

**Humanist documentary photography and magical realism in
Cristina García Rodero's *Transtempo***

**Documentalismo humanista y realismo mágico en la fotografía en
Transtempo de Cristina García Rodero**

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Abstract:

This article presents an interdisciplinary analysis of *Transtempo* (2010) by Spanish photographer Cristina García Rodero, one of the leading figures in contemporary humanist documentary photography. To explore the multiple dimensions of her work, which documents traditions, festivals and rituals in Spain, a novel analytical method is proposed that combines four methodological approaches: visual-semiotic deconstruction, anthropological-contextual analysis, critical conceptual interpretation and historical-artistic analysis. The analysis reflects on how García Rodero interprets humanist documentary photography by capturing both the everyday and the extraordinary, using a visual language that, unlike other interpretations, this research considers is closely aligned with magical realism. Furthermore, the article explores how *Transtempo* represents the search for meaning in human experience while managing to eternalize customs and traditions that are on the verge of disappearing.

Resumen:

Este artículo ofrece un análisis interdisciplinario de la obra *Transtempo* (2010) de la fotógrafa española Cristina García Rodero, una de las figuras más destacadas del documentalismo humanista contemporáneo. Para explorar las múltiples dimensiones de su trabajo, que documenta tradiciones, festividades y rituales en España, se propone un inédito método de análisis que combina cuatro enfoques metodológicos: la deconstrucción visual semiológica, el análisis antropológico-contextual, la definición conceptual crítica y el enfoque histórico-artística. El análisis reflexiona acerca de cómo García Rodero interpreta el documentalismo humanista al capturar tanto lo cotidiano como al representar lo extraordinario, utilizando un lenguaje visual que, a diferencia de otras interpretaciones, esta investigación considera que se acerca al realismo mágico. Asimismo, se reflexiona sobre cómo *Transtempo* representa la búsqueda de significado en la experiencia humana mientras que logra eternizar costumbres y tradiciones que están en vías de desaparecer.

Keywords:

Cristina García Rodero; humanist documentary photography; interdisciplinary analysis; magical realism; women photographers; traditions and rituals.

Palabras clave:

Cristina García Rodero; documentalismo humanista; análisis interdisciplinario; realismo mágico; mujeres fotógrafas; tradiciones y rituales.

1. Introduction

According to Andrei Tarkovsky, every artist is “a product of the reality that surrounds them” (2002, p. 193). This thought, connected to photographer Ugarte Calleja’s reflection (2016, p.19) on the function of images as cultural operatives, being “essential in the way we understand culture and as artifacts in the construction of our identity as a society”, reinforces the historiographic function of photography and its value as a cultural epistemological element. From this conception of visual art, the work of photographer Cristina García Rodero allows us to understand the symbolic dimension of the social and its representation and preservation of cultural identities and traditional practices over time. Her work is a unique visual testimony of folklore, rituals and rural daily life, both in Spain and in other parts of the world; as stated by Arocena *et al*: “García Rodero portrays the rituals, uses, customs and beliefs of rural Spain in the 70s and 80s” (2023, p. 215).

Renowned for her ability to capture the emotional intensity and authenticity of her subjects, García Rodero has established herself as one of the leading figures in Spanish photography (Guerrero González-Valerio, 2020; Soler-Campillo and Marzal-Felici, 2022). A specialist in documenting society (Peralta Barrios and Menéndez Menéndez, 2018) and defined as a photojournalist (Uta A. Felten, 2020), her gaze “has been attentive to the inflections of bodies, to the shadows of smiles and to the fragments of scenes within other scenes” (Olivares, 2002, p. 50).

García Rodero, born in Puertollano, Ciudad Real, in 1949, began her photography career in the mid-1970s in a Spain where the role of women in photography was more in front of the lens than behind it (López Mondéjar, 1996). Growing up in a rural environment in the midst of the Spanish dictatorship would influence her interest in documenting the traditions and rituals that define the cultural identity of a Spain that was slowly undergoing a process of sociopolitical change and openness to the world. She studied Fine Arts at the Complutense University of Madrid, during which time her interest in photography began to awaken. Since then, she has developed a deeply personal style that, as she herself describes (García Rodero in Nelson, 2023), was initially self-taught. Her work combines a

unique artistic sensitivity with a deeply anthropological perspective. This anthropological character, capable of highlighting individuality in the midst of the collective, is, according to academics, one of the most notable features of her work (Olivares, 2002).

