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Enacting Higher-Order Thoughts

Velasquez and Las Meninas

The special issue of the *Journal of Consciousness Studies* on ‘*Las Meninas* and Self-representation’ is a major contribution to our understanding of how higher forms of consciousness engage with art.¹ It deserves also to have a lasting impact on art history’s methods and concerns. One could take certain aspects of Uziel Awret’s broad approach in the lead essay, ‘*Las Meninas* and the search for self-representation’—in particular the attempt to show a relation between higher-order thoughts (HOTs) and *Las Meninas*—and extend them to a good many other works of art. In Velasquez’s *oeuvre* alone, there are paintings such as *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (1619-20) and *Las Hilanderas* or *The Weavers* (1667) which share important visual principles with *Las Meninas*, and cooperate with consciousness and self-consciousness in similar ways. They do this by employing complex frames-in-frames, shown as pictures-in-pictures or rooms within rooms or, in the case of *Las Meninas*, as a framed mirror inside a room with framed pictures on the wall in the background. These framing devices were produced by the artist’s higher-order thought and have continued to stimulate such thought about the painting long after the seventeenth century. This paper is an attempt to examine in detail how HOTs process these focal points depicted in *Las Meninas*.²

Awret suggests that *Las Meninas* imitates “a process that engages the

¹ Volume 15, no. 9 (2008). This builds on previous issues such as ‘Art and the Brain’, Volume 6 (1999) and Volume 7, no. 8/9 (2000). These were mostly concerned with lower forms of consciousness, perception and neurological processes involved in the experience of art.

² I gratefully acknowledge the help of Firuza Pastakia, Professor David Rosenthal and the *JCS* reviewers of this paper for their insightful comments and for helping to rid the text of ambiguity.

observer in a cascade of higher-order representations of the self” (Awret 2008: 15). But how is this cascade structured? There are many more aspects of this picture that provide reflection on HOTs and their relations. In fact, it is possible to use HOT theory to understand many other works of art. But it is necessary, first, to get the theory right and to look more carefully at exactly how HOTs are engaged with *Las Meninas*. Importantly, this engagement raises questions about some of the major assumptions we make about HOTs, about how they are constituted and how we may proceed to use them successfully in the study of art.

In *Las Meninas*, one of the most important frames depicted in the picture is the edge of the mirror and the black frame around it. Yet the doorway in the background also functions as a frame, and there are paintings shown above this, which are also framed focal points. And although the reversed painting the artist is shown attending to does not have a frame, its edge is lit up to remind us of one. We travel through the delimited spaces portrayed and yet we are also aware of the physical frame surrounding the actual painting of *Las Meninas*. These framed areas and images inside images are connected to each other by the different gazes of the figures portrayed. Much of the analysis of *Las Meninas* in the special issue consists of higher-order thoughts about these framed areas in the painting: they seem to attract and focus higher-order thoughts. These HOTs inevitably become targets for other writers, such as myself, eager to comment on how others see this painting. In this way, a series of HOTs about other people’s HOTs is stimulated by the painting’s focal points, and by its system of gazes, the disposition of which appears to reflect back this intersubjectivity of writing about the painting. This is, I believe, a sign of the painting’s success.³

Part of the fascination with these framed areas lies in the spatial anomalies they bring to mind. A framed picture contains within it a framed picture. The internal frame is both internal in relation to the outer frame and external in the sense that it, too, has contents. These frames, in their many guises, seem both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’; they have contents but also appear as contents of other larger contexts. The door, for example, frames a dark figure and is at the same time part of a whole wall of other framed objects. If these elements in *Las Meninas* bring to mind the capture and release of higher-order thoughts, what do these spatial anomalies allow us to think? Is it possible to use them in order to understand what it is like to be ‘in’ or ‘outside’ a mental state?

There are various theories in the philosophy of mind that try to explain whether having a thought about being in a mental state actually involves having two mental states: being ‘in’ a lower-order thought, and knowing you are ‘in’ a higher-order thought that is ‘about’ the lower order thought. These are intrinsicality/extrinsicality arguments; the former attempt to show that higher-order thought is part of the lower-order thought it makes conscious (part of a broader mental event), while the latter argue that

³ Because it is “self-teaching”, a phrase used by Merleau-Ponty referring to Cézanne, where he writes that it is not enough for artists to express an idea: “they must also awaken the experiences which will make their idea take root in the consciousness of others” (Merleau-Ponty in Johnson 1993: 70).

these are distinct mental states that accompany each other in order to produce consciousness.

Generally, higher-order representation (HOR) theories of consciousness maintain that a mental state, M, is conscious by virtue of the fact that it is the target of another mental state, M*. Higher-order thought (HOT) theories represent M* as an actual, occurrent thought.⁴ Different versions of HOR theory arise because there are disagreements not only over the contents of M* but also concerning the relationship between M and M*. Higher-order perception (HOP) theories maintain that M* should be construed as a kind of perception linked to sensations. There are theories that depict M and M* as less distinct, making them intrinsic to larger mental contexts. This may be seen with the wider intrinsicity view (WIV) and in higher-order global states (HOGS).⁵ Thus, in the literature concerning HOR theory, there are various metaphors and images referencing spatial categories and structures that are used to clarify the relations and boundaries between mental states.

In this paper I will use a theoretical yet also clearly visible construct, the frame-in-a-frame, to allow us to rethink this fundamental intrinsicity/extrinsicity dualism by appealing to more sophisticated conceptions of space and representation found in art and philosophy. An effective way for art theory, philosophy and science to understand the kind of consciousness involved with *Las Meninas* is to refer back to the work of art which displays a visual structure depicting a series of relations that is analogous with the relations of mental states attending it.

Awret claims that *Las Meninas*, “the painting itself”, represents a mental state M and that the reversed canvas depicted inside it can designate the state M* (which is “about” M). Rocco Gennaro’s important criticism of Awret in the same special issue points out that this would mean that M* is within M, “and this does not cohere well with standard HOT theory which states that M* has to be a *distinct* state or representation” (Gennaro 2008: 49). He may be concerned here to retain an element of this distinctness between HOTs within a wider intrinsicity view, but Gennaro’s point also shows Awret assuming intrinsicity. Yet both authors are constricted somewhat by the discursive practice of extrinsicity and intrinsicity. If we go back to the painting, however,

⁴ “Since a mental state is conscious if it is accompanied by a suitable higher-order thought, we can explain a mental state’s being conscious by hypothesizing that the mental state itself causes that higher-order thought to occur” (Rosenthal 2005: 26-27).

