

Infanta generated by di-ego.

The following text has been written as a stand-in presentation for the Warsaw GASC-conference in case one of the presenters were unable to perform. It is based on the lectures Wiel Eggen gave in Magdalena Z-D's course of generative anthropology and in my own course of mimetic theology, commenting on Velasquez' painting *Las Meninas*. The text has been checked with the author, who was also part of the Warsaw GASC-conference. {1}

### *Introduction*

Aesthetics' pivotal role, according to Generative Anthropology, concerns the working of metaphors letting humans' emerge as humans, both in phylogenetic sense, as a species at the originary onset, and in ontogenetic terms, with respect to each person's trajectory in reaching human status in personal development. This route, indeed, is aesthetically poetic or it is not. It is about rising above any resentment, mimetic tension or conflict, that upsets the drive to hold one's own. A trajectory that is disturbed by daily crises, in which people gradually learn, from the first crisis among the prehumans down to date, to devise the harmony of new solutions by their own efforts and with the help of educators, sages or artists,. Urging people to stand back may be seen as the essence of what storytellers, singers, dancers, composers, and even painters have been doing ever since. In his classical *Aesthetic theory*, Theodor Adorno notes that preceding any visual art expression, the oral representations and musical performances must have created a space for things to be transformed into images, thanks to a mimetic comportment in which an assimilation of the self to the other takes place. {2} As one gazes at visual artifacts from whatever age this must be kept in mind.

Just a cursory glimpse at the abundant literature on Velasquez' famous painting *Las Meninas* will explain why the thousands of participants of guided tours to the Prado are made to realize that reality is not what meets the eyes. Though paintings like poetic words may pretend to express a truth, at entering this impressive hall it is Nietzsche's paradoxical truism that hits home, stating that there is no truth, only opinions. Opinions on *Las Meninas* abound, most of them misleadingly agreeing that the title of 'the maids in waiting' is far from capturing the 'truth' of this brilliantly (ir)realistic scene. If the erstwhile name of "The Royal Spanish Family" might seem so much more befitting of what is presented, numerous comments see the painter Diego's self-representation as of equal importance. And undoubtedly for good reason. These and so many other perspectives urge any spectator to stand back and re-frame the own take on reality.

Indeed, Michel Foucault's famous study of the painting, - a contemporary of Girard's launch of the mimetic theory, - regards the spectators themselves as the true focus of the scene. {3} His argument relates the masterpiece to the unset of modernity. For Velasquez' years were actually those of Descartes as well, being the birth of modern 'ego'. The spectator, to whom all eyes in the scene are directed, holds the place of the royal couple posing for the painter's inverted canvas on the left and reflected in the mirror behind him. In that blurred mimesis of royalty, thus Foucault, modern

spectators are raised to prominence, but also questioned. Burgeoning modernity was set to create a generation that questioned the medieval vision of a divine program for each person's life, while stressing ego's own all but divine ratio. But the medieval ambiguity, partly stressing the equivalence of the divine and human ratio while also stressing a nominalist cloud that hides any access to eternal truth - or in Kantian terms the *noumenon* – had affected this humanist self already so much that the Diego's very scene shows signs of the subsequent demise, due to its faltering grip on the psychic and social identity. Consequently, *Las Meninas* has also been subject to numerous deconstructing comments in literature as well as painting. The over twenty variants painted by Picasso almost seem to be designed to corroborate Foucault's dismal thesis of humanism's demise, as already intimated by the picture's metaphor of the blurred royal couple and its reference to the proud but spurious self. In more recent days, Philip Roth's novel *The Dying Animal* is known to have taken the painting's Infanta Margarita as a focus of his elegiac comment on beauty and decay. Modigliani's nude on the cover of his novel is telling in relation to Velasquez' theme, as we will discover further on. These and hundreds more of comments recognize the painting as actually creating a space that allows people to stand back and reframe existence via its metaphors. The greatness of the work, no doubt, shows in these diverse comments. Yet, we wish to remain closer to the real composition with its brilliant use of the pictorial tools as it tells a concrete story and reflects on an enigma that Europe's transition from medieval to modern times was facing. While Foucault hints at that new vista, or *episteme* as he calls it, he ignores a crucial factor that is shimmering behind the Infanta's magnificent appearance. Let us try to catch a glimpse of it by following the construction and its battle to the end.

