

9

The capacity for re-description

Alberto Corsín Jiménez

When Velázquez took to painting *The Spinners* in c.1657 he had been court painter in the service of King Philip IV for over thirty years. Details of Velázquez's persona and biography are elusive and mysterious. Compared to his contemporaries, his oeuvre is scarce, perhaps because he attended only to royal commissions. In this sense, a great deal of his time as royal painter was spent, for instance, curating the royal art collection. In such a capacity he 'had responsibility for interior design and decoration – placing mirrors, statues, tapestries, and paintings in many rooms, in many royal dwellings, and at the temporary destinations of important royal journeys' (Alpers 2005: 183). His role as a collector of art has often been commented upon when noting how fellow artists – Manet, Picasso – have coincided in describing him as 'the painters' painter'. He made of the royal art collection and museum *his studio*, and his art displays this encompassing of art as technique, narrative, history and ambience. His art self-traps itself in both its aesthetic and environmental designs: 'we might imagine Velázquez', writes Svetlana Alpers of his courtly persona, 'as coolly making his way and his paintings while he is caught up (trapped, perhaps) in the Habsburg court' (Alpers 2005: 162).

Velázquez's work, however, is by no means subdued to courtly interests, as anyone who has ever approached his paintings can attest to. Velázquez's art resists comprehension; it places all sorts of frictions and tensions between the artwork and the spectator. Maybe Velázquez was trapped in the Habsburg court, but he surely managed to trap the court and its courtiers in his paintings too. For Alpers, who follows Ortega y Gasset in this respect (1987), Velázquez's strategic entrapment of himself and his work within courtly politics and affairs evidenced his being 'admirable in his *detachment*, a "genius in the matter of disdain"', for whom '[s]ingularity is valued ... not as the exercise of

freedom, but as a resistance to coercion' (Alpers 2005: 162, emphasis added). Velázquez's art functioned thus both as a *trap of* and a *trap for* an ecology of meaning, and it is in this capacity for 'double encompassment' (Wagner 2001: 63) that it afforded a sense of self-detachment for himself. Velázquez succeeded in creating a habitat or environment for his work that enabled his staging a dialogue between the things represented inside a painting and the choreographic displays with which he furnished the royal dwellings. He found a place for himself *in painting* that was at once inside and outside the canvas.

In this chapter I would like to explore some of the consequences that derive from this reading of Velázquez's political and charismatic detachment as an effect of his 'entrapment' in the presentations and representations of courtly life. Velázquez paints courtly life and lives a courtly existence, and his art attempts to capture this recursive displacement in and out of each. We may say that his is an attempt at making 'recursion' itself visible as an aesthetic form and technique. The notion of recursion is an important one that I return to later. For the time being, let me note that in Velázquez's case, this requires, on his part, the design of an environment (a pictorial language, a praxis of interior decoration) with which he furnishes and inhabits the interface between the inside and the outside of a canvas. This interface is an emerging and nebulous space, rarely explored before. Drawing from the pictorial resources employed in the description of insides and the ornamental means with which outsides have traditionally been furnished, Velázquez suddenly realises that he may actually be giving shape to an embryonic *capacity for re-description*.

I am interested in these re-descriptive exercises, in how they are rendered visible, and what their effects are. The *forms* of re-descriptions are important. Some rejoice in their spatiality. They come, we might say, with environments attached. Such is the case with Velázquez, whose work operates as a trap of sorts: a trap that draws you into the pictures and simultaneously draws the pictures out into the world. A trap that environmentalises relations. We see this in more detail in the first part of the chapter, where I return to *The Spinners* and describe some of the very original techniques through which Velázquez invented and introduced aesthetic forms of suspension, displacement and detachment into his work.¹

An argument I want to put forward is that the work of environmentalising relations – the work of environing the hyphen that holds the 're' and the 'description' together, so to speak – is worth paying attention to. Today the capacity for re-description seems to have been pre-empted by an economy of information that places a premium on *self-description*: descriptions that move by themselves, such as in cybernetic feed-

back mechanisms where information is recursively enriched and self-enhanced. ‘Recursion’ itself has in fact become a common analytical trope in social theory of late, and in the second part of the chapter I look at recent transformations in higher education, including developments in the political and aesthetic economy of information, to cast some light on the types of environments that these recursions are effecting. If Velázquez found a singular place for himself in courtly affairs through an aesthetics of *resistance*, it would seem that the politics of information today works through an aesthetics of *irresistibility*.