⁵ The case that a HOT may be part of the lower-order thought that it is about is argued by Brentano but more recently (Loar 1987: 103). Rosenthal argues against this by saying that a HOT will have more contents in it than a lower-order thought. Yet this does not mean that the lower-order thought is not represented within the HOT as part of its matrix. I will not, however, be arguing for intrinsicity, merely showing that the binary of intrinsicity/extrinsicity can be questioned. A HOT is discrete from the original lower-order thought but the HOT continues that thought with the added content of self-consciousness: I still experience red when I know I experience red. Rocco Gennaro and Robert Von Gulick take various positions which make both first- and higher-order thoughts intrinsic to larger mental contexts. With the first author, the ‘wide intrinsicity view’ (WIV) represents consciousness as a wider field within which both first-order and higher-order thoughts may reside. With the second author, the idea of ‘higher-order global thoughts’ posits lower-order thoughts as intrinsic to the higher-order ones within larger, more complex or global categories or brain states. For an introduction to these views and others, see Gennaro, 2004: 2.

spatial ambiguities in *Las Meninas* and the larger picture of the network of relations depicted show us it is possible to question this duality by using the concept of superpositionality.

The gazes in the painting link the figures to each other and also invite the viewer to imagine herself playing a part in this network of sightlines. They form a detailed visual system that the artist has devised to integrate different parts of the painting. The depicted gazes mediate the framed areas to create various combinations of meaning and self-consciousness. Similar to the framed areas themselves, these sightlines are also objects of higher-order thought, and serve to create relationships between them. We are looking at the painted figures and what they are looking at and, by extension, with our own higher-order thought we think about what *their* HOTs might be and analyze them using third-order thoughts.

These third-order thoughts may be relatively rare: “[...] it is hard to hold in mind a thought about a thought that is in turn about the thought” (Rosenthal 2005: 27). But it is hard not to think that this view of what is rare and exceptional merely represses this kind of consciousness in order to explain more ordinary examples, as if ordinariness is more worthy of study. In fact, the special kind of consciousness that involves third-order thought is an essential part of the experience of art and cinema, especially where there are nested scenes displaying frames-in-frames that depict characters’ thoughts about what is going on—which also happen to be our thoughts, depicted as theirs. This level of higher-order thought is commonplace in the literature on consciousness, even in the passage just quoted by Rosenthal: all the more reason to study it.⁶

In the following pages I will examine the visual network of framed areas in *Las Meninas*, and the lines of flight between them, as the external marks of Velasquez’s own HOTs about what he is seeing and what others might be able to see, and explore how these HOTs relate to each other in intelligible ways. A depicted frame in the pictorial space—and there are many of them in *Las Meninas*—captures ‘a view’ which is both caused by a higher-order thought and effects others in the viewer. But we are also able to shift our perspective from where we view these ‘visual HOTs’ to see them from the differing points of view of those who are looking at them: from the perspective of the dark figure in the doorway looking over the artist’s shoulder at the painting we cannot see, for example, or from the king and queen’s perspective, as well as the artist’s. The painting gives us a view of how HOTs can be arranged in relation to each other in complex permutations depending on one’s vantage point. This tends to question the absolute fixed location and even the definition of what a HOT is, particularly because, from the viewpoint of a third-order thought, this HOT is also a lower-order thought. The painting shows us a number of focal points in the visual field which change their status as HOTs or

⁶ There are various arguments citing vicious regress against this hierarchical view but these assumptions are based on notions of linear duplication and extension ad infinitum, defined by a series of extrinsic or intrinsically defined thoughts. The standard response is that a HOT need not be a conscious HOT and there is always a top-level HOT which prevents infinite regress. The HOT taking a mental state as its target, even if it were to be taken as a target by another subsequent HOT, is not a simple reproduction or reflection of the same HOT—it is a different HOT. The notion of infinite regress is based on a picture of pure reflection, or infinite reproduction of sameness, while the HOT hypothesis is not.

lower-order thoughts, depending on which point of view we adopt while experiencing them.

The relations that HOTs share with lower-order thoughts can be mapped onto the visual field of *Las Meninas* and should include the fictive canvas, as Awret does, but also the mirror, the doorway, the paintings on the wall in the background *and* the gazes which are launched by the figures, which show the relations between these HOTs. These visual elements may be seen as a *series* of mental states structured *vis á vis* each other, not just from the point of view of the viewer's self-representation. The system of relations depicted in *Las Meninas* creates an intricate network of mental states. The status of each of these, whether lower- or higher-order thought, depends *inter alia* on their relations to each other: one depicted figure's lower-order or pre-reflective thought is the target of another figure's higher-order thought, and another person's higher-order thought is captured by somebody else's HOT. The notion of 'sight watched' allows us to adopt a theoretical vantage point where it is possible to 'see' (or 'think') the network of gazes portrayed in its entirety, stepping back and directing our higher-order thought at what everyone else seems to be focused on. This is a moment of both distancing *and* framing, when one becomes aware that the criss-crossing sightlines of the figures portrayed appear to form a complex geometrical pattern in three-dimensional space. Being able to consider the *mise en scène* from various angles gives us the phenomenological experience of a conceptual three-dimensionality.

I will deal with two major ways in which *Las Meninas* encourages us to think of superpositionality as a way of going beyond the simplistic intrinsicality/extrinsicality binary. In the first section, 'Framing HOTs', I look at discrete areas of the painting divided into framed areas and examine their 'contents'. But because these areas are part of a larger content (the back wall, for example, which 'contains' them), I also relate these framed areas to their contexts. Following this, in 'Sight Watched', I examine the system of gazes and points of view depicted in the painting which enables us to adopt various perspectives on these framed areas and to relate them to each other in different ways.⁷ This enhances the superpositionality of the frames-in-frames because we can, in effect, adopt different third-order thoughts (thoughts about HOTs which these framed areas stimulate). Eventually, this process of generating a number of third-order thoughts of various perspectives allows us to construct a complex system of relations between the third-order thoughts themselves.