### *The Infanta's battle*

Diego does his painter's job of presenting an aesthetically enjoyable visual tale. As any narrative, it stages a plot seeking to resolve a conflict by offering a solution that temporally pacifies the mind with a more or less dramatic form of sacrifice. We briefly follow this story as told by the tools of his trade, colors and lines of construct, while noting that the subject clearly is neither the maids, nor himself, nor for that matter us as spectators, but the Infanta Margarita Teresa, who features in the middle, on the central vertical line. The fact that the upper half of the painting is in a semi-obscurity tells us that the geometric construct is basic for reading the painting, with lines such as diagonals and golden means playing a crucial role. They recount the plot of the drama with 12 actors, all mainly in the lower half of the painting, and evenly divided in male and female, with the girl's dog as her male beloved, to whom she unmistakably turns and points her little left finger, thereby setting the drama's inchoate conflict. This is spelled out by the diagonal from top left to right bottom, with the six main figures to its left: Margarita, the royal couple, the painter Diego, the maid Maria, and

the mastiff, whereas Diego's brother, the *apostador de camino* or *major domus* José Nieto Velasquez and the maid Isabella pose their hands on this key diagonal. The plot is between the parents and the child, while the brothers Diego and José seconded by the two maids are called upon to facilitate the transition of the child to the adulthood, alias the marriageable status, away from her infancy with her dwarfs friends and the dog, whose back touches that diagonal with the dwarf Nicolito playfully placing his foot on it. Consider the central triangle down from the middle of the painting – from the intersection of the two diagonals in between the top of the mirror and the open door halfway on the central vertical down to the left and right golden sections on the baseline. It shows the Infanta all by herself in splendid light, but dramatically betraying her deep resentment at the situation. Looking straight at us, who are located in the crucial spot that Foucault referred to on the prolongation of the middle vertical – the location of her parents but also of the painter, as we shall see – the girl clearly turns her head away from the mediation by the kneeling Maria and points her little finger to the dog, whose front toes touch the right golden section on the baseline. Her resentment at the choice she is to make is the ordinary drama of the tale Diego is about to tell. {4}

An intricate play of lines to such points on the actual painting's circumference and on the inverted canvass on the left reveals a transformation of the coupling of the 12 figures, starting from the two formulas the child and the parents have in mind and ending with the third setting, which Diego proposes to the girl via a most significant and charming line running up from the right corner via their faces to the golden sections on both the inverted canvass and the actual painting. As in a loving duet Diego proposes a solution to her. In his final formula a special role will be given to the mirror image of the diagonals' intersection on the central vertical down below the base. In Foucault's reading this is where the spectator holds the royal couple's spot. Following Propp's classic formula of tale-telling, that Levi-Strauss refined to a formula to be applied to any transformational procedure, we will see the logic of Diego's solution to the drama, when he proposes that she go and stand in that pivotal spot so that he does the aesthetic thing to her which is now doing to her mum and dad. {5}

Space does not allow us to elaborate on this intricate play of intersecting lines and the colorful narration of the plot caught by this construct in which the aesthetic deferral is given its crucial role. The astute use of the gender balance of six pairs, being framed in variant groups of four times three units gives the painting a mathematical feel, not unlike the later Baroque highpoints of J.S. Bach's major compositions. Let us consider on a few salient points and return to that important first diagonal down from the top left, which indicates the classical entrance for the eye into the scene. It divides the actors in two sets of six gendered figures. The main set to the left comprises the parents and the Infanta with her mastiff together with the two only acting persons, *la menina* Maria and the painter Diego. Their actions form the beginning and end of the tale. To the right of the diagonal we

see, as a counterpart of this scene, Isabella with the two dwarfs representing the child's playful world and the *apostador* in the open door with an adult couple in semi-obscure, who symbolize the opposite of the infant's existence. The open door controlled by José has a pivotal role to play. The child has just entered with her company to face the domain of her parents, from where she is to leave, ideally turned a grown up as they would like her to be. Let us give that diagonal a closer look. While Isabella and José have a grip on it with their left and right arms, we note besides Nicolito's playful foot on the dog's back on the lower end also the remarkable fact, at the upper end, the canvass' tip touching this crucial diagonal. So, what is the story and what is it to mean?

The arrangement of four groups of three persons the child has in mind is clearly different from her parents'. She is happy to be with Maria and Isabella enjoying the company of the dwarfs and her dog, while she sees José commanding the two servants in the semi-obscure and her parents being painted by Diego. But the parents undoubtedly wish to see the *apostador* in union with the *meninas* bring Margarita into their realm of etiquette and marital candidacy, leaving the playful world of the dwarfs and the dog far down in the corner. In all her splendor, the Infanta exudes the originary anxiety that shows in her undeniable turning away. The *meninas* present what she desires but also profoundly abhors and resents.