The chapter concludes with some observations about what it may mean to think of ‘detachment’, about how to inhabit the hyphen, in these our epistemic times: what traps we may need to deploy to move in and out of description as a critical form. The text as a whole may be read in this spirit too, as a modest attempt to essay some of these contraptions, where ‘detachment’ is presented not just as an object of analysis, but also as a style of argumentation.

The Spinners

Velázquez’s painting is a complex and highly sophisticated representation of the myth of Minerva and Arachne.² Ovid’s fable of Arachne in the *Metamorphoses* (Book VI, I) is the story of a young girl who challenges the accusation that her great skill as a weaver is owed to the goddess Minerva. Goddess and girl thus enter into a competition to prove their respective skills. Minerva soon realises that Arachne’s weaving skills are superior and takes offence at the latter’s weaving into her tapestry of an image of the infidelity of the goddess’s father, Zeus. The goddess then reprises by famously turning the girl into a spider. The weaver, in other words, spins herself.

The Spinners, however, offers no straightforward representation of Ovid’s fable. It provides a stark counterpoint to previous treatments of the theme, mostly of an allegorical nature, for example Ruben’s *Minerva and Arachne*, which was very well known to Velázquez, to the extent that he copies it in *Las Meninas*, on the far wall just above his (Velázquez’s) own head. But while Velázquez gestures and acknowledges previous takes on the Ovidian story, his pictorial solution is very different.

There are three planes to *The Spinners*. Upfront we encounter a group of five women in a workshop: a woman spinning a wheel, one carding comb and the other three variously assisting the spinners. The background space is itself layered into two, with a theatrical representation of Arachne’s fable taking front stage, and a tapestry of Titian’s *Rape of Europa* (a painting then in the Spanish royal collection) in the back. As



Figure 1 *The Spinners*, Diego Velázquez, c.1657

is so often with Velázquez, the painting looks unfinished: it employs economical, casual brushstrokes to display a sense of fleetingness and movement, blurring faces and hands, or simply avoiding them, by turning heads away or hiding body parts. Velázquez emulates here Titian's innovative *sprezzatura* brushwork (from *disprezzo*, disrespect or disdain; Alpers 2005: 156), to whom he in fact pays homage in the background tapestry. Moreover, this way of handling painting, Alpers has observed, allows Velázquez to blur, not just specific motifs or objects, but 'representation' as an aesthetic strategy more amply:

the manner of handling paint is sustained in depicting objects at a very different scale. It is not, to use a term of our times, fractal. Threads of white paint hanging from the large foreground winding-skein are painted with the same strokes that highlight and structure the smaller blue gown farther back. The same quick, economical brush strokes that constitute aspects of large things closer by also describe the small figure farther away. (Alpers 2005: 138–146)

This disrespect for scale and clarity is also extended to his representation of social status and standing. Mythical beings (Minerva and Arachne)

are pushed into the back of the painting as women of lower rank are placed up front. The stuff of myth (allegory and representation) is backgrounded while the everyday (manual labouring) takes front stage. As Alpers puts it more generally, 'It is not that he [Velázquez] erases or reverses distinctions, but that he frees pictorial representation from any simple relating of size and importance' (Alpers 2005: 178).

I noted above that among Velázquez's duties as courtly painter was taking responsibility for curating the royal collection. This included assisting with the display of the royal household's collection of tapestries, one of the greatest in the world. Velázquez himself never designed a tapestry, but it could be argued – and Alpers has persuasively done so – that perhaps he conceived of *The Spinners* as a commentary on, and a homage to, the traditions and authors that he cultivated as a painter and curator.

The seventeenth-century painting culture in which Velázquez was trained encouraged and rewarded copying. Students learned by copying the masters; artists competed to participate in the lucrative business of copying religious prints for sale in the New World; and patrons were keen to pay for replicas of great paintings, in particular those in the royal collection (Alpers 2005: 190–192). 'The aura of a work might be increased, not decreased, by copying it' (Alpers 2005: 193). In this context, it is not unimaginable to think of Velázquez as aiming to locate himself within this painting culture, and doing so by painting his own collection of copies, his own gallery. Unlike the tradition of collectors' cabinets paintings, however, where a painting reproduced the canonical system of images wherein it hoped for inclusion,³ *The Spinners* establishes a conversation about the very nature of painting. Thus, here Velázquez stages a conversation on the art and craft of making images with the masters that inspired him – Titians and Rubens, among others – and whose works he came to know and appreciate not just as an artist but as a collector too:

This room [the workshop represented in *The Spinners*] is not depicted with paintings hanging on the walls and life going on it. Instead, paintings are brought to life and they are brought together. Uncertainties result: are the figures of Minerva and Arachne in front of or part of the tapestry? what is the relationship of the foreground women to painted myth? The recollection of paintings that were in the palace collection – of Rubens, of Titian, of Tintoretto, of Jan Bruegel and more – is appended to a myth and to the practice of making. Art not as a matter of copying, or of imitating, but as re-creating. In *Las Meninas*, Velázquez depicts himself at work in the studio/museum. In *The Spinners*, he is imagining the experience of it. (Alpers 2005: 218)

With *The Spinners*, then, Velázquez plays off invention and convention inside a painting. He introduces spatial, temporal and narrative displacements that superpose and perturb cultural registers ordinarily kept separate, such as those of myth, theatrical performance, allegory, copying, museum collecting, tapestry or manual labour. He is not so much offering a description (a representation) of how these practices and activities take shape in the world as cracking open the terms through which *they mutually describe each other* in this seventeenth-century world. His is an attempt at showing how descriptions re-describe themselves.

The art of description ...

As noted, little is known of Velázquez the painter. His life is well documented, although historians remain relatively in the dark as to his personal vision and artistic project. His place in courtly affairs has left trails in administrative records and registers but little in the shape of biographical references or personal recollections. In the absence of such evidence it is, of course, moot to ask what may have motivated or shaped his outlook and sensibility. There is considerable consensus among historians that a driving-force in Velázquez's life was his ambition to obtain aristocratic recognition and status. His appointment as royal painter was of course a favourable step in this direction, but it also meant that he was left with less time for painting, for in this role he had to assume responsibility for the interior decoration of the royal household. Some historians have seen in this a source of internal conflict, between his vocation as a painter and his aspirations as courtier, between the artist and the aristocrat (Brown 1986).

Not being an art historian I will not dare to take sides in this debate. But I do wish to pause on the terms through which Velázquez seems to elaborate upon this very distinction – between painter and courtier– in *The Spinners*. We have seen that in this work Velázquez rejoices, not in the separation of offices or roles, but in the art of description, in the effects of mutual describabilities. He displays a deep commitment to exploring and generating the pictorial conditions that allow for 'description' itself to assume different registers and forms, and to move to different effects, inside the painting. 'The ability to constantly re-describe something from another viewpoint', writes Marilyn Strathern, 'produces a displacement effect of a particular kind' (Strathern 1992: 73). She calls this effect 'merography', a typically modern cultural resource where '[p]erspectives themselves are created in the redescrptions' (Strathern 1992: 73).

Although it is an intrepid claim to make, perhaps, in *The Spinners*, Velázquez was experimenting with this embryonic seventeenth-century cultural resource: what descriptive and aesthetic register, he might have challenged himself to think, might this emerging *capacity for re-description* assume? What kind of perspective may Velázquez have been attempting to extricate through this novel and exciting technique?

We can offer some tentative answers: no doubt that of an outstanding artist, the painters' painter, as he came to be known – of course, that of a noble courtier too, his long-standing aspiration. Yet perhaps he was aiming for a middle third also: the perspective of re-description itself, a Baroque in-between that places the person and her world in suspension, and that struggles to make this suspension – this recursion between aesthetic, political and biographical forms – visible. Not adjudication and resolution – now painter, now courtier – but re-description. A middle third capable of trapping the proliferative and wondrous capacities of description as a trapping interface itself.

... and the art of separation

The story of Velázquez's entrapment between his royal duties and his artistic vocation came to mind when reading a recent account by Marilyn Strathern on the changes in the expectations of academic office in UK universities over the past twenty years. The focus of her account is, in her own words, 'the *detachment* of the William Wyse Professorship [WWP] from the headship of the Department [of Social Anthropology in Cambridge]' (Strathern 2009: 127, emphasis added). When the head of department and the holder of the foundation chair coincided, 'there was a performative requirement made of the office-holder *as the Professor*' (Strathern 2009: 130). The university was evident, we might say, through the professor, in her investments towards the advancement of knowledge and her defence of the university's interests. Come the audit turn of the 1990s, however, and the person and the office part ways. 'The person', writes Strathern, 'becomes personalised. The WWP becomes less of an office' (Strathern 2009: 130). The office disappears from view and it is the individual intellectual – the intellectual as an individual – that gains full display.

Strathern's account draws on Paul du Gay's critique of the 'ethics of enthusiasm' that held sway across public sector management in the UK during the turn of the century (du Gay 2000, 2008). Enthused by a moral economy of participatory empowerment and creative management, the new gurus of third-way public administration called forth the abandonment of dusted principles of rule-bound bureaucratic organisation and

formalistic impersonality. The aim was to shake the state loose from its unbending formalities and inflect a new entrepreneurial and communicative spirit to the state bureaux.

