Law or Independence – What Does the Frame Stand For?

Vera Beyer

Résumé de l'article
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Vera Bever, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany

Résumé
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What do frames stand for? I want to propose that frames designate the relation between the inside and the outside of paintings. More precisely, a frame – as Louis Marin said – “can be understood as an interval of the limits of the three spaces which a painting unites”¹: the space represented in the image, the surface of the painting, and the space of the viewer in front of the painting. Considering a frame as the meeting point of these three spaces enables me to regard a frame as a manifestation of the relation between represented space and the surface of the painting, on the one hand, and between the painting and the space of the viewer in front of the painting on the other. This focus on frames as locations of relations allows an analysis of the fictional, ideal frames that the painting proposes, and to which the actual frames possibly, but not necessarily, correspond.

Marin further attributes the following function to the frame:

The frame is sign and operator of the shift from the descriptive mode of an empirical type of representation – presenting itself representing something – to the injunctive or prescriptive mode of a juridical type of representation – which has the right and the authority to present itself representing, presenting itself legitimately representing.²

In short, frames indicate a passage from “empirical” representation to “legitimate” representation. Frames, in this conception, characterize the relation between the painting’s surface and the represented content as legitimate. Elsewhere Marin stated that frames establish continuity between the represented space and the space of the spectator.³ Hence, frames in Louis Marin’s so-called classical conception designate legitimacy and continuity. This model, as I want to develop in this article, describes precisely the way the frame works in a “representation of classical representation”⁴: Las Meninas by Diego Velázquez (fig. 1).

Yet it seems to me that this classic model no longer applies when one considers a work by Velázquez’s most renowned successor: Francisco Goya’s Family of Charles IV (fig. 2). Here the relation between the surface of the painting and the space represented is explicitly left open and undetermined. And rather than establishing continuity between the represented space and the space of the spectator, the frame demonstrates a gap that marks the image’s independence from the viewer. This article will elaborate on my claim that what the frame stands for in these two canonical paintings shifts from legitimacy and continuity to independence and delimitation.

The Family of Philip IV

I begin with The Family of Philip IV, today called Las Meninas. The German art historian Carl Justi noted in 1888 “an abundance of frames in this image: many, all black frames of oil paintings, frames of the mirror, the door, the easel.”⁵ There is a wide range (almost an inventory) of different types of frames, of which I will discuss two, the mirror and the door frame, to show how they reveal the function of the picture frame itself.

In examining the relation between the painting’s surface and the represented space in Las Meninas the question is whether the frame declares that the painting is a legitimate representation of the represented figures – as the classical frame supposedly does. Because it is a portrait of the royal family, this question of the legitimacy of a representation takes on a specific concern: the infanta has to be presented as the legitimate representative of the king.⁶ As she is placed in the foreground of the painting, while the king is shown in the mirror in the background of the represented space, the relation between the painting’s surface and the represented space is inseparably associated with dynastic succession.

There are two ways in which the framing in this image establishes equivalence between these two levels. First, the frame marks the limits of the painting’s surface; this defines the painting’s centre, which is located where the infanta stands. The frames of the paintings on the back wall of the room also present a symmetrical order, with the mirror hanging at the centre (fig. 3). The frames of the paintings and mirror mark the fact that the infanta occupies the centre of the actual painting, as her parents occupy the centre of the represented space. In this way equivalence is indicated between the structure of the painting’s surface and the represented image, the mirror. Moreover, an examination of the structure of the painting shows that, again and again, one side of the image presents the mirror image of the other. The door mirrors the mirror, Velázquez mirrors his
This features framework.

On the right side of the mirror-axis of the painting there is a door opening. In this “double” of the mirror, a standing figure just beyond the threshold of the door is visible. It is also possible to trace the vanishing point to this opening, which is thus the central point of the space, as seen from the perspective of the fictive spectator of the image. Hence, the position behind the door frame can be regarded as a prefiguration of the spectator’s place in front of the image. The door frame then seems to describe how the image conceives its relation to the space of the spectator beyond its frame. It can be imagined that the viewer in the door crosses the threshold. The light actually does so: it falls from the outside through the frame. This “mirrors” the light that seems to fall onto the very foreground of the image from an opening that is supposedly located just beyond the right-hand edge of the painting. The light seems to cross the limits of the framed space.