Following the intricate play of lines constructing the scene we cannot fail to note that the painter is in the picture not just by some conceited self-reference, but because of his vision on the mediating role his art plays in society. In the standoff between the two irreconcilable and emotion-laden options of his patron's family he clearly empathizes with the beloved Margarita, sharing her anxiety and offering his service to modify the original triangle, composed by the diagonal with the line from the same top down to the golden section before the mastiff's toes, in which the child and her dog are confronted by the parents' command. By shifting the latter line somewhat to the left, into a line that runs from the top left to the middle of the baseline, he brings in both Maria's offer and his own palette. By this line that runs through his mouth he tells Margarita that he will replace *la menina* Maria's offer by his own. That is to say, he will do to her what is now doing to her parents. He will do the aesthetic plaything that will grant her a position in their adult world, according to the generative ways of transformation as Levi-Strauss defined. This he explains to the girl via the line mentioned above, running from the bottom right up to the golden section of both the canvass and the actual painting. And the Infanta is delighted to go along with his proposal that will result in the concluding line running from the tip of the canvass through the painter's mouth and palette down to the spot below the baseline mirroring the middle of the actual painting, being the place where the spectator stands, but also the royal couple, and the painter in his actual, and in his promised position. That is the place the child's eyes are unmistakably focused on. {6}

### *A solution demanding a resolve*

So, what did the four of them agreed upon? That Diego generously delivered on his promise can still be admired in various museums to date. The Infanta has been the proud subject of a brilliant range of paintings that still fill our iconographies. Both she and her parents got their satisfaction. But how was this aesthetic option a solution to Margarita's anxiety? In which sense did it respond to the prospects of her parents? And how to understand the four main mediating figures? If some comments see the maids as protectors of the sanctity and safety of Margarita's childhood, it must be clear that, while Isabella might seem to hover protectively over her, Maria has an unmistakably different role. The two brothers rising above them present a double metaphor related to the standoff facing Margarita. The *apostador* José Nieto standing in the open door symbolizes both the tale's onset and the ending . He has brought the child into the presence of her parents and shows the way out from the conflictual setting thanks to the stratagem devised by his brother Diego and agreeable to either side. His solution is most peculiar, if considered in the cultural history of mankind, as it implied a shift in aesthetic experience that betrayed a specific form of deferral. In fact, what some call an explosion of portraiture has occurred since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when the Cartesian ego replaced the divine ruler's plans. The colorful retinue of heavenly peripatetics came to be replaced by realistic portraiture of living individuals, to start with the royals, followed by deserving heroes and rich burgers. A unique feature in humanity's aesthetic history.

While the central perspective came to dominate pictorial arts and musical keyboards with equal temperament were invented, the focus on the individual human person replaced the saints as the concrete theme. By promising a portrait similar to the adults' play-thing he is making for her parents, Diego has the enchanted princess enter into a new cultural ambit. In our title his name is given as di-ego, in a double play on his name: not just replacing the divine ego, but in a manner that will eventually also undo the emerging humanist ego via a novel type of mimetic dialogue. {7}

### *A novel aesthetic space*

Considering the time frame in which Diego was operating, we might be tempted to analyze the political forces at work and situate his proposal in that ambit. Within the child's lifespan her need to fit into the diplomatic schemes of the international theater seems obvious. Yet, we must consider an aspect that was set to overrule the dominant pattern, and has been overlooked by leading cultural analysts. In European sociology, Norbert Elias claims that the courtly habits have set the tone for the cultural patterns, with burgers imitating the nobility ever since the Reformation enacted the religious revolt against the sacred hierarchy. The famous Dutch school of portraiture was soon to combine an extreme realistic accuracy with what Max Weber was to call a Calvinist inner-worldly asceticism and sobriety. Even if Velasquez is yet far from that stage, his proposal to the Infanta may

easily be reduced to a means to please the parents and show her as imminently marriageable. Yet there is much more than this facile reading of the scene.

