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Diego Velázquez's "Payment of Tribute"

Xavier d'Hérouville ^{1*} & Aurore Caulier ^{2*}

Diego Velázquez, the “painter of painters”, influencer of the impressionists, surrealists and cubists, nonetheless remains a modern painter - in his avant-garde sense - himself influenced by the ancients. How did the trips to Italy of the court painter of Philip IV seal his destiny and guide his pictorial technique? How did Masaccio, the Florentine painter considered the greatest painter of the First Renaissance and traditionally presented as the first modern painter by his introduction into Western art of the notion of optical truth, perspective and volume, shaped the mind of Diego Velázquez to the point of dictating the ordering of his most famous canvas, *The Family of Philip IV*, better known today - rightly or wrongly as we will see - under the name of *Las Meninas*? What metaphysical concepts borrowed from the ancients by the Italian Renaissance could Diego Velázquez in his turn have presented in this canvas to the point of making it the “theology of painting”, according to Luca Giordano's own assessment? These are all the questions to which we set out to find answers. The ultimate answer provided was in fact one and only... question: “But where is the canvas? ” ³. Our study making this fresco a portal transdimensional precursor of the contemporary “metaverse”!

By the time he tackled the production of *the Family of Philip IV*, Diego Velázquez knew perfectly well - having learned lessons from the old masters whose works he had been able to extensively contemplate during his two previous trips to the peninsula Italian – that any good canvas or fresco can be viewed over time. The unification of place does not systematically imply a temporal unification of history; there can thus be unity of place and action with three different times... As in *the Payment of Tribute* by Masaccio for example. Saint Peter is represented three times in three different situations (Fig.1).



Figure 1 | *The Payment of Tribute* by Masaccio

In the center of the scene, he is facing Jesus who asks him to go to the sea, to throw a hook there, to catch the first fish who will bite and open his mouth in which he will find a “stater” ⁴ (Fig.2).



Figure 2 | Central scene from Masaccio's *Payment of Tribute*: Jesus (right) asks Saint Pierre (left) to go to the sea to catch a fish

On the left of the stage, he is kneeling at the edge of the water and takes out the “stater” from the mouth of the fish he has just caught (Fig.3).

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³ History attributes this exclamation to Théophien Gautier who was literally stunned by the “tour de force” achieved by Diego Velázquez through this canvas

⁴ Ancient coin



Figure 3 | Left part of the scene of *the Payment of Tribute* by Massaccio: Saint Pierre extracts a "stater" from the mouth of the fish he has just caught

On the right of the scene, finally, he pays the fee (or tribute) in the name of his master to the collector in charge of the Temple in the city of Capernaum (Fig.4).



Figure 4 | Right part of the scene of *the Payment of Tribute* by Massaccio: Saint Peter fulfills in the name of his master the payment of tribute to the Temple of Capernaum

Following in Masaccio's footsteps, Diego Velázquez also represented three times in his production of *the Family of Philip IV*: three places and three different situations corresponding to three ages of life and three different functions which he occupied successively at the court of Spain under the orders of the King (Fig.5).



Figure 5 | *The Family of Philip IV* known as *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez

On the left of the scene, in the background, Diego Velázquez is facing us furtively grasping the specular image of *the Family of Philip IV*, between two touches placed on his canvas of which we let's see the chassis. "Painter of the King" was the first official position which he exercised upon his arrival at the court of Philip IV (Fig.6).

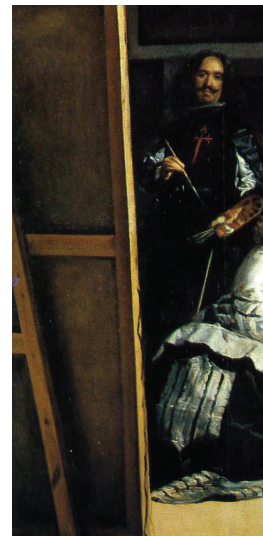


Figure 6 | Left part of the scene of *the Family of Philip IV*: Diego Velázquez at work, brush and palette in hands

On the right of the stage, alongside the duenna ⁵, he is a bit of a “man in the shadows”. “Valet of the King's chamber” was the function which he then exercised (Fig.7).

