

**Documentary Photography, between Evidence and Creation.
Cristina García Rodero and Cristina de Middel**

**La fotografía documental, entre la evidencia y la creación.
Cristina García Rodero y Cristina de Middel**

Beatriz Guerrero González-Valerio

CEU San Pablo University, Spain
beguergo@ceu.es

Laura González Díez

CEU San Pablo University, Spain
design@ceu.es

Abstract:

Cristina García Rodero (Puertollano, Ciudad Real, 1949) and Cristina de Middel (Alicante, 1975) represent two significant periods in the evolution of documentary photography in Spain. García Rodero, winner of the National Photography Prize in 1996, stands out for her ethnographic approach and her ability to capture the essence of Spanish traditions, along with the diverse cultures of other countries as well. Her work not only documents, but it offers an in-depth look at customs, as well as the intimate moments and feelings that spontaneously spring from humans. Cristina de Middel, who won the same award more than 20 years later in 2017, is well-known for her disruptive vision that challenges the boundaries between reality and fiction. In addition to the fact that both women are members of the photographic agency Magnum Photos, the connection between the two photographers lies in their profound influence on documentary photography. While García Rodero was groundbreaking in her traditional, documentary vision, Cristina de Middel has taken the genre to new heights, where the interpretation of reality and the potential of the image to offer new points of view play a crucial role. Both women exemplify the way in which documentary photography can be used as a medium for both artistic expression and social commentary.

Resumen:

Cristina García Rodero (Puertollano, Ciudad Real, 1949) y Cristina de Middel (Alicante, 1975) representan dos momentos significativos en la evolución de la fotografía documental en España. García Rodero, Premio Nacional de Fotografía en 1996, destaca por su enfoque etnográfico y su habilidad para capturar la esencia de las tradiciones españolas, así como culturas dispares de otros países. Su trabajo documenta y ofrece una mirada profunda de las costumbres, al igual que de los momentos íntimos y de los sentimientos que brotan espontáneamente del ser humano. Cristina de Middel, galardonada con este mismo premio en 2017, más de 20 años después, es reconocida por su visión disruptiva, desafiando los límites entre la realidad y la ficción. Además de ser miembros de la agencia fotográfica Magnum Photos, la conexión entre ambas fotógrafas radica en su gran influencia en la fotografía documental. Mientras que García Rodero abrió camino con su mirada tradicional y documental, de Middel ha llevado el género a nuevos horizontes, donde la interpretación de la realidad y el potencial de la imagen para ofrecer nuevos puntos de vista desempeñan un papel fundamental. Ambas ejemplifican cómo la fotografía documental puede ser un medio para la expresión artística y el comentario social.

Keywords: Photographic Image; Documentary Photography; Artistic Expression; Women Photographers; Cristina García Rodero; Cristina de Middel.

Palabras clave: Imagen fotográfica; fotografía documental; expresión artística; mujeres fotógrafas; Cristina García Rodero; Cristina de Middel.

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction to documentary photography: between the depiction of reality and artistic interpretation.

Documentary photography has become a crucial medium for recording and narrating reality, offering images that seek to capture the “authentic” and “truthful” aspects of the human experience. However, from its origins, this discipline has oscillated between two extremes: the objective depiction of facts, and the inevitable subjectivity of the person holding the camera. This dualism has led to an ongoing debate about the boundaries between visual documentation and artistic expression.

Documentary photography was initially seen as an impartial tool, or a direct mirror of reality. The work of photographers such as Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine in the late 19th and early 20th centuries is a clear example of this approach. Their images documented the living conditions of the most disadvantaged people in the industrial cities of the United States, and they were imbued with pro-reform intentions. Riis and Hine wanted photography to operate as visual proof, or as irrefutable evidence of social injustice. This is in line with what Susan Sontag calls “the naked reality”, which is allegedly offered by the photographic medium, as “the photographer was supposedly responsible for unmasking hypocrisy and combating ignorance (...). There was something bare in the truth conveyed by a photograph, even when its author did not intend to intrude” (Sontag, 2005, p. 66).

However, this idea of documentary photography as a ‘transparent window’ into reality has been gradually challenged. John Berger emphasises that ‘every photograph is an interpretation’ (1980, p. 10), and although documentary images may capture aspects of reality, they do so through the subjective lens of the photographer. Berger made the following observations:

Every image embodies a way of seeing. Even a photograph. For photographs are not, as is often assumed, a mechanical record. Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however faintly, that the

photographer has selected that vision from an infinity of other possible visions (Berger, 1980, p. 10).

The choice of what to photograph, from what angle, and in what context adds an interpretative component that inevitably enriches or distorts the representation of the event. This is the point where documentary photography becomes intertwined with artistic creation.

However, the claim to artistic distinction was manifestly overturned in Robert Frank's *The Americans*, published in the 1950s, which became one of the most influential photography books of the 20th century, having a great impact on subsequent generations of photographers. The 83 photographs in the book offered a highly personal and subjective view of life in the United States, focusing on its most popular aspects, “owing very little to the earlier documentary tradition” (Jefrey, 1999, p. 206), and “transcending that which was clearly shown, or the unambiguous record, in order to adhere to that which was experienced” (Monge, 2007, p. 1). The formal novelty lay in the fact that the author abandoned any control over the image, leaving each one to the mercy of circumstances and ignoring the rules and norms of composition. “His images are restless; their structural organisation is loose and often seems to emerge from a casual intake of breath” (Newhall, 2002, p. 288). Likewise, Robert Frank thought that any technical accident could be useful and that nothing is unworthy of being portrayed.

