

## PERSPECTIVE'S SIGNIFICANCE IN VELÁZQUEZ'S *LAS MENINAS*

Analyse the significance of how perspective is utilised in a painting or film we have studied.

For many people, Velázquez's use of perspective<sup>1</sup> in *Las Meninas* (fig. 1) is taken as a supreme example of one of the triumphs of the renaissance: a linear system allowing mimetic representation of the actual world (or the like presentation of possible worlds): convincingly, reliably and productively. But is that all there is to Velázquez's perspective? Its ability to force a gasp of 'wow' in the viewer, disguises a premise that is worth dispute: that perspective allows a viewer to contemplate the world (re)presented in an image from an external, contemplative, causally inert vantage point. *Las Meninas* has famously been seen as a puzzling painting. Quantities of literature have been produced expressing opinions as to what we ought make of it, yet resolution seems always elusive. Why? The questions seem always to essentially involve the painting's web of eye-lines, the position of the viewer and what the mirror in its rear wall reveals. Velázquez's sure use of the systematic, conventionalised rules of perspective seemingly should easily eliminate such uncertainty; yet strident dispute remains. A key to this problem, I think, lies in the observation that in *Las Meninas* ambivalently portrays two world-views. On one hand, a courtly scene of an old order is shown, an essentially teleological one, a naturally hierarchical one in which the king (Philip IV) is placed in the highest order, and the dog and inanimate things at the lowest. Ideally, one portrays such a world

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<sup>1</sup> From hereon, when I say perspective, I am referring (unless I say otherwise) to the formalised, geometrical, linear, predictive and productive system of perspective, which is still taught in architectural presentation schools. It also forms the basis of computerised software that produced 'three dimensional' images: the issues at hand here could easily be carried into new questions such as perspective's implications for virtual worlds in computer games.

from an inert, contemplative stance; and Velázquez's perspective ought facilitate this. On the other hand (as Erwin Panofsky suggests), linear perspective anticipates a profoundly different post-Copernian, Kantian world-view. Perspective gives us an image from a particular vantage, but we are forced to acknowledge that the point is simply one of an infinite number of possible ones; none ultimately supreme over another. In Lacanian terms, we seek to make sense of this plethora of viewpoints through an attempt to order it in a constrained order of symbols and language. Language is not fixed, If we use it, we are necessarily involved players in a mobile game. In short, Velázquez's re-portrays a teleological world using a perspective system that forces us to look from a modern, involved vantage. Perspective assures us that the painting is a reliable witness, but how can it be that *we* are looking from a long dead king's vantage? But *is* perspective as reliable witness as we assume, or is it, on inspection, as mobile in meaning as any other language?

My essay shall begin with some thoughts on the introduction of perspective into Western culture; for that is the system that Velázquez chooses to use here. I shall also briefly discuss the implications of both Panofsky's and Lacan's thoughts, qua perspective as a language whose primary importance is at a symbolic (versus a merely representational) level. This will enable us to look at *Las Meninas*'s perspective in such regards. To elucidate the issues at hand, I will contrast it with another, closely contemporary and thematically similar painting, which uses perspective in different ways.

Sometime around 1413, the Florentine architect Filippo Brunelleschi created a working demonstration of how convincing a representation in perspective of the seen world can be.<sup>2</sup> He took on the task of re-presenting the city's baptistry, as seen from the facing entrance to its cathedral, such that the image of the

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<sup>2</sup> Catherine Belsey, "Making Space: Perspective Vision and the Lacanian Real," *Textual Practice*, 2002, 35-7.

baptistry could be held as a substitute for the real thing. The details of the demonstration shall not concern us here; but what is significant here is that Brunelleschi had to impose on his audience extremely strict viewing *conditions* for his demonstration to be a success.<sup>3</sup> Equally significant is that Brunelleschi's conceptual system was taken up as a precedent as *the* way to represent the world: perspective quickly became a strongly normative standard of painting. Note though that this required a relaxation of Brunelleschi's conditions of viewing: one could not paint a large image on a church wall and expect people to view it only through a peephole. Close enough was necessarily deemed good enough.<sup>4</sup> In other words, perspective was not a perfect recreation of human vision, but it approximated it in ways that had not been accomplished before, and this was powerfully and *symbolically* useful to contemporary art patrons. It

