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The Modernist Iconography of Sleep. Leo Steinberg, Picasso and The Representation of States of Consciousness

Abstract

In the present study, I will consider Leo Steinberg's interpretation of Picasso's work in its theoretical framework, and I will focus on a particular topic: Steinberg's account of "Picasso's Sleepwatchers." I will suggest that the Steinbergian argument on Picasso's depictorial modalities of sleep and the state of being awake advances the hypothesis of a new way of representing affectivity in images, by subsuming emotions into a "peinture conceptuelle." This operation corresponds to a shift from modernism to further characterizing the post-modernist image as a "flatbed picture plane." For such a passage, I will also provide an overall view of Cubism's main phenomenological lectures.

Keywords

Leo Steinberg, Pablo Picasso, Cubism, Phenomenology, Modernism

1. Leo Steinberg and Picasso: The Iconography of Sleep

The American art historian and critic Leo Steinberg devoted relevant stages of his career to the interpretation of Picasso's work. Steinberg wrote several Picassian essays, that appear not so much as *disjecta membra* but as an actual *corpus*. In the present study, I will consider them in their theoretical framework, and I will focus on a particular topic: Steinberg's account of "Picasso's Sleepwatchers" (Steinberg 2007a). I will suggest that the Steinbergian argument on Picasso's depictorial modalities of sleep and the state of

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being awake advances the hypothesis of a new way of representing affectivity in images, by subsuming emotions in what has been called, since the first art theorizing on Cubism at the beginning of the Twentieth century, “peinture conceptuelle.”

According to Steinberg, Picasso brings in emotional states (well exemplified, in our case study, by the emotional hues involved in sleeping and waking) on canvas not much for their “dramatic interest” (Fry 1927, 10), but as if they were “states of consciousness”, in a sort of conceptualization of emotions through painting. This operation corresponds to a shift from modernism to the further Steinbergian characterization of the postmodernist image as a “flatbed picture plane” (Steinberg 2002, 27-36; 2007b, 82-91), and allows us to draw an explicit analogy between Picasso’s conceptual painting and Robert Rauschenberg’s conception of the work of art as a set of information. To clarify this passage, an overall view of the main phenomenological lectures of Cubism may be helpful.

Steinberg undertakes his efforts to shed light on the “so wide a variety of human experience” and the “psychological and physiological realities”¹ disclosed by Picasso. For him, the critical point is how Picasso managed such a diversity of subject matter (i.e., emotional-pathetic and ideal-conceptual, both involved in depicting couples of figures sleeping, waking, or watching) within the modernist iconic regime. Steinberg gets a crucial issue in the interpretation of Picasso: the contrast between kinds of subject matter that, nevertheless, get through figuration and the modernist handling of the picture plane, which even for Picasso (either in its pre- or post- cubist phases), stem from any form of illusionism, symbolism or mimesis.

Steinberg deals with the specific theme of sleep because it is paradigmatic of the tension between Picasso’s figurative impulse and the anti-figurative drive inherent in most modernist paintings. In its review of Picasso’s personal iconography of sleep, Steinberg is driven towards a peculiar declination of the abovementioned dialectics; on the first impression, Picasso may display simple variations on content vs. form issues, but deep down, it reveals to be a far more complex interplay. Since the Blue Period (1901–1904) to *Les Femmes d’Alger*² (1954–1955), quite a few of Picasso’s paintings, etchings, and drawings are often inhabited by sleeping figures

¹ I am appropriating—given the closeness of his scholarship to that of Steinberg—Robert Rosenblum’s lines (see Rosenblum 1970, 337-338).

² For a deep explanation of Picasso’s variations on Delacroix’s *Les Femmes d’Alger*, which underscores the operational nature of their seriality, see Steinberg 2007c.

(mostly female) and awake watchers (mostly male), that “introduce the subject of the watched sleeper” (Steinberg 2007a, 95).³

Firstly, Steinberg acknowledges the theme as an archetype, as a historically-rooted *Motif* that has experienced its articulated grammar: “The subject was old. Scenes of sleeping nymphs observed by alerted males—scenes concerned with looking and longing—are part of the grand tradition of art” (Steinberg 2007a, 95). We can draw a parallel between Picasso’s intimate concern with a variation of the sleeping figure as a modern nymph and Aby Warburg’s obsession with the moving nymph as “a proclamation of love to this very same *Pathosformel*” (Paskaleva 2016, 52): to this peculiar iconographic formula that represented for the German scholar the very essence of aesthetic research itself, in all its contradictions.⁴

Thus, in Picasso’s artworks the representation of sleep acquires the Warburgian status of “scientific object” by “the mere inventing of [...] an analytical level”⁵ (Paskaleva 2016, 47), because it “enters his work almost like a confession” (Steinberg 2007a, 95). For Picasso, sleep is an obsessive subject with a status comparable to that of the Warburgian nymph since it summarizes the most significant issues of artistic and creative research.

The theme becomes the battleground in which all the contentions on the image’s very nature take place; from both the creator’s and spectator’s side, thanks to its power of prominently staging, displaying all the problems associated with representation, and to its power of enacting an actual “logic of the gaze” (Bryson 1988): a metapictorial *mise en abyme* of image reception. The male watcher incarnates the figure of the artist himself, linked to “his cold shadow” and “gloom of the mind,” whereas the female sleeper embodies “brightness,” “radiance,” “light,” and “the pure bliss of the body”

³ “These early pictures [of the Blue Period] are curtain raisers. They introduce the subject of the watched sleeper which was to become one of the haunted themes that recur continually in Picasso’s work and give it constancy” (Steinberg 2007a, 95).