In her essay entitled, *Photography at the Dock*, Abigail Solomon-Godeau (2009) argues that documentary photography cannot escape narrative construction, and that beyond objectivity there is a relationship between documentary photography and the fictionalisation of facts, as she considers photographers to be “participating observers” (Solomon-Godeau, 2009, p. 193). This is where the work of contemporary photographers such as Cristina García Rodero and Cristina de Middel come in, as they move between the documentary and the artistic. Rodero captures the truth and emotion of rituals and traditions, while de Middel plays with the idea of fiction and the reinterpretation of historical facts, as in her famous work *The Afronauts* (2012).

This debate about the accuracy of documentary photography is intensifying in the contemporary world, where photographers no longer limit themselves to recording reality, but also reinterpreting, constructing, and turning facts into fiction. Allan Sekula (Pennsylvania, 1951-Los Angeles, 2013), one of the main proponents of the new documentary photography, states in the introduction to his photobook *Photography Against the Grain* (1984) that all documentary photography has a “dual purpose”: on the one hand, it acts as an “archive” of reality, and on the other, as a “symbolic operation” that intervenes in the construction of meaning (Sekula, 1984). This critical approach to the assumed objectivity of documentary photography points out how the medium, rather than reflecting reality, adjusts it; even when objectivity is sought, reality is shaped by the camera.

Along the same lines, in his article entitled “Documentary fictions?” (1995), Ian Walker puts forth several ideas, such as the fact that objectivity in reportage is not possible, since any narrative will always be influenced by the narrator's point of view. As he points out, due to this aspect photography not only records reality, but constructs it as well. Thus, he questions whether it is possible for people to believe that what they see is true (Walker, 1995, p. 1).

For his part, André Rouillé affirms that after a century and a half of the predominance by the documentary feature of photography, the last quarter of the 20th century saw a shift in trend, which led to the emergence of what he calls “expression photography” (Rouillé, 2017, p. 39).

In light of the foregoing, we can see that documentary photography has become an area of tense struggle between objective truth and artistic creation. Far from being a simple and accurate depiction of the world, it is a medium that allows photographers to create visual narratives that fluctuate between the real and the imaginary. Through this dialectic, contemporary documentary photography is enriched and broadened, challenging traditional concepts of what a visual document really is.

With the turn of the millennium, authenticity in documentary photography was seen as increasingly fragile, determined by the interpretation of the viewer and the creative choices of the photographer (Barker, 2024). In this way, the

interaction between depiction and reality calls for a reassessment of what comprises truth in visual storytelling, suggesting that authenticity may have more to do with emotional resilience than factual accuracy (García, 2011).

1.2. A brief profile of García Rodero and de Middel

This approach to documentary filmmaking includes two prestigious Spanish photo artists of international renown, Cristina García Rodero (Puertollano, 1949) and Cristina de Middel (Alicante, 1975). Both women are far removed from the journalistic circuit and have little interest in publishing in the press, preferring to engage in long-term work without newsroom pressure, yet committed to visual narratives. Although their styles are distinct, they both operate in the domain of reality, each reflecting the changes and challenges of their time.

At barely 23 years of age, Cristina García Rodero started a project with the idea of capturing the essence of Spanish traditions, as well as religious practices and rituals, as she was aware that they were on the verge of disappearing. García Rodero had this to say:

(...) With that, I discovered a world that for me was so rich, so strange, so mysterious, happy, absurd, and ridiculous, grandiose, so creative, and so violent. There were so many things that coexisted at the same time in our traditions, that I was surprised that no one had dedicated themselves to portraying them. (Baque, 2019)

The project she undertook lasted 15 years and culminated in the book, *España Oculta*, published in 1989. García Rodero continues:

For that reason, this in-depth anthropological study became my life. At the time, I wasn't very aware of the treasure I was creating, I only cared about the work and effort I had invested in it. I didn't want to miss any little detail: for me everything, was important (Baque, 2019).

España Oculta has become a classic of contemporary photography, although other monographs published by García Rodero include *Haiti* (2001), *María Lionza, la diosa de los ojos de agua* [María Lionza, the goddess with tearful eyes] (2008), and *Transtempo* [throughout time] (2010). In 2007, Cristina

García Rodero became an associate photographer for Magnum Photos as the first Spanish person to join the agency's prestigious group of photographers. Her admission as a full member was made official in June of 2009. In an interview, García Rodero expressed her satisfaction at having been accepted, highlighting three main reasons: the fact that she is a woman, her age, and the recognition of her photographic approach that focuses on everyday life (Alcocer, 2015). It is noteworthy that her work is in the permanent collections of numerous museums, including the *Museo Nacional Reina Sofía* (Madrid), the *Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno* (Valencia), and the *Museo de las Peregrinaciones* (Santiago de Compostela). Outside Spain, some of her works appear in the following institutions: the Museum of Fine Arts (Houston; Texas); The Getty Center (Los Angeles, California); the International Center of Photography (New York); the Center for Creative Photography (Tucson, Arizona); Meadows Museum (Dallas, Texas) and the Maison Européenne de la Photographie (Lausanne, Switzerland), among others.

Cristina de Middel started out as a photojournalist, working for a decade in the daily press. Regarding this stage, de Middel believes it was the place where she really learned to be a photographer (Bermúdez, 2016). However, she got bored with it and started telling other kinds of stories, with a different language, because at a certain point she realized that the potential she saw in photography was not going to be capitalized upon by the media (Bermúdez, 2016). Other factors that influenced her decision to leave the photojournalist profession were the crisis of independence that the press began to experience, along with the realisation that she was not going to be able to change the world (Ors, 2016). In this regard, she made the following assertion: “My problem with photojournalism, as with documentary photography, is that they point out the drama or the culprit, but do not provide any solution” (Bermúdez, 2016). Through her photographic projects, Cristina de Middel tries to generate debate regarding the norms of portrayal and the documentary value of photography. For example, in *Antípodes* [opposite extremes] (2016), she reflects on landscape photography and how it always reduces the real experience.