Having considered the relation between the represented space and the surface of the painting, I will now analyse the relation between the painting and its spectator. On the other side of the mirror-axis of the painting, there is a door opening. In this “double” of the mirror, a standing figure just beyond the threshold of the door is visible. It is also possible to trace the vanishing point to this opening, which is thus the central point of the space, as seen from the perspective of the fictive spectator of the image. Hence, the position behind the door frame can be regarded as a prefiguration of the spectator’s place in front of the image. The door frame then seems to describe how the image conceives its relation to the space of the spectator beyond its frame. It can be imagined that the viewer in the door crosses the threshold. The light actually does so: it falls from the outside through the frame. This “mirrors” the light that seems to fall onto the very foreground of the image from an opening that is supposedly located just beyond the right-hand edge of the painting. The light seems to cross the limits of the framed space.
Furthermore, the open door itself designates a spatial continuation behind the door frame. This door has a “double” – sharing its light brown colour and its position – in the canvas that is located in the very foreground of the image. And, like the door frame, the depicted canvas also seems to continue beyond the frame of the painting itself. All of these phenomena announce a spatial continuity between the spaces behind and in front of the depicted space. By the model of the door frame and its correspondence with the frame of the painting itself, the painting suggests a continuity between the represented space and the space of the spectator. The framing of Las Meninas thus promises both legitimacy and continuity.7

The Family of Charles IV

I now want to consider the portrait of the royal family that Goya painted as the first court painter, the same position held by Velázquez 150 years earlier. It has often been remarked that the Family of Charles IV refers to Velázquez’s Family of Philip IV. For example, Goya’s own position in the painting corresponds to the one occupied by Velázquez in Las Meninas, and the queen’s posture corresponds to that of the infanta. Goya also places the family portrait in front of a wall decorated with two paintings. But in Goya’s work the axis between these two paintings is empty: no mirror or, indeed, any central image is framed there. A central element of Velázquez’s construction of equivalence is missing. In addition, Goya performs a kind of “zoom,” such that no ceiling or side walls of the room are seen; one can see only the room’s back wall, parallel to the painting’s surface. There is thus minimal indication of the extension of space between the foreground and the background of the painting.8

In this way Goya appears to do without the construction of spatial continuity in the relation between the surface of the painting and the represented space, as well as between the actual
threshold between two spaces in Las Meninas, in Goya’s Family of Charles IV a delimitation appears in its place. Accordingly, Goya excludes any depiction of space for the spectator on the other side of the frame: a task performed by the door opening that Velázquez included in Las Meninas. The frame in Goya’s painting does not establish a clearly defined relation between the represented space and the “real” space of the spectator as we saw in Las Meninas. Instead it marks a delimitation and a “non-defined-zone.” In so doing the image appears to give up its authority over the spectator’s space; no allowance is made for a position from which the spectator is to view the painting. This creates a “non-obligation” between image and viewer. Goya’s portrait is thus characterized by a lack of legitimization and a delimitation from the space of the spectator.

But I wish not only to point out what is missing in Goya’s work compared to the “classical representation” in Las Meninas. I also want to show how Goya fills the gap he opens. This takes on a special relevance, in view of my argument that the framings in Las Meninas generate not only a continuity between the actual painting and the represented space, but also between the infanta and her ancestors. One may wonder, therefore, how Goya deals with the task of demonstrating dynastic continuity.

Compared to Las Meninas, the royal couple in Goya’s painting move from the background to the same level as its successors in the foreground of the painting. Hence, dynastic continuity is performed between different parts of the painting’s surface. And Goya uses superficial material qualities to establish coherence between the members of the family: the clothes seem to form a pattern within which the bodies are enveloped. I wish to consider how this pattern works by examining only one, perhaps emblematic, element: the sashes.

The sashes are repeated around the bodies of all the members of the royal family. They form a continuous pattern, tying the figures together. They first run in diagonal parallels, then turn into horizontals in the middle of the painting, and then continue in diagonal parallels again. Hereby a connection between the different members of the royal family is established with no reference to the painting as a whole. One may describe this as an ornamental structure, as opposed to the compositional
relation between the parts and the whole in Las Meninas. Dynastic continuity in Goya's work is indicated by the pattern of coloured fabrics: ornaments of state. It therefore looks as if Goya not only decomposes the legitimizing framework of Velázquez's royal portrait, but also proposes a new model of royalty based on superficial ornaments.

But more is thus established than just continuity between the family members; one may also imagine that the pattern of the sashes extends beyond the sides of the image. The spatial continuity of Las Meninas—to the back and to the front—includes the spectator's space. In Goya's painting this has been transformed into a superficial horizontal continuity—to the left and right—which excludes the spectator's space. This suggests that the ornamental surface that signals the continuation of royalty is at the same time a delimitation between the royal group and the space of the spectator. The superficial ornament appears as a mark of the exclusiveness and distinction of royalty, which runs counter to the claim of Las Meninas that the presented order reaches out into the space of the spectator.

What is remarkable is that the structure of the sash—a strip of textile horizontally divided into three bands, limited in its width, and extendable in its length—corresponds to the surface of the painting itself, which also is a longish textile divided into three fields, of which the middle one is the brightest. Thus, the sashes as well as the canvas form a stripe that appears limited in the vertical but that is extendable along the horizontal. Besides this structural correspondence, the sashes are positioned very close to the painting's surface. There, the sashes and the surface stand somewhat like a fence in between the represented space and the spectator; the ornament in a way closes the represented space. Goya seems to illustrate this in relation to his own position as a first spectator of the image, where the canvas stands between him and the royal family.