Framing HOTs

The viewer can examine the various framed areas in *Las Meninas* one at a time but the ability to switch from one to the other in a rapid series of saccades, collecting more information inside and outside these frames to

⁷ This approach meets the requirements stated by Jennifer Church that "[...] one must be capable of imaginative projections, not merely imaginative associations" (2000: 104), and that: "it is not enough simply to bundle together associated representations to get the experience of an object, the different representations must be actively imagined as varying in response to different points of view" (108).

form ever more complex HOTs, provides the viewer with the phenomenological feel of superpositionality. When we explore the contents of one particular frame, we take with us the memory of a previous HOT in relation to a framed area we have already viewed. In other words, we experience the frame and its contents through our experience and understanding of a prior frame and its contents, to create richer meaning. For example, we look at the frame of the mirror which might remind us of the physical frame of *Las Meninas* as a picture (our first access point), and we feel both drawn into the depicted depth and thrown back by our peripheral vision of the physical frame. Reflections in mirrors both attract and repel, are flat and hard, yet convey depth and space, just as the painting does. The mirror is thus a reflection of the painting's ability to stimulate a kind of binocular rivalry, or "seeing as" (Church 2000: 99-100), while at the same time suggesting that it bears the reflection of the reversed canvas which is shown before the artist. The mirror image in *Las Meninas* is thus a more complex three-fold "seeing as" because we can see it as (1) part of a painting signifying (2) a mirror reflection of (3) another painting which we see the reverse of. This superpositional intensity consists of keeping our higher-order thought of one framed area with us in our journey through to other frames in the picture, in order to see one through the other. It is precisely this kind of intensity, where HOTs emerge in the wake of other HOTs and seem to overlap in each other's duration, that makes conventional inside and outside spatial markers rather blunt tools to carve up this kind of conscious experience.

Much of what has been written about HOTs lends itself implicitly to this kind of framing logic. By way of demonstrating how mental states are structurally related, Rosenthal uses the language of representation: a higher-order thought "represents" us 'in' a mental state and bestows consciousness upon it through the co-presence of the two states. The use of the word "represents" indicates thought about a copy or mirror, and possibly something which separates them. He writes: "In representing us to ourselves as being in states of various sorts, HOTs are in effect interpretations of ourselves as being in those states" (Rosenthal 2005: 211). "Ourselves" suggests that in addition to the mental state (the "target", as Rosenthal so often puts it, which suggests visual focus and capture), a HOT consists of the self being represented 'in' that state, whatever state this is. A HOT is also "a kind of self-interpretation; they are an interpretation of one's current state of mind" (14). On this view, what began as 'current' on its own seems to exist alongside the HOT which now also becomes current; in other words, the two are concurrent. Rosenthal states that "HOTs make us conscious not only of our mental states but also of the self that is in those states" (17). But this is not all a HOT is capable of: it may also "describe its target qualitative state in terms of the position that state occupies in the relevant quality space" (202). This suggests that a HOT also functions as an index or bridge, and the "resulting comparative concepts for mental qualities can accordingly *provide content* to the HOTs in virtue of which we're conscious of our quality states" (207, my italics). This, presumably, is also how it is possible to be conscious of having a sensory experience while we are having it.

The often invisible, unquestioned but nevertheless strongly suggestive spatial value in all this envisioning of HOTs is the preposition, ‘in’. Many of the phrases that lead to various visualizations of HOTs are part of a language struggling to give form to the idea that a HOT is not an on/off switch that merely makes a mental state conscious but a composite entity that represents or contains within itself at least three or four main contents—‘self’, ‘in’, ‘conscious’—which are ‘current’ with each other, and some of these terms seem to be shared across the mental states. The third-order thought represents us ‘in’ a higher-order thought which, in turn, represents us in a first-order thought. There appears to be a double ‘in’ here, which I can make sense of by returning to the example of *Las Meninas*, where we look through the painting and through the mirror frame to the reflection of the king and queen. When we look at the frames depicted in *Las Meninas*, we experience both the painting and the frame.

Similarly, in the work of Mondrian, Duchamp, Ad Reinhart, Howard Hodgkin (whose daubs of paint on the frame and inside it are obviously a reference to Seurat who did the same) and others, the distinction between the frame and the painting is shown as interpenetrative: the frame is made integral to the representation, and part of the representation also functions as a frame. This tends to make us conscious of our peripheral field of vision, in the sense that it becomes the target of our conscious focus, and we have a HOT about something that normally lies below the level of consciousness.⁸ Used as an analogy for the ‘frame’ of a HOT in which we see a lower-order thought, the notion of a frame that is also part of the image need not suggest intrinsicity but a superposition, a spatial equivocation that is one of the most consistent properties of all representation, higher-order representation included. Whatever one is to decide about the nature of HOTs, it would be a good start to recognize that what seems consistent in the language describing them is the logic of framing. HOTs are conceptualized as frames or boundaries with ‘contents’, and with extrinsic and intrinsic qualities. Such a model allows us to have two (or more) current states, one of which may be seen *through* the other and frames the other while remaining distinct. It also allows for a superpositionality where we are ‘here’ (‘in’ the HOT), looking through to the lower-order thought ‘there’. Both are co-present as ‘(t)here’.

⁸ A well-known function of the frame in art is to bifurcate consciousness and nonconsciousness (Ortega y Gasset in Bell 1990: 185-190). Undoubtedly, there is much to be said about the dynamics of William James’s fringe consciousness here but I believe that the point has been adequately dealt with (Awret 2008: 14-16). Awret writes that the pictures in the background of *Las Meninas* are pre-reflective, on the fringe of consciousness. They have, however, been identified as paintings modelled on *Athene and Arachne* and *Apollo and Marsyas* by Rubens (Schneider Adams 1994: 185) and so these pictures are actually the result of the artist’s HOTs about his painting. In the first picture is depicted the tale of Arachne, who competes with Athena in a weaving contest (a subject the artist painted separately later in life). In the second, the satyr Marsyas challenges Apollo to a flute playing competition and loses his life as forfeit. In *Las Meninas*, these pictures-in-pictures refer to two types of creativity, earthly and heavenly, in competition with each other. Moreover, the pictures are styled on paintings by Rubens. Thus, Velasquez consciously sets up his own competition with that other great artist, and suggests that *Las Meninas* might also be seen in the light of Marsyas’s and Arachne’s challenges to the gods. Awret’s observation that these are peripheral elements in the painting is true for some viewers, but for others, they are evidence of higher-order thoughts about the *mise en scène* of *Las Meninas* and central to its meaning.

