

## After Steinberg: Contextualist Interpretations

Steinberg's "The Philosophical Brothel" completely modified the possible ways of dealing with the analysis of *Les Demoiselles* and it could be said that this text marked a turning point in the history of interpreting the work. Steinberg himself mentions this in the postscriptum of 1987 to his 1972 article in which he recognises that then, with formalism in full regression, recognition of the sexual charge in the painting could be considered almost a banality, although it certainly was not so when he pointed it out for the first time: "But such is the nature of my melancholic profession [...] It is in the character of the critic to say no more, in his best moments, than what everyone's lips in the following season repeats; he is the generator of the cliché" (Steinberg 1988, 74). And thus, from him at that moment, *Les Demoiselles* were sexualized to such an extent that in research about them, it is considered out of place to simply abide by the formal achievements of the work. Henceforth, for art historians who confront it, conscious of the force or the gravity of the matters it appears to contain, it will be practically impossible to detach the content from the context, whether biographical, historical, psychological, social or ideological, in which the work was created and its reception produced.

A key question raised from Steinberg's reading, and one crucial to the very understanding of Modernism, is the growing importance of the spectator in the aesthetics process. And if, as we shall see, from the decade of the 60s, one fundamental way of analysing *Les Demoiselles* was examining the condition of the spectator in front of the painting, just as another post-Steinberg approach will take the opposite direction, exploring the psychobiography of Picasso the author.

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Steinberg, however, was openly sceptical about the potential of the biographic theories telling us anything meaningful about Modernism.

These were two paradoxical, and even contradictory, directions. The biographical explored the understanding of the work of art from its title and partly from the idea of “genius” (as an inborn characteristic) while nourishing an immersion in the biography and psychology of Picasso that would consider more than the possible artistic influences that had contributed to shape the work. The other direction would tend towards the spectator and carry, on the contrary, the seed of a strong attack on the sacrosanct figure of the author. It implied admitting that the spectator, apprehensive of the work, endowed it with new meanings as legitimate as those bestowed by its creator. We must bear in mind that moving the centre of gravity from the author to the spectator can be considered one of the inherent elements of Modernism, even before the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Dividing the direction of analysis of *Les Demoiselles* is simply the reflection of the directions taken by the historiography of modern art in the postmodern era, once the common enemy that was formalism had been beaten.

#### Delving into Picasso's Biography

One of the key studies in this new post-Steinberg era is by William Rubin, director of the painting and sculpture section of the MoMA from 1968 to 1988 and author of one of the definitive texts on the painting: “The Genesis of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*”, without doubt the most exhaustive study that has been done about the work. It is part of the volume *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, shared with authors Judith Cousins and Hélène Seckel (1994).

Rubin's chapter leads with a clear statement of principles: *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* is without question a turning point in the history of modern painting. Until then, there had never been anything so radical in this evolution but what sustained Picasso's perseverance and courage in achieving this feat cannot be measured according to exclusively pictorial patterns. What sustained him came from his relentless confrontation of himself (Rubin 1994, 13). Rubin's study must be included in the contextualist analyses in so far as it is the result of a total relinquishment of formalism to devote himself to the enterprise of revealing all the most hidden details of Picasso's biography when he was painting the work and the creative process leading to it. Thus, he launched the path along which many of the studies focused on the biography would travel. Thanks to the careful compiling and analysis of the documentation available on the work, provided by Rubin, Seckel and Cousins in the volume edited by the MoMA, almost all the later studies are partly indebted to their discoveries. However, although they did use the documentation divulged by him, they did not always share Rubin's methodology as their interpretation tool nor even his conclusions, as we will see further on. Through William Rubin, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* essentially became the mirror of Picasso's emotions during the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; of the accumulated complex and contradictory feelings of the painter

about sex and women and also of some of his irremediable fellow travellers at that time. We refer specifically to venereal diseases and prostitution.

According to Rubin, the core to interpreting this work came from the gradual discovery that Picasso made while he worked on the picture: the magic function that from the beginning drove humankind to make images and consequently revealed the power of art to change life. This was a quality that painting had been gradually losing during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Rubin considered that for Picasso, the primal matter was not to change artistic conventions but to change life itself, or better still, his own life. A personal and psychological crisis, a profound exploration of his own psyche, induced him to paint *Les Demoiselles* and the many sketchbooks that were part of it are no more than a visual diary of this important existential crisis.

With this proposal, it is natural that Rubin would then devote a great part of his study to delving into Picasso's biography. I maintain that in this way he opened a path that has produced a prolific historiography of the leading characters, almost always male, of modern art in general and, of course, in the work of Picasso himself. It is, therefore, not surprising that in the opening pages of his text, Rubin concerns himself with the crisis in the relationship of the painter with his lover in 1907, Fernande Olivier (which "could be seen coming a mile off", *sic*) and which he considers crucial to the execution of *Les Demoiselles*. To make matters worse, everything was complicated by a possible episode of syphilis and also because the couple had adopted an orphan, Raymonde, whose presence in the Bateau Lavoir hardly helped to calm the situation; the reverse in fact. Rubin published some portraits by Picasso of Raymonde, in one of which the adolescent appears with legs apart, explicitly showing her genitals while she gives herself a pedicure.<sup>1</sup> At this point in time and although Rubin had only just started, the article gives the impression that he is laying out his arguments in a tone more suitable to a soap opera or a reality TV show. One needs to recover one's composure to continue reading in the hope of fathoming out, not Picasso's personal problems but something of substance on the possible meanings of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. I suspect that I am not alone in this appreciation and that the reservations shown in an important part of Picasso's historiography about Rubin's study, come from the apprehension generated by this kind of art history methodology (Green 2001, 128–50).