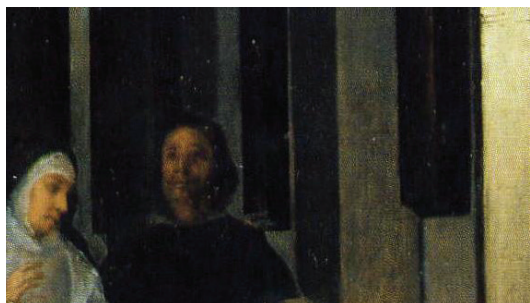


Figure 7 | Right part of the scene from *the Family of Philip IV*: Diego Velázquez as “Valet of the King's chamber” alongside the Governess

In the center, at the very place of the vanishing point of the scene, he is camped on the stairs of the background passage and lifts the veil on this representation that it gives us to see. “Aposentador” or “Marshal of the Palace”, such was the supreme function that he exercised to end up alongside his friend and King, Philip IV (Fig.8).



Figure 8 | Central scene from *the Family of Philip IV*: Diego Velázquez as that “Marshal of the Palace” lifts the veil on this representation

This fresco that Diego Velázquez shows us is therefore the story of his own social ascension within the court of Spain which saw him begin as a simple servant for end up being a friend and confidant of the King. Reference made to the fresco of Masaccio, Diego Velázquez dons the habits of Saint Peter, and

consequently endorsed to Philip IV those of Jesus, son of God. Through this fresco, he invests his King of divine power. “This canvas is the theology of painting” exclaimed Luca Giordano at that time. Through this conceptual masterpiece, Diego Velázquez pays his royalty – his tribute – to the court of Spain. This canvas is at the same time a extraordinary tribute paid to his friend and King, Philip IV, and his celestial contribution to the happy hours of the Court.

Diego Velázquez plays with the spatiotemporal continuum. And always a little further, more than two centuries before birth of science fiction, he had already conceptualized the notion of vortex. Better yet, the wormhole one. This “edge figure” ⁶ alongside the dwarf Maribárbola that some have designated as also being a dwarf: Nicolaso Pertusato. This “edge figure” is not a dwarf. He's not a dwarf. Neither in its morphology, nor in its gestures. This character has very childlike effect. This “edge figure” has all the grace of a child. Because he's a child! (Fig.9).



Figure 9 | Right part of the scene, in the foreground of *the Family of Philip IV*: El Menino sketched in a ray of light, a mischievous “edge figure” who from the tip of the foot comes to disturb the visible order of things, the apparent tranquility of the real world materialized by this good big Madrilenian mastiff dozing like an “earthenware dog”

A niño... A menino, hence this late requalification of *the Family of Philip IV*, frenchized in *Ménine*, then diverted into *las Meninas* (reference – erroneous – made to the following) by the yoke of this inevitable “entropy” ⁷ which, like a steamroller, plays on our collective memory. El Menino! An angel passes. A little angel straight down from Heaven in a ray of light. *This whole and mixed light which* – according to Michel Foucault – *serves as a place common to the representation. This light*

⁵ Governess charged with watching over a young girl from the Spanish nobility

⁶ “Edge figure” : expression of Louis Marin, cited by Daniel Arasse in *On n'y voit rien*, Paris, Denoël, 2002, p. 69 : «Its function is not to show what to see but to suggest how to look at what is given to see». Laurie Laufer in her article entitled *Transfrental figures, or “but what does the dead want from me?”* (Psychosomatic field 2003/4 [no 32], pages 19 to 37) tells us about this expression that «**The trauma of loss has opened a chasm which leaves the bereaved wandering in search of edge figures.** If these figures that the bereaved must subjectify do not hold or do not constitute containing edges, the distorted or formless bodily experience becomes the psychic form of the bereaved, causing a split necessary to avoid melancholic collapse. Neither the image of the self nor the object can hold in continuity. It is about creating an intermediate space which connects the image of the self and the object, so that the face sees itself being looked at. The place of passage allows the image of the self to remove the veil thrown over the mirror. The erasure of the bodily form, or its destruction under the shock of trauma, leaves a trace, a shape, an imprint. **The edge ghost-figure would come, from an imprint-matrix, to trace this shape...**»