⁴ In a famous letter to André Jolles (written in 1900), Warburg associated the figure of the moving nymph to a flying butterfly that you can never catch: “The most beautiful butterfly I have ever pinned down suddenly bursts through the glass and dances mockingly upwards into the blue air [...] Now I should catch it again, but I am not equipped for this kind of locomotion [*Gangart*]” (Gombrich 1970, 110). This analogy also stands for the continuous efforts of the researcher to interpret the power of images. For this reason, the nymph becomes the emblem of research work.

⁵ Paskaleva’s essay provides a comprehensive survey of the role of the nymph—constantly oscillating between its elusive essence and its embodiment as “the paradigm of pure image” (Paskaleva 2016, 20)—in history of culture from Renaissance up to the present.

(Steinberg 2007a, 93); these contrasts condense the striving between the corporality of experience—of aesthetic experience in particular: that of a perceiving body that equally feels and thinks—and the flat surface of modernist painting.

For Steinberg, the relevance of Picasso's *œuvre* largely depends on this discrepancy. The critic identifies a "modernist shift" in the representation of sleep. In Antiquity, sleep was depicted according to the order of symbol and allegory, which entailed a merely analogical interpretation system, proceeding from recognizing of the pictured characters as sleepers or watchers and their mythological or theological characterization. Classical depicted sleep corresponded with "unplanned or delicious encounters" and appeared as quiet and peaceful, when during Renaissance it started getting agitated and distracted by the power of imagination, by imaginary forces which "complicated" its fortunes (Steinberg 2007a, 98-99). Imagination progressively expanded the symbology of sleep, increasing its interpretative layers further and further, to the point of obscuring the starting theme and its native untroubled quietness.

This complication increased with modernism and the season of the Avant-gardes⁶ until sleep became completely desublimated. Released from its symbolic nature, the representation of sleep assumed the form of "the study of marginal states of consciousness" (Steinberg 2007a, 103); at this stage, depicting sleeping bodies meant setting aside all their literary features, so that those figures could work as analytical tools to investigate perception through the image. In modernism, sleep plays both an ambiguous and crucial role. This role is well exemplified—as a literary counterpart evoked by Steinberg himself—by Marcel Proust's metaphor of sleep as a threshold, as the condition that marks the transitions from "l'intelligence" (pure reasoning) and "la sensation" (pure feeling), occurring when a sensation is first "reconnue" by involuntary memory and then incarnated ("s'incarne") in its "résurrection poétique" (Proust 2019, 43-50). For Proust, literary creation operates in the same way with the passage from sleep to waking, and writing coincides with the elusive instant when, just woke up, we realize that we were sleeping: it is a permanent "chercher le sommeil"⁷ (Proust 2019, 51).

⁶ "Almost everything in their [of depicted sleepers and watchers] seems so long familiar, yet in their mutual relationship all is new" (Steinberg 2007a, 98).

⁷ "Mais alors était encore très près de moi un temps, que j'espérais voir revenir, et qui aujourd'hui me semble avoir été vécu par une autre personne, où j'entraîs dans mon lit, à dix heures du soir et, avec quelques court réveils, dormais jusqu'au lendemain matin.

Picasso performs his search on the states of consciousness linked to sleep by overturning the human body's traditional representation. He no longer represents the human body as seen from a single point of view: his typical poliperspectivism can be read to present it from many different angles, reflecting all the shades of perception. Therefore, the human figure is depicted to bring forward—using representation—new orientations of its phenomenological axes; in such a perspective, the sleeping figure coincides with a total reversal of the upright posture (Fig. 1).

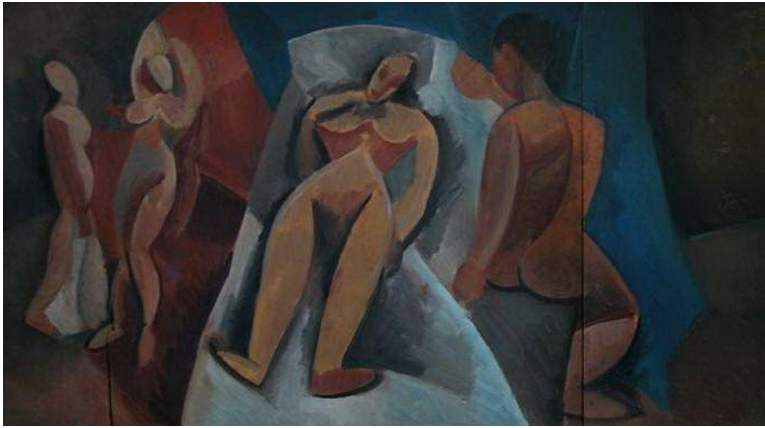


Fig. 1. Pablo Picasso, *Reclining Nude with Figures*, 1908 (oil on wood)
Source: Musée Picasso, Paris.