In any event, Rubin directs his discourse to the scene of welcome typical of the brothels of the era and from there to the painter's discovery of his own erotic desire, combined with the presence of Iberian art and contact with African art when he visited the Trocadéro. And in his opinion the encounter of the central Iberian and European nude figures that originated from African and Oceanic models, is the confrontation between Eros and Thanatos, between the object

<sup>1</sup> The biographical data used by Rubin to support his thesis come mainly from one of the greatest students of Picasso's life, Pierre Daix, from Fernande Olivier's biography and from testimonies of other people in Picasso's circle at that time.

of desire and death. According to Rubin, the reason Picasso's visit to the Trocadéro Museum aroused such strong feelings in him was seeing the collection that had previously been considered as ethnographic while in a state of fear and trepidation about syphilis (at a time when several institutional campaigns were warning about its terrible secondary effects). The conflict between Picasso and Fernande was also a reason for his strong reaction. This would all lead to his capturing the magical or apotropaic character of the "primitive art" in all its intensity that would give him some form of protection against the mortal danger entailed in sex. This was why Rubin conceded capital importance to what Picasso told Malraux in 1938, saying that this was his "first pictorial exorcism". As we have seen, this declaration, possibly the most popular comment made by Picasso on his prostitutes of Avignon, was not actually published until 1974. Rubin determines that the painter realised the masks he had seen in 1907 in the Trocadéro were magical things, "weapons against unknown and threatening spirits" and also, that giving the spirits shapes was a way of breaking free of them.

When he began the genealogy of the painting, Rubin dealt first of all with the impact of primitivism, first through Picasso's discovery of Iberian art in 1906, then in 1907 that of African and Oceanic tribal sculptures. He points out, and this is an essential point, that the conventional, or bourgeois, taste of that time used the word primitivism in a disparaging way and applied it to any type of non-European or even Medieval art. At the same time African and Oceanic art and artefacts were considered to be exclusively ritually savage or barbaric, never artistic. This even includes the enlightened minority who, since the 18<sup>th</sup> century extolled the primitive for its closeness to nature by resorting to "the myth of the good savage", using a battery of valid arguments to criticise the problems of "civilised" or modern man. Gauguin was a part of this panorama and must be thus understood. Rubin (1994, 38) states that his primitivism was more philosophical than aesthetical and even asserting that in his work, there is no trace of inclusion or assimilation of the primitive art of the Pacific peoples where he had lived: "The few Polynesian works among his paintings [...] functioned more as contextual symbols and decorative devices than as agents of influence in his style".

Next, the author identifies and analyses the relevance of some other paintings by Picasso in the genealogy of the work, including the *Two Women* that foreshadow some of the formal resources in the *Demoiselles* or that hint at the influence of El Greco and then dwells upon the prefigured medical student and sailor who did come on the scene but were not included in the final version. Rubin rejects the possibility of the work containing a *memento mori*, as Barr had momentarily suggested because he understood that the sexual morality of an anarchistic atheist like Picasso would not be compatible with the idea of presenting "waves or sin" or preaching a sermon through the painting. Steinberg had also rejected this idea as we have seen. Rubin in his turn did not find Steinberg's interpretations convincing, especially the contrast between the implicated (the sailor and his wine jug) and the unimplicated (the student and his skull) in the drama and sexual demands, guided by the idea that *Les Demoiselles* is fundamentally a work about the trauma of a sexual encounter.

For Rubin, it was impossible to disassociate the medical student and his *vanitas* of disease and death, the crucial aspect of the work, as he saw it, from start to finish. And, therefore one cannot detach from it the shadow of castration and death, characteristic of the male psyche when contemplating coitus, implicit in the French description of the male orgasm as *la petite mort*. And furthermore it was accompanied by the threat of a possibly deadly illness. A threat that must surely have been going through Picasso's mind, as in the majority of the minds of men at that time who visited brothels in what was known as the "golden age of venereal diseases" at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rubin (1994, 49) concludes "for me the final painting is less of a Dionysian orgy than a sexual battleground in which both Eros and Thanatos contend for Picasso's psyche". Ultimately, it makes more sense that the medical student is in the brothel to counteract the threat of syphilis than for the philosophical reasons proposed by Steinberg.

That said, it is legitimate to ask if the critics' insistence on the meaning of the male personages in the painting is not out of place, in view of their disappearance from the final version. Rubin argues that in fact Picasso may well have thought that the inclusion of disease (the student) and mortality (the sailor) was too banal or anecdotic but that nobody prevented these allegories being present in the work if the two men are no longer present because *Les Demoiselles* could then assume the onus of the allegory.

Having got thus far, Rubin offers an explanation as to why Picasso redid the canvas after its initial version, the most Iberian: because the reference to death and disease was less clear than in the first version. This is what made him re-touch three of the figures (the one on the left and both those on the right) and was crucial to the understanding of the painting because the symbolic narrative present in the preparatory sketches was replaced by stylistic contrasts. The horror felt by Picasso's acquaintances when the work was revealed was caused by the Medusa figure crouched at the right. Rubin, in one of his most controversial passages, stated that her asymmetric distortion conjured up the appalling deformities caused by tertiary syphilis bone damage and the facial disfigurement masks found in all tribal art, are those most akin to the "monstrous face" of the girl crouched on the right (Rubin 1994, 58). We must bear in mind this association with Africa, fright, monstrosity, venereal disease, sex and death that Rubin is tracing here because it will be one of the subjects of the most virulent debates in later criticism, mostly from post-colonialist and feminist adherents, for obvious reasons which we will discuss further below. Although, as we shall also comment, Rubin alluded to the possible concomitance between the face of this young woman and facial disease masks, precisely in order to reject the possibility that Picasso might have been inspired by these.