In describing consciousness, especially fine grained processes subserving higher-order thoughts engaged with art, it also seems appropriate to adopt some of the language of spatial paradoxes theorized by postmodernism. This approach is suggested by Plotnitsky in the special issue (2008: 92). The artists I have mentioned above and their complex framing strategies give us the opportunity to elaborate our conceptions of how higher-order thoughts can be organized. In the works of these artists, the frame questions the idea of presence in relation to absence by revealing not only that the two signal each other but also that their ongoing tendency is to become each other by mutual cross-referencing: absence, the invisible, the unthinkable has a kind of presence which subverts a simply posited, prior presence. As such, rather than notions of presence and absence, it would be more instructive to look at the relational dynamic of the two notions as part of larger networks and series. This, incidentally, is also a principle of music, where sound is perforated and defined by silences. In his analysis of the *parergon*, the philosopher Jacques Derrida questions the assumption that what lies outside the frame or the work of art is marginal, of minor significance. In his view, what lies outside the frame as a *parergon* not only supplements the work (*ergon*) but may replace it, or create a new foundation for its meaning, as the presence of the two paintings shown above the doorway in the background of *Las Meninas* threaten to do.⁹ In this sense, what lies inside and outside the frame are co-present and create an equivocation. This is the continual *différance* of presence, which is never fixed or absolute and, importantly, cannot be framed. Rather, it is a process of consciousness where presence is continually refreshed and reconfigured in relationship to other presences. It is also possible to re-think Rosenthal's terminology using the frame and Derrida's *parergon*. A higher-order thought, while taking a first order thought as its focus, frames it. But both are mutually defining and co-emergent. In *Las Meninas*, too, we have the presence of an absence—the king and queen, the faceless canvas, the target of the artist's gaze. These are lacunae in the visual field which nevertheless signify, but in a way that tends to deconstruct traditional notions of presence. And in this way, the presence of the painting and its depiction of presences also come into question.

The HOT may 'represent' a lower-order thought but we should view this simple representational relation as problematic, in the same way that we might view *Las Meninas* as challenging the notion of a precise, static location for the viewer and disrupting the presumption of a transcendent knowing subject. The viewer is both 'inside' the painting's depicted spaces, which appear to absorb the probes of consciousness, and 'outside' of it, absent. The viewer looks at the painting and is aware of herself looking. The viewer is also looking at herself while viewing the painting from the figures' points of view.¹⁰ The mental states we have, or have had, seem different depending on our present viewpoint, which may converge with what we know of others' viewpoints. These prior viewpoints are still consciously engaged, as if we see them through the frame of our present, ongoing higher-order thought or, indeed, as if we see them in a series of

⁹ See footnote 8.

¹⁰ This is in broad agreement with Plotnitsky (2008: 111).

frames-in-frames.

We can observe this more clearly if we look again at the phenomenological experience of various frames in *Las Meninas*. Much has been written about the mirror lodged in the background, which reflects the king and queen of Spain. For argument's sake, let us say the king and queen are the models for the painting that the artist is shown attending to, that they are standing before Velasquez who is looking at them, and that their position happens to be the same spot we occupy as viewers. The painting of them may be reflected in the mirror in the back of the room, a reflection that they too can possibly see. The following table shows the relationship between various framed areas and the mental states that arise from viewing these various transpositions.

	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)
Framed Area	Mirror reflection of king and queen	Mirror reflection of painting of king and queen (mirror framed)	Reversed painting as source of mirror reflection (painting framed)	King and queen in viewer's position as models of reversed painting (painting of painting framed)
Exposition of conscious states	^Lower-order thought about identity of reflection	< ^HOT directed at lower-order thought about reflection	< ^HOT directed at lower-order thought of reversed painting	< ^HOT directed at lower-order thought of painting of reversed painting

Table 1

In this scenario, I assume that the king and queen are standing before the painting in the viewer's position, that they see the mirror reflection of the reversed painting, and that they are the subjects of the reversed painting. Thus, they can see a mirror reflection of their own likenesses depicted in the painting. Imagine that we begin from the left column (a) and take a 'step back' with each subsequent column from (b) to (d). Each step back frames a wider contextual view. With the first, lower-order thought we identify that the mirror reflection is of the king and queen of Spain. We step back, 'out of' the mirror frame, to the reversed canvas which could be the source of the reflection and so become conscious of the 'frame' of the reversed canvas, which forces us back a step further until we see the painting in its entirety. We find ourselves standing in the king and queen's place, on the other side of the actual physical frame of *Las Meninas*, and the artist's gaze is directed at them, that is, at our world, the world of the viewer. The last two columns, (c) and (d), show us how a series of higher-order thoughts eventually leads back to the viewer's

perspective and place (the last act of framing, if you like), through which the other HOTs instigated by the objects and views in the picture may be seen. We have 'views through views' and these are third-order thoughts of HOTs. Another HOT makes us conscious of the possible point of view of the king and queen which we seem to share; we seem to look through their eyes at the scene, all the while conscious of our own viewing.

Self-reflexive, self-aware viewing, that allows us to remember the picture is only an illusion, is co-present with accepting the illusion in order to resolve the identity of the painting by examining its projections. This deferment is a lower-order thought which we must maintain from the vantage point of higher-order thought. The fictive painting's superpositioning (being both a reversed canvas and also part of the front of the real painting) is also a superposition between lower and higher-order thoughts. In the same way that we adopt the king and queen's position while holding our own in front of *Las Meninas*, the HOT adopts the lower-order thought, remaining distinct and experiencing ecstasis but also identity. This is not mere equivocation, for in the experience of viewing *Las Meninas* this is one of the most commonly recorded responses: the feeling of being inside someone else's shoes, feeling that we are behind masks that make us appear as the king and queen to those in the picture who address us. It is precisely the artist's carefully considered superpositionality of the king and queen of Spain, who are both present and not present in the scene, and external and internal to the painting, which allows us to theorize a similar superpositionality of the HOT in regard to its target state.

We can be deeply involved in the painting, suspending disbelief, and we can exercise critical awareness of that involvement. These conflicting perspectives give us a heightened consciousness. Like the king and queen of Spain, we are both 'here' and 'there', intrinsic and extrinsic to our lower-order involvement of the visual spectacle, examining (framing) our own responses while we are having (the contents of) them. But also, there is another kind of 'seeing as': we see the painting as viewers, but when we imagine we see through the eyes of the king and queen, we see through the painting to the scene where the figures appear to occupy space.

Thus, 'seeing as' cooperates with superpositionality and this experience can be extended across a series of mental states. These different mental states, some apprehending others, may be consecutive in relation to each other but from the vantage point where we make our stand, in front of the painting, our gaze (our thought) seems to pierce the whole series of frames at once. Phenomenologically, we get the impression that it is possible to pierce the series of frames in this way, looking at the painting through the eyes of the king and queen. The reflection of the king and queen in the mirror denies our self-reflexivity, yet sets it off again in motion through the series of frames, because it points to the same point of origin.