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<sup>3</sup> Brunelleschi had to force his viewers to look at his painting with one eye, using a mirror; positioning that eye, the painting, the mirror and the actual baptistry in very specific locations relative to each other. Briefly, he drilled a hole through the panel at the exact vanishing/viewer orthogonal (which because it is perpendicular to the picture plane, is a point); had the viewer stand at the exact point from which the image was originally produced, looking through the hole at San Giovanni, but not at the church itself. Instead, a mirror was positioned between the painted panel and the church, at the exactly half distance from the viewer's eye that the original picture plane had been from the artist's eye. Imagine that Brunelleschi had originally fixed a small peg where he wanted to hold his eye while drawing; the picture plane might have been a sheet of glass that he had fixed a small distance in front of this peg. He could have then traced the outline of San Giovanni onto this glass, transferring the outline to the wooden panel on which to paint. During the viewing experiment, the viewer would see the reflection of the painting in the exact scale and orientation of the original sheet of glass. Brunelleschi's painting would amazingly correspond to the actual building, *but only under these precise conditions of viewing*. The mirror could be removed and the actual building 'magically' fill the reflected painting's image. This all sounds rather complicated, and it is. The point is that perspective *re*-presentation is anything but 'real'.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, as soon as one breaks Brunelleschi's conditions of viewing, the perspective (re)presentation starts to be flawed: the more one deviates from the conditions, the greater the flaw. But people were prepared to accept the compromise between pragmatically unrealisable viewing conditions and freedom of movement and viewing point. Massacio's *Trinity*, is a good case in hand (c. 1426, in Santa Maria Novella, Florence). This portrays Christ being crucified, in a virtual chapel, perspectively contiguous with the actual architecture of the building. The illusion of continual space is compelling, *but decreasingly so* as one moves from the ideal point of contemplation. One imagines that during religious ceremonies, the person of highest spiritual rank would hold this most important position. Interestingly, and tellingly, by the time we get to Raphael's frescoes in the Stanza della Segnatura (1510-11, in the Vatican palace), the ideal viewing point requires that the viewer stand on a ladder. This seemingly bad design was forced on Raphael by the restraints of the room. The important point here is that already, a century before Velázquez, such compromised viewing was considered acceptable by none less than the Pope.

Hubert Damisch discusses Brunelleschi's demonstration at length: Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. Goodman, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1994, 101 ff.

is documented to the point where it is almost embarrassing to point out that the history of European art during this period is the history of art in the propagandistic service of either the Church or of monarchies; complex systems that formed the social reality of the time.<sup>5</sup> A rhetoric strategy is implied: if perspective can be used to convincingly re-present *actual* (physical) worlds, then cannot it be used to portray *possible* (spiritual) worlds too?<sup>6</sup> Turning to Velázquez, it is unimaginable that he, the sole painter of the most powerful, divinely ordained monarch in Europe,<sup>7</sup> would have been ignorant of the importance of symbolism and how perspective can portray it. Were he so, the virtuosity he displays in *Las Meninas* would seem strange indeed. So, it seems, perspective is used here as rhetoric ‘proof’ of a pre-modern monarchy. But as I have already suggested, perspective also points towards a very different world-view. Let me turn to Panofsky’s reading of it.

In *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, Panofsky is ostensibly giving a history of the development of modern linear perspective from so called “antique perspective;” but his analysis is essentially philosophical. One must ask *why* this new system was strongly endorsed; why was apparent optical veracity now held as a standard, whereas iconic symbolism had been in force for centuries? As Panofsky notes, modern perspective abstracts from psycho/physiological perception.<sup>8</sup> Contra the likely opinion of the person on the street, it does not

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<sup>5</sup> Notice, for instance, Brunelleschi’s choice of subject, a baptistry—a place of symbolic birth.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of this mater, see Margaret Iversen, “The Discourse of Perspective in the Twentieth Century: Panofsky, Damisch, Lacan,” *Oxford Art Journal*, 2005, 196.

It is worth noting here that this process of the elevation of new visual technology to the service of highly symbolic social orders recycles throughout more recent history. For instance, quasi-religious texts like Tolkein’s *Lord of the Ring* novels, or superhero comics were popular three quarters of a century ago, but with the recently available powers of cinema to convincingly present possible worlds, these texts have undergone a huge resurgence in popularity.

<sup>7</sup> Note that Philip was a contemporary of Charles I of England, who was executed precisely on the issue of the divine right of kingship.