Her best-known work is *España Oculta* (Hidden Spain) (1989), which is recognised as one of the most important photographic collections of the 20th century in Spain. In it, García Rodero compiles 15 years of work documenting festivals, customs and popular traditions in various regions of Spain through a collection of 126 photographs (Soler-Campillo and Marzal-Felici, 2022).

Throughout her career, García Rodero has received numerous awards, including the Spanish National Photography Award in 1996, the Gold Medal for Merit in Fine Arts in 2005 (Xunta de Galicia, 2011), PhotoEspaña's Bartolomé Ros Award in 2000 and the World Press Photo Award in 1993, 1997 and 2008 (Hoy es Arte, 2011). Her membership of the prestigious Magnum Photos agency since 2009 makes her the first Spanish photographer to form part of this organisation, highlighting the transcendence and international recognition of her work, especially taking into account "the scarce presence of women in the legendary Magnum agency" (Uta A. Felten, 2020, p. 491). Inspired by the humanist photography of Henri Cartier-Bresson, considered the father of photojournalism (Bautista and Roig, 2016), and the ethnographic works of figures such as Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange (Katz, 2004), García Rodero adopted a style that combines artistic aesthetics with rigorous documentary work focused on people and the idiosyncrasies of their contexts and spontaneous realities.

In terms of subject matter, although she is primarily known for her aforementioned work on rural life, traditions and popular festivals in Spain, her international work also includes the documentation of religious and cultural rituals in countries such as Haiti, India, Georgia and Italy. García Rodero herself shuns the label of *photographer of ancient traditions*, as she has also captured present-day traditions and rituals all over the world (García Rodero in Nelson, 2023). She is a photographer who is passionate about exploring universal themes such as the relationship between body and spirit, pain and collective representations of celebration and religion. Her work has taken her to Europe,

Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, Venezuela, India and Ethiopia, where she has captured significant images, reflected in highly relevant and widely read books.

In *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky states that “the one thing that mankind has ever created in a spirit of self-surrender is the artistic image” (2002, p. 261). This reflection highlights the unique value of art as a genuine act, a concept that is reflected in García Rodero’s photographic series in which she expresses an honest and emotional commitment to the representation of her subjects, moving away from any artifice or secondary interest. At the same time, she very characteristically conveys a feeling of closeness and intimacy traditionally perceived between the photographer and the photographed subject. And although in recent years she has also created photographic series in colour, her style, characterised by the predominant use of black and white, has allowed her to emphasise the contrast and drama of the scenes, creating images that *read* as timeless and that have a very distinctive hallmark.

García Rodero has received recognition and praise from both the professional field and the world of art and culture. In this regard, the curator of contemporary art exhibitions, Oliva María Rubio (2008), has written about García Rodero in exhibition catalogues, exploring her visual composition and interest in the ritual and the mystical (El Desván del Arte, 2020). Another example is the photography historian Publio López Mondéjar (1996; 1999), who has examined her work in the context of the history of Spanish photography.

According to Morales (2021), López Mondéjar emphasises García Rodero’s unique value as a visual chronicler of cultural traditions, highlighting her ability to capture the emotional and symbolic depth underlying rituals. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that her work has been compared to that of Sebastião Salgado, since the photographs of both transcend the visual by becoming narratives about emotions, human relationships and cultures.

However, despite her importance, the number of specific academic studies on the work of Cristina García Rodero is very limited. Peralta Barrios and Menéndez Menéndez (2018) have approached her work from a historiographical perspective, highlighting not only the importance of her work as a document of

rural, profound Spain but also her influence in promoting female photography, especially in her early days when it was an eminently masculine field, both artistically and professionally. Also noteworthy is the research of Guerrero González-Valerio (2011; 2020), who has analysed her work from different perspectives, paying special attention to *España Oculta* (1989).