In 2017, she won the National Photography Prize in Spain, and in 2022 she became president of the Magnum Agency, the first Spanish person to hold this position. Among her main works are the following: *The Afnauts* (2012), which was a big success; her next publication, *Polyspam* (2013), was self-published, like the previous one; *Muchismo* (2015), published by La Fábrica; and *The Perfect Man* (2017), also issued by La Fábrica, in which she questions the media discourse on India through humour.

2. State of the issue

In order to understand the complexity inherent to documentary photography, the first step is to define exactly what documentary photography is. Regarding this term, the famous photographer Walker Evans made the following statement in an interview with Leslie Katz:

When you say “documentary”, you have to be careful... What you do might have a documentary style, but art is useless in this regard, whereas a document is useful. Therefore, art is never a document, although it can have that style. And that's what I do. I'm called a documentary photographer, but there's a very subtle distinction (Lemagny & Rouillé, 1988, p. 211).

This quote from Evans has been used as a starting point due to his ability to illustrate the ambiguity surrounding documentary photography, and the inherent confusion in the term. It also raises the long-debated question of whether a documentary can, in essence, be considered an art form.

The first problem we have encountered is the lack of a clear definition regarding the term “documentary image”, as shown by the number of different labels it receives, such as streetphoto, straightphoto, documentary photo, photonews, and so on. The same occurs with documentary films, which are often called living cinema, *cinéma vérité*, direct cinema, docudrama, and *cinéma du réel*, or newsreels in English. However, in the present article we will not focus on the cinematographic image, but rather on the photographic image.

According to Professor Susperregui, one of the keys to documentary photography is the fact that its creation is done with an intention. This is how the professor describes the situation: “When a photograph initially has a documentary style, it means the image has been created with a precisely defined intention” (2000, p. 261). However, it is also true that in the field of photography, this documentary intention did not emerge until the beginning of the twentieth century.

On the other hand, Newhall adds the nuance of testimony. In his view, “The authenticity inherent to a photograph can give it special value as a testimony, which is referred to as documentary” (2002, p. 235). As pointed out by Guerrero (2018), the documentary photographer makes use of the testimonial power of photography. They take advantage of its nature of leaving an imprint, and they benefit from the fact that the mechanical component of photography makes the facts more credible, and that photography is socially accepted for its aura of certainty.

Based on the foregoing, the term *documentary photography* refers to photos taken with the aim of recording reality, preserving the accuracy of facts, and not compromising the truthfulness of the story, rather than expressing the photographer's deepest feelings. However, it is crucial to recognise that the work of many documentary photographers manages to integrate both aspects.

Along these lines, authors such as Professor Román Gubern consider that there are two ways of envisioning photography: on the one hand, as a means of reproducing a moment, in which the creative coefficient is reduced to a minimum, and on the other hand, as a means of expression in which the creative coefficient is highly relevant (Gubern, 2017, p. 22). However, the question asked by more contemporary authors is whether it is possible for these two concepts to coexist in the same photograph.

Nowadays, it is fully acknowledged that an image is not reality, but a depiction of reality, and the greater its degree of symbolism, the closer its relationship with the reality it reflects. However, as Professor Alejandra Walzer states, “Who is to verify that reality must necessarily refer to that which has a visible existence, or in other words, evidence?” (2021, p. 43). Reality is not only

external, but also involves the one who takes the image and the one who looks at it (Walzer, 2021). Delving deeper into this idea, we can assert that a photograph does not simply show reality, but is an interpretation made by the photographer, who present their personal vision by selecting features, the framing, and the lighting. The photographer is the one who creates the scene, and not the other way round (Parreño, 2005).

Therefore, photographic images represent a construction of the world based on the photographer's paradigm, which is transmitted to each viewer, who in turn constructs and interprets the image from their own perspective (Torres-Mestey & Do Montes, 2023). Consequently, both the gaze of both the photographer and the viewer, or “image reader”, are involved in the interpretation.

Fiction and subjectivity allow photographers to express their own interpretation and experience, thereby enriching the visual narrative and offering new ways to connect emotionally with the viewer. By incorporating fictional elements, photographers can explore complex stories or abstract issues that are difficult to depict in a direct way through strictly factual documentation, offering new perspectives (León, 2022).

In recent decades, it has become complicated, and in many cases unnecessary, to draw a clear distinction between the purely creative and the strictly documentary. Moreover, the concept of the photographer is constantly evolving due to the gradual progression of technology, which has led the discipline of photography to question itself. We can affirm that there are no pre-established ways of using photography. For example, Cristina de Middel considers that both the artist and the photographer have to make their opinion known, without this implying that it is necessarily the truth (Bermúdez, 2016).