Du Gay develops this analysis by setting in contrast Max Weber's famous account of bureaucratic organisation with the new ethics of enthusiasm. Despite caricatures to the contrary, Weber's model of bureaucracy in fact stressed the levelling and democratic impulses inherent in the procedural impartiality of bureaucratic administration. As Weber himself put it: 'Bureaucracy inevitably accompanies modern mass democracy', which results from the 'abstract regularity of the execution of authority' (Gerth and Mills 1946: 224). The procedural abstraction of impersonality abducts a society of equals from day-to-day interactions. No matter who you are or where you come from, the bureaucratic machinery will make all people conform into homogeneous administrative categories. The work of the civil service, then, may be mirrored to Archimedean levers. In its formalisation of vocation as a statutory professional goal, the bureaucrat enacts an ethic of organisational-cum-social democracy.

Not vocation but enthusiasm, empathy and care is what the new turn in public administration calls for. Under the auspices of 'responsive' government, the civil servant is to be reconfigured as 'something akin to an enthusiastic, energetic and entrepreneurial "yes-person"' (du Gay 2008: 343). The yes person, however, is likely to irradiate affection and commitment well beyond his constitutional and official mandate: 'office and self become blurred, with committed champions coming to see the office as an extension of themselves' (2008: 345). This, then, is a person who encounters no circumscription or delimitation to its attachments. She lets go of the office in lieu of new annexations. As Strathern had it, the office disappears – it gets detached from the person – but a new person appears in its stead: an enthusiastic individual keen on extending his or her constituency, on embracing new connections, on articulating novel annexations. An individual that grows on attachments.

The detachment of person and office, du Gay tells us following political theorist Michael Walzer, is an instance of the 'art of separation' that lies at the heart of liberalism (Walzer 1984). For Walzer, the craft of liberal politics consists in the institution of walls between social domains previously entangled. With each new wall a new liberty is instituted. Thus, the line drawn between church and state instituted a sphere of religious activity where men were allowed to exercise freedom of religious conscience. As for the rise of office as a corporate identity distinct from dynastic, familial or personal interests, the art of separation worked thus: 'the line that marks off political and social position from familial

property creates the sphere of office and then the freedom to compete for bureaucratic and professional place, to lay claim to a vocation, apply for an appointment ... The notion of one's life as one's project probably has its origin here' (Walzer 1984, 316–317).

Interfaces

Walzer observes that the separation of person and office marked a point of inflection in the history of political liberalism. His focus is on the reorganisation of a series of categories of political thought: religious conscience, privacy, property, office, even life itself. These were gradually and historically separated out into the building blocks and fundamental constituents of freedom.

I am intrigued by Walzer's resort to the image of the 'wall' as the technology of separation: 'Liberalism is a world of walls', he wrote, 'and each one creates a new liberty' (Walzer 1984: 315). Walls are a brake to rumour-mongering and conspiratorial politics. They help keep ghosts at bay. But walls may also be used for display and decoration. As we saw in the case of Velázquez's duties as curator, the walls of the royal household became centrepieces of his labours. Moreover, as historians Jonathan Brown and Svetlana Alpers have shown us, Velázquez sacrificed a good deal of *his vocation* – 'the notion of one's life as one's project', as Walzer puts it – on those walls. Velázquez took up the challenge of decorating the palace's walls, with tapestries, sculptures and paintings, in corridors and galleries, as a project in the art of description rather than separation. In this sense, walls may be said to behave more like thresholds or media interfaces than barricades.

Velázquez's experimentation with decoration and description as an interface effect makes sense when seen in the larger context of Baroque society, for a concern with theatrics, illusionism or the sublimation of form were indeed characteristic of Baroque aesthetics. Baroque society was in many respects the first media society. The first articulated expression of a theory of media was produced in the context of Baroque political work, and every theory of media since has been, in practice, a theory of the extensiveness and reach of Baroque effects (Corsín Jiménez 2013: 7–11). The use of 'techniques of incompleteness', such as *trompe l'oeil* or anamorphosis, or the phenomenal explosion in the use of stage machinery in theatrical representations, all contributed to a dramaturgical conception of social life (Maravall 1986).⁴