Words are not the only or the most direct way to describe higher-order consciousness of this kind; in film, visual sequences routinely access it in lightening ways. One only needs to look at the frames-in-frames in Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, which is a continuous penetration of frames and planes making us conscious of our gaze, or the thinking that underpins it. In *Las Meninas* we do not just become conscious of looking

at the painting (and the painting of the painting). Table 1 demonstrates that it can also show us how we organize the unfolding of our thought while looking. In this way, *Las Meninas* is also a portrait of how HOTs are organized in relation to each other as a simultaneous series of frames. Although the table suggests a linear unfolding of backward steps, it is also possible to see through the whole series in reverse, ‘going into’ instead of ‘coming out’ from the painting. In a remarkable moment of unity, it is possible to peer through the painting to gaze at the painted reflection of the king and queen through their eyes, back to ourselves where we stand in front of the picture, all in twinkling of an eye (or *Augenblick*¹¹). All other previous moments of vision are experienced in the last, and this moment appears to extend our consciousness into the world and into the world of the picture. Importantly, the exposition of higher-order thoughts, especially the kind involved in the viewing process of *Las Meninas*, can be characterized as a series of frames with paradoxical relationships to each other because we can pay attention to their contents and to what lies outside them.

That I am ‘in’ a mental state, and conscious of being in that state, suggests I might be in two places at the same time: ‘in’ the lower order thought and ‘in’ a HOT that allows me to be conscious of being in a lower-order thought. Even though I am not conscious of being in the latter, I am still in it so as to be able to experience that consciousness. The HOT I am in tells me I am in the lower-order state, although I may not be apparently, because it is only the HOT ‘representing’ me in that state. I am not conscious of being in the HOT that tells me I am in a lower-order thought until a third-order thought tells me I am in the HOT which was, until then, representing me in a lower-order state. From the second HOT’s point of view, the consciousness of being in the lower-order thought feels like one thought. From the point of view of the third-order thought (the kind that allows philosophers such as Rosenthal to propose the ontology of a HOT), we make the HOT distinct from the lower-order thought. I do not know I am ‘in’ the HOT. I only believe I am having a lower-order thought accompanied by the feeling I am in it. This must mean that just after the lower-order thought has been initiated it may happen that a HOT comes to accompany it. Rosenthal claims that it is ‘roughly contemporaneous’ (2005: 26). *Las Meninas*, however, shows us that this contemporaneity can be far more of a multiplicity. When we adopt the point of view the king and queen and ‘pierce’ the frames from their viewpoint, we are having an orchestration of HOTs rather than a neat, chronological unfolding of them, one by one.

The thought, ‘I am having a conscious thought’, is actually three or four thoughts depending on how you want to carve it up. Because new thoughts are initiated in split seconds, sharing some of the duration of previous ones and sharing some of the same contents which may be spread over two or more ‘boundaries’ of these HOTs, at some point in their crossover, and from a distance, there may seem to be an overlap. In visual terms, we do not need to look at each individual frame depicted in

¹¹ For an extended analysis of Nietzsche’s concept of the *Augenblick* as vision where previous moments of vision are experienced phenomenologically at the same time, see Shapiro 2003: 157-192.

Las Meninas and analyse the single thought about that frame. Although this is possible, and sometimes desirable, we create the whole picture by suppressing such individuation. In the same way, we might also think of suppressing the individuation of HOTs and their target states if it allows us to construct a more complex and fluent conscious experience of *Las Meninas*, yet we can also at any time drill down into the detailed focal points of the painting, to experience HOTs about these and their relations in mosaic detail, as opposed to a sweeping general view.

Sight Watched

‘Sight watched’ consists of thought about what is being seen by oneself and what is being seen by another person.¹² To use a term from Husserl’s *Ideas*, we seem to look ‘straightforward and reflectively’ at the same time (Kersten 1982: 148).

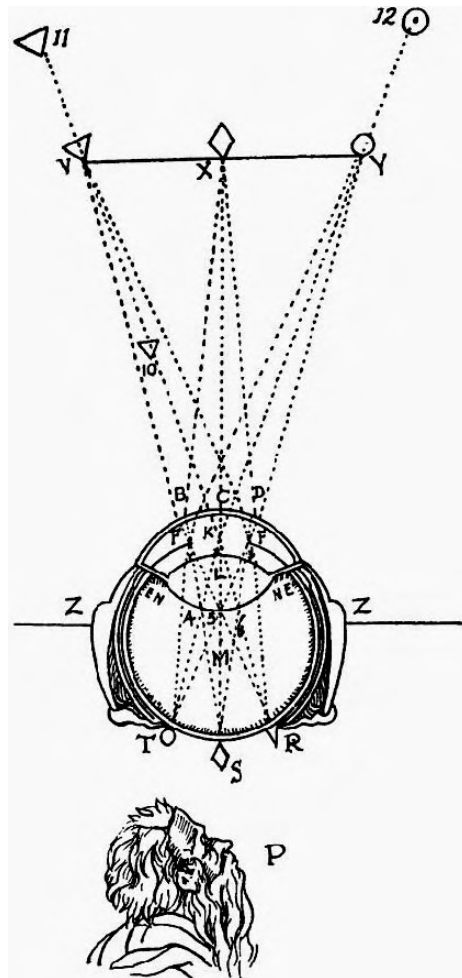


Figure 1. A diagram from Descartes’ *La Dioptrique*, 1637.

¹² It is, after all, the mind that sees. Sight enables us to be engaged in the world with the mechanics of the eye but also in cooperation with conceptual processing subserved by several brain areas, deepening interaction with the world.

Something of this sort comes into play during the visual inspection of a printed diagram showing the visual apparatus, such as the one published by Descartes in *La Dioptrique*, 1637 (Fig. 1). The diagram produces a higher-order thought about what we are looking at because it reminds us of our looking, and it is roughly an image of the effect of an image (perhaps even *this* one) on our optical system. Higher-order thought considering the diagram of vision is especially interesting because, inherently within this action, there is the possibility of using the retinal image and its relationship to the object of sight as an analogy for the relationship between higher- and lower-order thoughts. Can a third-order thought allow the second higher-order thought of Figure 1 to ‘look at itself looking’, forward and reflectively (think about itself thinking), while taking a lower-order state as its target?