Although García Rodero's work has received other labels such as surrealist (Soler-Campillo and Marzal-Felici, 2022, p. 53), it is normally inscribed in humanistic documentary photography, a photographic movement that seeks to capture the human condition in its maximum expression (Parejo, 2017). Humanistic documentary photography is associated with photographers such as Robert Frank, Denise Bellon, Dorothea Lange and Henri Cartier-Bresson (James, 2021), who used photography as a means to explore the diversity of human experience and to advocate for humanistic photography as a social document, as Freund (2004) categorises it.

In this way, this research follows previous studies on García Rodero's photography but focusing on the work *Transtempo* (2010) and from a novel methodological combination of analysis with the aim of providing a new reading of her photographic legacy. It also seeks to interpret her creations from other epistemological fields and artistic styles such as magical realism, a literary and artistic movement that combines the real with the fantastic, the ordinary with the supernatural (Asensio, 2022).

2. Method

In line with this objective, a methodological design was chosen that combines visual-semiotic deconstruction, anthropological-contextual analysis, critical conceptual interpretation and historical-artistic analysis. This method was chosen because it is considered novel and multidisciplinary, which will allow García Rodero's work *Transtempo* (2010) to be approached from a multifaceted interpretation that differs from previous studies, offering new perspectives on the formal, artistic and aesthetic aspects of her work as well as new intertextual

relationships with the cultural, social and historical context in which it was created.

Firstly, semiotics, used by art critics and photography theorists such as Rosalind Krauss in her book *The Optical Unconscious* (1993), allows us to explore how the formal elements of images and visual signs create symbolic compositions and interpret and communicate meaning in different contexts. In this way, it is proposed to deconstruct the predominant style of *Transtempo* into its significant components (signs and symbols) that transcend mere objective representation and explore how these provide complex meaning through formal elements such as composition, light and texture, which, in short, construct visual narratives.

Secondly, we will apply anthropological-contextual analysis to situate the photographs in their socio-historical intrahistory. As Allan Sekula argues in *On the Invention of Photographic Meaning* (1982), photographs, or rather “photographic discourse”, acquire meaning through the interaction of their formal elements with their historical-social context, as it is inevitably subject to a cultural definition. Therefore, based on this method, the photographs will be interpreted in relation to the traditions, rituals and festivals that García Rodero documents in *Transtempo*, exploring their cultural significance, their evolution over time and how these practices relate to the construction of collective identity and the people photographed.

Thirdly, a critical conceptual analysis is proposed, typical of the field of cultural studies, which conceives photography as something more than just a set of visual elements, envisaging it as a creation whose analysis requires interpreting sociological and philosophical reflections and critical thinking in the creative process (Cepkova *et al.*, 2021). From this critical, postmodern perspective, Fontcuberta, in *El Beso de Judas: Fotografía y Verdad* (1997), questions the notion of truth and the capacity of photography to represent reality. Fontcuberta argues that all photography is mediated by the subjectivity of the author in his or her cultural context and the expectations/perceptions of those who observe the photograph. A paradigmatic example is his analysis of the propagandistic uses of photography in the media, where images, far from being neutral and objective, become ideological tools that can shape public opinion.

Fourthly and finally, the work is analysed artistically and historiographically, taking into account the artistic movements in which it is inscribed and how these influence the techniques and themes chosen by García Rodero. It also explores the relationships between photography, memory and history, and how this symbiotic relationship contributes to the construction of cultural narratives. This is important, since as Costello and Iversen (2012) point out, photographs are material performances that negotiate past, present and future relationships with the history of art and philosophy. In this way, it is hoped to establish a dialogue between humanistic documentary photography and some of the artistic styles in which García Rodero's work seems to move, such as magical realism, although she has not previously circumscribed herself to these.