Rubin considers that the elegant, even pleasing, aspect of the two young, Iberian-inspired, women in the centre of the painting evoked Eros and should be seen as the counterpoint of the two Africanised figures on the right (especially the horrendous squatting figure), who are a synonym for Thanatos. Together they represent the image of Picasso's well founded fear and aversion of the female

body that goes hand-in-hand with his intense desire and his ecstatic idealisation of it. Rubin also recognises that this contradictory syndrome of attraction and repulsion, common in male psychology, was hypertrophic in the painter.

Rubin's text contains the most detailed study of the transformations that the painting underwent in Picasso's sketch and notebooks and during the actual painting of the work. He begins with the two male figures who would be the personification of Picasso and continues with each of the female figures. The two central female figures retain their initial Iberian style and Picasso had cherished the intention of them being attractive in some way. This was not the case of the three on the sides who would bestow the contrast of death versus love, ugliness versus beauty, youth versus its absence and animal versus human (Rubin 1994, 69). The figure on the left would be a sort of outsider on whom Picasso would have wanted to imprint a certain form of primitivism that distinguished her from the others. In any case Rubin did not consider the influence to be African, rather to be after the manner of Gauguin, more Oceanic than African, more "mysterious and evil" and endowed with a certain Egyptian air. Here he contradicts Golding who, in 1958 had associated it with a Dan mask from the Ivory Coast despite the fact that in 1907 no art from the Dan had yet been brought to Europe.

Rubin also rules out other influences that the critics had always maintained, especially the until now unquestioned imprint of Cézanne, who he considers would be a Cubist of the next stage, from 1908, but not with the Picasso of 1907.<sup>2</sup> In his estimation this was because the Picasso of that year could perceive the crucial aspect of the Cézanne revolution as being the conception of the painting as a simulacrum of bas relief (for which the *passage* technique is decisive). He also emphasised, on the other hand, that of El Greco, already mentioned by other historians. For example, and although not the first to point this out, Santiago Amón, in 1973, had juxtaposed reproductions of the *Opening of the Fifth Seal* and *Les Demoiselles* to demonstrate the numerous formal coincidences between the two compositions. In 1907 this work of El Greco was to be found in Paris, in Ignacio Zuloaga's home.

Lastly, the author returns to a subject repeatedly mentioned in his text and now reappears in more detail when he addresses Picasso's visit to the Trocadero Ethnographic Museum and the arrangement of the young women's heads on the left and right of the canvas. Their originally Iberian features were shaded over and indicate a familiarity with tribal art (probably retouched in June and July of 1907). According to Rubin, the Trocadéro visit signified a turning point because it gave Picasso a solution to express in a plastic form his feeling about sexuality and death in a way that the initial composition with its Iberian allusions and El Greco influence, did not allow him to achieve. His acquaintance with tribal art at the Trocadéro was something transcendental, something beyond the purely

<sup>2</sup> For example, he actually stated that Barr gave the impression of having exaggerated the presence of Cézanne in *Les Demoiselles* because without him it would not have been possible to maintain that this work marked the beginning of Cubism (Rubin 1994: 97).

formal features of this art. Now he saw the objects displayed in the ethnographic museum in a different light that enhanced their powers of exorcism, intercession or magic. He could appreciate them in this light and experience this epiphany as he was fully engrossed with painting *Les Demoiselles* and therefore seeking inspiration to express feelings that could not be shown directly and had to be substituted by images that concealed them in the Freudian sense of the word. Rubin was convinced that the presence of tribal art in the work had a spiritual character and rejected the possibility that it had served as the formal inspiration of the painting. We shall return to this subject in the chapter dealing with the problem of *Art nègre*.

Despite this he recognises that of the three retouched heads, the one on the upper right is the closest to the *negro art* masks. However, he insists that it is impossible to find specific examples of masks that may have served as models for Picasso, and that no sketch in his notebooks represents a tribal object. This means that there is no direct inspiration in any particular African art, merely a certain likeness that can be seen, for example in the young woman on the upper right. In fact, the type of shading shown on this face (*hachure* or hatching) which the bibliography invariably associates with the African impact on painting at that time, does appear in sketches of the Iberian heads, but not in those of the Africans.

The face of the young woman squatting on the lower right of the canvas suffered the most radical of the mutations and specially drew the attention of Rubin and the rest of the academics, perhaps because they saw it as the most bizarre and strange of them all, condensing many of the meanings attributed to the painting. And it is not merely her face. The posture of this nude is the most striking of all, as we have said previously. She has her back to the spectator, her legs are splayed out in a somewhat unconventional position for a painting and frankly vulgar if it were found in reality itself, while her head, on the other hand, is turned towards an imaginary observer. Rubin does not hesitate to state that she is backward facing despite Nash and Steinberg both speculating that the splayed legs were open in order to shamelessly show her sex. The torsion she is subjected to lends the painting its greatest impression of violence and hostility. Picasso had wrung her neck as if she were a chicken.