Take for example Thomas Hobbes's famous theatrical representation of sovereignty and political organisation. According to Noel Malcolm, Hobbes's famous *imago* of a sovereign body holding in its interior, and

pacifying the designs of, a chaotic multitude may have been inspired by an encounter with a dioptric anamorphic device designed by the French Minim friar Jean-François Nicéron (Malcolm 2002). Nicéron's design involved a picture of the faces of twelve Ottoman sultans which, on looking through the viewing-glass tube, converged into the portrait of Louis XIII (Malcolm 2002: 213). In Malcolm's account, the anamorphic lens's capacity to effect a transformation of relations, from multifarious and chaotic to unitary and orderly, would have seduced Hobbes's into imagining a similar iconographic representation for the title page of his book. We could say, therefore, that for Hobbes the lens generated the perspective – the capacity for re-description – from which knowledge of the political surfaced. That most modern of epistemes, 'the political', emerged therefore as an interface-effect: politics is what the world looks like from the point of view of the lens.

I have brought up Hobbes's political theatrics at this stage – the interface-mechanics of his politics – because it is to the Hobbesian theory of sovereignty that Paul du Gay turns to after rehearsing a genealogical study of enthusiasm. He traces the use of the term to the period of religious civil wars in seventeenth century England. Back then, Enthusiasts were members of a fanatical religious sect who in the name of an 'Enthusiasical' revelation claimed privileged access to divine inspiration and, therefore, an unmediated access to truth (du Gay 2008: 347). As is well known, Hobbes had tremendous contempt for such expressions of religious fervour. His *Leviathan* was a supreme effort to annihilate all manifestations of religious enthusiasm. For Simon Schaffer, who has commented on the dioptric (anamorphic) effect of the *Leviathan*'s parallax artifice, the capacity to 'see double' (to see the twelve sultans and Louis XIII in duplex perspective) became in fact a first step in the ultimate sublimation of sovereignty as hegemonic vision. In seventeenth-century politics this was easily accomplished because outside the rule of sovereign law, as Hobbes noted, lay only a chaotic state of nature, shaped by suspicion, fear, witchcraft accusations and the mischievous play of invisible phantoms. The rise of *Leviathan* exterminated the invisible, neatly aligning, in a supreme gesture of political illusionism, the planes of the natural and the phantasmagorical (Schaffer 2005: 202).

Let me recapitulate the interface-effect. The Hobbesian lens allowed for the imagination of sovereignty as an autonomous and self-sufficient political *organon*. It allowed Hobbes to cancel Enthusiasm, but it did so by cancelling or hiding the very artificial design that made the cancellation possible. Not unlike Walzer's use of walls, Hobbes opted to look through, and over, the lens rather than with it. His interest in the effects

of Baroque media lay not in the genre of its resistances and disturbances (the dioptric refractions) but in the irresistibility of its political programme. Having jumped over the wall, and left the Enthusiasts behind, the Hobbesian person turned his or her attention to the task of ‘extending his or her constituency, on embracing new connections, on articulating novel annexations’, as I put it above. An individual that grows on attachments and appropriations. A yes person.⁵

Recursions

I have borrowed the notion of the interface-effect from software and cultural theorist Alexander Galloway (2012). Galloway’s is a very suggestive take on software, and the structure of digital data and information in particular, because of his efforts at re-situating the latter in the terrain of allegory and symbolism rather than virtuality and technology. Although Galloway does not trace the interface effects of present-day media technologies back to the Baroque, his description of what interfaces accomplish may, I believe, sustain this link:

Digital media are exceptionally good at artifice and often the challenge comes in maintaining the distinction between edge and center, a distinction that threatens to collapse at any point like a house of cards. [...] The interface is this state of “being on the boundary.” It is *that moment where one significant material is understood as distinct from another significant material*. In other words, an interface is not a thing, an interface is always an effect. (Galloway 2012: 33, emphasis added)

The moment when a ‘material is understood as distinct from another significant material’ – the moment when a material detaches itself from itself – is of course a moment of re-description. Galloway is particularly interested in how this inter-phasing is accomplished by digital media today; how the digital becomes the hyphen, in the terms I used earlier. Our failure to pay attention to this middling effect of media, notes Galloway, reflects the poverty of our critical and conceptual imagination, which appears inexorably bootstrapped to the digital aesthetics of networked and informational capitalism. Software’s self-executability (the fact that computer programmes run on their own and do things) conceals the fact that it is at heart a symbolic operation. It expresses almost to perfection the idea of a ‘symbol that stands for itself’ (Wagner 1986), the symbol that self-eclipses its symbolic provenance:

Such is the fundamental contradiction: what you see is not what you get. Software is the medium that is not a medium. Information interfaces are always ‘unworkable.’ Code is never viewed as it is. Instead code must be

compiled, interpreted, parsed, and otherwise driven into hiding by still larger globs of code. Hence the principle of *obfuscation*. But at the same time it is the exceedingly high degree of declarative reflexivity in software that allows it to operate so effectively as source or algorithmic essence – the stating of variables at the outset, the declarations of methods, all before the real ‘language’ takes place – within a larger software environment always already predestined to parse and execute it. And hence the principle of *reflection*. (Galloway 2012: 69)

Information interfaces thus accomplish the trick of proffering re-descriptions that do not look as such. Re-descriptions without a form! Such apparently formless descriptions – self-descriptions, or descriptions that stand for themselves – have in fact long been the object of anthropological analysis. Thus, for example, Roy Wagner famously glossed the capacity of symbols to simultaneously produce obfuscation and reflection as ‘obviation’: the meaning and relations that are made ‘obvious’ by a symbol are one of many that have thenceforth also been ‘obviated’ (e.g. Wagner 1978). Obviation therefore ‘executes’ a recursive movement, such that the object of a description offers itself up for re-apperception in a future description. Such a descriptive move becomes a trope for/of perception (Wagner 1986: 33).

I have suggested above that it was this ‘for/of’ divisor that Velázquez may have been surprised to discover inside the *‘cárcel dorada’*, the golden prison, of his museum walls (Alpers 2005: 180), and which he spent much of his life interrogating and exploring: how to divide the divisor itself, how to trap it and express it in an aesthetic register and form. Velázquez’s pictorial solution to the trap was a form of ‘environmentalisation’: an exercise in interior decoration where the capacity for re-description *made room* (sometimes quite literally) for allegorical, symbolic, ornamental, material and even theatrical dispositions.

If Galloway’s and du Gay’s diagnoses of the political and aesthetic economy of information are anything to go by, however, it would seem that the enthusiastic self-executability of information is today leaving no room for re-descriptions. So how can social theory ‘occupy’ and make room for the nondescript again?

In this context it is perhaps no coincidence that ‘recursion’ has become a favoured analytical strategy in contemporary social theory. Thus, for example, Chris Kely speaks of free software engineers’ self-grounding of their collaborative efforts – by virtue of writing and coding the communicative infrastructure that supports their exchanges – as the construction of a ‘recursive public’ (Kely 2008). Exploring the cult of Ifá divination in Cuba, Martin Holbraad likewise resorts to the idiom of ‘recursion’ to explain how the inventive definitions – the ‘infini-

tions' (Holbraad 2012: 220) – of the truth-regimes through which Ifá practitioners describe their predicaments must inevitably re-inscribe the truthfulness of anthropological description too. And Sarah Franklin has recently advocated a similar recursive route for anthropological analysis, taking inspiration in the way human development is modelled *in vitro* in stem cell labs (Franklin 2013). Modelling 'man' *in vitro* researchers are afforded the possibility of holding a description of anthropos in suspension, a possibility that opens up in turn the conceptual space for encountering and designing new diagnostic tools.

These moments of infrastructuring, infinity and suspension are reminiscent of Velázquez's re-descriptive exercises, as I have presented them here. They dwell on the culture of invention fuelling every description. Yet I wish to pause for a minute on this inventive moment, on the trope of cultural resourcefulness and prefiguration, figuration ahead of time, that these analytical sensibilities announce and incorporate.

Whereas for Velázquez recursion was an *effect* of his re-descriptive perambulations, the aesthetic of his encounter with the environments of mutual describabilities, it would seem that the status of recursion in contemporary social theory is that of a *methodology* instead: recursion as something we should do to or look for in descriptions, rather than something that descriptions do to us.⁶ Now it is not my intention to produce a typology of recursions, let alone a normative classification of recursive usages, but I do think it is worth briefly laying out some of the epistemic components of this methodological strand.

The forefather of the methodological use of recursion in social theory was, of course, Gregory Bateson, who borrowed the epistemics of recursion from cybernetics. In particular, he was drawn to cybernetics' conception of information as a feedback system for the way it enabled him to think of the future and the possible as self-looping environments (Harries-Jones 1995). We experience a therapeutic sense of freedom, Bateson argued, when we sift through information that is layered recursively. In so doing we correspondingly undergo a transformation from self- to ecological consciousness. Recursion does not come with environments attached, but if properly executed all the way through, it releases the environment as consciousness.