Table 1 below summarises the variables identified in the four types of analysis and which will be developed in the results section:

Table 1. Independent variables extracted from the different analysis methods.

| Method | Variables | Aim |
|--|--|--|
| Semiotics (Krauss, 1993). | Formal elements: composition, light, texture, colour and framing. Signs and symbols. | To break down Transtempo's predominant style and explore how these elements construct visual narratives. |
| Anthropological-contextual (Sekula, 1982). | Historical context, cultural practices, translations, construction of collective identity. | To interpret the interaction between the formal elements and the historical-cultural context of the photographs. |
| Critical conceptual interpretation (Fontcuberta, 1997). | Ideological implications, author's subjectivity, public's possible interpretations. | To explore the ability of García Rodero's work to question notions of truth and reality. |
| Artistic and historiographic (Costello and Iversen, 2012). | Relationship with artistic movements and relationship with historical memory. | To explore how her work engages with artistic and philosophical traditions. |

Source: Author.

3. Results

Transtempo, published in 2010, is a photographic book comprising 66 black and white images. Named after the exhibition García Rodero held on the occasion of Xacobeo 2010, it captures a series of rituals, festivals and everyday moments in rural Galician communities. It could be said that it is a conceptual book in that it focuses on the idea of time as a connecting thread between the past and the present, documenting cultural practices that reflect both the attachment to traditions and the effect of the relentless passage of time upon them. It is important to add that some of the photographs that appear in *Transtempo* are also found in other books by the author, such as, for example, the photograph *El Alma Dormida*¹, which is also included in *España Oculta*.

3.1. Visual-semiotic deconstruction

In addition to the aforementioned connecting thread, all the photographs in *Transtempo* have one visual characteristic in common: the use of black and white. García Rodero's mastery of black and white allows her to emphasise the image's drama while at the same time stripping it of any chromatic distraction, allowing the gestures, postures and expressions of the subjects to become the focus of the photograph's observer. Likewise, the contrast of white as a symbol of purity, life and innocence is very striking, while black is associated with death, as can be seen in the images in which cemeteries and black coffins are contrasted with boys and girls dressed entirely in white. Similarly, the contrast of the photography with both colours gives greater strength and prominence to the expressions, sometimes challenging when García Rodero seeks to confront worlds or realities, sometimes full of joy and happiness when she represents the emotions of the celebrations and popular festivals of the towns of Galicia. In addition to the colour, the use of light and shadow is one of *Transtempo*'s hallmarks, creating a visual drama that enhances the spiritual and emotional meaning of the events portrayed, as in *El Alma Dormida*, where the darkness of the sky, the ground and the cemetery walls contrasts starkly with the light of the skipping girl.

¹ <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/coleccion/obra/alma-dormida-saavedra-lugo>

On the other hand, García Rodero usually uses closed frames and geometric compositions that direct the viewer's attention to the image's central subjects, as in the processions in which the bodies line up in orderly rows, sometimes playing with the crosses, other times with the buildings or with elements of the town and its streets. She plays with symmetry and geometric shapes, using architectural frames or lines in the environment that balance the image, often contrasted with human figures that break up the geometric perfection, adding visual tension. This visual organisation conveys the feeling of collectivity and ritual order while also being useful for hierarchizing the importance of the elements or subjects photographed. Furthermore, as we have previously highlighted regarding the use of black and white, geometric compositions also serve to emphasise contrast, as can be seen in *La Confesión*² with the vertical confessional boundary that separates the priest (dressed in white and illuminated) from the woman confessing (dressed in black and less illuminated). It can also be observed in *Ventana al Aire*³ and how the geometry and composition separate the two young women and confront their expressions and moods.

Regarding the visual arrangement that connects with the Gestalt law of continuity, the elements seem to flow naturally into each other, guiding the viewer's gaze through the symmetrical composition. Points of interest in García Rodero's images often focus on the characters' faces and gestures, anchored by a careful division of framings and shots. These framings are designed to balance the narrative and the visual, highlighting both the protagonists and the space that surrounds them. At the same time, García Rodero avoids the abuse of blur and uses a high shutter speed to capture movements clearly, as seen in the image of the skipping girl in *El Alma Dormida*. Although many of her photographs convey a sense of planning and technical control, they are imbued with moments captured in the spontaneity of the instant, which creates a duality between artistic meticulousness and the naturalness of the photographed subjects. This example can be seen in *La Confesión*, which gives greater value to García Rodero's ability

² <https://www.academiacolecciones.com/fotografias/inventario.php?id=F-0513>

³ <https://www.fundacionmapfre.org/arte-y-cultura/colecciones/cristina-garcia-rodero/espana-oculta/ventana-al-aire-amoeiro-oreense/>

to create these types of geometric, harmonious compositions without having planned the photo with models, but rather capturing the naturalness of a moment that will not be repeated.