<sup>8</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Wood, New York, Zone Books, 1991, 39.

correspond to what the human eye sees, so why so strongly endorse it?<sup>9</sup> Panofsky's implicit suggestion is that at the time of perspective's endorsement, the world is already shifting from pre-modern to modern reflexive views, and that it is both a reflection on and a part of this change. In fact, the reflexive quality of linear perspective (that the viewer of an image is part of the Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology : Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, trans. Translator, New York, Harper & Row, 1962, .to be paradigmatic of modernism.<sup>10</sup> Pre-renaissance perspective often attempts empirically to reproduce the curvature of the retinal image, a sort of 'truth'. This truth is passive, contemplative and 'pre-critical'.<sup>11</sup> In pre-renaissance perspective, space is finite and adheres to already substantial things.<sup>12</sup> Modern perspective is markedly different. Newly, it uses a space that is distinctly Cartesian, an empty matrix extending infinitely in all directions, a blank sheet

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<sup>9</sup> In fact, the subject *never*, strictly speaking, sees straight lines as straight, or flat surfaces as flat. Both normally appear curved. This is easily demonstrated, empirically. Sit about four metres from a fairly long wall, preferably with rectangular markings on it like doorways, shelves of tiles. Hold your head still and look directly at it. Now concentrate on the periphery of your vision, to the left, right, top and bottom. You will soon notice that, contrary to your knowledge that the wall is flat, it appears distinctly curved. To accentuate the effect, slowly look from the right to the left, from top to bottom. ~~Teniers~~ is recording this effect, in the lateral direction. Note though that both artists ignore the effect in the vertical dimension, as is still conventional practice. This can only emphasise that such modes of (re)presentation are conventional. Hence they are symbolic too, and prone to the complications of language.

<sup>10</sup> Iversen, "The Discourse of Perspective in the Twentieth Century," 195-6.

<sup>11</sup> A Kantian term. *Ibid.*, 196. The essential idea here is that we can only be critical of a system from *within* the necessary conditions of perception and our necessary limits of experience. To use a rough analogy, if were we all inevitably born necessarily wearing rose coloured glasses, then we would only be able to produce images of the world as through rose coloured glass. Kant's modernist thought is that within such conditions, we can productively and *a priori* (re)present possible worlds; but that we can never know the 'things-in-themselves' beyond such necessary conditions. To us, a green ball will always be coloured rose. Before this realisation, it is supposed that a painting can show things as they are, from a God's-eye view. A Kantian 'critical' view says that this is simply wishful thinking: we can never see with such freedom: our perspective is always conditioned and implicated.

<sup>12</sup> In Ptolemaic space, the pre-modern sort, consisted of a finite number of concentric orbs, God populating the outermost, and nothing, not even space, existing beyond. Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology : Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, trans. New York, Harper & Row, 1962, 135-7.

with which we begin to populate with posited objects.<sup>13</sup> Modern perspective produces space and objects of a possible world in a structured, particular way, a methodical, productive form of 'language' rather than a revelation of the real. But it is ironic that perspective was adopted as a "reliable witness" of pre-critical, teleological world-views.<sup>14</sup> This helps explain why *Las Meninas* is perplexing, despite its apparent veracity.

Jacques Lacan suggests a model of the world that echoes this Kantian reflexivity, but in psychological terms that are pertinent here too. According to Lacan, during the first few months of human life, we simply take from the world without knowledge (the 'real'); but thereafter, and eventually through the symbolic order of language, 'reality'.<sup>15</sup> Knowledge is limited to the language-based 'world' we live in. Knowledge comes at a cost: a sense of loss of the initial, unknowable, unspeakable access to the real. Perspective images reflect this. For instance, for Lacan, perspective's vanishing point, seen, desired, but inaccessible behind the picture plane, denotes this desire.<sup>16</sup> In *Las Meninas* this point (barred, one notes, by the man who holds the palace's keys, a man also

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<sup>13</sup> Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. 41. As Margaret Iversen puts it, "Instead of immediacy, abstraction from sense experience. Instead of bodily sense impressions, geometric systematicity. Art is no longer regarded as a mimetic depiction of objects seen; rather, it reflexively includes the acknowledgment that it is a highly formalised kind of *performance* aimed at a spectator." Iversen, "The Discourse of Perspective in the Twentieth Century," 196 (my emphasis).