I am interested in this therapeutic dimension of information, its status as a symbol that may liberate or restrain cathartic energies, for this understanding of information as an on/off releaser of energy is not how cybernetics was first conceptualised in the 1940s. As Peter Galison has shown, cybernetics emerged from Norbert Wiener and his associates' wartime effort at engineering servomechanisms capable of predicting an enemy aircraft pilot's actions (Galison 1994). The blurring of the

human-machine (pilot-weapon) interface in the name of an information loop was modelled on the ontology of an enemy, an enemy that was not defined negatively as other than ourselves, but mysteriously as an informational black box:

the cybernetic Other is not negatively contrasted with us, nor are we the model upon which the Other is empathetically formed; our understanding of the cybernetic Enemy Other becomes the basis on which we understand ourselves. [...] It is an image of human relations thoroughly grounded in the design and manufacture of wartime servomechanisms and extended, in the ultimate generalization, to a universe of black-box monads. (Galisson 1994: 264–265)

The fundamental problem for cybernetics, then, was not the ontology of the Other, nor the nature of our relation to them, but *the Other as instruction*, a recursive function for perpetual self-modelling. Description as executability. Thus the premium that cybernetics placed in defining information as structurally irresistible: an object whose density overcomes every matter of resistance, friction or detachment. Information must be free! Its flow uninterrupted, yes, yes, yes all the way through.

Re-enter the ‘yes person’, for whom the office was ‘an extension of themselves’, as du Gay put it (du Gay 2008: 345). The extension, we know now, is informational: the cultural obsession that yes persons evince in their demands for ever more information – information that loops around itself, in the name of audit and transparency – is therefore simply a reflection of their ontological self-formation as replicable beings (beings that aim for the replication of themselves in and through information):

the image of self-replicators such as computer viruses is breathtaking in its own way. *No environment appears necessary when what is at issue is the replication of communication devices themselves.* It is as though genes did not need to be embodied: what is reproduced is simply the informational capacity itself. Models with a life of their own! (Strathern 1992: 169, emphasis added)

‘No environment appears necessary’ because recursion is indeed its own model, its own method. Because it is self-delivered (data-streamed) in its transformation from self- to ecological consciousness. In this context, then, perhaps the lessons to be drawn from Velázquez’s *Spinners* involve imagining what it may mean to speak from a cultural episteme where information does not exist, whose modernity is Baroque rather than anti-, non- or post-, and where the aesthetic sources of suspension and

infinite have to be trapped rather than invented. When the capacity for re-description aims for enviroining its own hyphen.

Coda

One of reasons why the humanities have received vigorous criticism from quarters concerned with their social and media impact refers to the use they make of unpalatable, opaque, unreadable jargon. How can writings that claim social provenance, the critics argue, stand in no relation of transparency whatsoever to the publics they refer to? Why do some academics insist on making information *resistible*?

In a wonderful essay that takes issue with such criticism, Michael Warner has exposed some of the underlying assumptions that equate clarity with political and popular engagement, and has profiled in turn how an intellectual public may in fact work (Warner 2005). For a start, notes Warner, we miss the point of intellectual engagement if we think social or critical commentary should have immediate effect. Those ‘who write [so-called] opaque left theory might very well feel that they are ... writing to a public that does not yet exist, and finding that their language can circulate only in channels hostile to it, they write in a manner designed to be a placeholder for a future public’ (Warner 2005: 130). The channels that mediate the relationship between an intellectual and its publics are not simply communicative, nor are they coeval to the writing process. We have come to think of the public as a ‘socially expansive audience’ to which public intellectuals must relate to ‘in horizontal terms’ (Warner 2005: 144); an over-enthusiastic crowd hooraying our theoretical exegeses. Yet remember: all enthusiasms end up calling forth an art of separation. We might do better distinguishing, then, between the temporality of politics and the temporality of critical and world-making projects. The latter mobilises an orientation to strangeness and long-term risk that is not to be found in the former (Warner 2005: 150, 158). An orientation, in a sense, that looks for and engages in a deliberate play of baroque displacements or enhancements: postponing completion, exercising estrangement, trapping descriptions. Environmentalising relations.

Let me finish with Weber. In an age of disenchantment, Weber found in the vocational call an ethical escape from the determinism of technical accomplishment and the frenzy of enthusiasm. Vocation poised itself in an ethical space at a complex historical moment, when the production of knowledge was being reconfigured by the rise of individualism and rational self-interest. A hundred years later, the one has caused ‘vocation to lapse into diletantism, the other to harden into professionalism’.

The person and the office, the artist and the courtier, the scholar and the administrator parting ways. This is why political theorist Sheldon Wolin has suggested that to ‘survive, the idea of vocation might have to be revoked and replaced by the sobrieties of method or invoked: Invocation as vocation’s conscience recalling it to the cross-grained’ (Wolin 2000: 6).