3.2. Anthropological-contextual analysis

In *Transtempo*, García Rodero explores traditions deeply rooted in religion and popular beliefs in various regions of Galicia, such as Saavedra, in Lugo. The pilgrimages and processions that she captures are manifestations of a collective cultural identity that resist modernisation and oblivion, although other times they are spontaneous moments that occur in parallel, such as girls and boys playing, a couple kissing, or a man drinking and urinating in the middle of a celebration. For example, the photographed Holy Week processions, with their solemn, ritualised character, construct a collective narrative of sacrifice and redemption that weaves the past with the present. These can be interpreted as a resistance to the established order and the advent of urban hypermodernity, allowing the subversion of roles and norms in a playful, communal context. The photographs produce a certain temporal alterity and, in addition to providing a different perspective on the manifestations of Christian devotion, reaffirm the social cohesion and cultural identity of the communities.

We interpret this symbiosis of both types of photographs as a meta-narrative in which each photograph is a small story in itself that delves into the social and geographical context of several decades in Galicia while being part of a whole that consists of the traditions, customs and lifestyles of people who still live outside of postmodernity. In this photographic journey, García Rodero highlights how memory, with its persistence, clings to the smallest details, revealing fissures that are almost unknowable in their apparent meaning. This process evokes a reflection, which we could label as existentialist, on life and its meaning. Through this experience, the narrative celebrates the ephemeral, giving it a meaning beyond the literal, even providing an ontological vision of being on the horizon of its finitude and eternalizing it in image.

We also believe that the work documents communities that keep alive Christian events such as processions and festivals such as carnival. This, far from being an

obvious act of celebration, contains multiple layers of meaning as the representation of a space of temporary liberation in which social hierarchies are dissolved and spirituality is reinforced. In Galicia, these carnivals (or *entroidos*) have particularities that distinguish them: costumes, masks and figures such as *cigarróns* or *peliqueiros*, which embody symbols of local identity with roots in ancestral traditions, often linked to agricultural cycles or fertility rites. They are expressions of cultural resistance that preserve the identity of communities against the cultural homogenization and the hypermodernity and hyperconnection of Han's so-called fatigue society (2015) and, as Fisher (2009) points out, the constant pressure of productivity of contemporary capitalist realism.

Transtempo captures how the sacred and the folkloric intertwine in community events and is contextualised within the tradition of more humanistic documentary photography of popular festivals, connecting with the work of photographers such as Diane Arbus who explore the transformation of identity through celebrations and collective demonstrations by means of portraits of people in unconventional social contexts such as carnivals and fairs (Bernstein, 2007). As has been said, García Rodero's photography can be placed in the context of the photographic tradition of documenting religious festivals, but the value of her work as a continuation and renewal of some traditions that have been lost or are becoming extinct over the years must be included. Her photographs are ethnographically and anthropologically very valuable, as they not only show the persistence of popular customs but also reveal the tensions and frictions between tradition and change. The folkloric and religious acts that she captures with her camera clash visually with the social, economic and political transformations that are affecting rural Galician communities.

On the other hand, the images in which children appear, such as *El Alma Dormida*, can have a second interpretation on the universality and innocence of childhood. García Rodero has expressed on more than one occasion her interest in capturing moments of joy, happiness and freedom that transcend cultural barriers, highlighting that certain human experiences are universal. If we compare her work with others that have captured this type of context, we

highlight her more intimate and less stylized gaze, focused on the personal and collective experience of the subjects, their emotions, experiences and their moods spontaneously, thus giving greater value to the ethnographic testimony of her photographs.

3.3. Critical conceptual interpretation

Through a critical conceptual approach, we can highlight how García Rodero uses her images to reflect on profound questions related to the human condition, faith and cultural resilience. Many of the images in *Transtempo* seem to explore the idea of transcendence. For example, bodies of subjects in ritual movement, participating in acts of devotion and appearing to be in a process of transformation, seeking the divine. Others turn their backs on tombs, on darkness or on old age, always emphasising the contrast from different aspects. In many of the images of penitents and processions, the subjects photographed seem to be caught in a search for meaning in a rapidly changing world. Acts of physical sacrifice —such as carrying a coffin or religious figures— reflect the existential tension between the human desire to transcend and the material reality of the body, which is also an object of transition between childhood and old age.