Souvent, à peine ma lampe éteinte, je m'endormais si vite que j'avais pas le temps de me dire que je m'endormais. Aussi une demi-heure après, la pensée qu'il était temps de m'endormir m'éveillait, [...] et j'étais bien étonné de ne voir autour de moi qu'une obscurité, [...] qui [...] apparaissait comme une chose sans cause et incompréhensible" (Proust 2019, 51). For a monography entirely devoted to the relationship between Proust the man and the author, his writings and sleep, see Mabin 2019 (esp. 159-182). *La Prisonnière* (1923) is directly quoted by Steinberg in "Picasso's Sleepwatchers" for its long digressions on waking, dreaming and sleeping conditions; the novel (along with the whole *Recherche*) can easily be focused within the lens of sleep; it cuts across a broad range of occurrences, from the narrator who sleeps like a "divinité du ciel déposée sur un lit" (Proust 2020, 11) to the half-dead Albertine, passing from the delusional altered states of Bergotte under the effects of opiates: "Vers quels genres ignorés de sommeil, de rêves, le nouveau venu va-t-il nous conduire? Il est maintenant dans nous, il a la direction de notre pensée" (Proust 2020, 175). Among them, the most extreme case maybe is the analogy of Albertine's sleeping body with a dead corpse, which has assumed "une rigidité de pierre" (Proust 2020, 346) due to its horizontality, and that is tightly marked as 'processual,' as if it were a test bench: "Et en voyant ce corps insignifiant couché là, je me demandais quelle table de logarithmes il constituait" (Proust 2020, 346).

At this stage, we have to ask what consequences this radical modernist refocusing of the depicted human figure has had on the representation of affects and concepts, now intended as states of consciousness. Focusing on the beginning of the Cubist Period, Steinberg goes straight to the point by addressing the decisive issue of Cubism as “*peinture conceptuelle*” (Kahnweiler 1946, 269), precociously raised by Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler in the second decade of the Twentieth century, when the so-called Analytical phase of Cubism was still developing. Taking a philosophical stance neo-Kantian mold, Kahnweiler was the first to regard Picasso’s paintings as entirely focused on an ideal subject matter, made of the same substance of concepts. Steinberg wonders *if*—and more insistently *how*—Picasso’s work does cope with conceptual “naked problems” (Steinberg 1988, 7) as Kahnweiler demanded.⁸

I would advance the hypothesis that Steinberg embraces the interpretative tradition, inaugurated by Kahnweiler and subsequently brought forward by several authors close to phenomenology, for which cubist paintings are incarnations of concepts. Steinberg, however, goes beyond, and encompasses even affectivity in the realm of conceptualized painting. His writings on Picasso bring out the possibility that the kahnweilerian “*peinture conceptuelle*” may also represent—or rather *present*—emotions. In a Steinbergian way, Picasso handled emotions without any urge to empathy, with no need to express or arouse *pathos*, and free of dramatic interest; indeed, “states of consciousness” are very close to ideas and concepts. As a result of this, I suggest addressing the phenomenological lectures of Cubism: to see how Steinberg could have come to a similar interpretation of modernist painting as conceptual, and how this reading then leads towards a postmodernist image and a “flatbed picture plane.”

⁸ In his essay on *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, Steinberg quotes directly from Kahnweiler’s seminal book *Der Weg zum Kubismus* (1915), in which Picasso’s famous gallerist states the genesis of Cubism as “a desperate titanic clash with all of the problems at once” (Steinberg 1988, 7n), and connects the revolutionary ways of representing time-space relationships of Cubism to neo-Kantian philosophy. In his further book on Juan Gris, Kahnweiler describes the cubist treatment of depiction as a strong re-iconization of the world itself through a special kind of pictorial signs: “Les ‘emblèmes graphiques’ qu’elle [cubist painting] a créées sont emmagasinés dans l’imagination du spectateur, et c’est avec eux qu’il constitue son monde extérieur, quitte à enrichir, plus tard, d’autres assemblages d’emblèmes graphiques avec les images-souvenirs qui se sont ainsi constitués, jeu d’actions réciproques dans lesquels, toutefois, la peinture reste primaire” (Kahnweiler 1946, 103).

2. Painting, Ideas and Emotions: Theoretical Lectures on Cubism

Since its origins, cubist art has strongly appealed to philosophers, especially phenomenologists, as if it nearly claimed theoretical-interpretative reading. It was not only a matter of superimposing theory to artistic practice, but rather a series of attempts to arrive “à une sorte de réflexion pratique de l’art sur lui-même” (Klein 2018, 411). A radical assumption was at stake: “The hypothesis that Cubism does *the same* as phenomenology, that it performs *a parte imaginis* the same operation that phenomenology performs *a parte philosophiae*”; that cubist painting “is in itself phenomenological” (Pinotti 2010a, 64).

