymous language.[30]

However, Véronique M. Fóti analyzes Foucault's understanding of representation through Velázquez's *Las Meninas* and points out that, although Foucault claims that the painting "reveals and subverts the epistemological structure of classical representation", he often "neglects the materiality of painting in favor of its quasi-mathematical (perspective) comprehensibility."[31] A theory of representation informed solely by geometry does not give sufficient weight to the materiality of painting. Norman Bryson argues that the ideal system of perspective cannot allocate just an axis to the viewer but also a precise point of view. Foucault's analysis does not take this into account: the vanishing point in perspective becomes the "anchor of the system that embodies the viewer" and makes them visible "in a world of absolute visibility"[32]. This critique highlights the need for a more integrative approach. Such an approach requires necessary interdisciplinary methods and disciplines for a comprehensive interpretation of the painting.

[29] Foucault, *Riječi i stvari*, 83.

[30] Ibid., 77.

[31] Véronique M Fóti, "Representation Represented: Foucault, Velázquez, Descartes," *Philosophy Today* 7, 1 (September 1996), https://www.pomoculture.org/2013/09/22/representation – represented – foucault – velazquez – descartes/, acc. on August 27, 2024

[32] Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 106.

## Interdisciplinary interpretations of symbolism, power, and identity

Velázquez was not a member of the Order when he painted the work in 1656: the cross was added later, likely in 1659 after Velázquez was inducted into the Order, as a posthumous honor. The presence of Velázquez in the painting and the painted cross on his chest representing the Order of Santiago can be interpreted as a symbol of the sublimation of his unconscious desires for recognition and status within the court hierarchy. Sublimation is the process of redirecting repressed desires into socially acceptable activities and the painting becomes a space where the artist's unconscious conflicts are transformed.[33] Furthermore, the mirror can be viewed as a symbol of the artist's aspirations and desire for validation as well as narcissism where the artist seeks reflection of his own worth.[34]

The mirror on the wall delineates a boundary between reality and art. According to Lacan's mirror theory, the gaze serves as a tool of power and forms the basis for the development of identity through the relationship between the observer (subject) and the observed (object).[35] In other words, due to the mirror in the painting, everyone becomes both the observed and the observer; this creates a binding relationship between the subject and the object. This reflexive aspect allows the viewer to become part of the painting and form a new identity. However, the viewer's identity becomes fragment.

The illusion of wholeness is crucial in the formation of one's ego: according to Lacan, the ego is a fragile structure prone to fragmentation; narcissistic identification with the idealized self (an unreal reflection)[36] creates the ego through constant internal struggle, and identity fragmentation is inevitable – the mirror provides an image of a whole self, but that image (imago) conceals internal instability. [37] In *Las Meninas* the mirror in the background reflects the king and queen – they are physically outside the composition but through reflection they become its integral part; the viewer can identify with them, immersing herself/himself in the painting and feeling the tension between the reality and the reflected identity. The royal couple in the mirror can be interpreted as the "ideal I" (imago); the viewer recognizes the ideal image but realizes that it is a construct, not reality. Velázquez's presence in the composition further complicates the relationship – his self – reflection suggests that the painting becomes a place where identity changes both for the viewer and the artist.

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[33] This interpretation draws on Sigmund Freud's discussion in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) as found in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and Its Discontents, and Other Works* (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), vol. XXI, 97. Jacques Lacan's interpretation of sublimation, which may align more closely with the thesis presented here, can be found in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, 112, 119.

[34] This interpretation draws on Sigmund Freud's discussion in "On Narcissism: An Introduction", in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIV, ed. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 73.

[35] This interpretation draws on concepts discussed in Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 75–81.

[36] Ibid., 76.

[37] Ibid., 77.

*Las Meninas* poses the question of what we see and who we truly are using the "gaze"[38] as a driver of tension in the formation of that identity – by overlooking its illusory nature the viewer fails to recognize that all identities are illusory. According to Lacan, the gaze is not just what the eye misses: it is a fantasized object that fills that void and creates the illusion of a coherent identity while simultaneously provoking a sense of fascination and destabilization.[39]

Behind the painter, on the wall, are two copies of works by the Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens, depicting the myths of Minerva (Athena) and Arachne, and Apollo and Marsyas. In the first myth, Arachne challenges Minerva to a weaving contest and is turned into a spider as a punishment for her hubris. In the second myth, Marsyas challenges Apollo to a musical contest and is brutally punished, being flayed alive. These mythological depictions can symbolically reflect Velázquez's position at court, his relationship to art, and the artist's place in society serving as symbols of the transition between the seen and the unseen.[40] The theme of art emerges from these "nested images" and evolves at the level of "pictorial discourse"[41].