Time itself inspires the title of the book, *Transtempo*, as it alludes to the idea that time is fluid and that these sacred rites connect the present with the past. This temporal journey is a recurring theme in this series of photographs, where traditions are a way of defying the passage of time, of connecting the past with the present and of keeping alive an identity that would otherwise be in danger of disappearing. From a critical perspective, the photography can be interpreted as a commentary on the need for collective catharsis and the ritual of purification in a society marked by a history of conflict and betrayal. By documenting this act, it can also be interpreted as an invitation to reflect on the cycles of condemnation and redemption in Spanish society.

Likewise, the ambiguity of the costumes and the anonymity of the participants can seem like a visual critique of power structures and the transience of identity during the festival. In many of García Rodero's photographs of religious processions and rituals, covered faces, crosses and moving bodies function as

symbols evoking devotion, spirituality and sacrifice, with everyday objects taking on an almost mystical dimension within her photography.

As mentioned in the method section, the postmodern critical analysis by authors such as Fontcuberta (1997) goes beyond questioning the aesthetics of the image, examining the ethical and political implications of its creation and reception. From a critical perspective, García Rodero does not passively legitimise official discourses on identity or culture, but confronts them by capturing the symbolic resistance of communities to globalisation and cultural homogenisation. We believe that *Transtempo* invites us to reflect on the human condition through an existentialist prism: in her images, collective memory becomes an act of resistance against oblivion, while the ephemeral nature of rituals is eternalised in photography, giving them a meaning that goes beyond the literal. Thus, her work functions as a space for dialogue between the sociocultural and the philosophical, inviting us to question the dominant narratives and confront them with the complexities of cultural traditions.

3.4. Historical-artistic analysis

The historical-artistic approach places us within the tradition of humanistic documentary photography while recognising García Rodero's ability to infuse her images with a style that borders on the poetic and the mystical. Compared to other documentary photographers, García Rodero stands out for her focus on rural traditions in Spain, concentrating more on their symbolic and cultural meaning through the inhabitants themselves, with real, spontaneous moments combined with other, more prefabricated ones.

Although it is possible to establish general links between *Transtempo* and the work of photographers such as Henri Cartier-Bresson or Sebastião Salgado, it is more pertinent to highlight its connections with photographers of closer generations and with whom it shared an aesthetic and thematic sensitivity in the Spanish context. In this respect, García Rodero's work accords with that of photographers such as Ramón Masats, whose documentary gaze also explored popular traditions, or José Manuel Navia, whose photography mixes the observation of everyday life with the capturing of cultural and human roots.

However, García Rodero introduces a more intimate and personal component in which the subjects seem to participate in a visual drama that evokes both the religious and the magical. Some of her photographs can be interpreted as a reflection on otherness and exoticism. Rather than exposing the subjects as exotic “others”, she presents the ritual with a universality that highlights the human emotions and experiences shared across different cultures. Indeed, paraphrasing the photographer in her documentary (Nelson, 2023), she reflects on something that Joseph Campbell had already done in 1949 when he wrote *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, which is that countries and cultures change but not people or their emotions.

4. Discussion

The combination of the four analysis methods applied to Cristina García Rodero’s work —visual-semiotic deconstruction, anthropological-contextual analysis, critical conceptual interpretation and historical-artistic analysis— has allowed us to construct a multidimensional interpretation of her work from different fields and disciplines. All four analyses share a common interest in the emotional and human dimension of her work and emerge, as she attests in Carlota Nelson’s documentary, from what she seeks to convey: “the desire to investigate who you are and how far you can go” (2023).

However, although the photographer herself avoids labels, the different analyses allow for new lines of debate and study on her work to be opened and for different interpretations to be compared. On the one hand, visual-semiotic deconstruction leads us to affirm that the compositional elements such as light, the arrangement of the subjects, shutter speed, blur, the law of continuity and the use of black and white construct a visual narrative that seeks, above all, to emphasise emotions and reality. Her work moves away from any consideration that questions traditional notions of photographic representation (Fontcuberta, 1997).