⁷ The term “entropy” was introduced in 1865 by Rudolf Clausius from a Greek word meaning «transformation»

which bathes both the surface of the canvas with the volume it represents, and in front of this surface the real volume occupied by the spectator⁸. This light which diffuses following a straight incident wave relative to us, the spectators. However, as we are going to focus on the prove throughout this analysis, we are indeed at the King's Square. Of the God-King. *Deo regi*. The incidence of light is therefore in perfect adequacy with the metaphysical rules of the time who wanted the subject of the canvas to be bathed in a light diffused on its right. That of the hand of God. But what is this childish figure as if sketched by a streak of light? Who is this child who appeared out of nowhere?... From nowhere ? Not quite ! From the borders of the Realm of the Dead ! Because this is indeed Baltasar Carlos, the late little prince of Asturias (Fig.10). Beloved son of Philip IV, gone to soon. Diego Velázquez, apprentice sorcerer, succeeds in the sleight of hand to make him reappear within Philip IV's family... in the time of a blink. Mischievous edge figure, who with the tip of his foot comes to disturb the visible order of things, the apparent tranquility of the real world materialized by this voucher big Madrid mastiff dozing like an “earthenware dog”. Besides remember: we find ourselves... or rather all of characters that we see without being seen are found in the bedroom of the deceased little Prince! The only image really “ghostly” of this canvas is not that of the King and Queen in the background mirror, but rather that of the “spectrum” of this edge figure! An angel passes.



Figure 10 | Baltasar Carlos, the late little prince of Asturias, beloved son of Philip IV, gone too soon

The essential question to ask, at the very moment when the time seems to have stopped, is this: But whose really intended for this canvas? And following the same idea, what was it intended for? The sponsor is Philip IV, king of Spain. This is a personal order for use private. In other words, this finalized canvas was not intended to be viewed by ordinary mortals as it is currently at the Prado Museum. But very exclusively by the King – and his wife – as it hung on the wall of his study.

The detail is far from trivial. This canvas has been designed by Diego Velázquez at the request of the King and at his strict personal use. In a word: private!

The other question – no less essential – to ask now is: But what does this scene really represent? – Report to *signifier* and not the *signified* – What does it want to represent? Once again, the answer is simple: you just need to refer to the canvas title. In the original title. Exit that of *las Meninas* attributed formerly. As far back as we can remember, the title which qualified formerly this canvas was *the Family of Philip IV*. “Family”, (from the Latin *famulus*, derived from *osque famel*) in its meaning broad, that is to say that of the inhabitants of the King's house: children, as well as maids, governess, chaperone and others house people. In short, all those who, near or far, shared the intimacy of the royal couple on a daily basis. Let's keep these two elements of response in mind: this canvas represents the close entourage of the royal couple and was not intended to be seen and looked only for themselves very exclusively.

What does the young Infanta Margarita really do that makes us facing the very moment we observe it? (Fig. 11). Of all obviously, everything in her coquettish gestures – from the posture of the head oblique with a sideways gaze that stares (scrutinizes) straight ahead passing through a slight rotational movement of the body on himself – seems to indicate that she is looking at herself in a mirror !



Figure 11 | Infanta Margarita looking herself in a mirror

And there is another, moreover, which according to this same Obviously “playing the mirror”, it is the dwarf Maribárbola! That does she do it with all the majesty of a great lady? She holds between his fingers – thumb and index finger of the left

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, 1970

hand – a golden ring (Fig.12). Under the combined effect of light (which diffused from above and to its left) and from the mirror which faces to the actors of this scene – and following the game of reflection – Maribárbola observes with contented interest and amusement the halo of shine thus diffracted. We could even lend ourselves to imagine that this little spot of light reflected by the mirror would get lost somewhere on the Infanta's dress, hence the expression of satisfaction and undisguised amusement of the latter.