There is also some confusion and disbelief on the part of image consumers about the work that photographers have traditionally done. The link between the actual appearance of the world and the real image has been broken. In this regard, Cristina de Middel believes it is necessary to “educate the audience in images so that they know what they consume and what they see”. Moreover, she adds that “photography is both a very useful and very dangerous tool, but there is a lack of visual education, although I suppose future generations will not have

this problem” (Ors, 2016). The work of Joan Fontcuberta is in line with this critical type of work regarding the image, and he points out that in his work, whether conceptual or experimental, “What I do is to comment on documentary photography, or in other words, I analyse how information is transmitted” (Fontcuberta, 2001, p. 37). Especially noteworthy was his project entitled *Sputnik* (1997), in which he drew attention to the danger of the credibility of photography and criticised forgery. It was a laborious work, which took him more than six years to complete, and in which he initially concealed his authorship in order to give it greater credibility. Through images and text, he tells a story with traces of plausibility about a Russian astronaut who disappears in space. The aim was for the viewer to question their own trust in the photograph. “What I am pursuing is precisely this notion of the work as a screen on which everyone can project themselves in an individualised way. I am interested in establishing a dialogue; for me this is the goal that the artist must pursue” (Fontcuberta, 2001, p. 87).

For decades, it has been reported that both the media and documentary photography are in crisis, even though they have always been seen as “eyewitnesses to the testimony of real and important events” (Baeza, 2009). Baeza considers that we are currently witnessing “a genuine appropriation of the documentary image” in the press (Baeza, 2009). As the media are increasingly controlled by a small number of groups, they are striving to control the enormous potential of the image. Therefore, authors such as Cristina de Middel and Joan Fontcuberta are tying hard to convey their scepticism, “in order to make people less submissive to those powerful media” (Fontcuberta, 2001, p. 94).

With regard to the academic world, given that Cristina García Rodero has had a long and successful professional career, numerous scholars and researchers have taken an interest in her work, notably García de León (1996), Christian (2004), Andrés Rojo (2006), Ramos (2017), Perera (2016), and Guerrero Glez-Valerio (2019, 2018, 2012, 2011, 2010). As for Cristina de Middel, the research carried out by Torralba bears mentioning, which is entitled, “*Cristina de Middel y el fotolibro. Humor, subjetividad, y libertad como distintivos de autoría*”,

[Cristina de Middel and the photobook. Humour, subjectivity, and freedom as hallmarks of authorship]. The book is part of the R&D project known as, “*Mujeres artistas en España, 1804-1939*”. [women artists in Spain, 1804-1939]. In addition, Arquero and Deltell published a work entitled, “*Parodias en la fotografía actual: Chema Madoz, Joan Fontcuberta y Cristina de Middel*” (2021), which deals with the subject of humour, focusing on several Spanish photographers, including de Middel herself.

3. Objectives

As previously shown, it has now been confirmed that for decades the boundary between strictly documentary and creative photography have become increasingly blurred and tenuous. On the one hand, we have witnessed the “rediscovery” of press photographers, whose work is the subject of major retrospectives in museums and galleries, thereby becoming documents that acquire the status of art. On the other hand, we have confirmed that the images of photographers who define themselves as artists are integrated into journalistic, scientific, and sociological domains. In view of the foregoing, the main objective of this research is demonstrate the evolution of the concept of documentary photography and its relationship with real life. To illustrate this transformation, we will focus on the work of two women photographers whose work falls under the heading of documentary photography: Cristina García Rodero, and Cristina de Middel. The difference in time of more than 40 years regarding the majority of their work will allow us to pinpoint the changes that have taken place.

The work of Cristina García Rodero and Cristina de Middel allows us to explore the tensions inherent to contemporary documentary photography. Although both photographers start by observing reality, their approaches reveal nuances that reflect the diversity and complexity of the genre. With an established career in anthropological and ethnographic photography, García Rodero is renowned for her ability to capture the intangible: the emotions, expressions and moments that reveal the essence of the cultures and humans she portrays. Although

deeply linked to documenting reality, her work is inherently personal and emotional in its point of view, which turns each image into a unique experience.

For her part, Cristina de Middel takes a much more disruptive approach, where the intermingling of fiction and reality challenges the limits of the documentary. Her work not only records events, but also experiments with the narrative and the viewer's perception, subverting the expectation of objectivity inherent to classic documentary picture-taking. By including elements of the fictional narrative, de Middel creates a space in which the real and imaginary intertwine, thereby casting doubt on the idea that documentary photography must be a true reflection of the world. In this sense, she shares the ideas of Fontcuberta, who considers that “there are still authoritarian elements that impose a certain notion of truth or trust in certain messages” (Fontcuberta, 2001, p. 89).

Therefore, this article sets out to analyse how both of these women photographers, through their divergent careers and styles, represent complementary approaches that enrich the documentary genre. While García Rodero explores the emotional depth of reality, de Middel challenges the boundary between the truth and what is created, proposing a reinterpretation of the documentary from a more experimental point of view. This analysis will allow us to understand not only their individual contributions, but also the dialogue that both women have with modern documentary photography, a genre that has evolved to include both objective evidence and artistic creation.

4. Methodology

To carry out this type of research study, we will use a qualitative methodology based on comparative visual analysis, content analysis, and critical theory, with an interdisciplinary approach that combines art theory, visual studies, and socio-historical analysis.

Firstly, we will carry out a bibliographic and documentary review in order to lay the theoretical and conceptual foundations of documentary photography, as well as its fluctuation between evidence and artistic creation. To this end, we will use a strategy that involves a literature review to address the evolution of

documentary photography, the role of subjectivity in photography, and the convergence between documentary and artistic aspects. We will use key sources such as books, academic articles, essays and interviews related to documentary photography, image theory and the work of García Rodero and de Middel. Authors such as John Berger, Susan Sontag, and Abigail Solomon-Godeau are essential references in the analysis of visual representation. We will also conduct a critical analysis of the sources identified, especially the key theories on objectivity and subjectivity in documentary photography, and how these have been reinterpreted by the women photographers under study.