Similarly, anthropological-contextual analysis explores how these emotions are rooted in specific cultural traditions, while critical conceptual analysis reflects on how these images can challenge or reinforce certain social or political discourses.

García Rodero's photography can be seen as a representation of the relationship between human beings and their natural environment, highlighting the tension between tradition and modernity. Ritual can be interpreted as an act of cultural preservation in the face of increasing technological cannibalism. Close to this analysis, Barthes (1989) reflects on the ability of photography to capture the essence of a lost moment, while in *Transtempo*, García Rodero also seeks to represent the timeless emotional dimension of life, evoking hidden feelings and the permanence of the human through this series of photographs. Therefore, it is possible to say that what Barthes (1989) defines as *studium*, that is, the cultural, historical or intentional elements of photography, for García Rodero could be the capacity of her photography to capture the essence of traditions and to transcend time, while the *punctum* or the sting that moves according to Barthes, would be García Rodero's capacity to generate an emotional connection with the people who observe her work.

The historical-artistic analysis situates these emotions within a broader trajectory of documentary photography, identifying how García Rodero aligns with and deviates from the styles of other historical photographers within a broader framework of the history of documentary photography, comparing her work to that of other photographers such as Dorothea Lange, who has also played with the idea of truthfulness in representation. The anthropological-contextual analysis highlights the importance of the cultural context in the construction of images' meaning, while the visual-semiotic analysis allows us to observe how the compositional and symbolic elements of her images enhance the emotional and narrative charge, highlighting her capacity to transcend mere documentary register. García Rodero's work emerged in times when in the process of capitalist profitability, art acquired the condition or status of problematic (Ehmer, 1997) and the role of women in professional photography was something Dantesque. However, García Rodero has succeeded in achieving her dream and pursued and photographed the scenes that, according to her, she imagined in her dreams. Her work transcends the artistic insofar as it has become a historical reminder of traditions that are in danger of extinction; as Pena Presas (2014) states: "I wanted to document a reality that could disappear, that was in danger. That is why

Cristina García Rodero's work is a very rich and interesting source both on a historical and anthropological level" (p. 594).

Regarding the question we have raised about whether it is possible to interpret García Rodero's work as magical realism, an artistic style that combines everyday events with supernatural elements (Khan, 2023), according to the historical-artistic analysis, we consider that her work cannot be classified under this style in general terms; it does, however, share several characteristics. We should start from the basis that magical realism has several interpretations and that the supernatural or that which evokes magical and dreamlike worlds can be more an interpretation of the visual composition and the symbolism than actually of fictitious elements that have been used to construct an artificial photographic image (Batchen and Kanicki, 2020). Therefore, under this conception, it could be considered as magical realism insofar as in many of her photographs, García Rodero conveys mysticism and magical elements, but she does so from reality, not from the artificially instrumentalised.

Many of her images present scenes that, although real, seem to belong to a dreamlike or fantastical plane in which the ordinary becomes extraordinary, although a narrative heterotopia (Vidal-Mestre and Freire-Sánchez, 2023) or visual heterotopia does not occur between what is expected to be real and what the captured image represents. For example, the ambiguity of the costumes and the intensity of the expressions create an atmosphere reminiscent of surrealist compositions in which logic is questioned and we are invited to discover the unusual within the familiar. The tension between the real (people, places, the everyday) and the almost supernatural (carnival, rites, masks, beliefs) creates a visual experience in which the magical and the tangible coexist. Her photographs reflect a cultural reality in which the extraordinary is found in everyday details and in simple gestures that reveal the constant struggle to give meaning to life in a world full of uncertainty. In this regard, as Batchen (1997) points out, theorists and analysts must recognise and accept the abstractions and contradictions of photography. It is possible, therefore, to classify García Rodero's work within an artistic style, not so much for its historical and contextual affiliation, but for the meaning or symbolism that many of her photographs provoke.