<sup>14</sup> Victor Burin writes: "Some two thousand years after Euclid, Brunelleschi conceives of this same cone (cone of vision) as intersected by a plane surface - the picture plane. By means of this model, something of the pre-modern world view passes into the Copernican universe - a universe which is no longer geocentric, but which is nevertheless *homocentric and egocentric*. A basic principle of Euclidean geometry is that space extends infinitely in three dimensions. The effect of monocular perspective, however, is to maintain the idea that this space does nevertheless have a *centre - the observer*. By degrees the sovereign gaze is transferred from god to Man." (my emphasis.) Victor Burgin, *Psychoanalysis and Cultural Theory: Thresholds*, trans. New York, Macmillan Education, 1991, 13.

<sup>15</sup> For a concise summary of Lacan's theories see Dino Felluga, Modules on Lacan: On Psychosexual Development, <http://www.purdue.edu/guidetothetheory/psychoanalysis/lacandevlop.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Lorens Holm notes that the diagrammatic representation of Brunelleschi's demonstration is coincident with Lacan's operational montage of the structure of the scopic field. He discusses the implications of this at length. Lorens Holme, "Reading through the Mirror: Brunelleschi, Lacan, Le Corbusier: The Invention of Perspective and the Post-Freudian Eye/I," *Assemblage*, August 1992, 21 ff.

called Velázquez—both points of matter in psychological terms).<sup>17</sup> is the *brightest* point of the painting: a brightness we desire but cannot have without passing through the painting's picture plane and consequently losing it.<sup>18</sup> The point I wish to emphasize is that such Lacanian analyses fit within the general pattern of Kantian critical philosophy; we exist *within* the technologies we use to explore the world—perspective here. We are barred by these technologies from reaching into the real world, free of what Lacan calls the symbolic order. Though pre-renaissance perspective was not necessarily *aware* of this implication (it lacks a fixed unreachable vanishing point, for instance), it is strongly implicit in Velázquez's linear perspective. To illustrate this, I want turn to visual analysis, drawing attention to three points by comparing *Las Meninas* with a painting by David Teniers II, made only three years earlier for a cousin of Velázquez's Philip IV, the Archduke Leopold Wilhelm.<sup>19</sup> Like *Las Meninas*, this shows a room in a palace, used to display collections of art, and denotes a royal personage (fig. 3).

Firstly, though Teniers' painting also employs a central vanishing point (though inaccurately, and hence indefinitely), it implies two others, breaking with the conventions of one-point perspective and *more* accurately representing what the human subject sees. When we stand in front of a large wall, it appears to us as slightly curved and bulging.<sup>20</sup> Teniers denotes this effect by the slightly receding lines of the frames at the top of his picture (fig. 4). Velázquez probably had no formalised geometric system to accurately represent this effect; but more to the point, it is doubtful that he would have *wanted* to. Geometric perspective, Velázquez's chosen paradigm for re-presenting the world, is

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<sup>17</sup> Svetlana Alpers, *The Vexations of Art : Velázquez and Others*, trans. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2005, 125.

<sup>18</sup> In linear perspective, the 'picture plane' is analogous to a sheet of glass placed between the viewer and the objects (re)presented. The image lies on this plane.

<sup>19</sup> Alpers, *The Vexations of Art : Velázquez and Others*, trans. 185-186.

<sup>20</sup> See footnote 9.

heavily associated with the notion of the straight line as bearer of epistemological authority. Significantly, Velázquez's system relies almost entirely on emphatically *straight* lines, both in the image and in its construction.<sup>21</sup> A symbolic expectation for a privileging of the straight over the curved is implied. Also, we 'know' that architectural elements are straight and flat. Hence, we expect to see them so (re)presented. Combined, these notions emphasise the post-Copernican idea of the autonomous observer, but always observing and knowing *within* necessary conditions. Note Velázquez's convenient avoidance of the problem of optical curvature (with its psychological implications). He limits the viewer's angle of view to approximately the same angle of the central portion of Teniers' composition.<sup>22</sup> The difference of approaches in the two paintings is significant. Velázquez's convergent orthogonals draw us magnetically *into* the *mise-en-scene*: we are involved. Teniers' bulging wall seems to push us outwards, making us contemplative, inefficacious, if privileged, observers of the scene.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> In setting up a linear perspective, one starts with a plan-view of the object to be presented, a point representing the viewer, and then draws straight lines radiating *from* this point to the object's vertices. A straight line representing the picture plane is inserted between the viewer and the object. Ultimately, the intersections of these rays and the line are transferred to the picture plane as a set of points; the edges of the object are interpellated as straight lines between these points. Curved objects are difficult to deal with in perspective: which supports the claim that perspective is in fact a symbolic language, not the real. Note that Piero della Francesca divided the human head into a series of flat planes so that he could deal with it 'accurately' in perspective. Birgit Laskowski, *Piero Della Francesca*, trans. Koln, Könemann, 1998, 114.