Secondly, we will perform a comparative visual analysis with the aim of comparing and contrasting the style, techniques and intentions of both photographers through an analysis of their works. To do so, we will first select the works. We will choose a representative sample of the works of both photographers. As far as Cristina García Rodero is concerned, it will be her photobook known as *España Oculta* (1989) [the hidden Spain]. Not only is this a compilation of 15 years of work, but it comprises her first work and is the one that allowed her to become internationally renowned. In the same year the work was published, she won first prize for the best photography book at the 30th *Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie* [30th international photographic convention] in Arles, France. Today, *España Oculta* is considered a classic of contemporary photography, as evidenced by its recent reissue. As for Cristina de Middel, *The Afronauts* (2012) was chosen to be studied due to its being her first publication and the work that launched her to fame, which has allowed her to continue working along these lines.

Thirdly, we will undertake an iconographic and iconological analysis in line with the theories of Erwin Panofsky (1998). From the point of view of iconography, we will describe the images, content and the themes that both photographers address, and try to identify what they are depicting as well as the socio-historical context of the images. With regard to iconology, we will interpret the images beyond what they show on the surface by examining the formal elements such as composition, light, and framing, as well as their symbolic or artistic meaning. At this point, it is essential to ask ourselves what contribution each

photographer has made to the documentary discourse as a result of their aesthetic and technical decisions.

Finally, we will carry out a stylistic comparison. In other words, we will compare the approaches of both photographers in terms of the interrelation between documentary and artistic aspects, the use of colour, light, framing and other visual resources, and the photographic narrative, or how the two women organize their photographic series and what kind of story or discourse they create.

5. Results

5.1. Cristina García Rodero and her work, *España Oculta* [hidden Spain]

5.1.1 From an iconographic point of view

The book entitled, *España Oculta* (1989), published by Lunwerg, contains 126 photographs taken since García Rodero began her photographic career in the last century in the 1970s and 80s. Religious festivals dominate, many of which celebrate different aspects of Holy Week. In presenting images of a rural world on the verge of extinction, Cristina García Rodero focuses on traditions and rituals, because in her words, “They contain the history of each town, and the needs of the people” (Moreno, 2000). In this way, the accomplished photographer manages to immortalise festivities that were in the process of disappearing. Her aim was to disseminate Spain’s cultural traditions and make them known. Nevertheless, she also states that what inspired her work for more than five decades was the desire to preserve the collective memory of the country (Cordero, 2024).

With regard to the historical and social context, we can point out that despite her youth, García Rodero was able to go against the flow, because in those days reportage was hardly practised, nor was there any interest in rural life at that time – in fact, it was quite the opposite. In Spain, the dominant photographic trend followed other paths, focusing on experimental photography.

5.1.2. From an iconological point of view

With this work, García Rodero took a journey through Spanish festivals and customs by using the portraits of their protagonists, especially in search of expressions, a face with an open mouth, or the glimpse of a fleeting glance (Guerrero, 2019, p. 106). Likewise, she needs to be close to what she photographs. One reason for this is her short stature. The second reason is that she feels “a psychic need to see, hear, and be moved”, and because “proximity is contagious” (Cordero, 2024). Moreover, this is why there is an abundance of medium and close-up shots in this work (f. 1).



F1. Cristina García Rodero, *¡Viva el Santo Cristo!* [Long live Christ the Lord], 1978 © Cristina García Rodero

Regarding formal elements, it should be pointed out that all of García Rodero's work stands out for its formal style, which is due to her education in Fine Arts (f. 2). All the images in this work are in black and white, making the result more timeless, suggestive, and dramatic. Cristina García Rodero chose black and white due to its more sober nature, and because it lacks the sensuality of colour. Therefore, it enhances the photographer's communication and requires the image to be well-structured, whereas colour can be distracting. There is an abundance of clear, crisp images of one or two characters, in which the portrait is the main focus. She is a framing photographer who is highly demanding of

herself, and she likes to close her compositions at the top and bottom, using light and skies to do so. In her early years, symmetry and mass balance were frequent.

Lighting is also a key feature of her work. She uses it to highlight the most important aspects of each image. She photographs while the action unfolds, looking for movement, action, expressions, and she must be very fast to capture these images (Guerrero, 2019).



F2. Cristina García Rodero, *El danzante azul* [the blue dancer], 1980 © Cristina García Rodero.

5.2. Cristina de Middel and her work, *The Afronauts*

5.2.1. From an iconographic point of view

The Afronauts is a compilation of 88 images. The size of the book is 17 x 23 cm (7 x 9 inches), and only a thousand copies were printed, as it was self-published. The work tells a story, and is therefore a fictionalised narrative, in which the real and the imagined are intermingled. The opening page is based on a true story, which is a space programme ideated by a high school teacher in Zambia in 1964. Cristina de Middel uses this true story to create a fictional tale full of humour. Thus, she uses models and recreations of images. However, in the background of this story, de Middel is trying to draw attention to the image and stereotypes we have of African countries.

The book opens with a picture of a desert landscape. This is followed by a hand-written letter, in English, in which a Zambian civil servant is writing to his superior telling him about the teacher's project and asking for money to finance it. The photographs, most of which are arranged on the odd-numbered pages, have no footnotes, captions, nor any explanation. In the book, the photographs alternate with other elements that follow one after another, such as a blueprint of a space base, a newspaper article, and another hand-written letter, which somehow puts the finishing touch on the story, as it answers the first letter that appeared at the beginning. As such, the viewer does not know what is true, and what is not true.



