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Prostitution and Art Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)* and the Vicissitudes of Authenticity

Abstract: The paper argues against interpretations of *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)* that look for its meaning in Picasso's state of mind and treat it as the expression of a struggle with his personal demons. Rather, it interprets both versions of the painting as a response and contrast to Matisse's *Le Bonheur de vivre*, which is proposed as the main intertext of *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)*. Moreover, an excursus into Lacanian theory allows the author not only to explain the supposed inconsistencies of *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)*, but also to propose that in its final version it is a meta-painting which analyses the way representation comes into being.

Keywords: Picasso, gaze, look, authenticity, biographical criticism

*Nothing seems more like a warehouse
to me than a museum.*

— Michel Leiris¹

In 1906 Picasso is only beginning to make his name in Paris and his painting is far less advanced or “modern” than Matisse's. In fact his Blue and Rose Periods, when he mostly painted outcasts in a nostalgic style influenced by El Greco's mannerism, can be squarely placed within the 19th century tradition of symbolist painting. But with his Iberian experiments of the same year, he is struggling with his sentimental side in order to “modernize” himself.² Although Iberian sculptures are archaic, not modern, they offer a way: they are “primitive,” that is, they provide something different than the academically acknowledged tradition. From the painting of outcasts, Picasso is moving towards painting in an “outcast” style: the sculptures are bulky and statuesque, very different from the flimsy

1. Michel Leiris, *Manhood: A Journey from Childhood into the Fierce Order of Virility*, trans. Richard Howard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 30.

2. Specimens of Iberian sculpture had been excavated in 1905 in Osuna and Cerro de los Santos, and then exhibited in Paris where Picasso saw them (Alfred H. Barr, *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art* [New York: Arno Press, 1980], 56).

figures of Picasso's earlier painting; their faces and eyes are blank, which makes for a disquieting hieratic effect.³

Many critics mention Matisse's *Le Bonheur de vivre* as one of the paintings which, together with others by Cézanne, Gauguin, El Greco, and Ingres, might have had a certain degree of influence on the *Brothel*.⁴ Without entering into an argument about the probability of these works' presence in Picasso's pictorial "unconscious," I would like to suggest that, for the reasons that will follow, Matisse's *Le Bonheur* is the main intertext of Picasso's painting. I will argue, in other words, that Picasso's *Brothel*, in both of its incarnations, is a straightforward answer to Matisse, and that its repainting can be explained by its relation to *Le Bonheur*.

Le Bonheur de vivre (174 x 238.1 cm) is a painting as monumental as the *Brothel* (243.9 x 233.7 cm). It was first exhibited at the *Salon des Indépendants* in 1906 where it caused sensation. It was the most spectacular statement of Matisse's Fauvist period or perhaps of Fauvism in general, which in 1906 was the most advanced modern school of painting. Yet, looked at in hindsight, and especially if compared with the *Brothel*, it seems more like the final statement of the 19th century than a painting inaugurating Modernism. One of the things that make Matisse a modern painter is his relative indifference to the subject matter. In fact, any subject is just a pretext for a decorative design which, according to the painter, should have "a soothing, calming influence on the mind."⁵ This is also evident in *Le Bonheur*, but here the influence on the mind is effected not only by the form of the painting but also by its narrative, which is as traditional as it could be in Western art: the mythical Golden Age of nature's plenty and innocent sexuality. Yet the canvas is traditional not only in its subject matter. It is also a whimsical summary picture which freely borrows from past styles and paintings in order to create not only a fantasy of the Golden Age but also an elaborate pattern of allusion to art history,

3. Many of Picasso's paintings executed before *Les Femmes d'Alger* are strongly "Iberian." These include such famous ones as *Self-Portrait*, *Portrait of Gertrude Stein* and *Two Nudes* (all 1906).

4. I will henceforth follow Wayne Andersen in calling *Les Femmes d'Alger* Picasso's *Brothel* for the same reason he gives for it – Picasso hated the other title: "*Les Femmes d'Alger*, how this title irritates me. Salmon invented it" (*Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views*, ed. Dore Ashton (New York: Da Capo Press, 1988), 153; also quoted in a slightly different translation in Wayne Andersen, *Picasso's Brothel: Les Femmes d'Alger* [New York: Other Press, 2002], 19).