<sup>22</sup> The rear wall in Velázquez's painting corresponds roughly to the limits of an actual subject's point of detailed focus, about 10 degrees. Notice that none of this discussion has accounted for the treatment of *verticals* in either painting. To be consistent, Teniers ought have curved the vertical corners of the walls. Velázquez is actually straining what is credible in his. Yet, and this emphasises how much a symbolic convention geometrical perspective really is, is is an extremely entrenched convention that vertical lines be shown as vertical on the picture plane. These days architectural photographers use special "perspective *correction*" cameras to render the vertical elements of buildings vertical. Architectural presentation drawings of possible skyscrapers conventionally show all verticals as parallel and vertical. Even discounting optical curvature, geometrical perspective can only correctly show verticals as vertical if the hypothetical viewer's eye is *level*. Notice that in *Las Meninas* nobody (except the hypothetical viewer) looks horizontally! This is a good example of how psychology over-rides actuality; convention and Lacan's symbolic order constitute our 'reality'.

<sup>23</sup> One must speculate on the possibility that the differences in *our* responses to these two systems of (re)presentation is a result of long symbolic conditioning about what is supposed 'natural'; again an example of Lacan's symbolic order.



The second point of comparison between the two paintings concerns the representation of sharply receding walls. Such foreshortening has always been one of the visually intriguing aspects of geometrical perspective; the tricky matter of making things look convincingly smaller as they recede from us. The picture frames on Velázquez's side wall do this convincingly, but at a cost: we cannot see what the paintings are. The royal collection is reduced to a collection of protruding frames, mere indicators of Cartesian space. The pay-off is that we feel a *jouissance*, a feeling that we are complicit with the magic of Velázquez's convincing, involving (re)presentation. By contrast, Teniers 'extends' his walls back towards the vanishing point to give us epistemological access on a different, symbolic: we are witnesses to the archduke's magnificent collection of paintings. Here, the cost is that of facilitating our attraction to the 'real', that Velázquez's perspective signifies. Because he prioritises a different epistemological order, Teniers' two receding walls seem strangely twisted in even though we 'know' they are supposed to be parallel; and his floor seems oddly tilted up—the archduke seems in danger of sliding off. Though the vanishing point in both paintings lies inside a doorway, a portal to Lacan's 'beyond', these effects in Teniers' painting again seem to push us forward, away from it and it's Lacanian location of desire.

Finally, I want to examine the implications of perspective and eye-lines. Modern perspective deals explicitly with the problem of what we can see. In psychoanalytic terms, eye-lines are implicated with the concept of the 'gaze', with ownership and power. Lacan claims that from the onset of the 'mirror stage', of differentiation of the Self from the Other, the gaze's source, ownership and target has a major impact on our reality.<sup>24</sup> As I have mentioned, the court portrayed in *Las Meninas* is symbolically structured in a teleological world-view. Velázquez's perspective implies that *our* gaze intrudes into this teleology, yet there is a strong claim that the gaze properly belongs only to a

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<sup>24</sup> Felluga, Modules on Lacan: On Psychosexual Development,  
<http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/lacandevlop.html>.

king. This is suggested by his and his queen's reflection from the mirror on the back wall.<sup>25</sup> The academic literature on this apparent paradox is filled with claims, refutations and counter-refutations, focussing around the matter of this reflection. This is astounding, considering that a major point of perspective is supposedly to eliminate ambiguity—remember the point of Brunelleschi's demonstration. What is going on? The answer, I think, lies in the fact that Velázquez makes the question of *who* is looking into the painting ultimately unresolvable. He does this through careful arrangement of perspective both horizontally and vertically. Horizontally, he deals with the source of the king's image. Vertically, he deals with the both perspective representation (of the represented world), and with the symbolic implications of looking *up* or *down* at a person. Let me explicate.