F3. Cristina de Middel, *The Afronauts* 25, 2012. © Cristina de Middel.

5.2.2 From an iconological point of view

In this section, we describe how de Middel takes the clichés of how we see the space race, such as astronauts in space suits, spaceships, blueprints, sophisticated control rooms, etc., and she contrasts these images with the clichés of how we see Africa, such as elephants, colour, exotic costumes, and a considerable amount of poverty, and she mixes them all together (f. 3 and 4). As Cristina de Middel acknowledges, it was a daring project in which she sought to address clichés and stereotypes, or in other words, the stereotyped images that we conjure in our minds due to the influence of the media regarding everything we don't know. In an interview, de Middel herself underscored the strategy: “What I do is look at the media, see how they explain the world to us, and where

I think there is a lack of information, or when I believe it is badly explained, and I go there” (Bermúdez, 2016). In this particular case, she managed to start a debate on the portrayal of Africa in the media. In another interview, de Middel continued on the same topic: “For me, it was perfect. There was the debate between reality and fiction in photography, which interested me, and there was a different point of view of Africa as well” (Ors, 2016). With regard to this idea of stereotypes, which is of such interest to de Middel, we can see that she shares the ideas of Ian Walker, who points out that in documentary photography, “stories are constructed by the winners”, in the sense that we impose our vision on their lives (Walker, 1995, p. 3).

Regarding formal elements, the photographs are in a square format and in colour, although there are some alternating black-and-white, double-page spreads. The colour of the photographs is not highly saturated, so they are somewhat reminiscent of the colour of photographs from the 1960s. She tends to place the main character in the centre (f.3), while the cloudy skies are a resource of great artistic value.



F4. Cristina de Middel, *The Afronauts* 51, 2012. © Cristina de Middel.

6. Discussion

With a generational difference of more than 40 years, the two women photographers have in common a Fine Arts education, a tireless capacity to work, a frenetic work pace, and a renowned reputation inside and outside of

Spain. Another similarity is that they do not confine themselves to photographing only in Spain, as they have travelled and shot photos all over the world. Unlike the early documentary photographers, the intention of these two women is not to set the world straight or change it. Instead, in the case of Cristina García Rodero, her aim has been to present the festivities, rituals and changes that have taken place in Spain over the last 50 years. As for Cristina de Middel, her focus has always been to show certain incongruities in Spanish society.

Both women have fought against the information monopoly by trying to find other channels of exhibition and information diffusion which, in the words of Cristina de Middel, “are not so tainted or politicised” (Bermúdez, 2016). Hence, she chose to make a photobook. In this regard, as de Middel muses, “I think that with the photobook, you impose the artistic experience on the spectator in a much softer way, and I find that very interesting” (Bermúdez, 2016).

Cristina García Rodero photographs festivals and rituals, yet she does not merely photograph these events, as she focuses mainly the human behaviour during such events, exploring its duality and contradictions, as well as its expression and body language. The renowned photographer put it this way:

I want to talk about life through a specific instant. I want to talk about what’s important for human beings, about similarities, and about small differences, because in the end, the most important things are the same for all human beings, in any country, and in any race. (Moreno, 2000).

Thus, as far as Cristina García Rodero is concerned, the camera records events, thereby providing testimony and becoming a document. However, her work does not stop there. What is striking is the strength and intensity that she manages to transmit by way of her images.

Through photography, Cristina García Rodero seeks to communicate with what is in front of her, apprehend it with her senses, savour it, and transmit it to others (Moreno 2000). Something that naturally inherent to García Rodero is her desire to know other people. What drives her is to make that discovery (Peralta & Menéndez, 2019, p. 69).

By contrast, in the case of Cristina de Middel, her images are impregnated with fictitious elements, as they are based on the exploration of unreal worlds. It could be said that de Middel shares the ideas of Susan Sontag who, in her work entitled *On Photography*, pointed out that “photographs in themselves explain nothing. They are never-ending invitations to deduction, speculation and fantasy” (2005, p. 42). Based on this premise, Cristina de Middel increases the complexity even more by resorting to imaginary components. This is why she uses both staging and photographs taken from the real world, which she incorporates arbitrarily. Likewise, she uses colour and black and white indiscriminately in her work, even adding colours that are not necessarily real.

Cristina de Middel believes that documentary photography is simply not enough to explain certain things, which is why she resorts to fiction. One might say that she agrees with Susan Sontag who said, “The camera fragments, controls, and obscures reality” (2005, p. 41). Furthermore, thanks to her interplay between fiction and reality, de Middel breaks the stereotype of portraying and distancing herself from the issue. In her own words, she explains as follows:

There are different things; photography and truth, and photography and reality. Both truth and reality are open philosophical debates to which no one, as far as I know, has come to one single conclusion. And even with my camera, I haven't come to one conclusion. But again, what I can do is open the debate and experiment with it it (Bermúdez 2016).

De Middel employs subversive documentary methods that blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, encouraging viewers to question the authenticity of the visual narratives they see (Bersch & Grant, 2011). It could be said that her work is located in the realm of post-photography (Catalá, 2011), and is aligned with the emergence of new visual forms that broaden the definition of documentary beyond traditional photography.

Although she has a degree in Fine Arts, Cristina de Middel has distanced herself from the language of art because she believes that nobody understands what they say, and that artists are not good communicators. In this regard, she points out that her priority in artistic expression is to be understood (Bermúdez, 2016). Through her work, she seeks a connection with the world in which she lives, and

she tries to understand and explain it through a language that is appealing. She searches for a different way of telling stories, resorting to provocation and, at times, irreverence.