Analyzing gender roles in *Las Meninas* through the positions of the female figures enters the realm of performativity and identities.[42] The depiction of women in the painting reflects broader societal attitudes and the constraints placed on women at the time.[43] Additionally, the painting may also reflect colonial power and identity in 17th-century Spain illustrating how cultural identity is formed through historical transformations, hybridization, and the negotiation of new spaces of meaning. [44]

Light in Velázquez's painting filters through dark frames and falls on the painter's gaze, which can be interpreted as part of the complex ecological system of the painting.[45] In this context, all elements of the painting – people, objects, space, and light – mutually influence the viewer's perception. Digital humanities, using new methods for analyzing cultural artefacts can deepen the interpretation of Velázquez's painting by uncovering subtle cultural expressions beyond traditional boundaries.[46]

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[38] Ibid., 77.

[39] Ibid., 128.

[40] This reference draws on themes discussed in Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949).

[41] Victor Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 275.

[42] This reference is informed by the concepts of gender performativity as discussed in Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 24–25.

[43] This reference is informed by the arguments presented by Linda Nochlin in her essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 145.

[44] This reference is informed by Homi K. Bhabha's discussions on cultural identity and hybridization in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 123–39.

[45] This interpretation is influenced by concepts discussed in Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 28–29.

[46] For insights into the role of digital humanities in analyzing cultural artefacts, see Johanna Drucker, *Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 17–21, and Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 49–66, 80–99.

Cognitive art theory helps explain *Las Meninas* by linking artistic creativity and appreciation to the brain's neural structures, where perceptual processes and sensory interpretation form the basis of the artistic experience. [47]

Velázquez's work *Las Meninas* has become the subject of detailed analysis, particularly regarding composition, perspective, and representation. In her book *The Vexations of Art* (1995), American art historian Svetlana Alpers highlights how Velázquez uses light and space to organize the composition creating a "visual metaphor" for the distribution of power within the Spanish court, thus making *Las Meninas* a cultural artefact that reflects the social hierarchies of its time. [48]

In his book *Velázquez: Painter and Courtier* (1986) Jonathan Brown analyzes how *Las Meninas* reflects the political power dynamics, social hierarchies, and intimate aspects of life at the Spanish court under King Philip IV.[49] By combining art history, sociology, and political theory, Brown argues that *Las Meninas* affirms royal dominance and elevates painting as a noble art form, posing the question: what is Velázquez painting? Three hypotheses – a portrait of the king and queen, the Infanta with her entourage, or *Las Meninas* itself – create space for various interpretations, while the presence of the royal family reflected in the mirror underscores "the nobility of artistic expression"[50].

In his work *Las Meninas and the Paradoxes of Pictorial Representation,* American philosopher John R. Searle analyzes the painting through the lens of the paradox of self-referentiality: the paradox arises when Velázquez includes himself in the painting – the painting becomes a play of perspectives and reflections, where the artist and the viewer blend into a unified visual and conceptual whole. [51]

Romanian art historian Victor Stoichita wrote a book titled *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta – Painting* (1997) in which he argues that Velázquez's techniques create paradoxes: *Las Meninas* is interpreted as an example of meta-painting, where the work, as a self-aware object, reflects its process of creation through "intertextuality" – referencing other artistic works and traditions – and the technique of "mise en abyme", where the painting contains another painting within itself. [52] Stoichita suggests that "the artist presents himself as the creator in the first

[47] Cognitive art theory's application to *Las Meninas* is informed by the works of Semir Zeki, *Inner Vision: An Exploration of Art and the Brain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), and V. S. Ramachandran and William Hirstein, "The Science of Art: A Neurological Theory of Aesthetic Experience," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6, 6–7 (1999): 15–51.

[48] Svetlana Alpers, *The Vexations of Art: Velázquez and Others* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 145–46.

[49] Jonathan Brown, *Velázquez: Painter and Courtier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

[50] Jonathan Brown, *Images and Ideas in Seventeenth-Century Spanish Painting* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 109, 110.

[51] John R. Searle, "*Las Meninas* and the Paradoxes of Pictorial Representation," *Critical Inquiry* 6, 3 (1980): 477–88.

[52] Victor Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 103, 141, 183, 229, 291. For a more detailed exploration of these concepts, see especially chapters "Assemblage: How to Make a Painting from an Old Image", "The Intertextual Machine", and "Paintings, Maps, and Mirrors".

person: 'It is I, Velázquez, whom you see in the act of painting.'"[53] The role of the witness – observer can be understood as an act of "deconstruction": Velázquez separates the functions of the mirror and the door, using them as framing elements in the background of his painting. In the mirror, he places the "image", while in the doorway, he positions a figure to act as both "observer" and "author", though not entirely. [54]

This theme of paradox is further explored by Joel Snyder and Ted Cohen in their essay *Reflections on Las Meninas: Paradox Lost* (1981), where they analyze how Velázquez uses composition and perspective to create a layered depiction: although *Las Meninas* initially appears to uphold classical artistic rules, its true impact lies in the "destabilization of those very rules"[55].