5. Conclusions

As Becker (1995) points out, the act of reinterpreting photographs taken in one style or genre –such as humanistic documentary photography– as if they had been taken in another demonstrates the contextuality of meaning in visual sociology, documentary photography and photojournalism. This research has allowed us to observe part of García Rodero’s work through different methods and compare it with magical realism, an artistic style that, as previously discussed, shares many elements with her photographs.

In times of mass information and oversaturation of visual impacts, hypermodern society, as Fontcuberta states, “is marked by excess, flexibility and the porosity of a new relationship with space and time” (2020, p. 21). Here *Transtempo* represents an impasse between history and photographic art, as it invites a multifaceted reading and a multidisciplinary reflective observation. As John Berger (2001) has argued, it is precisely this other view by photographers that allows us to read and observe the hidden meaning of things.

The photographs collected in *Transtempo* provoke this reflection from the semiotic deconstruction of the visual by exploring the signs of what is considered sacred or ritual –depending on how you look at it. It does so also from the anthropological and contextual dimension, which reveals the cultural and spiritual intrahistories of peoples, and from critical conceptual interpretation by suggesting an existential, humanistic search. Finally, from an artistic-historical perspective, it places us within a documentary tradition that celebrates the human condition in its purest, even crudest, form, and does so without blushing, but with the compositional precision of the *soul thirsty for genius* (Freire, 2022), in this case the genius of García Rodero, who is capable of introducing unreal elements and creating compositions that inevitably bring her work closer to evoking feelings similar to magical realism.

That said, García Rodero brings a unique perspective to humanistic documentary photography by focusing her lens on cultural practices that, at first glance, may seem extinct or ancestral, but which, in reality, represent a fundamental core of

collective identity and the cultural memory of life in villages. In her work, one can see a genuine commitment to the subjects she photographs, going beyond objective documentation to become deeply involved in the folkloric rituals and practices she photographs. Through her lens, traditions and festivals are not just cultural events; they are deeply emotional and spiritual experiences in which the human manifests itself in its most authentic, complex form. In this respect, García Rodero broadens the definition of what humanistic documentary photography means by not limiting herself to portraying the social and economic conditions of her subjects, but by focusing her attention on their cultural practices, beliefs and rituals that shape their identity. Her work, therefore, documents, preserves and reinterprets these practices, inviting the viewer to reconsider their value and importance in the construction of collective identity.

From an existentialist perspective, García Rodero's work addresses the search for meaning in fundamental human experiences: birth, death, celebration, mourning. Her photographs capture moments in which people confront their existence directly through rituals that mark the stages of life. This confrontation with existence and the search for meaning becomes evident when community mourning becomes a reflection on the finitude of life and the need to find meaning in loss. Her unique style can be defined as a fusion between ethnographic photography and author photography in which the documentary is intertwined with the artistic. One might wonder whether García Rodero's legacy could be moved by the words of the poet José Emilio Pacheco against photography in his poem *Contra la Kodak*:

Photography is a terrible thing... Faces that no longer exist, air that no longer exists. Because time takes revenge on those who break the natural order by stopping it, the photos crack, turn yellow. They are not the music of the past, they are the roar of internal ruins collapsing.
(*Poemas*, 1958-2009)

Although this combination of four methods has also allowed us to provide new insights with respect to previous studies on the work of Cristina García Rodero, the research has several limitations. It should be noted that, although we have focused on *Transtempo*, her body of work is much broader, which suggests that

future research could include a more exhaustive analysis of other lesser-known series and projects. Moreover, by using specific analytical methods, we have focused the interpretation on certain theoretical perspectives, leaving aside other potential approaches such as psychoanalytic or feminist analysis that could provide additional insights into her work.

Regarding future lines of research, this method could be applied to other works by the same photographer or other contemporaries. For example, the similarities and differences between her work and that of documentary photographers operating in contexts of postcolonialism, globalisation or social transformation could be explored. It would be interesting to further examine how García Rodero's work has influenced younger generations of Spanish and international photographers, and how her work has been interpreted in different cultural contexts beyond Spain. Another line of research could focus on a more detailed study of the reception of her work by various audiences, analysing how different cultural and social groups interpret her photographs and how these interpretations vary according to context.

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