Throughout the corpus of de Middel's work, the presence of humour stands out, with a gaze that laughs at everyday events and their absurdities, as “she manages to mainstream the language of humour in contemporary documentary photography, where she also introduces conceptual practices” (Arquero & Deltell, 2021, p. 199). Thus, irony is a constant feature of her work, yet de Middel is also known for her transgression and her ability to surprise the viewer through her work.

Going even further, de Middel believes that the photographer must express their own opinion, thereby making a clear break with the assumption of objectivity in documentary photography. Furthermore, she considers that “we have to stop asking photography to be real, because no one asks this of literature, nor of cinema” (Carazo, 2021). In this regard, de Middel thinks along the same lines as Joan Fontcuberta, who made the following comment: “It’s a question of finding out where that dose of confidence that photography used to have has gone, and confirming whether or not it is, in fact, worthy of such a mission” (Fontcuberta, 2001, p. 93).

In short, the images of Cristina de Middel combine aesthetic quality with a critical will, while at the same time proposing a subjective interpretation of the contemporary world (Torralba, 2017).

7. Conclusions

This study has enabled the authors to confirm how Cristina García Rodero and Cristina de Middel, despite being photographers who have lived in very different periods, have made photography a medium for personal expression, research, and formal experimentation. As travelling photographers, both women have left their mark on the profession through portrayals that are very much in tune with the times in which they have lived, while maintaining a rigorous commitment both to their concerns, as well as to their inner worlds.

With over 50 years dedicated to photography, García Rodero focuses on photojournalism, which demands speed and a good eye. Through her images she labors to convey the highest degree of truth, while at the same time expressing her personal self through the photos.

For her part, Cristina de Middel has dismantled the deep interdependence that has historically existed between images and reality, moving toward an exploratory autonomy. She has clearly broken away from the concept of imprint, testimony, and authenticity that traditionally accompanied documentary photography. Her innovative contribution lies in breaking with the stereotype of documentary photography as a true reflection of the world. Instead, she advocates the use of fiction as a narrative tool.

Likewise, de Middel also exemplifies a tendency to search for new languages that are not only visually appealing, but that make an impact as well, and are able to spark debate by exploring alternative ways of storytelling in which fiction and humour play a role. Moreover, she engages and challenges the viewer by confronting them with their own clichés and stereotypes. In Cristina de Middel's work, the audience takes on a very important role. This is also reflected in her preference for the photobook format, as she believes it offers many possibilities. As pointed out by Bello et al. (2012), the tactile and interactive nature of photobooks enriches the reading experience, making it more immersive.

In any case, Cristina de Middel's work represents a significant transformation in the field of documentary photography. It casts doubt on traditional depictions and uses innovative strategies that subvert conventional imagery. However, de Middel is not the only contemporary photographer to break with the traditional codes of documentary photography. As such, this appears to be a shift in trend where photographs no longer serve to reaffirm and authenticate, which have been its social and cultural roles, but instead, they increasingly focus on the experiences they produce in the viewer.

The increasing importance of subjectivity and fiction in the realm of photography raises the need for new ethical guidelines, as it is crucial for photographers to be transparent about the use of fictional elements in order to maintain the public's trust.

On the other hand, one positive aspect of this fusion between reality and fiction is that it drives innovation in documentary photography, allowing its creators to experiment with new techniques and approaches. As a result, this is yielding more creative and provocative works that are moving away from conventions and traditions.

All of the above is leading to a potential shift in how the public perceives and values documentary photography. Subjectivity in documentary photography invites the viewer to question and reflect on the nature of reality and truth. As noted by Fontcuberta (2016), in this way the public has become more critically aware, and we are witnessing a growing scepticism and distrust toward the notion of photography as solid evidence.

Bibliographic references

- Alcocer, S. (29 de septiembre de 2015). La sociedad avanza y es cada vez menos machista; la fotografía no. *El País*.
https://elpais.com/cultura/2015/01/31/actualidad/1422709948_935057.html
- Arquero, I. y Deltell, L. (2021). Parodias en la fotografía actual: Chema Madoz, Joan Fontcuberta y Cristina de Middel. En M. Blanco y N. Parejo (Eds.), *Historias de la fotografía, siglo XXI* (pp. 185-205). Comunicación social ediciones y publicaciones.
- Baeza, P. (agosto de 2009). Fotografía documental: decreto de crisis. Las imágenes controladas de los mercaderes. *Le Monde diplomatique*,
<https://mondiplo.com/fotografia-documental-decreto-de-crisis>
- Baque, I. (2019). *España Oculta: Hidden Spain. Magnum Photos. In conversation with Irene Baque*. <https://www.magnumphotos.com/arts-culture/society-arts-culture/cristina-garcia-rodero-espana-oculta/>
- Barker, M. (2024). Verdades superiores y las llamadas mentiras: la autenticidad animada del documental. *Revista de la Sociedad de Antropología Visual*, 40(1), 25-38. doi: 10.1111/var.12315
- Bersch, A. y Grant, L. (2011). De testigo a participante: la creación de un documental subversivo. En A. Freund y A. Thomson (Eds.), *Oral History and Photography. Palgrave Studies in Oral History* (pp. 187-201). Palgrave Macmillan.
https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230120099_11
- Berger, J. (1980). *Ways of seeing*. Penguin Books.
- Bermúdez, R. (5 de junio de 2016). Cristina de Middel: “El fotógrafo y el artista tienen que dar su opinión, que no es la verdad”. *Clavo ardiendo*.
<https://clavoardiendo-magazine.com/mundofoto/entrevistas/cristina-de-middel/>