The common ground that links together most of the theoretical readings of Cubism, from Kahnweiler onwards, is the insistence on the loss by the representation of the referent and reference to actual data: “La disparition de ce que nous allons appeler la référence, l’être réel ou idéal auquel se mesurait l’œuvre” (Klein 2018, 412). Phenomenologists have been the first to recognize this transfer’s importance from a philosophical point of view: cubist image strongly detaches itself to any mimetic-imitative requirement, from traditional modes of representation derived from the perspectival conception of the Renaissance. According to them, the referent’s absence begins with an increasingly evident awareness of the images’s formal principles, in opposition to the pure forms of appearance.⁹

In the early Twentieth century, the German art theorist Fritz Burger played as a precursor by stating the cubist revolution as triggered by the “Gestaltungsproblem”: the problem of configuration and conformation (i.e., of form as a result of a creative process), rather than the problem of form (i.e., of pure form as *a priori*, as a scheme superimposed in advance on the image), brought on by “die Erkenntnis [...] um das formende Prinzip”¹⁰ (Burger 1918, 115-116). Hence Burger argues the ultimate dismissal of cubist painting—in this respect very close to Wassily Kandinsky’s abstraction—from every need to reproduce reality through any mimetic procedure, because it “nicht das Geformte, sondern das Sichformende gestalten will” (Burger 1918, 119).

⁹ According to Robert Klein, this does not necessarily coincide with the move from figuration to abstraction: “L’agonie de la référence commence bien avant la disparition de la figure” (Klein 2018, 413).

¹⁰ Burger opposes “der impressionistischen Raumillusion,” still built on the mimetic depiction of appearances, and “die schlichten, abstrakten Formen” of Cubism, that capture the essence of figuration itself (Burger 1918, 115). An analogy can obviously be drawn with Paul Klee’s “macht sichtbar” mandate for art (Klee 1920, 28).

However, ictorial abstraction, however, moves from the object-like¹¹ and from any duty to referentiality towards the complete liberation of representation. In contrast, Cubism gets close to the same operativity of thought in itself thanks to its capacity to operate through iconic conformations¹² or configurations (that is through representations that capture the essence¹³ of the perceptual process of reality), gets close to the same operativity of thought in itself: “Der Wert dieser Kunst wird zunächst darin liegen, daß sie schon durch den Widerspruch zum Denken und Neugestalten zwingt” (Burger 1918, 120). Cubist art is then for Burger an analogon of Edmund Husserl’s “vision of essences (Wesensschau)”¹³ (Burger 1918, 123). Thus, thanks to its power to obliterate the mere objects on perception of their essence’s behalf, Cubism began to be philosophically bounded to concepts and conceptualization.

Steinberg seems to accept this perceptual perspective, neither mimetic nor abstract, on Cubism (and, by extension, on Picasso) as a *conditio sine qua non*, when he indicates what he calls its desublimated and desublimating emphasis, achieved primarily by making a clean sweep of traditional ways (illustrative, descriptive, lyrical, didactic) to represent emotions: “The Cubist enterprise then being launched had no use for its sentiments. But before putting the subject away, Picasso stripped it of its private emotional connotations” (Steinberg 2007a, 95). To remain with our case study, the modernist depiction of sleep is also “depersonalized,” as long as “a sensitive private theme becomes neutralized” (Steinberg 2007a, 96).

Despite being figures, Picasso’s watchers and sleepers are no more strictly figural in the illusionistic and mimetic sense. Although Picasso depicts human beings in acts certainly charged with emotional and even erotic overtones, they do not illustrate definite emotional tones, liable to have arisen in the spectator in exact correspondence. They are figurations (or better configurations) that directly embody different states of conscious-

¹¹ “Nur macht er [Kandinsky] sich hierbei im Gegensatz zu Van Gogh und Cézanne völlig vom Gegenständlichen los” (Burger 1918, 119).

¹² “Picasso bringt nicht mehr Gegenständliches zur Darstellung, die Welt als Organismus ist der Gegenstand seiner Gestaltung” (Burger 1918, 120).

¹³ The analogy of cubist painting and husserlian vision of essences is drawn by Burger because, according to him, Cubism captures reality as if it nothing had in common with empirical experience. Cubist painting, instead, operates as “apprehension of essence (Wesenserfassung)” and stimulates vision as a “prehension of essences (Wesenfassung),” grasping the essence of objects beyond their existence as mere things (Burger 1918, 123). Burger uses Husserl’s terminology by quoting directly from its *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft* (1911). For Burger’s “modernist” and “aesthetologic” turn, see Filippi 2014 (esp. 103-110).

ness: "Picasso's sleep-watching encounters are no accidents but juxtaposed states of being" (Steinberg 2007a, 101). Picasso's configurations of sleepers and watchers summarize the affective tones of sleeping and watching bringing them to the level of consciousness, thus subsuming feelings and emotions in the representation of the concepts of sleep, wake and watch.

Given the non-objective nature of Picasso's configurations—and the fact that it is not a matter of symbols or allegories: "They are never abstractions alone, nor mere symbols of watch and sleep" (Steinberg 2007a, 105)—we have to wonder how a painting that becomes conceptual, to the point of conceptualizing emotions turning them into states of consciousness, is compatible with the principles of modernist figuration. In other words: to what extent are Picasso's configurations of sleep and wake *conceptuelles* and at the same time not neutered of affectivity?

