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Extract from forthcoming Essay, *The Visual Field and the Place of the King*

It has been widely remarked that *Las Meninas* lacks a central point of perspective, a vanishing point on the model of Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (1494-1499). Of all the visual and compositional tricks in Velasquez's great work, one is key: the gazes and visual vectors of all the protagonists, the subjects, of the painting are being held by something not in the painting. That something is of course the place of the sovereign, the royal couple, indicated only in a spectral and absent presence by their shadowy reflection in the mirror painted in the mid-ground – a position still not at the perspectival centre of the composition. And yet, and yet...as Foucault points out (1974:15), this place outside the painting is shared between the sovereign and the spectators, the viewers, themselves:

That space where the king and his wife hold sway belongs equally well to the artist and to the spectator: and in the depths of the mirror there could also appear – there ought to appear – the anonymous face of the passer-by and that of Velázquez. For the function of that reflection is to draw into the interior of the picture what is intimately foreign to it: the gaze which has organised it and the gaze for which it is displayed. But because they are present within the picture, to the right and to the left, the artist and the visitor cannot be given a place in the mirror, just as the king appears in the depths of the looking-glass precisely because he does not belong to the picture.

What Foucault's analysis points to here is the ways in which the painting is indicative of the demise of representation in its 'Classical' mode – the painting is a symptom of 'the withdrawal of knowledge and thought outside the space of representation'. It puts representation into the frame as both a means and an end – a subject and an object, and problematizes the gaze that lies outside the purview of the frame itself, that conditions those gazes and representational vectors within the frame. It is an early example of a work of art which represents representation itself.

As Dixie's work *To be King* hypothesises, this nascent 'doubling' of the visual field coincides historically with the formalising of the colonial project. Her dense, lyrical, atmospheric and troubling video installation sets out, at one pole, the atomisation and recontextualisation of the minutiae of its masterpiece template, *Las Meninas*. At the other pole lies a welter of images extending the vectors of the original painting beyond the frame bounded by the original work and its implicated viewers. In this welter a ship emblematic of early colonial

slavers and trading ships common to Spain, one of the earliest colonial powers, sails off the edge of the ocean; the artist, standing in for the painted figure of Velásquez, becomes a paper cut-out comprising pages from Foucault's *The Order of Things*, and crumbles away on the wind blowing over an Eastern Cape landscape called Burnt Kraal; roles are taken on, reversed, doubled, relocated to the backdrop of a classic colony, the Eastern Cape. Dixie's animations and multimedia interventions layer palimpsest upon palimpsest, offering thought by way of a radical re-vision. What if, she says? What if the Infanta was black, and stood mutely outside the frame of the picture? What would make this possible, what transmutation of thought and representation? How would it change things, if the Southern Cross was the constellation guiding the centres of political power and the rules of representation?