Figure 12 | Maribárbola looks through reflection in the mirror at the phenomenon of diffraction of light by the play of its ring

Apart from the characters in the next one kneeling on the right of the Infanta Margarita and the chaperone, behind her left, all the other characters in the scene are looking or looking at each other in the mirror positioned in front of them. Diego Velázquez in owned no less than ten of all sizes and all forms that followed him in all his movements. These mirrors allowed him to open up other perspectives and other spaces. The mirror game thus offered him the possibility of grasping the most natural expressions possible in his models. Rather than an ungrateful face to face with their portraitist, they were left in complete freedom, alone in front of the mirror, facing their own picture. Diego Velázquez, behind them, could then furtively grasp the subject of his work in complete spontaneity. The mirror also allows you to open a window in the canvas himself. By projecting before us – spectators – the reflection of what happens virtually behind our backs or in our place, the painter places us at the heart of the canvas. And passive spectators transforms us into actors. No backsliding. Neither degree of freedom. The painter like Arachne makes us prisoners

of her canvas. The most perfect illustration of this concept is, without doubt, the canvas known as *the Arnolfini Spouses* by the Flemish master Jan Van Eyck. And from the witch's mirror of *the Arnolfini Spouses* to the mirror from the bottom of *las Meninas* there is only one step to take... in a path unfortunately no way out!

The mirror. The back mirror. However, this is the key of this canvas (Fig.13).

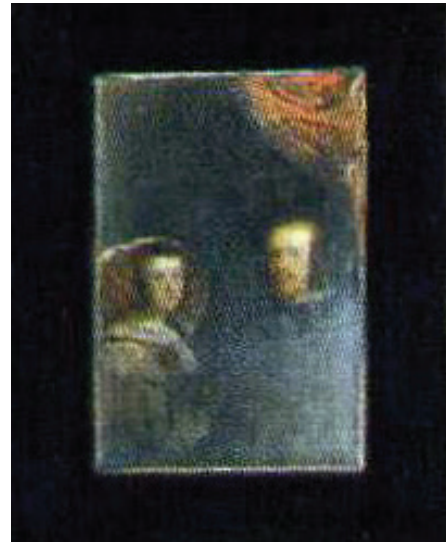


Figure 13 | The "ghostly" representation of the King and Queen of Spain

Let us return to the question we asked about the young Infanta. What is the Infanta Margarita really doing right now? where do we observe it? She looks at herself in a mirror, like most of the protagonists in this scene. And we, spectators – charmed by this delicious face which presents itself to our gaze in all the innocence of childish coquetry – we are on each other side of the mirror transformed into voyeurs. Behind this mirror – mirror without one way – we see without being seen the charming and full spectacle of emotion of this young infanta who looks at herself in all innocence and in complete peace. In this case, we see without being seen all the characters gathered in this room, aka *the Family of Philip IV*. If so, we are instead exact reserved for the King alone – accompanied by his wife – who could enjoy this scene at his discretion from his study. work. Always a little further, let us remember that this canvas finalized was not intended to be viewed by the average person mortals as it currently is at the Prado Museum. But good exclusively by the King – and his wife – as it was hung on the wall of his study. As we liked to point out previously: the detail is far from trivial! This canvas was designed by Diego Velázquez at the request of the King and strictly for personal use. In a word: private! Only the King himself – and his wife – could enjoy this scene at their

discretion from his office. Not an ounce of voyeurism in that. Nothing immodest or perverse, although Diego Velázquez has materialized or more precisely dematerialized – “But where is the canvas?”, exclaimed in his time Théophile Gautier who had already perceived the essence of this masterpiece – three centuries before its time the Balthusian concept: *seeing without being seen*. Because this is the subject of this conceptual work by Diego Velázquez. Although all the protagonists in this scene are unaware of anything spectacle that they offer us to see. No voyeurism. But quite the opposite of benevolence. The kind gaze of the only entity capable of seeing without being seen. God the father. God almighty, invisible God, who from the highest of his Heavens temples the spectacle of his creation: his family! Characters of this scene are under the benevolent gaze of God. And us, impudent spectators, we are in the gaze of God.