In Rubin's opinion all the transformations made to the face culminated in the "indescribable effect of violence and monstrosity" of this young woman at the lower right so that even the women in a De Kooning or a Dubuffet appear to transmit empathy. The terrifying effect of this impression was avoided by the formalist interpreters of the painting even though it had affected contemporary observers of the work. And in fact, in 1910 Burgess had labeled them as monsters, ogres, abominable, terrifying, nightmarish, defilers, atrocious and savages. This is what warrants Rubin understanding the painting not as a tribute to Eros but as an agonising relationship with Thanatos since the woman causes an impression that implicitly leads to fear of disease and death. In other words, for Rubin the meaning of the work really lies here, in this young woman who Steinberg called a "harlot" and who depicts the sexually transmitted disease that can

disfigure the face and cause death. As we have seen, some art historians have identified the face of the young woman seated on the right with the head of Medusa, the mythological creature whose gaze would turn to stone anyone who looked upon her. Since this is a narrative that involves the gaze, logically it is one of Ariadne's threads that guides the possible interpretations of *Les Femmes d'Alger*, especially those that favour a psychoanalytic approach. John Nash, in the radio broadcast we mentioned, was the first to put forward the Medusa connection of this figure and we should remember as well that he considered it a type of shift of repressed desires toward the object of a fetish, to put it in Freudian terms.

Considering the genesis step by step and the X-rays of the splayed figure, Rubin concludes by exhibiting his conviction that neither Africa nor any other tribal source plays a part in the morphology of the head, no matter how much the bibliography of the work until that moment had considered it the epitome of "African" influence. And this was not because there are scarcely any masks that show the slightest sign of the asymmetry observed in this figure. It was because the small number in existence did not arrive in Europe until after *Les Femmes d'Alger* had been painted and some of them, like the Mbuya disfigurement mask, were carved after 1907. The model for this young woman's face is not Africa. It is that of the disfigured syphilitic faces that Picasso had seen in the Saint Lazare hospital. If there is a similarity between the young woman on the right and this disfigurement mask it is because they were both inspired by the distortions caused by diseases.<sup>3</sup>

Rubin unhesitatingly joined the fierce debate on primitivism in which a certain historiographical line was being firmly upheld: namely that there is no influence of African art, in formalist terms, in *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Accordingly, the models must have been truly disfigured by syphilis which undoubtedly unleashed fear of dying: "We sense the thanatophobia, he states, in the primordial horror evoked by the monstrously deformed heads of the two whores on the right of the picture, so opposite to those of the comparatively gracious Iberian courtesans in the center [...] These 'African' faces, I believe, express more than just the 'barbaric' character of pure sexuality invoked by Steinberg; in the first instance their violence alludes to Woman as the Destroyer" (Rubin 1984, 254). As already mentioned, he identifies the two young women in the centre, the seductive Iberians, with Eros against the Africanised, associated with Thanatos; especially the "hideous squatting figure" he specified.

Furthermore, Rubin's article on the "Genealogy of *Les Femmes d'Alger*" that we have just commented on and which has an important repercussion in the history of the interpretation of the work, ends abruptly with no conclusion, denying the artistic influence of "tribal art" in our *Femmes d'Alger*. From my point of view we should not be surprised by this *discursus interruptus* because it is a truly hard task to fathom out exactly what Rubin's conclusions or even his key ideas are, other than considering *Les Femmes d'Alger* a faithful reflection of Picasso's

<sup>3</sup> Rubin defends these arguments both in 1994 and in 1984.

complex and contradictory feelings on women, sex, syphilis and prostitution. Added to this, rather than clearing the way, his aseptic analysis of the concurrences between *Art nègre* and modern art, contribute to leaving the “negro problem” open. We shall deal with this difficult but still current debate in Chapter 5 when we tackle the problem of “African art” in the avant-garde.

#### Picasso on the Couch

The majority of analyses on *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* from a biographical point of view seem to have been done from a pressing need to lie Picasso down on the couch. And not all, but a majority, are heirs to the “Steinberg effect”. There is even an antecedent in the 40s entitled “Picasso. A Psychoanalytic Study” (Schneider 1947-48, 81-95). It is commendable because it does go further than the formalism that held sway at the time with regard to the specific interpretation of the work. The author’s departure point is Picasso’s famous negation that is generally summarised in the motto “I do not seek, I find”. Schneider, the author of this article, places *Les Femmes d'Alger* in the painter’s “negro period”, as was customary at that time and stated that it was rumoured Picasso was using hashish to get into a “primitive mood”. He centres his attention on the pointed belly of one of the young women in the painting and the disfigured faces of the two on the right. He is of the opinion that the former suggested a phallic symbol and that the latter faces referred to primitive voodoo or witchcraft masks, but also of a constant assault on femininity and a way of negating tenderness. In this way he alludes to the matter of motherhood that will occur again in the psychoanalytic studies of the work and considers that the still life is a way to counteract the primitive impulse to suckle at a mother’s breast, a scene befitting of cannibals.

In the future the brutality of the work will be analysed by adding more psychoanalytic ingredients. This is especially the case of the “Medusa effect”, defended by Bois who associates the paralysing gaze of *Les Femmes d'Alger* with the fear of castration and the rejection of the Renaissance’s unique perspective. In other words the intense stare that fixes explicitly on the spectator. In its turn all this will be linked to another of the Freudian topics, killing the father or rather, destroying representative conventions of the past. Bois (2001, 44) asks “can we not suppose that, in *Les Femmes d'Alger*, Picasso was saying aloud what they [his painter colleagues] did not even dare to think themselves, namely, ‘if we are brave to kill the father (tradition, the law) symbolically, this is what we will get; this thing so monumentally terrifying in both for its freedom and its constraint.’ Not that Picasso would have been the first to defy tradition, but he might have been the first to perceive the libidinal foundation of such a combat.”