5. From Matisse's "Notes of a Painter" (1908): "What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art that could be for every mental worker, for the businessman as well as the man of letters, for example, a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair that provides relaxation from fatigue" (*Matisse on Art*, ed. Jack Flam [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995], 42).

in which inconsistent and achronological fragments of the past are put together to create a whole, even if the effect is rather “stagey” or artificial.⁶

I propose that Picasso was struck or perhaps even exasperated by this contradiction between the narrative of naturalness and formal artificiality, between modern means and trite traditional subject matter or perhaps even Matisse’s incomprehension of the subject of his painting (sexuality as the source of fulfilment and well-being). Therefore, against Matisse’s soothing Arcadia, he offers his own: *The Brothel of Avignon* in the first version, in which all the prostitutes wear Iberian “masks.”⁷ This answer to Matisse is partly sarcastic but not primarily so. Although transferring Arcadia to the brothel makes for a wry comment on *Le Bonheur*, Picasso’s purpose is not really satiric. In fact, in the *Brothel* Picasso returns to his old subject, but this time with radically modernized means.

While during his Blue Period, Picasso used to present his outcasts as victims of modern society destroyed by destitution, absinthe, disease, etc., in the Rose Period he becomes more affirmative and begins to paint them in a different way. The beggars become clowns and acrobats – still outcasts but not broken ones. Although they are marginal, they have their own skill and tradition. These are people who exist on the edges of modern society and might be poor but they are also figures of defiance and independence from the omnipresent corruption, latter day incarnations of the noble savage, the last remnants of authentic “natural” humanity.⁸ They represent nothing less than truth to Picasso, hence his identification with them, confirmed in self-portraits in clown or acrobat costume.

The prostitute is also an outcast and one who can be related to nature in a way even more direct than circus people for the obvious reason that her profession is to satisfy sexual, that is, “natural” needs. Moreover, the figure of the prostitute also has a kind of tradition behind it: it is not accidental that it features so often in 19th century paintings and writings. The reason why so many artists identified with the prostitute was her disruptive position in 19th century society: prostitution was universally present, while it was at the same time universally condemned as immoral. In other words, although the bourgeois sexual politics idealized the woman and desexualized her in the image of “the angel in the ho-

6. Jack Flam, *Matisse: The Man and His Art, 1869–1918* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 157–159; Christopher Butler, *Early Modernism: Literature, Music and Painting in Europe 1900–1916* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 32. Apart from obvious borrowings from Ingres’s *Le Bain turc* and Giorgione’s *Concert Pastoral*, Flam also identifies parallels to Carracci, Watteau, Oriental art and even prehistoric cave paintings (159).

7. Critics have noted a number of similarities between the *Brothel* and *Le Bonheur*: a woman with both arms raised, another one with an arm behind her head and half lying, yet another one seen from the back.

8. John Berger, *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 44–45.

use,” creating a fantasy space ultimately not so very different and less ideal than the blissful quietism of *Le Bonheur*, the prostitute haunted this fantasy as its truth, ceaselessly undermining its dominion and discolouring its bright paints: the presence of the angel at home meant ubiquitous prostitution in the streets.

Thus there was a double impulse behind the painting of the Iberian version of the *Brothel*. On the one hand, its source is sheer rivalry: Picasso trying to claim the throne of the modern master and outdistance Matisse. On the other hand, an accidental infringement by “over-cultured” Matisse, the most refined representative in painting of the cultural capital of the world, on Picasso’s Spanish turf (the uncivilised, the natural, the countercultural), which gave the latter the idea for the coup. The seriousness of the undertaking can be measured, as many authors remarked, by the sheer amount of studies (several hundred) that the picture demanded, and Picasso’s radical break with his own former painting evident in the rejection of virtuosity, which is visible in the *Brothel*.

In his counterstatement to Matisse’s fantasy of sexual innocence in bright colours, which is supposed to bring solace and relaxation to the tired businessman (and even perhaps persuade him that he likes modern art), Picasso confronts him with another Arcadia: a brothel, where one can escape the artificiality of the sterile love of a monogamous marriage hemmed in by laws and where one can luxuriate in full satisfaction of the sexual instinct, which allows one to return to one’s natural source. But this kind of authenticity, in order to be experienced needs to escape from the straightjacket of fake social conventions, which in terms of painting are the conventions of the academically accepted Western tradition (which Matisse, in his fantasy space, rather extends than denies). This is the reason why Picasso uses an alternative “primitive” convention of his native Spain: a different canon of beauty or attractiveness is needed. The Iberian faces and eyes are blank because we are not in the space of idealised love, of the coming together of two individuals in the psychological sense (the individuals whose eyes are the windows of their souls). But it is precisely that which makes the coming together more poignant – hence the flat and more angular bodies that replace the rounded shapes of academic Venuses (a roundness which is also present in *Le Bonheur*). And hence the cooling down of the colours (mostly whites, greys, blues, and coolish pinks): against Leo Steinberg, one can say that ecstasy never takes place in the hothouse⁹; it is more