In his work *Velázquez' Las Meninas* (1981) Leo Steinberg provides an exhaustive study of composition and perspective, exploring how Velázquez uses space and perspective to evoke specific reactions in the viewer: the arrangement of figures in the painting highlights the structures within the work as a complex narrative system, where perspective plays a central role, and the painting "remains a metaphor, a mirror of consciousness"[56]. While Steinberg's analysis of perspective and composition emphasizes traditional narrative structures, contemporary post-humanist theory may offer a new dimension in interpreting *Las Meninas*.

Post-humanist theory redefines the concept of the subject as a transversal entity immersed in a network of relationships with non-human entities – environmental, technological, and social.[57] In this context, *Las Meninas* can be interpreted through the lens of these relationships, where the reflection of the king and queen in the mirror, the arrangement and space between the figures, as well as the presence of non-anthropomorphic entities (such as dog, mirror, and light) function as relational elements. The mirror contributes to the painting's narrative and influences the viewer's perception; the arrangement of the figures defines their real and symbolic relationships, articulating the hierarchy of power, thereby creating a network of meanings within the composition and enhancing its performativity. Although the king and queen are physically absent from the scene, their essential presence is established through the mirror, positioning them at the center of the narrative. This duality – presence in absence – reveals how power in *Las Meninas* flows through a network of symbolic relationships, connecting humans, objects, and non-human entities within the painting, ultimately returning to the enigma of the scene.

In line with Braidotti's concept of *Zoe*, "Living matter – including the body – is intelligent and self-organizing, but precisely because it is not separate from the rest of organic life."[58] According to Braidotti's post-humanist ontology, matter is "affective

[53] Ibid., 276.

[54] Ibid., 280.

[55] Joel Snyder and Ted Cohen, "Reflections on 'Las Meninas': Paradox Lost," *Critical Inquiry* 7, 2 (Winter 1980): 429–47.

[56] Leo Steinberg, "Velázquez' 'Las Meninas'," *October* 19 (Winter 1981): 54.

[57] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 49, 50.

[58] **Ibid.**, 60.

and autopoietic", evolving through continuous processes of becoming *Zoe*, permeating all forms of existence.[59] The materiality in *Las Meninas*, particularly through textures, colors, and fabrics, expresses *Zoe* by infusing vitality into the painting, allowing for its interpretation through a material – symbolic lens: the white and gold colors on the Infanta Mariana may represent *Zoe* – the central energy within the painting; white can symbolize purity while gold signifies wealth and power; the texture of the richly embroidered dresses symbolizes wealth and connects the material with the symbolic, providing a tangible sense of touch within the painting.

This material – symbolic transition is enhanced by the strategic use of light: the light falls on the central figures, especially the Infanta; highlighting the textures and colors of her attire, *breathing life* into the characters and reinforcing their vitality. Light also functions as a visual indicator of hierarchy – emphasizing the contrast between the illuminated and shadowed areas. The interplay of light and richly embroidered fabrics vividly exemplifies *Zoe* – the energy animating matter and conveying symbolic meaning throughout the painting.

In *Las Meninas*, light as a metaphor for *Zoe* reinforces the perceptual dynamics that structures its artistic representation. The evolution of post-humanist theory could offer new perspectives for analyzing *Las Meninas* through the lens of redefined elements and networked relationships.[60]

Velázquez's painting resonates today as a product of artistic imagination, directly linked to human perception: it articulates the social hierarchies of its time and establishes an ontological paradigm; it serves as an archetypal example of meta-reflection raising questions about representation, subjectivity, the boundaries between illusion and reality, and symbols of power and identity.

## Conclusion

Foucault discovered significant epistemological changes and thoroughly described the structures of representation, the dynamics of power and knowledge discourse. However, his analysis does not fully encompass the way the viewer engages with the painting. By expanding Foucault's methodology with interdisciplinary perspectives, it is possible to reassess some of his conclusions and interpret Velázquez's painting as a self-referential artefact with a complex network of meanings. Integrating interdisciplinary approaches with Foucault's analysis allows us to broaden the interpretation and to see that epistemological changes can be viewed as manifestations of deeper ontological structures. Artistic works continuously change through interaction with the audience, context, epistemological processes and systems of power. However, they transcend binary positions of interpretation, methodological relativism, and determinism beyond ontology, moving towards integrative approaches sensitive to the multilayered nature of expression.

[59] Ibid., 60.

[60] For an analysis of non-human actors and their impact on the creation of meaning, see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), as well as Actor-Network Theory.

Velázquez's painting recontextualizes meaning serving as an interactive platform for understanding art, identity, power, and perception, while transcending spatial and temporal boundaries.

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