For her part, Mathews Gedo in “Art as Exorcism: Picasso’s *Femmes d'Alger*” of 1980 (72 and foll.) carries out a more detailed psychoanalysis than she would make later on in her book *Picasso. Art as Autobiography*. Her study is diametrically opposed to Rosalind Krauss’s famous article “In the name of Picasso” and starts with the premise that it is only possible to reveal the most important secrets of this work through a biographical reading. Her hypothesis is that Pi-

casso concealed, or rather “actively sabotaged all the attempts to reconstruct the exact story of the canvas,” not because he was irritated by the discussions on his sources as Pierre Daix had argued but because of a biographical reason. He concealed to preclude revealing things about himself that he preferred to keep secret. Thus the painting will continue, as did many others by the painter, on an autobiographical course. In the spotlight of the psychoanalytical focus in general and that of Mathews Gedo in particular, Picasso conducted himself with respect to this work as the “the great concealer.”

Mathews Gedo suggests that the figures of the sailor and the doctor that appear in the preparatory sketches are different facets of Picasso’s character (as Barr had speculated and Rubin had defended). She believes that these two figures and also that of the demoiselle, to be different steps in the metamorphosis of Picasso’s self-portrait. Twenty years after Mathews Gedo’s text (2001, 59–65), in an article entitled *Portrait de Picasso en Demoiselle*, Lydie Pearl again proposes a similar hypothesis, even affirming that the truly shocking at the time was, as had traditionally been upheld, neither the representation of a brothel, nor the presence of African masks. It was the transexual and transgender mutation that could be seen in its creation process. Beneath the rejection of aesthetic codes, an even more violent disavowal can be found; the definition of genders and sexes for which Picasso had revisited his childhood when sexual and identity definition takes place according to conventional codification.

But let us return to Mathews Gedo in the examination of various drawings and sketches by Picasso where the author came to the conclusion that he would always have used the theme of prostitution as a way of rebelling against the order of the fathers. The paintings resulting from Picasso’s visit to the Saint Lazare prison hospital for prostitutes suffering venereal diseases suggest that he worried about an unresolved problem of dependence on his mother. There is something similar in his self-portraits as a sailor and medical student.

Mathews Gedo’s main theory is that Picasso would have used the painting to explore his ambivalent feelings towards women: his mother (*Les Demoiselles* would be a vision of his mother as an irrational and savage being) or other feminine figures of carers and even that of his partner at the time, Fernande Olivier, identified with a prostitute, reveals hostility and resentment about her past as an artists’ model. This is what provokes a growing violence in the painting, an invasion of arousal and anger. The author continues to confirm that clinical experience reveals it would appear men who maintain relations with troubled or “severely disturbed” women as Picasso did, had a father, or particularly a mother, who was disturbed (Mathews Gedo 1980, 79).

It is possible to detect that in her icono-psychological analyses, Mathews Gedo overturns the vision of *Les Demoiselles* as a work possessing a universal content. The author reaches the conclusion that the “truth” revealed by Picasso is not universal but rather the story of the genesis and development of his misogyny and his identifying with a mother he perceives as savage or barbaric. The demoiselles and their masks would have been the powerful and magic tools with which the painter hoped to protect himself and maintain his inde-

pendence from his mother. If he had revealed his sources the effigies of the *Demoiselles* would have lost their secret power to control the evil feminine spirits. The masked “damsels” conceal the persona of the artist shaman, destroying his childhood world and triumphing over his private female demons. For this reason *Les Demoiselles* is not simply autobiographical art. It is painting as exorcism (Mathews Gedo 1980, 81).

In my opinion, the problem of certain psychoanalytic interpretations of art works is precisely the risk of overstating the artistic analysis and focusing too much on personal questions about the artist, unearthing the possible universal content or even concluding by revealing in chapter and verse the psychology of the artist at the cost of distancing from the work itself. Mathews Gedo does manage to bring to light several intimate details of Picasso’s relation with women and even with friends like Max Jacob. Her psycho-iconological approach gives the impression of wishing to “take photos or make carbon copies of the subconscious” with all the betrayals this implies (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 19).

Certainly Lydie Pearl’s analysis, although beginning with proposals similar to Mathews Gedo, tends to put the emphasis on the problem of the separation of the sexes. She contends that *Les Demoiselles* offers us a pictorial equivalent of sensations that might be produced by the unsuppressed ghost of a transgression of basic sexual prohibitions of a “cultural order” (Pearl 2001, 64) and considers that there is something more universal, or less private, than Mathews Gedo’s analysis allows for. Pearl maintains that if the work is totally contemporary it is because the deconstruction-reconstruction of the bodies made by Picasso allowed him to account for the divisive violence of a century in which the identities of man and woman began to be obscured. For its emphasis of gender matters this theory bears a certain relation to some of those of the feminist gaze of the moment and that we shall discuss later.

In any case it is worth noting that the idea of woman as the enemy, arrived at by both the psychoanalytic and the feminist analyses, is called into question by other women historians. For example, while leaving aside the questions of the private obsessions Picasso was expressing in the painting, Elizabeth Cowling’s revolutionary proposal consisted in regenerating contemporary art through brutality, dissonance and fear. At the moment in time that *Les Demoiselles* was being painted, beauty, and particularly the beauty of the eroticized female nude, had become a falsehood. In 1945 Picasso said that art was not made for decorating apartments but as an offensive and defensive weapon against the enemy. And, according to Cowling (2002, 179) that was also true for *Les Demoiselles*. When Picasso made this statement the enemy he had in mind was fascism and he was using women to express anxiety, fury and resistance during the German occupation. No, women were not the enemy either in 1907. It would be preferable to consider them an *alter ego*.