As the surface is conceived as a delimitation, the frame also does not appear as a spatial threshold between the painting's
and the viewer's space any more, but as a flat and material ornamental structure, which separates the painted space from the spectator. Accordingly, frames in Goya's painting appear as golden ornaments, rather than as distinctive forms as was the case in Las Meninas.

The sashes, the painted surface, and the frame thus correspond in their functions: they delimit the space and indicate continuity on a superficial level. Goya fills the gap between the represented and the "real" space with an ornamental foil that stands between royalty and the spectator. Curiously, the Spanish word for sash, bandada, also means "group," and the delimitation of a field against a spectator. If one wishes to name it, therefore, the framing conception that Goya installed in place of the classical framing might be termed bandada. Goya exposed this framing structure more explicitly in his Tauromachia (fig. 4): the bandada of the arena, parallel to the wooden frame engraved around the images, at the same time delimits the bullring against the space of the spectator, and indicates a continuation of the row of framings toward the sides.

It can thus be stated, that the frame is by no means a constant parameter of Western easel painting, as is often assumed; rather it can shift its function, from an indicator of compositional structure to that of a superficial ornament, from a threshold between represented space and spectator to a delimitation between them. And where in Las Meninas the frame appears to perform the legitimization of the royal portrait, in Goya's portrait of the royal family the frame in its ornamental quality seems to declare that the continuity of the royal family is independent of the space outside the painting.

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Notes


2 «Le cadre est le signe et l'opérateur du passage de la modalité constative de type empirique de la représentation - elle se présente représentant quelque chose - à sa modalité injonctive ou prescriptive de type juridique - elle a droit et autorité de se présenter représentant, elle se présente légitimement représentant...» Marin, "Du cadre au décor," 21.


5 "Ein Überfluß von Rahmen in dem Bilde: viele, sächlich schwarze Rahmen von Ölgemälde. Rahmen des Spiegels, der Tür, der Staffelei." Carl Justi, "Die Familie Philips IV. (Las Meninas)" [1888], Las Meninas im Spiegel der Deutungen. Eine Einführung in die Methoden der Kunstgeschichte, ed. Thierry Greub (Berlin, 2001), 91. He continues: "Und doch ist kein Bild geeigneter, das Bild vergessen zu machen. "Où est donc le tableau?" frage Théophile Gautier." The "doch" in this context indicates the modern understanding that for illusion one has to neglect the picture surface, which thus has a problem with the frame, as it then would contradict illusion.


7 Evidently Velázquez's construction differs from its model, Jan van Eyck's The Arnolfini Marriage. Jan van Eyck establishes equivalence between painting and mirror not by structural equivalence but by figurative repetition, and he indicates continuity between depicted space and the spectator's space by placing the spectator in the mirror. I cannot develop the implications of these models here, but I want to point out that in the case of Velázquez the indications of equivalence and continuity are to be found in the structure of the surface rather than on a mimetic level as in Van Eyck's case. Thus, the surface as the frame plays a constitutive — not a deconstructive — role in the constitution of the authority of Velázquez's painting.

8 This "room" also implies that one does not see the limits of the wall any more on which the paintings in the background are placed. Without this frame of reference, the paintings on the back wall look like they could shift to the right or to the left without fundamentally disturbing the composition. Frames, rather than marking a definite position as they do in Las Meninas, seem to demonstrate mobility. The impression of a mobile framing is underlined by the way Goya depicts frames without sharp contours and as repetitive lines resembling traces of altering positions, rather than as fixed forms. This is most obvious in Goya's etching after Las Meninas.

9 This comes close to what Wolfgang Iser described as "blanc," Wolfgang Iser, Der Akt des Lesens. Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung (Munich, 1976), 257–355.

10 Jörg Träger describes this as follows: "The group seems to be webbed by a cocoon of common heritable preciousness ... By this pupation unity is constructed. This is underlined by the blue-white-blue striped sashes, which pattern the family as an ornamental rapport." Jörg Träger, "Goyas königliche Familie: Hofkunst und Bürgerblick," Münchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst 41 (1990), 169. "Die Figurengruppe scheint übersponnen durch einen Kokon

11 From left to right: On the red suit of the boy at the far left, one sees a diagonal blue-white sash, then another parallel to this on the blue clothing of Ferdinand, the heir to the throne. A small segment of sash can even be seen on the shoulder of the older woman in the second row. On the woman beside Ferdinand, the sash fades slightly and turns from a diagonal position over the shoulder into a horizontal belt around the waist. This s-shape repeats exactly on the dress of the king's daughter, who is in the arm of the queen. On the queen, the sash runs horizontally, though one end hangs down and indicates, underlined by the diagonal of the queen's arm, the continuation of this line in the diagonal sash of the little prince. The prince's sash runs parallel to the one that crosses the chest of the king and a diagonal sash repeats on the man adjacent to the king. The line of that sash connects to the one on the baby, which unites with the mother's sash. Family ties.