9. Leo Steinberg, “The Philosophical Brothel,” *October*, no. 44 (Spring 1988): 7–74, which is the revised version of the essay originally published in *Art News*, vol. 71, no. 5 (September 1972) and no. 6 (October 1972). Trying to substantiate his claim that the painting exudes the hot and stifling atmosphere of sex (“the smell of the hothouse, the effect of a caged jungle,” 55), Steinberg, in one of his signature comparisons, writes that “Picasso’s space insinuates total initiation, like entering a disordered bed” (63). The comparison to the bed was probably suggested to him by the positions of two middle (“Iberian”) prostitutes who may be seen as lying down (he calls

like shivering in the wind. Even the presence of the skull in the early sketches can be seen in the context of such “cool Arcadia.”¹⁰ Sexual experience, understood in the ecstatic sense, has nothing to do with the imaginary sweetness and serenity of Matisse’s vision. It is the eclipse of the “balanced” and “happy” individual, hence the typical 19th century connection of sexuality with death and madness (even outside the context of syphilis). Sexuality is an experience of the mortal body,¹¹ while Matisse’s *Le Bonheur* is a fantasy from which all unpleasantness – including the biggest one, death – is evacuated. In this sense, it is more earthly paradise than Golden Age, and therefore as desexualized as the ideal bourgeois woman.

We know that this cool Arcadian image of the brothel did not satisfy Picasso and that he stopped working on it for a while. Then, in the last “campaign” he repainted the faces of three of the prostitutes, changing them from Iberian to “African” masks. What prompted this decision, which, apart from changing the nature and meaning of the painting, was also the source of the claim that the *Brothel* remains unfinished?¹² Although Picasso denied it many times, the most popular critical theory is that the repainting was due to his visit to the ethnographic exhibition in the Trocadéro, where he saw African or Oceanic masks, which made him realize the true meaning of painting: as Africans create their ritual objects to defend themselves against evil spirits, the painter paints in order to exorcise his own destructive (unconscious) drives – by giving them form, he becomes independent, frees himself from them.¹³ A lot of ink has been spilled on discussing Picasso’s denials, establishing the possible date of the visit, etc. These matters, however, are important only for those who accept the theory of “painting as exorcism,” those who think that the authenticity of the painting has its source in Picasso’s state of mind and that it is the expression of a struggle with his

the left one gigante and claims that she is in the recumbent position [27]), but perhaps mostly by the colour and the way the white and blue backdrop is painted, which might suggest a bed sheet. Yet, if one looks again, the same backdrop may just as well suggest ice and therefore present the prostitutes as frozen in their rigid poses.

10. Picasso’s early studies for the painting included a man carrying a skull, a skull and a book and a book only – chronologically probably in this order of composition.

11. I do not suggest that the “intuitive” Picasso was a forerunner of Bataille; simply that the painting is a statement of an atheist.

12. The claim, later repeated by many critics, is Kahnweiler’s: “In early 1907, Picasso starts work on a strange large painting with women, fruit and curtains which was never finished” (Daniel Henry Kahnweiler, *Der Weg zum Kubismus* [Munich: Delphin, 1920], 17; quoted in Hélène Seckel, “Anthology of Early Commentary on *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*,” in: William Rubin, Hélène Seckel, Judith Cousins, *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* [New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1994], 235).

13. This is what Picasso supposedly said to André Malraux in a conversation in 1937, which the latter recounted in his 1974 (!) book entitled *La Tête d’obsidienne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 17–19 (quoted in Seckel, “Anthology,” 219).

personal demons. Because I find this kind of biographical criticism unconvincing, let us try to examine the changes introduced to the painting in the light of my interpretation of the first version of the *Brothel*.