If the aesthetic, in Adorno's words, contains what has been excised from civilization and repressed, including the suffering of the loss endured, we must see this painting both as a sign of empathy with the child's chagrin at the prospects of leaving her joyful infancy and a agreeable vista that doesn't coincide with that conventional perspective. For this we have first to take note of reality to which René Girard has drawn our attention and which, in a sense, is at the opposite what Norbert Elias seems to imply in suggesting that the kings and nobility set the ideal for their subjects' mimetical desires. Royal weddings may be referred to as a desirable fairytale dream, in fact the ethnographic evidence shows that this royal existence is not only outside reach, but also detested in essential respects. Many a royal fact points to the special status, which Girard linked to an institutionalized scapegoat. In African traditions, but also in the ceremonial royalties of the West, the royals are wont or even obliged to act as 'dirt' by certain detestable behaviors. Whereas this is often ritualized in Africa, in Europe it is covered over by constitutional indemnity. In anthropology, this has been recognized by authors like Pierre Clastres, as society's cultural means to keep the centralization of power in check and safeguard the space for the populace to seek its creative ways. {8}

This has a specific bearing on the topic of Velasquez' masterpiece. While arranged weddings have been the courtly practice till recent years, by the end of the medieval times a new option was on offer, or rather already ingrained in canon law. It actually can be said to contradict the so-called dominant social vista. And it is here that we must value to the full the workings of aesthetics as a generative force by allowing a deferral inspired by the paradox of what Girard has called the *meconnaissance* and the evangetic unraveling of the victimary condition proper to the woman's position in customary exchange patterns. Contrary to the biblical demand that the man leave his home and cling to his wife (Gn 2:24), in all but very few traditions the common practice is that the woman is handed to the man and his clan with rituals that imply sacrificial symbolism. By the time of Diego's pictorial dialogue with Margarita, however, a new pattern was in place, which deserves to be considered more closely.

#### *A battle to the end*

The painter's proposal to his beloved Margarita is the opposite of what either the old or the new exchange systems expect. The portrait he promises does not intend, far from it, to raise her standing as a desirable value in the marital exchange patterns of royals, nor is the canvas itself to embody an investment with a skyrocketing price in the emerging capitalist carousel. The maids in waiting, *las meninas*, surrounding the girl may, therefore, rightly be considered the prime topic of the scene, in that they symbolize the protection of her uniqueness as a person, while the blurred mirror image of

the parents, alias of the gazing spectators, effectively express the rejection of any greedy projects of both the old or new value exchange. The aesthetic space that Diego creates surrounding the Infanta makes us stand back from the stock exchange stratagems that surround her, both old and new style. In respect of the tale told by this masterpiece a double uniqueness of the European cultural setting stands out. As mentioned above, there is the unprecedented artistic phenomenon of very accurate portrait painting, which must moreover be related to a unique social-religious novelty that is rarely put in relief. When Foucault correctly stresses the transition from the medieval to modern humanist episteme, he quotes a religious dimension, of which he fails to ponder the social roots. He mentions that the new humanist person is no longer defined by heteronomous, divine, or supernatural plans, but rather by ego's autonomous perspectives, which painters may capture in the novel specialty of portraiture, and which is related to innovations in other arts, among which the rise of the modern novel.<sup>{9}</sup> Historians have rightly remarked that scholastic theology prepared this focus on the ego by emphasizing the interconnectedness of the three ratios: of the Creator, the creation, and of the human intellect. But even though this clearly helped to raise the ego's standing as an autonomous individual, in Cartesian sense, there was a social factor of much greater import that is rarely mentioned. Apart from the economic conditions in burgeoning urban centers, there was the unique development of the marriage as a sacramental order, developed by medieval canon law, which brought the pivotal turnaround compared to the age-old nuptial customs.

By defining marriage as an interpersonal bond of two individuals of equal standing as God's children in Christ, the Church undercut the ubiquitous pattern of kinship groups exchanging their procreative assets. A unique ambit was thus created, in keeping with what the mimetic theory has called the biblical anti-sacrificial logic, a condition in which persons of either gender, in full juridical autonomy, enter into a unions of interindividual dialogue, where each one's social past counts far less than their common perspective together. Even though this social pattern derived from the words of Genesis and of the Christ himself, only medieval legal forms came to effectuate its social impact on the cultural patterns.

Velasquez actually intimates to the princess Margarita Teresa that her identity as an individual person transcends her parents' designs for what seems a rite of passage, while he proposes one of his own. After she has entered the room as a pawn in the royal court designs, the *apostador* Jose Nieto, staying behind in the doorway and taking the lead from his brother's, invites her to the exit as a person of autonomous standing, ready to enter into a dialogue on her own terms. What this implies in terms of deferral is not just the subject's autonomy entitled to override and blur any heteronomous plans via an interiorizing of the divine ratio, but even a step far beyond to make this very 'di' of the divine materialize in a 'di' of interindividual dialogue.

