

Comment on "Anamorphosis and the Eccentric Observer: Inverted Perspective and the Construction of the Gaze"

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Source: *Leonardo*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (1993), p. 90

Published by: The MIT Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1575802>

Accessed: 01-02-2019 12:27 UTC

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COMMENT ON "ANAMORPHOSIS AND THE ECCENTRIC OBSERVER: INVERTED PERSPECTIVE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE GAZE"

Daniel L. Collins, in his fascinating article on anamorphic art (*Leonardo* 25, No. 1, 73–82, 1992), contrasts the central gaze required in viewing classical perspective pictures with the eccentric point of view in which anamorphic pictures are viewed.

A case can be made for making both kinds of gazes as special examples of the way all of us see everything; the fact that eyes have lenses means that, following laws of optics of which we have no control, we are seeing both centrally and anamorphically whenever we look at *anything*. Two examples will illustrate this. An observer sits in an actual room and sees a nearby box turn into a distorted solid with its parallel sides now proceeding to some distant vanishing point. A distant tree seen from a window appears no larger than the observer's hand. Already the gaze is "eccentric" relative to the box and to the tree. In viewing the anamorphic skull in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, the fact that we are seeing the skull "correctly," i.e. from an acute angle, renders the rest of the painting itself an anamorphic blur with emaciated ambassadors and instruments!

Yet we learn not to be "fooled by appearances" and learn how to maneuver fairly efficiently in this beautiful world of ours.

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COMMENT ON "COMPUTER GRAPHICS FOR THE ANALYSIS OF PERSPECTIVE IN VISUAL ART: *LAS MENINAS*, BY VELÁZQUEZ"

In so many ways Velázquez's *Las Meninas* is an enigma—attested at least by the various conflicting and contradictory interpretations by scholars over the years. But one matter has been settled—as I reported in this journal in 1982 [1]—namely, the source of the reflected image of the king and queen in the mirror on the far wall of the picture.

In an important article published in 1980 [2], Joel Snyder and Ted Cohen drew on the laws of optics to show that the (mirror) image is reflected from the depiction on the canvas being painted by Velázquez, and not (as customarily assumed) from the king and queen themselves, presumably the spectators (or models) in front of the picture plane. This follows from the fact that the vanishing point of the painting is to the (viewer's) right of the mirror. (It seems to me that the man on the stairs is indeed pointing to the very place.) In order for the reflected image to be the spectators themselves, the vanishing point would have to be in the mirror, since the mirror is parallel to the picture plane. But, since the vanishing point is to the right of the mirror, then the source of the reflected image must be to the left of the mirror—hence, the painted canvas itself. The argument is simple and consistent—and is based on optical facts [3].

I reiterate this argument because of the publication of the recent article by Frederic Chordá (*Leonardo* 24, No. 5, 563–567, 1991), in which he uses computer graphics to reconstruct a three-dimensional image of the spatial arrangement of the figures in Velázquez's picture. The approach is original and ambitious but regrettably flawed because of the author's erroneous explanation of the mirror image. As he writes: "The perspective in the painting places the viewer approximately in front of the mirror, occupying the place of

those who are reflected in it, King Philip IV and his queen, Marianne of Austria, who are recognizable from other royal portraits" (p. 564). Since this is not true (that is, the viewer is not in front of the mirror, which is the crucial fact), then the inference Chordá draws in the next sentence is also wrong: "This painting is from the perspective of the king and represents what he sees, with the perceptual quality of the 'royal gaze'" (p. 564). Chordá goes on, unfortunately, to make much of this "royal gaze" in his interpretation of the picture.

References

1. David Topper, "Historical Perspectives on the Visual Arts, Science and Technology," *Leonardo* 15, No. 3, 234–237 (1982).
2. Joel Snyder and Ted Cohen, "Reflections on *Las Meninas*: Paradox Lost," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (Winter 1980) pp. 429–449.
3. See John F. Moffitt, "Velázquez in the Alcazar Palace in 1656: The Meaning of the *Mise-en-scène* of *Las Meninas*," *Art History* 6 (1983) pp. 271–300.

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COMMENT ON "ON MEMORY (ELECTRONIC OR OTHERWISE)"

The following remarks were formulated and submitted before I learned of Vilém Flusser's death. Were it not that the attitudes I criticize are held, I believe, by persons other than Flusser, I would withdraw my comments. I invite critical responses.

In Vilém Flusser's General Note, "On Memory (Electronic or Otherwise)," (*Leonardo* 23, No. 4, 397–399, 1990) the following ideas are stated:

Electronic memories provide us with a critical distance from a simulation of our ability to store acquired information; a distance that will permit us, in the long run, to emancipate ourselves from the ideological belief that we are "spiritual beings," subjects that face an objective world (p. 398).