To start with the horizontal dimension, the viewer's position cannot be that of the king as as being painted by Velazquez, for the viewer's eye-line is substantially lower than Velázquez's, exactly aligned, in fact, with the emblematic cross on his chest (fig. 2). It would be a clear breach of decorum to paint a monarch as looked down on, and no such other painting exists by Velázquez.<sup>26</sup> Also, the king's eyes in the reflected image are above the viewer's. Unless a mirror is not flat against a wall, when one looks into it, one looks *straight* back at oneself. But this mirror is shown flat against the back wall, as denoted by its shadows. Further, the mirror is to the left of the viewer's gaze, as denoted by the vanishing point. Looking into the mirror this way would not reveal yourself, but what lies to your left. Hence the reflection, it seems, comes from the canvas Velázquez is working on.<sup>27</sup> Some authors have cited this

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<sup>25</sup> I am discounting the possibility that the image is a painting rather than a mirror. The bloom of light suggests otherwise, both in quality and intensity. Velázquez owned around ten mirrors and was intensely interested in reflectivity. Belsey, "Making Space: Perspective Vision and the Lacanian Real," 48.

<sup>26</sup> It is interesting, to see that Teniers clearly has the viewer look down at the archduke. But, as I have pointed out, Teniers' viewer is not *in* his scene.

<sup>27</sup> Snyder provides a calculated diagram of this. Joel Snyder, "'Las Meninas' and the Mirror of the Prince," *Critical Inquiry*, 549.

conclusion as proof that the viewer cannot be the king; and that hence, for instance, Foucault's reading of the painting (which relies on the notion) is invalid.<sup>28</sup> But this is missing the point, and is in fact an invalid refutation. Returning to vertical eyelines, the viewer is either very short (which Philip IV was not) or is *seated*, as denoted again by the horizon line relative to Velázquez. Now, imagine this little scene: the king and queen have been standing to pose. Their daughter comes in with her retinue. The king takes a break from the tiring business of posing, and is offered a seat. A courtier carefully positions the seat so the king can examine the progress of his portrait, via the mirror. This plausible scenario accounts for all the painting's geometry without recourse to notions that Velázquez is playing with inconsistencies of perspective. It also retains the possibility of what is symbolically important to Foucault and others: that the temporal *durée* (to use Bergson's term) of the painting stretches across time, leaving the question of ownership of the gaze into the painting as ambivalent. What is our relation to the king?

It could be argued that the viewer sits beside the king. But this raises one last issue that also reveals the significance of perspective in this painting. Unlike with Brunelleschi's demonstration, we commonly view perspectival paintings from many points, without loss of a sense of their optical veracity and coherence. Strictly speaking though, this is a matter of degree. The more we move away from the point directly in front of the one vanishing point, the more distorted the image becomes, until finally it is an unrecognisable sliver, like the

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<sup>28</sup> For instance Snyder discounts the validity of readings by Foucault and John Searle, based on the incoherence of the notion that the viewer's gaze can be that of the King. Ibid. 550. A similar claim is made by Chordá (remarkably, based on an accurate computer reconstruction of the painting) and refuted by Topper. Frederic Chordá, "Computer Graphics for the Analysis of Perspective in Visual Art: 'Las Meninas' by Velázquez," *Leonardo*, 1991, 565. David Topper, "Comment on 'Computer Graphics for the Analysis of Perspective in Visual Art: Las Meninas' by Velázquez," *Leonardo*, 90.

paintings shown here on the foreshortened wall.<sup>29</sup> Literally and symbolically, the more we are nudged from this privileged point of ownership, the less access to image we have, and the more we desire it. The significance of perspective in this painting is that is instrumental to an apparently *real* representation, but that because, like all our human experience at the level of epistemology, it is inevitably a *conventionalised* language. We may not like to admit this, but the fact nags somewhere within us, leaving us with a desire for what we apparently cannot have. We must gravitate around an impossible vanishing point.

(2730 words)

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<sup>29</sup> And this raises another point about perspective as a symbolic language versus the real, not directly relevant to *Las Meninas* because its vanishing point lies within its frame, pertinent nonetheless. Snyder points out that a picture's vanishing point need not be located *within* its frame. This is true enough. But unlike physiological vision, the further to the right or left the vanishing point is located from the frame's centre, the stranger the image becomes: foreshortened lines start to appear at very strange angles and look disproportionately long. The more this happens, the more perspective is revealed as a conventional, symbolic language that does *not* correspond with physiological vision; it does *not* denote 'truth' of vision; it is *not* a reliable witness of what we see. See Snyder, "'Las Meninas' and the Mirror of the Prince," 550-1.



Fig. 1. Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*. Oil on canvas, 318 x 276. Prado, Madrid.



Fig. 2. Orthogonals, vanishing point and viewer's eye-line.



Fig. 3. David Teniers II, *The Private Gallery of the Archduke Leopold William in Brussels*. Oil on canvas, 106 x 129. Prado, Madrid.



Fig. 4. Teniers' analytic perspective.

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