We can better understand the assimilation of emotions into concepts by looking at the next step towards a "phenomenological Cubism". This step has been taken by the French scholar Guy Habasque, who moved from Burger's "mystical" attachment to essences by linking cubist non-objectual paintings of the Synthetic phase to Husserl's eidetic reduction. The point here is not *platonesque* idealism, but the faculty of images to do the same of perception: in synthesizing *eidos* and body in the apprehensive exercise of consciousness over experience (see Habasque 1949). Such an adjustment, which takes into account the corporeal dimension in all its aspects, fits very well with Steinberg's treatment of Picasso's works—once symptomatically addressed as "a paronomasia induced by the sense of touch" (Steinberg 1995, 107), rather than by eyesight alone—as arenas in which the whole range of desire, even sexual, is displayed through figuration.¹⁴ Hence the link between the representation of perceptions, at the same time bodily and conceptual, and modernist painting. For Steinberg, this synthesis of bodily and conceptual occurs, in Picasso's *oeuvre*, precisely because his painting strains both hints of perception within the iconic regime.

Contemporary studies of phenomenology and Cubism have switched to a parallel between Husserl's concept of *epochè*¹⁵ and cubist metarepresentational figurality, (Sepp 1994). In this perspective, Cubism as a "pictorial

¹⁴ Robert Rosenblum as well, considering a painting of Marie-Thérèse, Picasso's lover in the late 1920s and 1930s, says that the painter "captures the fragile moment of transition between consciousness and sleep, [...] and the shift from the awareness of an external world to the liberation of subconscious desires", and that "this sexual unveiling is almost literal" (Rosenblum 1996, 4).

¹⁵ The suspension of the judgment by parenthesizing the actual world with "eine radikale Zäsur im welterfahrenden Leben" (Sepp 1994, 295).

epochè” incorporates the ideal-conceptual and physical features of depicted figures in their iconic destination; therefore, the stress is placed on the dimension of iconicity intrinsic to cubist painting. By considering images as philosophical instruments, this point of view brings justice to what is their own “immanent field,” to their “immanenter Bereich [...], in dem das Gegebensein von selbst sichtbar würde.”¹⁶ Thus, the cubist image makes its pure figurality and its pure pictoriality visible: “Die ‘res,’ die Grundtatsache des Malerischen selbst” (Sepp 1994, 310-311).

Most phenomenologists have finally wondered if cubist painting can be juxtaposed or superimposed on ideas: the scope goes from Arnold Gehlen’s full acceptance of Cubism as resulted from the conceptualization of the world of experience (see Gehlen 1986), to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s explicit refusal to overlap rationality on painting as if it were an *a priori*.¹⁷

Steinberg seems to embrace most of the achievements of phenomenology on Cubism, whether by the side of conceptual painting, by the side of pictorial *epochè* or by the side of iconicity; he brings together their leading suggestions, notably when he speaks about the representation of sleep and watch as “iconized states of consciousness.” Interpreting the depiction of the bodies in *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, he asks himself: “are these morphological changes metaphors for states of existence?” (Steinberg 1988, 11). And for him this applies to the entire, vast, and incredibly varied figurative universe of Picasso.

Picasso deals with the ideal-conceptual and emotional features of the figure through the sole means of representation. What Steinberg calls “the representations of states of consciousness” is nothing more than the

¹⁶ “Erkennen wir dem frühen und noch dem analytischen Kubismus eine Reduktion bezüglich der Existenz des Wahrnehmungsgegenstandes in einem durchaus phänomenologischen Sinn zu, so ist die eine Reduktion, die letztlich nur darin von der genuin phänomenologischen unterschieden ist, als ihr Worauffhin die reine Bildfläche und nicht das reine Wahrnehmungserlebnis als einer phänomenologischen Gegebenheit ist” (Sepp 1994, 308).

¹⁷ “Die Leitidee der ‘Bildrationalität’ wird m. E. dann entstellt, wenn Rationalität hier konstruktiven Aufbau aus Prinzipien im Sinne der Anwendung einer zuvor aufgestellten Theorie bedeuten soll” (Gadamer 1999, 312). Gadamer argues that an exact comparability of painting and ideas can never be taken for granted, because iconicity always exceeds the parameters of thought: “Eine ernüchterte Denkweise der Einsicht in die wirkliche künstlerische Produktionsweise nähergekommen ist—was gewisse Wechselwirkungen nicht ausschließt, aber weniger eine konstruktive Lenkung der künstlerischen Produktion durch Theorie bedeuten würde, als vielmehr die neue Entsprechung von Bild und Bilderwartung bezeugt” (Gadamer 1999, 314).

attempt to exhibit, in painting, other ways to “inhabit” the body, the figure, and the depicted space, presenting them as if they were apprehensions of consciousnesses; sleeping and watching figures “become readable as alternate states, twin phases of a single existence” (Steinberg 2007a, 105). They are given in configurations that are “materialized thought in which desire and form intersect” (Steinberg 2007a, 114). Furthermore, this is due to the fact a modernist non-objectual treatment of the figure (in the case of Picasso neither mimetic nor abstract) can make a sort of embodiment of the figure itself, an incarnation wherein the emotional and the conceptual, mutually interplaying, cohabit on the same ground (viz. the sphere of figurality, that encompasses them).