In the final version the two “middle” prostitutes do not change, that is, their faces remain Iberian. As to the altered ones, the most obvious thing one notices is that each face is repainted in a different way. Moreover, they are not just different – there is a definite progression in their “disfigurement.” The face which is closest to the “pretty” Iberians is the face of the curtain-raiser¹⁴ on the extreme left; then comes the face of the curtain-parter, which, according to William Rubin, is “animalistic”¹⁵; and then, of course, the “splayed whore,” who is, according to him, the most inhuman and most terrifying. With the progression in “dehumanization,” another gradual change takes place. The Iberian prostitutes look straight into our eyes. The curtain-raiser’s face is in almost perfect right profile (when one examines the painting closely, a tiny fragment of her left brow is visible) but her right eye (inconsistently) looks straight at us. The curtain-parter is represented in three-quarter left profile but her left eye has disappeared; we look into a black eye-socket; and the crouching figure’s face is a more extreme version of the curtain-parter: the same kind of mouth, the same but more abstracted nose, the eyes which reappear but become asymmetrical and even blanker than the eyes of the other prostitutes.

What is the purpose of this evidently gradual transformation? Primarily, this is the way Picasso guides us through his picture. Encountering the painting, our look is first of all transfixed by the figures who blankly stare at us frontally with both eyes, and, in order to strengthen the effect, there are two of them (their faces look almost exactly the same). The middle figures are also painted and placed in such a way that their eyes – reinforced by the position of the left hand of the prostitute with both arms raised and a fragment of the parted back-curtain – form a diagonal line which descends towards the curtain-raiser who looks at us with

14. The figure is often called “curtain-puller” because in a number of sketches for the painting it is evident that he or she (the man gets replaced by the prostitute) pulls the curtain to the right, as if to hide the view from us. However, because from the position of the figure in the finished painting one cannot determine whether she is pulling or raising the curtain (in fact, more probably the latter), it does not make much sense to me to insist on calling her the curtain-puller, especially as so many details differ completely between preparatory versions and the final execution of the painting.

15. William Rubin, “The Genesis of *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*,” in: William Rubin, Hélène Seckel, Judith Cousins, *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*. Rubin, a believer in biographical criticism, writes that she has “a snout-like animalistic head” (107), which is appropriate “for investing [Picasso’s] picture with what must have seemed to him an allusion to total sexual *déchaînement* – a primal physicality so enveloping and so instinctual that it overcomes the inhibitions and controls that inhere to the Western psyche, thus tending to erase the distinction between human and animal” (108).

only one frontal eye, inconsistent with her face shown in profile. This is the first transformation and the first hint we get.

I think Rubin is quite right when he suggests that the origin of the curtain-raiser's face is Gauguin, but not in the way he tries to include the hint in his biographical interpretation.¹⁶ What is of importance in this connection is the relation of this head to the original Arcadian meaning of Picasso's painting. Gauguin's Tahitian women live in a romanticized exotic paradise, which is yet another incarnation of the (lost) Golden Age, yet the "untruth" of Gauguin's vision of authenticity manifests itself on the level of style: the natural paradise is rendered by means inspired by highly stylised (sophisticated, not "primitive") "non-Western archaic court styles such as the Egyptian, Persian, Cambodian, and Javanese."¹⁷ Therefore, it is not an accident that the Gauguinesque figure seems to display the Iberian figures to us: Picasso has understood that although the first version of the painting was a critical comment on Matisse's *Le Bonheur*, in fact its criticism was fundamentally spurious, because, for all its differences from the Matisse, the painting still presented an idealized, romanticized, that is, nostalgic, version of the state of natural (sexual) plenitude. In other words, moving Arcadia to the brothel might be superficially shocking, but this vision does not really differ much from its more benign and mythic version: we remain within the bounds of "soft primitive" ideology of authenticity whose originator in the Western tradition of painting is Gauguin.

After the head-on confrontation with the gazes of the pretty Iberians and the figure who displays them to our view, our eyes are directed further, and in a kind of spiral movement we first encounter the head of the curtain-parter and finally the croucher whose eyes, head, and body in general are the most abstract and hence most puzzling to the viewer already engaged in a reciprocal game of exchanging gazes with the painting. This is the part of the picture which has produced the greatest number of comments of all kinds, from strictly formal to frighteningly biographical. But is it possible to explain its purpose without, on the one hand, seeing its pull towards abstraction as the beginning of Cubism, and, on the other hand, without recounting once again the trite story of African masks and the descent into the heart of darkness teaming with primeval instincts? Perhaps the order of transformation can tell us something here: from naturalist fantasy (the Iberians)

16. Rubin finds this head "more 'Oceanic' than 'African' in spirit" (95) and associates it with Gauguin's *Spirit of the Dead Watching* (which Picasso probably knew), where we can find a similar face in profile with an eye frontally looking at us, also situated at the extreme left of the picture and also adjacent to a drapery. The painting fits into his biographical Eros/Thanatos scenario thus: "It shows a [naked] troubled young girl at the age of sexual awakening reclining on the bed. [...] Her 'fear' or 'dread' (in Gauguin's words) is related to the imagined Tupapau [a female ancestor spirit] and hence to death" (95).