In – vocation: to summon and extricate – to detach – new voices, new descriptions. An environment for another hyphen.

Notes

- 1 Velázquez was in fact participating in a larger Baroque epistemology that discovered the trick of holding forms and effects in mutual suspension (Corsín Jiménez 2013): for example, the Shakespearian trick of writing a play into a play, or the pictorial techniques of trompe l’oeil or anamorphosis, where paintings self-efface a part (or the entirety) of their representational motifs. The play and the trompe l’oeil work as descriptions that detach themselves from themselves yet retain descriptive integrity: aesthetic forms and effects through which the detachment of detachment – a capacity no doubt for re-description – is accomplished.
- 2 What follows is a close reading of Svetlana Alper’s magisterial interpretation of Velázquez’s work (Alpers 2005).
- 3 For example, William van Haecht’s *The Gallery of Cornelis van de Geest* (c.1628).
- 4 It is worth noting that the Baroque remains tightly anchored in the episteme of modernity. Thus, art historian Martin Jay has distinguished three ‘scopic regimes of modernity’: Cartesian perspectivalism; the so-called art of describing, where the viewer is drawn to the surface or material qualities of objects and not their relational disposition in space; and, finally, Baroque or anamorphic modernity (Jay 1988).
- 5 Perhaps the most famous characterisation of the Hobbesian yes person is Macpherson’s ‘possessive individual’ (1962).
- 6 I think it is fair to say the exception here would be Kely (2008), who encounters ‘recursion’ as an ethnographic quality of how programmers construct their social and technological relations.

References

- Alpers, Svetlana, 2005, *The Vexations of Art: Velázquez and Others*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Brown, Jonathan, 1986, *Velázquez: Painter and Courtier*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Corsín Jiménez, Alberto, 2013, *An Anthropological Trompe L’oeil for a Common World: An Essay on the Economy of Knowledge*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn.

- du Gay, Paul, 2000, *In Praise of Bureaucracy: Weber, Organization, Ethics*. London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- du Gay, Paul, 2008, Without Affection or Enthusiasm: Problems of Involvement and Attachment in 'Responsive' Public Management. *Organization* 15(3): 335–353.
- Franklin, Sarah, 2013, In Vitro Anthropos: New Conception Models for a Recursive Anthropology? *Cambridge Anthropology* 31(1): 3–32.
- Galison, Peter, 1994, The Ontology of the Enemy: Norbert Wiener and the Cybernetic Vision. *Critical Inquiry* 21(1): 228–266.
- Galloway, Alexander R., 2012, *The Interface Effect*. Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity.
- Gerth, H. H. and Mills, C. Wright, 1946, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Harries-Jones, Peter., 1995, *A Recursive Vision: Ecological Understanding and Gregory Bateson*. Toronto, Ont.: University of Toronto Press.
- Holbraad, Martin, 2012, *Truth in Motion: The Recursive Anthropology of Cuban Divination*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press.
- Jay, Martin, 1988, Scopic Regimes of Modernity. In Hal Foster, ed., *Vision and Visuality*. Seattle, WA: Bay Press, pp. 3–23.
- Kelty, Christopher M., 2008, *Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- Macpherson, C. B., 1962, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Malcolm, Noel, 2002, *Aspects of Hobbes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Maravall, José Antonio, 1986, *Culture of the Baroque: Analysis of a Historical Structure*. Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press.
- Ortega y Gasset, José, 1987, *Velázquez*. Madrid: Aguilar.
- Schaffer, Simon, 2005, Seeing Double: How to Make up A Phantom Body Politic. In Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds, *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*. Boston, MA: The MIT Press, pp. 196–202.
- Strathern, Marilyn, 1992, *After Nature: English Kinship in the Late Twentieth Century*. Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures, 1989. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Strathern, Marilyn, 2009, Afterword: The Disappearing of an Office. *Cambridge Anthropology* 28(3): 127–138.
- Wagner, Roy, 1978, *Lethal Speech: Daribi Myth as Symbolic Obviation*. Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press.
- Wagner, Roy, 1986, *Symbols That Stand for Themselves*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
- Wagner, Roy, 2001, *An Anthropology of the Subject: Holographic Worldview in New Guinea and Its Meaning and Significance for the World of Anthropology*. Berkeley, CA and London: University of California Press.
- Walzer, Michael, 1984, Liberalism and the Art of Separation. *Political Theory* 12(3): 315–330.

- Warner, Michael, 2005, *Publics and Counterpublics*. London: Zone Books.
- Wolin, Sheldon S., 2000, Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation. In J. A. Frank and J. Tamborino, eds, *Vocations of Political Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.