Diego Velázquez, through this canvas, invests his King of the divine power. “This canvas is the theology of painting”, exclaimed at that time Luca Giordano who also had already fully grasped by the spiritual power of this masterpiece. There key to the canvas is on the back wall of the stage. There is indeed a bottom mirror. But this mirror is virtual and does not participate in the spatial construction of this room. Clearly, this mirror is not there, at the very place, where we see it hanging on the wall. He is simply there – inseparable from the passage at the bottom in which the “third man” is camped, no point of escape (“the other eye”) of the perspective construction of the canvas – to allow us to understand the concept from which the scene facing us (Fig.14)

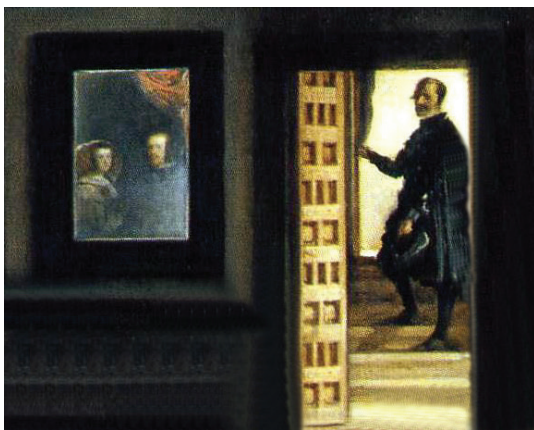


Figure 14 | The “ghostly” representation of the King and Queen of Spain inseparable from the “curtain raising” scene which takes place on the steps of the background passage, “vanishing point” of the perspective construction of the *Family of Philip IV*

It's a simple *Windows* window. A double left click on your mouse and the window appears. Left click and window disappears. More seriously, André Chastel affirmed that

when a painter represents a canvas within the canvas, this prefigures neither more nor less the production scenario of the canvas where it is located. In this case, there is a window projected on the back wall of the *Family of Philip IV*. If applicable, there is a canvas within the canvas of the *Family of Philip IV* – other than the one which gives us turns his back, and of which we only see the reverse – and this other canvas prefigures the scenario of the production of the canvas where it is located. As evidence, the scenario thus projected at the bottom of the picture now jumps out at us. The producer-director at the helm is once again Diego Velázquez. The “third man” camped on the stairs of the passage background is indeed Diego Velázquez as we mentioned previously. Diego Velázquez. Himself. In person. Marshal of the palace in office. Our gaze unconsciously captivated by the “vanishing point” of perspective construction of the painting, we are inexorably drawn to the bottom of the room. It seems there is something to see. Diego Velázquez is waiting for us there. He indeed has some something to show us. A message to deliver to us. A mystery to unveil. In his left hand a hat has replaced his palette. In his right hand a section of curtain now replaces his brush that looks like a magic wand. He lifts the veil on the darkroom mystery. The dark room. This is the room contiguous in which, in the darkness, the King – the Queen to her sides – observes through a “one-way mirror” the entirety of its family gathered in the room of the late little prince Baltasar Carlos. Diego Velázquez lifts the veil and sheds all the light on this divine mystery. By lifting this curtain, he allows the light in the adjoining room, thus unmasking observers royal (Fig.15).