17. Rubin, "The Genesis of *Les Femmes d'Alger*," 38.

to inconsistency (the curtain-raiser) to the effect of the inconsistency: the eclipse of vision (the empty eye) to something “strange” and “unnatural.” In what sense is the croucher strange and unnatural, however? She is strange because of her “inhuman” head, and she is unnatural because, as Steinberg already noted, “the figure appears somewhat ambiguously dorsal and frontal”¹⁸ at the same time. But is this seeming inconsistency of presenting us with the frontal face superimposed on the prostitute’s turned back aggressive¹⁹ or even arbitrary?

In the earliest studies for the painting, there were two men present among the prostitutes: the medical student and the sailor²⁰: the latter seated among the women, the former entering from the extreme left and pulling the curtain. Then Picasso decides to replace the student with one of the prostitutes and turn the “action” of the painting “through ninety degrees toward a viewer conceived as the picture’s opposite pole.”²¹ In other words, we, the viewers, are put into the shoes of the student who enters the room and sees the sailor among the prostitutes. But what is the sailor looking at when the student is no longer represented within the picture? It is not difficult to guess, because he is seated opposite the prostitute we see from the back, whose legs are spread as wide as possible. Later, in the first Arcadian version of the painting, the sailor disappears and the squatting prostitute’s head is turned toward us in a three-quarter profile, like the curtain-parter’s²² – this is the idealized picture of the brothel in which nothing is disfigured (Iberianism stands for an alternative canon of beauty) and nothing is lacking.

Because it is an image of plenitude, it has to present itself as a whole to a single point of view and has to be stylistically consistent. Such a vision, however, was found wanting by Picasso and it seems that he realized that the most obvious way to overcome the spurious (romanticizing, idealizing) consistency was to (re)introduce into the picture another point of view that would “disorganize” it, something that its Arcadian version had repressed. But how is he to do this without bringing the eliminated figure (the sailor) once more onto the scene, which would make the painting less “confrontational”? There seems to be only one way: to superimpose both perspectives, so that they converge in the look of the viewer, and do it *gradually* so that the superimposition registers in the structure of the painting. This would mean that Picasso did not, in a flash of inspiration, paint five contorted

18. Steinberg, “The Philosophical Brothel,” 58.

19. Rubin, “The Genesis of *Les Femmes d’Alger*,” 114: “the effect of indescribable violence and monstrosity of this head [. . .] the awe produced by this crouching figure remains undiminished.”

20. As Picasso described them to Alfred Barr in 1939 (Barr, 57).

21. Steinberg, “The Philosophical Brothel,” 13.

22. This is at least what can be conjectured from the studies and the radiograph of the final version of the *Brothel* (Rubin, “The Genesis of *Les Femmes d’Alger*,” 112–113).

women arbitrarily put together, but meticulously inscribed another point of view into the picture: we start with the head-on sentimental vision of the prostitutes (the unified single point of view/the “middle” Iberians), an inconsistency appears in this vision (the unified vision is questioned/the curtain-raiser), the vision goes through a crisis and disappears (another perspective blocks it/the curtain-parter), and reappears reassembled in an “impossible” and unnatural way (superimposition of two perspectives/the croucher).²³ This way the exchange of looks between the student and the sailor, which originally constituted the narrative axis of the painting, becomes reinscribed in the formal organization of the canvas when the narration is abandoned. Moreover, this transformation is far from arbitrary, because the student’s and the sailor’s looks converge also on the level of the anecdote.