Picasso charges figures of desire via a “lifelong practice of projective inhabitation”¹⁸ (Steinberg 1995, 116), which makes them “complex biological fantasies” (Rosenblum 1970, 342), often arising from the channeling of sexual drives.¹⁹ What would have been previously represented only through symbol or allegory (like concepts, emotions and desires), in Picasso ends up being “eroticized,” and directly presented with full force: form and content, style and will, idea and feeling are inseparably welded in their figural interpenetration. Also by this reason, in his paintings he faces the previously mentioned “naked problems,” concerning concepts and feelings and well exemplified by the couples of watchers and sleepers, “as nude women” (Steinberg 1988, 33): he makes them act like living bodies, although desublimated and “progressively dehumanized” (Steinberg 2007a, 106) in their minimum figural trace (Fig. 2, Fig. 3). In painting, idea and feeling can wake up and make love figuratively, as if they were the same watching and sleeping figures who incarnate them.

¹⁸ “Picasso’s sense of the inner feel of a gesture conditioned his art from its beginnings and never relaxed” (Steinberg 1995, 109).

¹⁹ “The multiple aspects of sexual experience become a major obsession in his [of Picasso’s] imagery, a phenomenon that may be explained, in part, by both public and private reasons” (Rosenblum 1970, 338).



Fig. 2. Pablo Picasso, *Study*, February 10, 1946 (pencil)
Source: private collection.

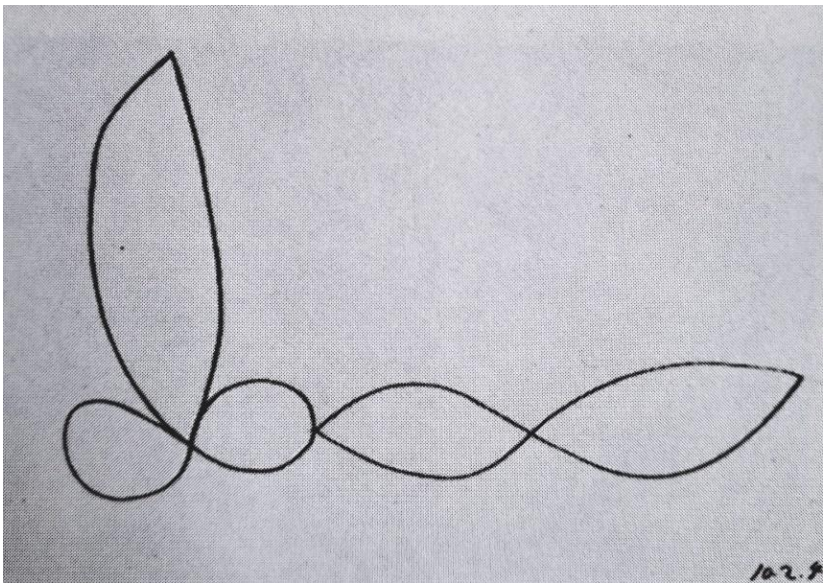


Fig. 3. Pablo Picasso, *Two Figures*, April 20, 1933 (drawing)
Source: private collection.

3. Picasso and Robert Rauschenberg: from “Peinture Conceptuelle” to “Flatbed Picture Plane”

Such a heterogeneous conception of the image goes far beyond the circumscribed boundaries of modernist painting, and this is evident in the way Steinberg refers to Picasso’s handling of the picture plane. In his sleep paintings, Picasso’s goal is “to get a plausible accommodation of solid body in a flat ground” (Steinberg 2007a, 96), e.g. how to fit his conceptualized configurations²⁰ to the unavoidable breakthrough of the Avant-gardes against mimesis and illusion.

Watchers and sleepers’ depicted bodies are acted on the picture plane in order to raise states of consciousness, while bypassing any form of illusion or illusionism; which is why “the whole surface, whether descriptive of solid or void, hardens into a crust, and the illusion of space is impaired” (Steinberg 2007a, 95). Picasso sets up his canvases as a means of giving his figures maximum expression; their identities are “manifold” and always “oscillating between portraiture and abstraction” (Steinberg 2007a, 106-111), then they need a proper ground of action.

This set-up translates into a picture plane that is, to use the lexicon of Michael Fried, neither “theatrical” nor “literal”: neither illusionist nor object-like (Fried 1998, 158-172). Furthermore, even though Picasso usually tends to flatten three-dimensionality within two dimensions, his picture flatness is never the sole actor on stage. It is not the same as the issue of “the integrity of the picture surface as a flat continuum” (Greenberg 1995, 167) that Clement Greenberg assumed as ontological to the essence of modernist painting.²¹ For Steinberg, on the contrary, flatness is just one of the many

²⁰ For Steinberg, in fact, Picasso’s figures do not just enact a relational logic of the gaze, but also unfold a higher degree of conceptualization, although always linked to figurativeness: “At any moment Picasso’s imagery may require one to read his characters not as persons engaged in watching and being watched, but as a figuration of sleeping and waking—dependent states that exclude and presuppose one another, nourish and infect one another, each lacking some richness the other has” (Steinberg 2007a, 105).

²¹ As is well known, for Greenberg Cubism played a crucial and fatal role in achieving pictorial flatness. It has to do with cubist gradual abolition of any difference between actual pictorial surface and visual depth: “Contour and silhouetting lines were lost (especially when the object was spread apart so as to show its surface from more than one point of view): the space inside the object now faulted through into surrounding space, and the latter could be conceived of as, in return, penetrating the object. All space became one, neither “positive” nor “negative,” in so far as occupied space was no longer clearly differentiated from unoccupied. And the object was not so much formed, as exhibited by precipitation in groups or clusters of facet planes out of an indeterminate background of similar planes, which latter could also be seen as vibrating echoes of the object” (Green-

options to embody the states of consciousness in painting; it is not a prerequisite, but rather a consequence of what can be called a modernist shift in approaching figuration: “The shallowness of the pictorial space is not given but won” (Steinberg 1988, 63). Picasso’s ‘crusts’ do not sacrifice and, above all, do not neglect anything: they can canalize every stimulus because in them, “every spatial dimension—width, height, and depth—lives under stress” (Steinberg 1988, 63).