Among the psychobiographic interpretations of *Les Demoiselles*, lead by that of Rubin, mention must be made of Rosalind Krauss’s celebrated essay “In the Name of Picasso” attacking art history based on the famous name. This was an authentic indictment against the biographical comprehension of the work that

she wrote after attending a lecture by Rubin about Picasso in the Baltimore Museum of Art in 1980. Rubin maintained that the changes of style in Picasso's work at the end of the 1920s resulted from his relations with his lovers at that time, Olga Khokhlova and Marie Thérèse Walter, crucial arguments in the 1996 exhibition and catalogue *Picasso and Portraiture: Transformation and Representation* (edited by the MoMA, New York). The article by Krauss was published in issue 16 of the periodical *October* in the spring of 1981 and analyses explicitly this volte face of Rubin on the history of biographical art; a volte face that could be considered extraordinary, coming as it did from one of the most influential formalist critics or art historian of his generation. Rosalind Krauss (1981, 22) attacks the biographical theories, particularly when applied to someone like Picasso, one of the creators of collage because it implies something of a betrayal of the Cubist language as signic language because "it strips each sign of its special modality of meaning: its capacity to represent the conditions of representation." This leads to a massive erroneous interpretation of the signification process and reduces the visual sign to an ostentatious list of proper names. We shall return to this matter, crucial for a true understanding of the critical discourse of Modernism, in the next chapter.

#### Cultural Contexts: the Fabulous Encounter of Malaga and Cubism

As we have mentioned before, another approach, in parallel to the psychoanalytic and psychological approaches had been unfolding that, while retaining Picasso's personal circumstances, engaged in a study of the cultural context that produced *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. In a book entitled *A Sum of Destructions. Picasso Cultures & the Creation of Cubism* (2001) the American author Natasha Staller offers a perfect example of this contextualist type of critique. Her intention was the study of what she called "the cultures of Picasso" which in her opinion, were decisive in the configuration of Cubism: the popular culture of Malaga, Corunna, Barcelona and Paris at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Her book is the result of an intense investigation into these popular cultures between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, which undoubtedly the author had studied in detail and with which she was perfectly familiar. It was therefore surprising that a book about Cubism should open with the reproduction of religious images (known in Spain simply as *imágenes*, images) of Málaga. Staller commences with the idea that the influence of this city, often underestimated, was fundamental in the invention of Cubism because it held Picasso's elementary attitudes towards nature and tradition and also his ideas about the meaning and power of images. It was a whole mental and mythical universe of images that the painter would remember and later transform, thanks to his powerful imagination. Although this hypothesis is not entirely unreasonable, the examples offered by Staller may lack conviction and her arguments, in our opinion, do sometimes appear to lose coherence. I will explain my reasons for stating this.

The first chapter of Staller's book presents different aspects of the history and mentality of Malaga at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One of these is the series of

catastrophes that desolated the city (phylloxera, earthquakes, epidemics etc.) that, according to the author, would have led to the general belief that nature is the source of all types of calamities and is not a benefactor. On this subject, as with the rest of matters relating to the history of Malaga in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Staller made use of the contributions of the specialist scholars of the time. Her sources appear to be impeccable but one cannot say the same of the consequences she extracted from them. In her opinion there is a very direct cause and effect relation between this consideration of nature as the enemy, typical of the Malaga mentality of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the destruction of the mimesis inherent in Picasso's Cubism. To wit, Picasso would be a part of this mentality and this would lead him to dispense with the mimetic or naturalist character of painting. The problem with Staller's argument is that, truthfully, this destruction of the mimesis is also a characteristic of Braque, the other founding father of Cubism whose mentality, however, was not even remotely similar. And, on the other hand, the explanation of the reason for this belief driving Picasso (a painter who in fact left Malaga shortly forever) to forsake naturalism, is left in the air. Furthermore this had not the least effect on the rest of Malaga painters who remained unshakeable in this naturalism, firmly rooted in this city that supposedly mistrusted nature so heartily.

It is surprising, in any case, that there is not a single reference in this book to the text by Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* which, at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century upheld the thesis that cultures in harmony with nature produce naturalist art while cultures that for whatever reason fear and distrust nature (including primitive and contemporary ones) tend towards abstraction. Staller could have supported her theory by basing it on Worringer, as long as the rupture of the mimesis had been a generalised phenomenon in painting in Malaga at that time and not isolated in one individual called Picasso.

In this first chapter Staller also tackles the worship of religious images, superstitions and bull fighting as fundamental elements in the culture of Malaga during Picasso's childhood. Again, although the author has used excellent sources to explain the function and meaning of the religious images, her conclusions on the use of these images, specifically during the episodes of the burning of churches and works of sacred art during the Spanish Civil War, are somewhat outlandish. She explains, repeatedly, that the people who adored these images and carried them in procession through the streets were also those who mutilated or destroyed them in a reaction to the alliance between the Catholic Church and Fascism. She does not, however, explain that in that period those who processed with the images were part of the proletariat and did so paid by the Malaga bourgeoisie and not from any sense of devotion. On this particular point Staller ignores the fact that agnosticism or atheism had taken root in Spain some time before and did not appear, as one might deduce from her words, overnight as a result of the birth of Fascism. The anti-clerical mindset began prior to Fascism and was opposed to the power that the Catholic church exercised over the population before the Civil war broke out. In any event there is not sufficient evidence for Picasso building his idea of the artistic image and its power from these reli-

gious images as Staller infers. Nor is it possible to support the argument that, had he witnessed the burnings, he could be considered one of those who, according to Staller, had passed spontaneously from their adoration to their destruction.