The identification of the figure on the left as a student was picked up by critics from Picasso’s hint. Yet most of them either seem to collapse the difference between the two male figures (both students and sailors are typical patrons of brothels) or to oppose them in some allegorical understanding.²⁴ But the student is not any kind of student but a medical one, and what can a medical student with a notebook be doing in a brothel? The answer seems to be obvious and it should have been even more obvious to Picasso’s biographical critics, because his friend Cinto Reventós was a medical intern in gynecology at Barcelona’s Hospital de Santa Creu i Sant Pau.²⁵ He even took Picasso to the morgue there to show him “a dead woman [...] who had undergone a gynaecological operation.”²⁶ Yet it took Wayne Andersen, in a book published as late as 2002, to suggest the obvious: “I propose that part of Cinto’s advanced schooling involved visiting brothels as a medical inspector. Registered prostitutes were required to undergo health examinations at regular intervals; inspectors descended on brothels periodically to examine for dermatological and venereal diseases.”²⁷ Thus a rather prosaic connection between the sailor and the student as a medical inspector is established on the level of looking: what the sailor is gazing at, the medical inspector has come to inspect. We are looking at the squatter from the position of the student who enters the room

23. I think that the critics who perceive the croucher as monstrous and aggressive use these adjectives simply to express their helplessness in front of what to them seems to be the inexplicable arbitrariness of the croucher’s image.

24. Barr: sailor – carnal pleasures/student with a skull – *memento mori*; Steinberg: sailor – carnality, engagement/student: knowledge, distance.

25. John Richardson, with Marilyn McCully, *A Life of Picasso, vol. 1: 1881–1906* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), 138.

26. Richardson, *A Life of Picasso*, 237.

27. Andersen, *Picasso’s Brothel*, 177.

and hence we see her back, but because the sailor's look is superimposed on ours we simultaneously see what the sailor was staring at, that is, the squatter's genitals.²⁸

Some may say that this scenario fits very neatly into the biographical horror story, according to which Picasso is afraid of women and vaunts his aggression by deforming them in his paintings, because, in a certain interpretive tradition, female genitals are supposed to evoke dread. Yet the fact is that although the croucher's head has been called "inhuman," it might be described so only in the sense of being *abstract*. Abstraction, however, means the subject's *neutralization* (like in Cubism) and not expressionistic deformation. But this is not all. To make matters even stranger, these are genitals that *return our look*, that is, stare back at us from within the split that the inconsistency of the body and the superimposition of two points of view has produced. In other words, we are moving away from the trite territory of attraction/repulsion or Eros/Thanatos into a more abstracted region of what is by definition invisible, and not just hidden from view from a particular position.

Lacan's most popular invention is (the early version of) his mirror stage theory which, however, is rarely connected with his discussion of the gaze that he offers in his eleventh seminar. In the mirror stage scenario, an actual inconsistency is imaginatively overcome and produces a unified image of oneself. The inconsistency is often described as originating in the infant's inability to control its body but in fact we are not speaking about one body only – another kind of control that the child lacks is over the body of the mother or care-giver. However, unlike early psychoanalysts who, in a sense, idealise the mother and focus mostly on the comfort her body provides, Lacan treats her as the real which unbalances the world of the child: the body of the mother knows no measure: it is either excessively present (suffocatingly close) or unbearably absent – in both cases overloading the processing capabilities of the infant. Because such traumatic experience is unrepresentable (it overloads the mechanisms of representation), it has to be removed into a "beyond," if the infant is to create for itself its own consistent image. With this removal, a zone comes into existence, which is by definition inaccessible and therefore lost to us. The important point is that although all our representations and meanings are organized around this void or lack, it has to be covered with something to disappear from view, so that we are able to experience our world as "normal" and "real," that is, consistent. If the void reappears, we are no longer able to hold to our self-representations, and with this to the meanings and representations of our world. But how is the empty space removed from view, so that the world may become consistent and make sense to us? The emptiness is veiled by images and myths of *origin*, that is, of the original plenitude, which

28. Rubin (115) writes that John Nash, in the unpublished BBC 3 radio talk of 1970, was the first to propose that the squatter's head may be a metaphor for female genitals.