One does not literally look at one’s eye in a mirror, however, but at the mirror image of one’s eye. Phenomenologically, the reflexive movement of the eye watching a mirror image of the eye is only deceptively simple, as we tend to view the reflected eye with a first-order thought due mainly to habit. If we had a HOT attending that viewing, we could imagine what is reflected in the retinal image that receives the image of reflection, and this would be a reflection of a reflection (although the retinal image is turned upside down). The higher-order thought attending the mental state of a ‘reflection of a reflection’ is a third higher-order thought. A HOT can be seen as a mirror reflecting the image of the lower-order thought. The advantage of using this physical analogy for a mental process is that it allows us to bypass the intrinsicity or extrinsicity of the HOT and the lower-order thought by depicting the former as something which bears the image of the latter. In using the mechanics of sight as an extended metaphor for the production and organization of conscious states, I am in fact only referencing the philosophy of reflection and its methods.¹³

It is possible for us to imagine our current retinal image. We can see what we are seeing and this guides us, and we can imagine Figure 1. The diagram appears to reflect our retinal image *and* our envisioning of it, providing consciousness with a brief yet distinct experience of co-emergence or circularity. Using a system of analogies we can think of the retinal image as a HOT, and the object of sight (which the retinal image is a reflection of) as the lower-order thought. Thus, the lower-order thought is reflected in the HOT while at the same time the possibility of their distinct natures is preserved.¹⁴ This analogy, it must be said, is the product of a third-order thought about two lower, occurrent mental states. Looking at the figure looking at his optical apparatus makes me conscious of myself looking, and this is also a third-order thought. Figure 1 is, in fact, more complex than is immediately apparent because the diagram is also represented as the object of the observer’s gaze, which we logically infer

¹³ “The entire philosophy of noetics, including the Platonic idea, Cartesian clarity and distinctiveness, Lockean sensational noetics, the Kantian phenomenon, Hegelian phenomenology, Sartrean opacity and much else is inextricably involved with thinking in intellection by analogy with vision” (Ong 1982: 135).

¹⁴ Similarly, the retina is part of my body but it seems important to maintain the difference between it and the reflection upon it.

to be reflected on his retina. This makes us aware of what might be reflected on our retina while looking at this image. The added interest is how this organization of consciousness logically becomes more involved when we consider that the retinal image we have of the retinal image suggested in the diagram serves as both an analogy and an actualization of a third-order thought about the higher-order thought it takes as its target.

What we have in common, in both the organization of consciousness attending the visual process of inspecting a diagram of the retinal image and the diagram itself, is an encounter where the internal appears externalized. And yet this image, external to our bodies, is reflected into our internal optical apparatus. In Figure 1, an observer in the diagram looks at an image and appears, at least outwardly, to mimic our visual inspection. The depicted observer makes the image appear as his, setting up a picture-in-a-picture that duplicates the internalization of the reflected image in his eye and appears to mimic what is happening when we look at the picture. Our imagination of the retinal image and pictorial inspection cooperate to create a heightened sense of self-consciousness. In *Las Meninas* these various processes involved in sight watched are multiplied many times over.

When I look at *Las Meninas* after all these years I am still struck by its lustrous surface, and I often find it tempting to imagine my retinal reflection of it while I am looking at it. I imagine that inside my retinal reflection a small Velasquez is shown staring back and out again to its source, the *Las Meninas* in the Prado, Madrid. This glossy painting, in which the artist is shown peering out at us, has so much about it that reminds one of a mirror reflection. And indeed in a sense it was, at least for the artist, who at some stage presumably stepped back from his creation to see an image of himself looking—the ultimate ‘sight watched’.

I have shown, in Table 1 and the various transitions from frame to frame which mark the stages of a line of thought, that we can see the framed areas in *Las Meninas* from the point of view of the king and queen of Spain. Like us, the royal couple seem to have the whole gallery of frames set out before them barring, of course, the reversed canvas, which may nevertheless be accessible to them via the mirror reflection. In this sense alone, whatever commentators say about its unconventional nature, *Las Meninas* still provides the viewer with the privileged vantage point inherited from Renaissance art. Some of this omniscience is challenged, however, by the point of view of the dark figure in the background. We know he has the power to look over Velasquez’s shoulder to reveal the subject of the canvas (and this increases our curiosity in that direction), but he can also see us, the viewers. Foucault refers to this figure as a ‘pendulum’, perhaps meaning that he introduces with the door the potential rhythm of an on/off switch. In addition to filtering with his body the light from the doorway, this figure signifies the concept of distance and a contrast in scale. The frame of the doorway doubles as a picture frame. It not only provides consciousness of another area of perception within a system of perceptions, but also neatly frames the human form, a body which seems ensconced in the thought of the frame. The figure is a gatekeeper marking a threshold from the inner to the outer limit of visibility, where the painting seems to leave its final trace before vanishing completely. He seems to turn to leave the scene of the painting,

as we are ultimately destined to do as well.

As Victor Stoichita has pointed out, this figure is José Nieto y Velasquez, the queen's chamberlain, who bore the title of *sumiller de cortina* (controlling a curtain): "[...] in other words, he controls the representation [...] Nieto is an epiphanic sign. He is announcing the arrival of the kings [...] an 'unveiling' seen from the back" (Stoichita 1997: 254). At the same time, Nieto is also the painter's alter ego, given that they share the same second family name (254). He shows us that the scene depicted in *Las Meninas* can be understood from behind, reminding us of the function of the retinal image at the back of the chamber of the eye. He also alerts us to a number of blind spots. Nieto cannot see the mirror, although he can possibly see the source of the reflection it bears, and he is blind to the paintings above the door. His blind spot is duplicated by ours (we only see the reverse of the canvas, not its front). Most of the figures in the painting cannot see Nieto or these things in the background, nor can they see the reverse of the canvas which we see. The viewer (or the king and queen) cannot see the front of the canvas, although they may be able to see its reflection in the mirror. It seems that many of these blind spots are compensated for: if direct vision is not possible, then a view may be gained indirectly, through inferential methods. This system of optics seems to dramatize the interpretative processes that the hidden identity of the fictive painting encourages.

Many analyses of *Las Meninas* omit any treatment of the little girl, Princess Margarita Maria. Literally speaking, it is her portrait. Traditionally, it was thought that she takes central place because it was on the princess that the dynastic hopes of the Spanish Habsburgs rested after the death of her brother, Prince Baltasar Carlos. Also, it is often said that the little girl is comparing the likeness of the painting to her mother and father, at whom she is looking, mimicking their stiff dignity (which brings old fashioned, simpler portraiture to consciousness). It seems obvious that the child's gaze appears to address us and her parents; it is another important aspect of sight watched and forms yet another narrative frame through which to understand the painting. As a child, through a child's eyes, her consciousness is relative and limited. She cannot see the mirror behind her, the artist, or other figures and, as such, she epitomises the partiality of knowing. She is at the centre of the painting with court life around her yet only cognisant of a part of it, just like a child she is only partly aware of life around her: we are looking into the eyes of childhood.