- Català, J. M. (2011). Reflujos de lo visible. La expansión post-fotográfica del documental. *AdComunica. Revista Científica de Estrategias, Tendencias e Innovación en Comunicación*, (2), 43-62. doi:10.6035/26
- Cordero, D. (23 de abril de 2024). Cristina García Rodero, premio a la trayectoria profesional: “Las fotografías son el momento que le arranco a la muerte”. *El País*. <https://elpais.com/comunicacion/2024-04-23/cristina-garcia-rodero-premio-a-la-trayectoria-profesional-las-fotografias-son-el-momento-que-le-arranco-a-la-muerte.html>.
- De Middel, C. (2017). *The perfect man*. La Fábrica editorial.
- De Middel, C. (2012). *The Afnonauts*. Self-published.
- Di Bello, P., Wilson, C. y Zamir, S. (2012). *The Photobook: From Talbot to Ruscha and Beyond*. I.B. Tauris.
- Fontcuberta, J. (2016). *La furia de las imágenes. Notas sobre la postfotografía*. Galaxia Gutenberg.
- Fontcuberta, J. (2001). *Joan Fontcuberta habla con Cristina Zelich*. La Fábrica. Conversaciones con Fotógrafos.
- García, E. C. (2011). *Photography as Fiction*. Getty Publications.
- García Rodero, C. (2023). *Ser fotógrafa, un regalo de la vida*. J de J Editores.
- García Rodero, C. (1989). *España Oculta*. Lunwerg.
- Guerrero Glez.-Valerio, B. (2019). Cristina García Rodero: España Oculta. *Razón y Palabra*, 23(106), 97-123. <http://revistarazonypalabra.org/index.php/ryp/article/view/1485>
- Guerrero Glez.-Valerio, B. (2018). Fotografía documental y la utopía. *Miguel Hernández. Communication Journal*, 9(2), 293-307. <https://doi.org/10.21134/mhcj.voi9.251>
- Gubern, R. (2017). Medios formativos. En G. Indij y S. Silva (Comps), *Clic! Fotografía y percepción* (pp. 21-23). La marca editora.
- Jeffrey, I. (1999). *La fotografía*. Ediciones Destino.
- Lemagny, J. C. y Rouillé, A. (1988). *Historia de la fotografía*. Martínez Roca.
- León, A. (2022). La ficción en la fotografía documental: Entrevista a Federico Estol. *FOT*, 5(2), 88–101. <https://doi.org/10.19083/fot.v5i2.1751>
- Monge, A. (4 de septiembre de 2007). *¿Qué cambió Robert Frank en la fotografía?* [Sesión de conferencia]. Alianza Francesa, Buenos Aires, Argentina. https://p.pdfdokument.com/1-que-cambio-robert-frank-en-la-fotografia-alberto-a-_5ee87759097c4733388b917a.html
- Moreno Pachón, S. (30 de diciembre de 2000). Me gustaría que Madrid fuese lo menos ciudad posible. *El País*. https://elpais.com/diario/2000/12/30/madrid/978179071_850215.htm
- Newhall, B. (2002). *Historia de la fotografía*. Gustavo Gili.
- Ors, J. (27 de mayo de 2016). Cristina de Middel: “Me siento cómoda en los lugares sin ninguna identidad”. *La Razón*. <https://www.larazon.es/cultura/cristina-de-middel-me-siento-comoda-en-los-lugares-sin-ninguna-identidad-LH12733594/#.Ttt1UrV8xbIqvQo>
- Panofsky, E. (1998). *Estudios sobre iconología*. Alianza Editorial.

- Parreño, J. M. (2005). *“Miradas de mujer”, 20 fotografías españolas*. Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Esteban Vicente.
- Peralta, M. y Menéndez, M. I. (2019). Cristina García Rodero y la fotografía documental: antropología visual en España Oculta. En F. J. García Ramos y U. Felten (Eds.), *Fotografía (Femenino; Plural): visiones, ensayos y otros escritos sobre mujeres fotógrafas* (pp. 65-90). Fragua.
- Rouillé, A. (2017). *La fotografía, entre documento y arte contemporáneo*. Editorial Herder.
- Sekula, A. (1984). *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973-1983*. College of Art and Design.
- Solomon-Godeau, A. (2009). *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Sontang, S. (2005). *On Photography*. Rossetta Books.
- Susperregui, J. M. (2000). *Fundamentos de la fotografía*. Universidad del País Vasco.
- Torralla Gállego, B. (2017). Cristina de Middel y el fotolibro. Humor, subjetividad y libertad como distintivos de autoría. Proyecto I+D+i *Mujeres artistas en España, 1804-1939*. Financiado por Ministerio de Economía, Industria y Competitividad (MINECO), la Agencia Estatal de Investigación (AEI) y el Fondo de Desarrollo Regional (FEDER).
- Torres-Mestey, V. y Do Montes Ribas, L. (2023). La paradoja de la fotografía: entre la supuesta realidad y la ficción inherente. *Cuadernos del Centro de Estudios de Diseño y Comunicación*, (191), 131-137. <https://doi.org/10.18682/cdc.vi191.9551>
- Walker, I. (1995). Documentary fictions? *Photography in the Visual Arts, Art and Design*, (44), 1-8. https://ianwalkerphoto.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Ian_Walker_Documentary_Fictions.pdf
- Walzer, A. (2021). En torno a la definición de imagen como representación de la realidad. *Doxa Comunicación. Revista Interdisciplinar de estudios de comunicación y Ciencias Sociales*, (33), 39-51. <https://doi.org/10.31921/doxacom.n33a924>