tell us what we lost, so that we can no longer enjoy ourselves fully.²⁹ Moreover, because we are dealing here with a lure covering the void (which, however, has no depth because it just figures a split at the origin), whose reappearance means the destruction of the consistency of our world, these images and myths are also of *death*. And the privileged figure of this double inscription (birth/death) in the “civilized” West is, of course, the myth of “the indestructible claims of sex,”³⁰ as sex is supposed to be a matter of instincts (Eros and genitals), and as such also by definition excessive, dehumanising and therefore lethal (Thanatos and dread). Moreover, if what we take to be our reality is always already a product of a certain staging (veiling of the void), we are no longer speaking about the difference between natural reality (plenitude) and its artificial image (art) but “between a reality which is *already artificial* and the image.”³¹ In other words, reality itself is constructed like a scene in a brothel: a prostitute is never “natural,” but acts a certain role for the patrons of the brothel – she must be “cold” (detached from the image she presents to the other) because this is precisely what allows her to control a role that is demanded of her (for instance: being “hot”). Therefore, a prostitute at work wears a mask by definition and even if it is an animal mask, it does not make much sense to write about her as exuding primeval sexual energy or being the image of life force, because we are talking about market exchange in which an artificial act can be gotten for a price and not about a plunge into “authentic” prehistoric slime.³²

Discussing vision in his eleventh seminar, Lacan describes the dialectics between the void at the centre of representations and the orderly image of the world, from which it is evacuated, as the difference between the gaze and the look. The look is connected with narcissism (consistent (self-) image) and hence with pacification:

The painter gives something to the person who must stand in front of his painting which, in part, at least, of the painting, might be summed up thus – *You want to see? Well, take a look at this!* He gives something for the eye to feed on, but he invites the person to whom this picture is presented to lay down his gaze there as one lays down one’s weapons. This is

29. Darian Leader, *Stealing the Mona Lisa: What Art Stops Us from Seeing* (New York: Counterpoint, 2002), 59.

30. Steinberg, “The Philosophical Brothel,” 43.

31. Leader, *Stealing the Mona Lisa*, 64.

32. The *Brothel* is a representation of the stage: two prostitutes in the middle are frozen in theatrical poses exposing themselves to patrons (us) and this is emphasised by the front curtain being held up by the prostitute on the left and the back curtain, which is parted by another prostitute. Although the painting does not try to be three-dimensional and, in fact, part of its effectiveness resides in its flatness, the space, as it is organised in the picture, consists precisely of a three-fold: the audience (us – invisible), the stage, and the back of the stage (invisible).

the pacifying, Apollonian effect of painting. Something is given not so much to the gaze as to the eye, something that involves the abandonment, the *laying down*, of the gaze.³³

But “before we look we are being looked at” (74); in other words, there is “the pre-existence to the seen of a given-to-be-seen” (74), which Lacan calls the gaze. Because the gaze is something which enables looking and seeing of the consistent image, Lacan compares it to light as brightness (what allows for vision), different from light rays which propagate in geometrical space (which he connects with the formation of the consistent picture, that is, narcissism and consciousness):

That which is light [the gaze] looks at me, and by means of that light in the depths of my eye, something is painted – something that is not simply a constructed relation, the object on which the philosopher lingers – but something that is an impression, the shimmering of a surface that is not, in advance, situated for me in its distance. This is something that introduces what was elided in the geometrical relation – the depth of field, with all its ambiguity and variability, which is in no way mastered by me. It is rather it that grasps me, solicits me at every moment, and makes of the landscape something other than a landscape, something other than what I have called the picture. (96)

In other words, the gaze is not only a “stain” in the picture, which is a remaining trace indicating that something has been excised from the painting. It is also something which “solicits me” and makes the picture differ from itself: it is not “just” a landscape identical with itself, there is something in it which goes beyond the literal identity of the objects represented in it. There is a beyond which awakens our desire. To put it differently, the gaze is the point in which the viewer (as a desiring subject) is inscribed in the picture.

This Lacanian excursus, apart from perhaps explaining what lies at the origin of the horror-mongering interpretations of the *Brothel*, permits me to propose that its final version is a meta-painting which, apart from being a representation of some women in a brothel, is also an analysis of the way representation comes into being: it is as the “stain” of the croucher’s head that the gaze counters our look. In this aspect, the *Brothel* can be compared to Velazquez’s *Las Meninas*, which Steinberg refers to in his essay, but only to emphasise its “confrontational” aspect: “The nine, ten, or twelve characters in *Las Meninas* seem uncomposed and dispersed, unitive only insofar as they jointly subtend the beholder’s eye.”³⁴ According to Steinberg, as in the *Brothel* it is only the viewer’s look, which is

33. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 101; henceforth page numbers in the body of the text.