In terms of sexuality and gender relations, the period of Velasquez' work was pivotal due to

ideological battles of epic proportions. His aesthetic masterpiece in the Prado can be separated neither from what Margarita Teresa's contemporary namesake from Avila was advancing in terms of profound feminine mysticism, nor from the struggles affecting her parents empire, where Protestant revolts attacked the hated clerical grip on society, among others by rejecting marital sacramentality and its implications for moral regulations. Indeed, the liberation that the individualization of the marital order entailed had been accompanied by rigorous moral and penitential constructs that had painfully increased the clerics grip on daily life and provoked deep rifts across the continent. { 10} For, besides nasty self-serving habits of ecclesiastics, there were the many justified concerns over society's coherence within the individualized constructs of autonomous persons that were in the process of replacing ages-old honored schemes of kinship lines with marital exchanges schemes.. Charmed though the Infanta may have been by the artist's generous offer, her future perspective and that of her sisters was less blithe and carefree as the novel position of autonomous counterpart suggests. Her childhood companions will not necessarily be replaced by gender-friendly partners and what the Diego proposes will be a most challenging condition demanding heavy investment.

#### *A di-fering conclusion*

Looking at the aesthetic space created for the spectator in the interface with the actors, we note that, as a playwright, Diego does more than reporting or representing. If Foucault is to be taken seriously claiming that, in Velasquez' and Descartes' age, the humanist ego was being inaugurated, surely that is to count particular for someone in the Infanta's position. And *Las Meninas* has an indisputable portent that extends far into the future leading in diverse directions. Who is this royal child to be as an icon, or rather an idol, of the courtly ways that are setting the trend for the Western civilization, which is on the point of colonizing humanity as a whole? Whom are the maids in waiting protecting and the brothers Velasquez promoting? Which ego is she to introduce into modernity and beyond? The ego that supplants the divine with a transcendental self, or rather who sees itself dismembered, dislodged, dispersed and infinitely deconstructed? The painting contains an ambivalent promise in respect of her feminine prospects that Picasso's persiflage leaves no doubt about. What is she to choose when Facebook will ask her to select her gender identity among the over seventy option on offer? What will remain of her splendid dress when faced with a law forbidding the wearing of skirts to UK- schoolgirls as they are not gender-neutral? Could the kilt solve her plight? Irony apart, we must note that the aesthetic excellence of Diego's masterpiece indeed offers a space to the spectator's di-fering drive to affirm the depicted reality and yet to perceive an end to its infinite urge. The very word 'offer', while linguistically akin to *oeuvre* (Lat: *opus*) implies also the notion of sacrifice, as in the German *Opfer*, meaning the readiness to 'make sacred', or respect the sanctity of ego's basic drive to dialogue, which roots in the will to be devoted to life and its future,

Margarita will soon come to hear the biblical word that in God's kingdom there will be no marrying or giving in marriage. It will be read out by clerics who also proclaim the sacred sacramentality of the marital order. Surmounting that apparent paradox, Diego's composition offers her a sign in that exquisite line rising up through both their mouths to the double golden section on the left. It holds a metaphor allowing to surmount this dilemma. Whereas royal exchange patterns will still be in operation after his artistic sign, her is promised an autonomy that admits a glorification of what her gender is essentially about, a cooperative and interindividual devotion to life's infinity, turning most of Facebook's options into nonsense and homosexuality into a *contradictio in terminis*.

How the gospel's anti-victimary option fosters a liberating turn in the cultural forms inherited from tribal and imperial gender practices became most evident, albeit belatedly, through the innovation of the nuptial sacrament, built on the exclusive agreement of the spouses as equal God's children, or divine egos in dialogue. Together with other medieval factors this has arguably been a key factor bringing on the emergence of the individual's position, irrespective of the gender. Although the Reformation rejected the marital sacramentality, it further stressed the individual's standing. Even if this was the time of extreme religious anxiety about one's standing in God's eyes, it saw also the birth of the literary novel and the aesthetic interest in portrait painting. Velazquez was, no doubt, one of the great masters of that trade. His proposal of fine portraiture to Margarita was an offer she could hardly resist as an alternative route to adulthood, especially as it would, no doubt, please her parents as well. Not meant to improve her position on the exchange chessboard, but to help her differ society towards an open future of gender equality in mutual commitment to life.

A masterpiece like Diego's is called an oeuvre in the sense defined by Levinas, as a call for a reply, in which sacrificial deconstruction of forms and prejudices is the deferral that allows mutual respect of the other's uniqueness, making mimesis no longer a matter of rivalry, but an offer that challenges the human person, irrespective of gender, to be involved, and yet with a distance from what will always be real life's tensions and conflicts. {11} If fear of a fatal chaos inspires the deferral of a metaphoric sign, the concern must focus what the self and the other share, namely the love of life's infinity, which Diego presents as the glorious Infanta.