Do we see in the mirror image behind her what she is seeing directly? And how does this affect our interpretation of her eyes, and what she is thinking? In comparing the image of her parents with her parents standing before her, like Velasquez, her consciousness is split between canvas and models but, in contrast with the artist, from the point of view of the naiveté of a child. Epitomising her child's eye view is the Pauline verse:

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face-to-face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known (I Corinthians 13: 11).

We owe to Foucault the observation that the child's eyes are at the very

centre of the painting: “A vertical line dividing the canvas into two equal halves would pass between the child’s eyes [...] here, beyond all question, resides the principal theme of the composition; this is the very object of the painting” (Foucault 1970: 12). This emphasises the princess’s viewpoint. She may be looking at her parents through a child’s eye view (“through a glass darkly”) while we see, literally, through the glass darkly at the back of the room: both views are imperfect.

We are urged “to put away childish things”, the child eye view, and by extension the literal or naïve reading of simple representation and the belief that mimesis is real, in order to move on to the figurative, esoteric and religious interpretation of the imagery, that sense particulars are only pale reflections of immutable ideals or that the world is a complex of imperfect and partial perspectives which, indeed, often use the impoverished metaphors of sight and vision to understand epistemology. The painting revels in its own powers of illusionism, a lower-order appreciation of painterly devices that ultimately causes us to distance ourselves from such sensuous involvement, with its invitations to look again through different eyes. We enjoy the sheen of silk cooperating with the glossy pigment, the tender light glancing off the princess’s hair, the texture of velvet and lace, the dog’s fur, all rendered with a generous impasto in which the hairs of the artist’s brush leave the striations of a presence. This is all sensuous surface, the material substrate which we invest with the illusion of life because it bears the external marks of thought, and the realization of this is a kind ‘putting away’ of ‘childish things’.

The reflection of the king and queen of Spain (“through a glass, darkly; but then face-to-face”) also suggests that in looking at the royal couple, a gaze that the artist directs at them and possibly also at the viewer, he refers to the part of the verse, “then shall I know even as also I am known”. But this may also signal the future moment when the child will become an adult looking back at history, standing in front of this painting, seeing through an adult’s eyes, ‘through the eyes’¹⁵ of her mother and father, her own likeness as a child (“then face-to-face”). We can imagine seeing the picture through the eyes of the grown-up princess, whose gaze we are presently targeting in the painting. In this way, the whole painting of *Las Meninas* acts as a glass through which we see things darkly, but we begin to see the painting ‘face-to-face’ by looking at it (or thinking about it) straightforward *and* reflectively, as the artist most probably did also, when viewing his own work. Part of this face-to-face encounter consists of how, when we try to understand *Las Meninas*, we end up trying to understand ourselves.

The mirror in the background and the child whose gaze we may engage cooperate as a statement of a temporary, naïve understanding or partial consciousness of the visible world which we are asked to understand as a series of appearances and points of view. Imagining the scene through the child’s eyes sets up a hierarchy of consciousness, for

¹⁵ The notion of eyes looking through eyes is, of course, cooperative with looking through frames inside frames. Eyes become frames. But both expressions denote a process of thinking about another’s thoughts, where one is thinking or looking straightforward and reflectively.

while she is not completely at its base (the sleeping dog is), she is surrounded by circles of figures that possess ever increasing consciousness compared to her. We, as viewers, might form an outer circle. The mirror at the back of the room is not just a mirror or a frame but the object of a higher-order thought enclosed in the context of an even more complex and sweeping system of HOTs engaged with the painting as a whole.¹⁶ Here, the painting's display of frames activates higher-order thoughts placed in the context of an all-encompassing third-order thought scanning a picture gallery, an iconostasis where monadic views of views from a number of vantage points are captured for posterity.

Conclusion

As we can see from an analysis of the processes of organizing the pictorial space into framed areas in *Las Meninas*, each area stimulates a higher-order thought, mainly because each area can remind us of what we are currently doing: looking 'through' the frame of a painting to see other framed areas. And because there are a number of these framed areas, we relate our higher-order thoughts to each other in a system of contrasts and comparisons which builds up a complex of meanings and interpretations. But what makes *Las Meninas* even more noteworthy is that it encourages us to look at these HOTs not simply from our own vantage point but from the point of view suggested by the depicted figures. We can engage in this process of 'looking through their eyes' at the framed areas rapidly and easily, sometimes without thinking about how remarkable this process is, particularly because these are third-order thoughts about how others are conscious of what is happening in the pictorial space. Superpositionality breaks up the static binary of intrinsicity/extrinsicity on several levels. It is implicated as a way to describe the relations between framed areas, none of which we need confine ourselves to, since hovering between them also seems to be a valid mental state. There is also a superpositionality involved in our entertaining various third-order thoughts as we imagine the thoughts the figures may be having when they reconstruct their visual fields from their points of view. It is the rapid switchback mechanism initiated in our viewing of the different framed areas, in conjunction with seeing these through different points of view, that creates the distinct phenomenological feel of a superpositionality which cannot be adequately described if we are forced to decide on either intrinsicity or extrinsicity in order to characterise these HOTs.

The dominant binary of intrinsicity/extrinsicity affects how we think about the organization of consciousness. It may also lead to various misunderstandings about HOTs, for example, that they should be seen as internalist (mentalist) entities in relation to lower-order thoughts which are external to them yet somehow closer to the world of sense objects. But

¹⁶ This is, to some extent in agreement with Rosenthal who states "HOTs operate in large bunches" (2005: 28). He also writes, "[...] when we consciously reason, we are often conscious of one intentional state as leading to another [...] perhaps one could be conscious of one's intentional states as inferentially connected simply by having a single HOT about them all" (129).