Nevertheless, the problem with *A Sum of Destructions* would not be so much this interpretation of the facts. It would be that the author attributes the painter, mechanically and repeatedly, with a mentality that prevailed in Spanish cities during the change of centuries. The problem is the determinism that guides her arguments: the automatic step in a supposedly general atmosphere, to the beliefs, ideology and attitudes of an individual, as if one forcibly inferred the other. Perhaps the author is asking too much of the readers: she asks that they firmly believe in the existence and functioning of a collective mentality characteristic of a specific time and place and that they believe this mentality is imprinted indelibly on individuals. At the same time she would have the reader believe that some of these individuals are “geniuses” who transform this legacy in masterpieces; that thanks to their innate character of genius, they convert popular culture into avant-garde culture, out of the blue. In fact, she demands that the reader believe as much in the power and singularity of the groups as in that of the individuals.

Anthropological determinism again becomes the basis of the reasoning applied to the particular examination of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. Staller maintains that in the work Picasso musters Africa and the Black Catalan *Moreneta* Madonna and Iberian warriors (naked like Picasso in *Bateau Lavoir, sic.*) and the Virgin of Victory (patron of Malaga), and the crescent moon of the Immaculate Conception or of the Turks, and the Moors and the bleeding Christs (Staller 2001, 324 and foll.). And at this point of her study Staller establishes somewhat superficial affinities and relations that, had they been the fruits of exercising a surrealist psychic automatism, would have been an achievement but that as a logical way to carry out historical research are not entirely accurate. The *omnium gatherum*, the hotchpotch of data that the researcher absorbed when beginning to work on deciphering the Spanish cultures Picasso had lived in becomes unreal; as if Staller were one of those historians who could not leave out any of the information gathered and had insisted on using every bit, by hook or by crook.

With respect to the African element, that contemporary critics consider crucial in the examination of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, Staller assures us that Chapter 7 of her book addresses “for the first time” the analysis of the legacy of a vision of Malaga’s history, saturated with holy wars that glorified the Reconquest of Andalusia from the Moors and rested on the belief that the defeat of the Moors from Africa was what made Spain modern. In short, it was decisive for its passage from the Middle Ages to modernity. Staller appears to be convinced that Picasso’s sense of modernity was conditioned by this belief. She reasons that this vision of history is one of the cornerstones of *Les Demoiselles* and was even the catalyst, to a large extent, of the first *papiers collés*. Thus, the idea of Africa that Picasso might have had when he visited the Trocadero Museum in 1907 depended in great measure on this binomial modernity/not Moorish and identifying the African element with the Moor. According to this, in Spain at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and start of the

20<sup>th</sup> centuries the word *moro*, Moor or Moorish, was used indiscriminately to mean African, Berber, Turk, Mahomedan. This also raises the issue of the popular rituals of “Moros and Christians,” the Catalonian Black *Moreneta* Madonna, the sketches of Arabs drawn by Picasso himself or the events where the Universal Expo of 1900 and the ethnographic Trocadero Museum connected or confounded the Arabic and its material culture with the rest of Africa.

Staller even maintains that the painter associated what he saw in the museum (Trocadero) with his childhood memories of “powerful tormented Christ, venerated through incense; and of *imágenes* being carried in procession through the streets at night, illuminated by candles, sooty candles, carried by the *penitentes*” (Staller 2001, 335). Other *penitentes* will follow bleeding from the marks of their flagellations. She offers this hypothesis but never supports this with any proof.

All in all, for Staller (2001, 336) *Les Demoiselles* are “Picasso’s personal *reconquista*” of the magic properties of art. Although he would have dealt with the idea of modernity “unlike his forebears, who saw the *pueblo africano* as the infidel Other, who could survive only by defeat and subjugation, Picasso recognised in the magical resonance of Africa’s images, a kindred spirit to the awesome images of his childhood.”

The Spanish spectator familiar with the Holy Week would be justified in asking, why? To what did the author owe these conclusions? I find it hard to believe that when this spectator sees African masks, he is thinking of bleeding Christs or processions. Nevertheless, the idea of mixing magic, exorcism and African masks with the beliefs of Spanish Catholicism and its mysticism appears to be something deep-rooted in the American academic milieu. Elizabeth Cowling for whom witchcraft substitutes Spanish mysticism in *Les Demoiselles* also states this. She states that for Picasso, a superstitious ex-Catholic, the religious fervor of El Greco differs little from the spirit worship that gave rise to the magic masks and the sculptures found in the museum. A fusion of Christian apocalypse and dark exorcism could have been more appropriate (Cowling 2002, 177). I fear that in certain American academic circles the features of the “other” will turn out to be interchangeable in too precipitous a manner. And thus, in this type of association, topics on cultures of the African continent are being mixed with Spanish stereotypes that suggest the hackneyed mysticism and other elements of the “darkest Spain.” This tendency to create an “other” homogeneity is not exclusively American and can be found in Eurocentric criticism and even in some cases Spanish historiography and critique.

But returning to the approaches used to analyse the history of art and its ideological values and convictions, let us concentrate on those that are the basis of studies similar to those of Natasha Staller. The author offers this statement of principles at the beginning of her study: “[this book] is resolutely historical at a moment when the dominant way of understanding Cubism is with a-historical theory. It insists on the importance of individual choice and individual transformations, at a time when many still believe in the so-called death of the author [...]. I still believe that individuals matter. History matters. Culture matters” (Staller 2001, xv).