In opposition to Greenberg and formalist art criticism, Steinberg states that planarity and quasi-abstraction are not for Picasso the conditions of possibility of the picture, which make possible its evolution towards the self-determination of the medium, following a teleological scheme moreover. Albeit “modernist orientation ought to be to the flat picture plane” (Steinberg 1988, 11), the case of Picasso is peculiar and unique; “the flat picture plane is his whole working world” (Steinberg 2007a, 114), but this *scenario*, not being a pre-formed given frame, does not inhibit his figurative language. Indeed it makes it flourish.

Picasso’s ultimate goal is not to resort to flat surfaces and bidimensionality. For him, it is an inevitable choice, which follows from the desublimation and depersonalization needed to represent states of consciousness in all their perceptual shades effectively; thereby, resuming affectivity in conceptual configurations. In Picasso’s work, surface and depth flatten just enough to project the states of consciousness on figures; following our case study, depicted watchers and sleepers can turn into the representation of watch and sleep in themselves, in a process that conceptualizes emotions via figuration. With Picasso, painting has gone from being illustrative and emotional to being eidetic and perceptual: somehow *conceptuelle*, then.

Another element that shows the uniqueness of Picasso’s achievements in the context of modernism is the issue—once again phenomenological—of horizontality vs. verticality, raised in particular by his watchers and sleepers. Steinberg says that in representing the theme of sleep vs. watch, Picasso is prompted to reorganize pictorial space by questioning the traditional vertical orientation of western easel painting.

Even modernist painters have struggled to get rid of the supremacy of verticality on several occasions, without ever succeeding, while Picasso does; in fact, his watchers/sleepers paintings display “a minimal statement of hor-

berg 1995, 167-168). For the Greenbergian interpretation of the function of the inclusion of fragments of actual objects in cubist painting, in order to strengthen the impression of pictorial flatness, see Greenberg 1989a. For an analysis specifically focused on Picasso as a modernist painter, see Greenberg 1989b.

izontality—which is all the ground that sleep needs” (Steinberg 2007a, 113). Thus, representing sleeping figures, lying or reclining, as modernist conceptualized configurations bring him to subvert the picture’s characteristics, targeting horizontality. This subversion has substantial implications, both by the artwork’s and spectator’s side, and it ultimately leads Picasso’s conception of the image past modernism, and very close to the Steinbergian notion of the postmodernist image as a “flatbed picture plane.”²²

Steinberg indeed argues that after the culmination of the modernist enterprise, ended more or less with Abstract Expressionism, and there has been a revolution concerning the ontology of the image; the new pictures of the 1960s presented themselves with a new look, featured with “a pictorial surface whose angulation with respect to the human posture is the precondition of its changed content” (Steinberg 2002, 27). Their angulation bends horizontally, and implies “the shift from nature to culture” in “the psychic address”²³ of the painting, which now makes possible “a different order of experience” (Steinberg 2002, 28), rooted in the perception of the picture as an operational and operative recollection of any data.

This address is the Steinbergian definition of the new surface: “Yet these pictures no longer stimulate vertical fields but opaque flatbed horizontals. They no more depend on a head-to-toe correspondence with human posture than a newspaper does. The flatbed picture plane makes its symbolic allusion to hard surfaces such as tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards—any receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed, impressed—whether coherently or in confusion. [...] [It] insists on a radically new orientation, in which the painted surface is no longer the analogue of a visual experience of nature but of operational processes” (Steinberg 2002, 28).

²² “I borrow the term from the flatbed printing press.” It’s used by Steinberg to describe a radically new treatment of the picture plane as phenomenologically operational: “Any flat documentary surface that tabulates information is relevant analogue of his [of Robert Rauschenberg, the Steinbergian prime example of the new art] picture plane—radically different from the transparent projection plane with its optical correspondence to man’s visual field” (Steinberg 2002, 27-30).

²³ The relationship between orientation of the human posture, mind and images has precociously been explored by psychologists such as Erwin Straus, see Straus 1963, esp. 316-330, 390-392. For an overall view on aesthetological reflections about orientation, direction and images in authors like Wölfflin, Schlosser, Faistauer, Uspenskij, see Pinotti 2010b. For the hypothesis of a phenomenological use of laterality by abstract expressionists, especially Barnett Newman, see Bois 2002.

According to Steinberg, Robert Rauschenberg's works represent the paradigm of flatbed picture planes.²⁴ Rauschenberg was the first to treat the picture plane as a solid horizontal ground, on which all sorts of data could be enacted as artistic facts. His pictures were no longer optical *plenums* of visual flatness; in this respect, "the picture's flatness was to be no more a problem than the flatness of a disordered desk or an unswept floor"²⁵ (Steinberg 2002, 32). Rauschenberg began to handle the materiality of the visual field's flatness, now turned horizontal, and produced images very close to the realm of objectuality. Following Rosalind Krauss, Rauschenberg's pictures "embed" objects like images, and "images themselves, within the medium of Rauschenberg's art, *are* material substances": in a process of "physical incorporation of the image," they can be defined as "image-object[s]"²⁶ (Krauss 2002, 45-52).