34. Steinberg, “The Philosophical Brothel,” 14.

addressed by the eyes of the figures in the painting, that imposes unity on so dispersed a composition. Although there are a number of other details which the two pictures seem to have in common,³⁵ I would like to mention only one thing which, among others, creates the “meta” dimension of this painting, something much simpler than what we find in Foucault’s famous elaboration of the picture’s theatre of representation.³⁶

In *Las Meninas* some figures’ eyes address the viewers look, which constitutes the “psychological” dimension of the painting, but it also goes beyond this dimension in order to make the gaze appear. The task of the system of perspective is to render three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional plane in such a way that it is made to cohere in relation to a single point, that is, the proper (ideal) position of the spectator’s eye – there is only one place in front of the painting from which it can be properly regarded. This point (the ideal position of the eye in front of the painting), however, is also inscribed into the picture as the vanishing point towards which all the lines of perspective converge. In other words, the organizing principle is present as something toward which everything recedes but which is in itself invisible (as a geometrical point it has no extension).³⁷ Yet Velazquez finds a way to make the principle visible by putting a mirror in the place of the vanishing point, which reflects to the viewer the (usually invisible) gaze which orders the image and for which the image is ordered (the royal couple).³⁸ Moreover, although the mirror reflects the monarchs, they are present in it only as spectres, because the mirror image in itself is nothing; the mirror is the depthless void the veiling of which allows the space of representations to constitute itself for the subject.

In the *Brothel*, this void which at the same time reflects our look is, of course and for the reasons I have argued, the head of the croucher. But there is a further twist which can be given to this interpretation, which will take us full circle to where we began, that is, Matisse’s *Le Bonheur de vivre* and the image of the Golden Age. It is not surprising to find naked women in a brothel, but neither is it to find them in Western painting. In fact, as Andersen remarks, “[t]he unsullied nude,

35. For instance, the almost square format and large size (321 x 281 cm), the profile and three-quarter profile of the ladies-in-waiting, the “monster” (female dwarf) on the right, the figure opening the backdrop/backdoor.

36. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 3–16.

37. Although *Las Meninas* is not perhaps the most consistent example of linear perspective, it was painted when this most dominant convention of Western painting could not be disregarded, and therefore it, so to speak, goes through the motions.

38. One can, of course, pursue the usual critical path here – the royal couple as the transcendental subject: not only are they the centre of their world, as royalty they also have other spectral-mystical bodies, which are not subject to the bounds of space and time.

her purity reinforced by a clean body – virginal springs and frequent bathing – had been the epitome of humanistic art throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.”³⁹ After the ancient dominance of the male nude had waned with the end of the Renaissance, “[a]rt had come to look like naked women”⁴⁰; or to be more precise: art which was interested in the ideal of beauty had come to look like the nude, because, as one Camille Lemonnier, a 19th century critic, noted in 1870: “nothing is less nude than a woman emerging from a pair of drawers.”⁴¹ Moreover, the same critic explains to us, although perhaps unintentionally, what makes the idealized female nude the incarnation of beauty: “The nude has modesty only if it is not a transitory state. It hides nothing because *there is nothing to hide*. [...] It hides nothing and shows nothing: it makes itself seen *as a whole*.”⁴² The naked female body is scraped clean and rendered completely hairless (apart from the head, of course), so that there can be no doubt whatsoever that it is whole. It has nothing to hide because nothing is there – like the body of the angel it has nothing to show, not even a lack.

The origin of all those nudes which hang in the galleries of the world and are supposed to present to us the ideal beauty incarnated in a more or less generalized human form is of course literally divine: Venus, the goddess of love. Yet once again there is more to this, perhaps overwhelming, image of beauty than meets the eye: when Venus rises gloriously from the sea foam, we tend to forget where she is coming from. Saturn, the youngest son of Uranos (Heaven) and Gaia (Earth), advised by his mother, castrates his father and throws into the sea his mutilated genitals out of which Venus is born. Once again we encounter here the image of beauty (that is, wholeness, plenitude), which is just a screen separating us from the void which keeps soliciting us against ourselves.⁴³ It is in this sense that art/beauty can be connected with transcendence – beauty always gestures beyond itself, but the zone it gestures to is the void in which the world decomposes into chaos. Therefore it is not for nothing that in ancient mythology it is Saturn who rules during the Golden Age – a circumstance of which Picasso hoped to make Matisse aware.

39. Andersen, *Picasso's Brothel*, 121.

40. Andersen, *Picasso's Brothel*, 121.

41. T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 128.

42. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 128–129; emphases added.

43. Leader, *Stealing the Mona Lisa*, 125.