HOTs can be seen as enactive towards the art object in the world. *Las Meninas* shows us that HOTs are cognitively extended into the world beyond crude internalist and externalist views. The involvement of HOTs in the intricate details of this painting is an argument against the notion that art is simply a dumping place for the pre-existent HOTs, for these are instantaneously engaged in the visual world and part of its unfolding. Using art to enhance what we know of consciousness in this way is certainly not new. Husserl's analysis in his *Ideas* of a Teniers picture in the Dresden Gallery is evidence that, in the philosophy of mind, complex forms of consciousness have previously been dealt with in regard to works of art. His analysis also shows that the focus on *Las Meninas* as an object of research for those interested in higher forms of consciousness is part of a tradition. The picture by Teniers depicts a gallery with many framed paintings on the wall, an image of a gallery that mimics the real gallery in which the picture is placed. Husserl focuses on this painting in order to show stages of the noema which undermine categories of internal, mentalist representations and the external, physical world (Husserl in Kersten 1982: 270).¹⁷

Rather than making mental states ontologically present either by isolating them or nesting them inside other structures, we see them instead as we might understand two non-inertial frames of reference encountering each other: to some extent contingent upon each other, yet defined by a series of relations and trajections, which in fact defines their presence more accurately. We see the overall 'picture', that each mental state can be distinct or non-distinct from another depending on limitations of perspective or vantage point, and this involves degrees of intersubjectivity and superpositionality which representations like *Las Meninas*, and more modern pictures of its kind, exemplify and sustain in their intuitive yet sometimes programmatic questioning of the notion of presence.

We can take what we know of higher-order thought and apply it to the analysis of many other works of art but the theory will only be effective in this context if it develops a critical awareness of its own limitations. There are many paintings in the history of art which are not only images of thought but also engage with complex higher-order processing that is often self-aware. One can point to Velasquez's other works, such as *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* and *Las Hilanderas (The Weavers)*, mentioned in the introduction. The first features an esoteric narrative (a picture or window containing a scene of Christ teaching) framed inside an exoteric, down-to-earth Spanish domestic scene, the former attracting a higher-order thought about the latter. *Las Hilanderas*,

¹⁷ Husserl's correlation between objects of various kinds and our consciousness of them in his description of this painting emphasizes that consciousness (and indeed vision) cannot be understood as possessing external and internal, inner and outer qualities because it is directed at objects straightforward and reflexively, in the same way that we might assume the HOT experiences something of itself (with the help of a third-order thought) while taking a lower-order mental state as its target. The Teniers picture contains within it levels of representation co-present with a series of conscious mental states processing these different levels. This is one of the ways in which Husserl brings together the internalist/externalist divide. Husserl's attempt to connect consciousness to objects in the world amounts to such a "fundamental re-thinking of the very relation between subjectivity and the world that it hardly makes sense to designate [it] as being either internalist or externalist" (Zahavi 2004: 42).

a painting which depicts the story of Arachne, similarly contrasts a critically aware consciousness with apparent perceptions, using mythological allegory as a frame in the depth of the picture, through the presence of which we can transform our consciousness of the apparently quotidian scene unfolding before us in the foreground. There are, of course, many other examples in art history, such as Van Eyck's Arnolfini portrait, 1426, where a small mirror placed in the back of the room reflects those standing in front of the painting; Vermeer's *Art of Painting*, c. 1666, showing the artist with his back to us, painting a model who we also see in front of him; and Magritte's *Not to Be Reproduced*, 1937, where a man observes a mirror image of his own back, instead of seeing his face. And there are many self-portraits in art, photography and film which also use frames-in-frames to trigger questions about lower-order sensations experienced from higher-order perspectives. These paintings feature superpositionality, using various frames-in-frames which quicken the pace of our higher-order thoughts and allow them to be built up in complex relations to each other.¹⁸

The notion of representation used by Rosenthal and others when they describe a higher-order mental state representing one 'in' a mental state (acknowledged most obviously by the well-known acronym in consciousness studies: HOR or higher-order representation) cannot be a simple matter, for representation itself is dogged with dispute about how it works, especially in art theory and philosophy. Merleau-Ponty's conclusions about art and phenomenology are clearly meant to address the problem of representation and consciousness. For him, a representation was not something that was meant to refer to the external world of objects and things. By extension, the notion that a HOT represents a lower-order thought 'out there', extrinsic to itself, or simply being part of its matrix 'in here', must also be questioned. Representation is not simply an expression of the artist's internal world but an emergence of the internal in the external and the external in the internal. There is something of this kind that occurs in a serial way in third-order thoughts monitoring this co-emergence. Representation is pigment and canvas, bricks and mortar, which emerge in the world amongst other objects and things, as does the painter's body in the form of gesture. But representation is also inside the painter's body in the form of thought and vision, which may take as their objects of intention the configuration of objects and things emerging in the world. Velasquez, or Matisse in Merleau-Ponty's example, paint themselves painting because they were:

[...] adding to what *they* could see of themselves at that moment, what *things* could see of them—as if to attest to there being a total or absolute vision, leaving nothing outside, including themselves [...]. Essence and existence, imaginary and real, visible and invisible—painting scrambles all of our categories (Merleau-Ponty in Johnson 1993: 130).

[Paintings] are the inside of the outside and the outside of the inside, which the

¹⁸ These and other examples of frames-in-frames in art are explored in more detail in Minissale 2009.

duplicity of feeling [*le sentir*] makes possible (126).¹⁹

As we have seen with *Las Meninas*, paintings can also question linear time and spatial coordinates, the mutual exclusivity of external and internal properties, and ultimately, the precise anatomy of brain states by which we are meant to carve up the territory of consciousness. It is the argument of this paper that the visualizing language of science describing consciousness with binaries such as being inside or outside a mental state, or a mental state being intrinsic or extrinsic to another, is just poor art history. The superposition and reflexivity of the frame-in-the-frame in many kinds of art question this dualistic imagery of consciousness, as it has been questioned in various ways in the past. This is what Merleau-Ponty was working towards with his notions of flesh and reversibility, “meant to express both envelopment and distance, the paradox of unity at a distance or sameness with difference, finding a new ontological way between monism and dualism” (Merleau-Ponty in Johnson 1993: 49). More recently, Jennifer Church (2000: 109-110) has argued that the process of “seeing as”, that is, seeing a painting as a landscape yet seeing it also as a painting, involves both conflict *and* convergence together. I would add that a third-order thought can go through a process of “seeing as,” able to understand co-present second- and first-order thoughts as both intrinsic and extrinsic to each other.

The phenomenological experience of art is certainly as important as the folk psychology on which scientists and philosophers always rely to taxonomize ordinary first-person modes of subjectivity in pursuit of understanding the mystery of consciousness. As the special issue on *Las Meninas* demonstrates, consciousness is magnified by visual art. But complex forms of consciousness and self-consciousness also have a lot to tell us about what is happening in art. Interdisciplinary studies of this kind involving a broad range of approaches will undoubtedly reveal blind spots in consciousness and art, and will lead to the framing of new questions.

¹⁹ A similar spatial paradox is initiated when one holds one’s own hand: one is both touching and being touched, one envelops while being enveloped.

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