It is indeed a statement of methodological principles and an explicit stand taken against the post-structuralists' theses and more precisely those of the *New History of Art*. But, in the first place, Staller's work is not preaching in the desert as this declaration would have us believe. It is inserted in a context of preference for the historical study of Cubism that David Cottington or Patricia Leighton have been making for years, (with greater distinction, if I may be permitted to say). Secondly, studies of history of art made with the idea of the fictionality of the author (using the popular metaphor of the author's death or disappearance) are still one of historians' options, it is true today. But it is not the only one, and I would venture to say that it is not even the preferred at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century when the study of artists' biographies and their subjectivity once again engages the greater interest of art historians. One has only to notice the proliferation of this type of perspective among specialists devoted to the work of Picasso and among art history students. I fear that contrary to Staller's opinion, the theses presented by Rosalind Krauss in "In the name of Picasso", though important at the time of publication for renewing the discipline of art history, are no longer shared by many historians and even less so by institutional hegemonic art history to which, without doubt we could consign Staller's own approach. At least in the Spanish academic context, Staller's complaints against the renovating methods of the discipline are meaningless.

Lastly, individuals mattering seems to be something rooted in American culture and, like everything else, in the majority of present-day studies. However, the importance that Staller concedes to the individual is incompatible with her study of the collective culture of the places she mentions, simply because she mechanically applies the ideas and dominant feelings of the cultures to Picasso the individual. She gives no indication of how the painter might receive these ideas and, more importantly, how he processed them. Staller wants us to believe that Picasso lived religion, bull fighting, Holy Week, prejudice about Africa or feelings about nature in the same way as the general Malaga public. This means that, to start with there must be belief in the certain essence of this body, of "the citizens of Malaga" should such a body exist, without the least consideration of ideological, cultural or class differences that existed in these societies at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Precisely the differences that erupted at least during the Civil War without doubt characterised the way in which the different social groups received and processed this general state of mind or the popular culture of the time. Did Staller really believe that Picasso would have lived through the episodes of iconoclasm in the city in the same way as convinced believers or the fearful superstitious? The concept of local identity is very powerful and perhaps in Staller's theories it sweeps aside the influence of other factors (social, economic, ideologic or gender) that should have unquestionably represented an important role in the Spanish cultures experienced by Picasso before he reached Paris of the avant-garde for ever.

No matter how much the theory of the author's death infuriates Natasha Staller, she has done nothing more than invent a new "author's function." Her author is someone who, in the period between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, devoured the (popular) cultures of Malaga, Corunna, Barcelo-

na and Paris just like anyone else who had lived at this time immersed in them. However Staller's historic account does not appear to have played any role in the cultural or "economic capital" nor the *habitus* and even less in the artist's own individuality and despite assimilating all this as any other component of these cultures would have done, it secretes the digested in only one way, as only a "genius" could have done. There is a curious dissymmetry between how the product of this cultural digestion is ingested and disgorged.

In sum, Staller's proposal to draw the portrait of Picasso's cultures before Cubism is a magnificent idea. Her research into it appears to have been done correctly. Its results, however, leave something to be desired. What really needs to be investigated is the deep relation, and not just the superficial affinity, that links all this with Picasso and Cubism by studying these relations that go further and are more plausible than, for example the simply epidermic coincidences between the clay figures of Malaga and the *collage*, the most revolutionary invention of art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While the small clay figures known locally as "barros" include other elements such as a metal guitar or fabric with fringes or tassels and for this they are fundamental for a greater invention of Cubism, according to Staller, the collage cannot but be interpreted as a mere coincidence unless the deep reasons on which the relation rests is explained. This is something that the author omits to do, merely mentioning that Picasso must have known these little figures. Then, given the importance conceded by Staller to the religious images, these figures must have played a more important role with their combination of both the actual and the modeled. If one decides to establish this type of analogy, one could reflect on the religious origin of the rope used as a frame for *Still Life with Chair Caning*, 1912, Picasso's first collage, something that could appear unfounded and unwarranted. Ultimately perhaps the author's passion for explaining the influence of popular culture in Cubism (and even the importance that is attributed now to this culture in the birth of avant-garde) led to an extra-limitation in establishing elective affinities. Nonetheless some elements of her proposal are suggestive and valid as departure points for the reexamination of Cubism.

Roger Caillois begins his *Méduse et Cie* (1960, 9) with these words: "The progress of knowledge consists, on the one hand in discarding the superficial analogies and discovering the deep kinship, perhaps less visible but more important and meaningful." One might ask oneself if Staller's work is about deep kinships or superficial analogies. Perhaps it would be the former but generally her arguments only appear to account for the latter.

In general all the psychobiographical trends can leave the aftertaste of a limitation, capable of raising suspicions about its genuine historical-artistic importance. Reducing history of art or the senses of artistic creation to the vicissitudes of the life and personality of the author, or in this last case, to a unique, extraordinary and personal way of living certain historic circumstances, infers a risk of impoverishing the very historic-artistic discourse even of art itself. In 1928, Carl Einstein in his book on 20<sup>th</sup> century art had already reproached some historians who were tempted to isolate Picasso's work from the rest, something that

had been done by a certain historiographical trend for decades: “It is an error to consider Picasso as an isolated apparition instead of having him as a necessary part of a wider trend. It is impossible to examine and judge his paintings individually and aesthetically; nor is it reasonable to build a specific and extemporaneous case on his person. This would only at best serve to disclose the narrow vision of the proposer; continuing like this only serves to diminish the spiritual relevance of his work. Thanks to the idiotic admiration it is subjected to, the art only becomes a hindrance, in a reactionary recourse” (Einstein 2013, 8). The psychobiographic historiography always runs the risk of falling into hagiography.

Nevertheless, the points of view garbed in the new art history’s own convictions as well as a censorious attitude, or at least caution before the extra-limitations of the veneration of proper names, will conclude by spurring the direction of discourse about Picasso and modern art in other directions ways as we shall see below.

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