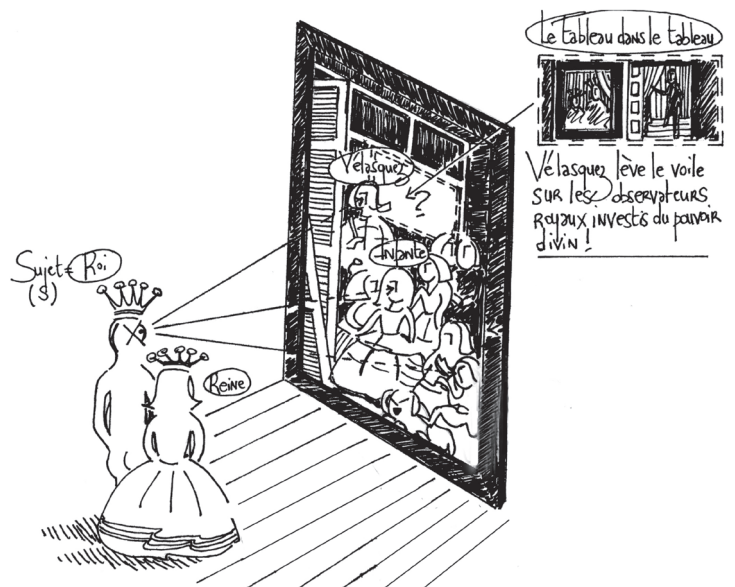


Figure 15 | “The canevas within the canevas”: Diego Velázquez lifts the veil on the royal observers invested with divine power

The “ghostly” appearance of the King and Queen, as they are represented side by side on the back wall, is exactly what we can see of what is happening behind this “one-way mirror” at the very moment when light enters the room in which they are located (Fig.16).



Figure 16 | “Ghostly” image of the King and Queen unmasked by the entrance light in the room where they were discreet observers until until the curtain is raised

Now that we have elevated Diego Velázquez to the rank of conceptual painter – Salvador Dalí, in person, he said about him: “What’s new in painting?... Velázquez!” – exit the image of Epinal which would reduce him to a vulgar painter of bodégonnes... or painter of dead (human) nature. Three centuries before Balthus and Marcel Duchamp ⁹, Diego Velázquez had already achieved the feat of putting this concept into an image which since the dawn of time has made humanity fantasize: *seeing without being seen*. So be *the Invisible Man* of H.G. Wells, *Orpheus* of Jean Cocteau or even *the Passer-through-walls* by Marcel Aymé. Diego Velázquez, the first of the surrealist painters!

Nothing immodest or perverse, although Diego Velázquez has materialized or more precisely dematerialized – “But where is the canvas ? », exclaimed in his time Théophile Gautier who had already perceived the essence of this masterpiece – three centuries before its time the Balthusian concept: seeing without being seen. Because this is the subject of this conceptual work by Diego Velázquez (Fig.17). Although all the protagonists in this scene are unaware everything about the spectacle they offer us to see. No voyeurism. But quite the opposite of benevolence. The kind look of the only entity capable of seeing without being seen. God the father. God almighty, invisible God, who from

the highest of his Heavens temples the spectacle of his creation: his family! Characters of this scene are under the benevolent gaze of God. And us, impudent spectators, we are in the gaze of God. It is no longer a question here of a “representation” strictly speaking, but of a “projection”. Because it is here *the viewer who makes the picture* ¹⁰. Thus making this fresco a precursor transdimensional portal of the contemporary “metaverse”.



Figure 17| The canvas of *the Family of Philip IV* designed by Diego Velazquez no more like the interface of a simple window on the world but like that of a "one-way mirror"

PS: This article served as a working basis for the writing of Xavier d'Hérouville's exhaustive work published in 2015 by l'Harmattan editions in the “ouverture philosophique” collection under the title *Les Ménines ou l'art conceptuel de Diego Velázquez* (EAN13: 9782343070704)

⁹ Marcel Duchamp, father of the ready-made, developed the so-called “keyhole concept” in the same way: « Every peephole to which the viewer is invited extends a certain type to infinity of attention, that of the voyeur through a keyhole or a peephole. It is the viewer who makes the picture... »