The flatbed picture plane is not only a mere transfiguration of an *object trouvé*, but "a relocation of it;" its virtue lies in its power to re-signify the experience of the actual world through the iconic regime. It raises the marks of what we have called a configuration to a higher degree, since it presents and combines, in the image, every kind of data; even emotional ones, embodying them in a process of figural conceptualization (not figurative anymore but, in the case of Rauschenberg, objectual and almost literal). One of Rauschenberg's most famous works is closely related to the discourse of sleep. I am talking about *Bed* (1955, Fig. 4), an object-like image that can be read as a forceful index of the artist's sleep, and in which the sheets, instead of canvases or paper, function as "a pictorial surface that led the world in again"²⁷ (Steinberg 2002, 34).

²⁴ "But on the New York art scene the great shift came in Rauschenberg's work of the early 1950s. Even as Abstract Expressionism was celebrating its triumphs, he proposed the flatbed or work-surface picture plane as the foundation of an artistic language. [...] Rauschenberg began to experiment with objects placed on blueprint paper and exposed to sunlight. Already then he was involved with the physical material of plans" (Steinberg 2002, 28-29).

²⁵ "The flatbed picture plane lends itself to any content that does not evoke a prior optical event" (Steinberg 2002, 34).

²⁶ Krauss distinguishes between "the single-image" of modernist painting, conceived as autonomous entity, and the "part-by-part, image-by-image" (Krauss 2002, 40) of Rauschenberg's work, associated to materialization and to discursive ways of fruition. The second one has much in common with Steinberg's flatbed picture plane.

²⁷ "Perhaps Rauschenberg's profoundest symbolic gesture came in 1955 when he seized his own bed, smeared paint on its pillow and quilt coverlet, and uprighted it against the wall. There, in the vertical posture of 'art,' it continues to work in the imagina-

Afterward, Rauschenberg will take the next step to the complete objectuality in many of his 1960s and 1970s works; the theme of sleep will be developed in his *Hoarfrosts* (Fig. 5, see Fernandes 2008), in which the phantom of the canvas has vanished, and the work of art is given through the ostension of printed veils and sheets.



Fig. 4. Robert Rauschenberg, *Bed*, 1955
(oil and pencil on pillow, quilt, and sheet on wood supports)
Source: MoMA, New York.

tion as the eternal companion of our other resource, our horizontality, the flat bedding in which we do our begetting, conceiving, and dreaming. The horizontality of the bed relates to 'making' as the vertical of the Renaissance picture plane related to seeing" (Steinberg 2002, 34).



Fig. 5. Robert Rauschenberg, *Hoarfrost*, 1974
(solvent transfer on fabric with pillow)
Source: The Menil Collection, Houston.

The Steinbergian interpretations, respectively of Picasso's and Rauschenberg's work, present evident analogies, as if Picassian "peinture conceptuelle" were a precursor of the Steinbergian flatbed picture plane. It is almost as if Picasso had been the only modernist voice with the foresightedness to anticipate postmodernist developments within the conception of images as operational and informational processes. At the end of his essay on Picasso and sleep, Steinberg accords Picassian configurations the same operational power of "flat bedding" the "columnar body" (Steinberg 2002, 27), because of the mutual interaction of verticality and horizontality on the picture plane, all in favor of the latter: Picasso's "upright watchers and reclined sleepers serve him as a means of constantly charting and redefining the ground of his canvas, his paper, or etcher's plate. [...] They stake out an elemental geometry" (Steinberg 2007a, 114).

As has been seen, this exceeds the field of the mere formal organization of the picture or the sole dramatic interest of its characters: "Perpendicular to each other and parallel to the margins, they [watching and sleeping figures]

span and they scale the pictorial plane, so that horizontal and vertical materialize in ever-new personifications. The artist's will to lay down and erect the forms that perpetually reembody the conditions of his two-dimensional plane—this is more than a technical matter" (Steinberg 2007a, 114). Although Picasso remains anchored to modernist figurality, and does not trespass the threshold of objectuality, his configurations are situated at the border of modernism and tend to postmodernist drives.

When Steinberg describes the haptic features of *Les Femmes d'Alger*'s impressions of spatiality, he interestingly employs a metaphor with Rauschenbergian echoes: "The space of the *Femmes d'Alger* is a space peculiar to Picasso's imagination. Not a visual continuum, but an interior apprehended on the model of touch and stretch, a nest known by intermittent palpation, or by reaching and rolling, by extending one's self within it. [...] Picasso's space insinuates total initiation, like entering a disordered bed" (Steinberg 1988, 63).

In conclusion, it can be said that Picasso, through a modernist iconography of sleep, opened a radical change in the depiction of human figures. His conceptualizing configurations overcome both naturalism and modernist formalism, through a desublimating painterly *epochè*. He lets his sleeping and watching figures lay on a modernist picture plane, so that they could successively awaken on a "quasi-postmodernist flatbed picture plane."

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