

Gender behind the cameras. European women photographers

El género detrás de las cámaras. Mujeres fotógrafas europeas

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Abstract:

Women have never been a homogenous and essentialised category. Extending the analysis of women to the notion of gender is useful for keeping in mind that ‘woman’ and ‘man’, while biological types are cultural constructs. Gender denotes perceptions of femininity and masculinity and, at the same time, hierarchical structures and power relations in society. Gender is a multi-layered concept that opens up other notions, such as class, race and religion; as well as other epistemological meanings. These arguments, and recent historical research applied to European women photographers, have led us to the aim of this monograph: updating some of the fundamental questions and renewing our knowledge of European women photographers’ work. We do not exclude those who have made their way outside Europe and used different photographic practices. At the same time, we consider women photographers who have extended their activity to cinema, a medium where, historically, they have been underrepresented. These issues are transversal to the ten articles in this monograph, which has been structured, for reasons of presentation, into four main issues or chapters:

1. Comparing Women Photographers: Legacies and Impacts;
2. Women Photographers: Biographies in Perspective;
3. Documentary Photographers and Committed Photojournalists;
4. Photography and Cinema: Approaches and Hypertexts.

Resumen:

Las mujeres nunca han sido una categoría homogénea y esencializada. Ampliar el análisis de la mujer a la noción de género resulta útil para tener presente que “mujer” y “hombre” no son sólo especies biológicas, sino también construcciones culturales. El género denota percepciones de feminidad y masculinidad, al mismo tiempo que estructura relaciones de jerarquía y poder en la sociedad. El género es un concepto con múltiples capas que abre otras nociones como los procesos de racialización, religión y clase, así como otros significados epistemológicos. Estos argumentos y la investigación histórica reciente aplicada a las fotógrafas europeas nos condujeron al objetivo de este monográfico. Se actualizan algunas de las cuestiones fundamentales, renovando el conocimiento de su obra fotográfica. No excluimos a las que han abierto camino fuera de Europa y utilizado diferentes

metodologías fotográficas. Al mismo tiempo, pensamos en las fotógrafas que han extendido su actividad al cine, donde históricamente han estado infrarrepresentadas. Estas cuestiones son transversales a los diez artículos de este monográfico, que se estructuran, por razones de presentación, en cuatro apartados o capítulos:

1. Comparando mujeres fotógrafas: legados e impactos;
2. Mujeres fotógrafas: biografías en perspectiva;
3. Fotógrafas documentales y fotoperiodistas comprometidas;
4. Fotografía y cine: enfoques e hipertextos.

Resumo:

As mulheres nunca foram uma categoria homogénea e essencializada. Alargar a análise das mulheres à noção de género torna-se útil para ter em mente que “mulheres” e “homens” não são só espécies biológicas mas construções culturais. O género denota percepções de feminilidade e masculinidade e estrutura as relações de hierarquia e de poder na sociedade. O género é assim um conceito de múltiplas camadas que abre a outras noções como processos de racialização, classe e outras interpretações epistemológicas. Esta argumentação e a investigação histórica recente, aplicada às mulheres fotógrafas e europeias, moveu-nos para o objectivo deste dossier. Algumas das questões fundamentais são actualizadas, renovando o conhecimento da sua obra fotográfica. Não excluimos aquelas que fizeram o seu caminho fora da Europa e utilizaram metodologias fotográficas diferentes. Ao mesmo tempo, consideramos as mulheres fotógrafas que estenderam a sua atividade ao cinema, onde historicamente têm estado sub-representadas. Estas questões são transversais aos dez artigos do dossier que se estruturaram, por razões de apresentação, em quatro sub-temas principais ou capítulos:

1. Comparando Mulheres Fotógrafas: Legados e Impactos;
2. Mulheres Fotógrafas: Biografias em Perspetiva;
3. Fotógrafas Documentalistas e Fotojornalistas Empenhadas;
4. Fotografia e Cinema: Abordagens e Hipertextos.

Palabras clave:

Mujeres fotógrafas; fotografía colonial; biografías; fotografía documental; fotoperiodismo; cinema.

Keywords:

Women photographers; Colonial photography; Biographies; Documentary photography; Photojournalism; Cinema.

Palavras-chave:

mujeres fotógrafas; fotografía colonial; biografías; fotografía documental; fotojornalismo; cinema.

Why a monograph on gender and European women photographers?

Women have never been a homogeneous and essentialised category (Gunnarsson, 2011). Extending the analysis of women to the notion of gender is useful for keeping in mind that ‘woman’ and ‘man’, while biological types, are cultural constructs. Gender denotes perceptions of femininity and masculinity at the same time as it structures hierarchical and power relations in society. As Griselda Pollock has suggested, the ground of artistic practice and the marginalisation of women by the men who have written the history of art, and by extension the history of photography, are structured and shaped by gendered power relations (Pollock, 1998, p. 55).

The fact that gender is a multi-layered concept opens up other notions, such as differences based on social class, racialisation and religion, as well as other epistemological meanings. To speak, for example, of the relationship between gender and the colonial state implies considering both European and colonised women as subaltern (Spivak, 1999). In other words, as they were viewed and imagined in the metropolis and in the colonies; and as they perceived themselves.

In the case of colonial Portugal, which is the subject of this monograph, the study of photography and empire is a dynamic and developing field that includes researchers and archivists with highly diverse perspectives. As a colonial space, gender metaphors were as much a part of Portuguese colonialist language as French, Italian or British, and this can be explained only by the domination of a patriarchal society’s viewpoint (Ryan, 2014, p. 42; Vicente, 2014, p. 22, and 2013).

These arguments, applied to European women photographers, have led us to the aim of this monograph in *Fotocinema* magazine. Its articles focus, in broad terms or through specific cases, on some of these fundamental questions in order to update and renew our knowledge of European women photographers’ work. The geographical delimitation is explained by methodological reasons. Firstly, there is limited number of texts possible in a monograph of this nature,

but also because we wanted a more focused approach, knowing that availability of historical sources is an important criterion for historical research. In recent years, the work of countless previously unknown European women photographers has been highlighted. The impact of one of the most important exhibitions in the 1990s immediately comes to mind: that of European women photographers in *Women on the Edge: Twenty Photographers in Europe, 1919-1939*, (J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California; Guggenheim, New York). Held at almost the same time as the publication of historian Naomi Rosenblum's book, *History of Women Photographers* (1994), the exhibition dealt with a large number of German women photographers, as well as American, French, British and Swiss naturalised European women. Many were active in inter-war Germany, where the influence of the Bauhaus, an independent, avant-garde art school that democratised the apprenticeship system, was visible. In fact, Lucia Moholy (1894-1989), Ellen Auerbach (1906-2004), Grete Stern (1904-1999), Florence Henri (1893-1982) and many others studied at the Bauhaus.

Although the exhibition did not discuss the development of women photographers' social status in the inter-war decades exhaustively, it served as an introduction to the subject, making clear how in the 1920s and 1930s a considerable number of women turned to photography as a means of artistic and personal self-invention.

However, from this perspective, we did not exclude the many European women photographers who have made their way outside Europe, in other territories and continents, and who have used different photographic methodologies: from documentary, photojournalism and war photography to colonial photography. At the same time, we were also interested in the opportunity to 'discover' women photographers who had extended their activity to the two complementary languages of photography and cinema. In this case, women photographers, who have historically been underrepresented in the cinematic profession. By extending photographic practices to moving images, we highlight a separate chapter for women cinematographers in this introduction.

It is remarkable to see the number of women photographers that feminist historical research is making visible, through the preservation, study and research of photographic archives, museum exhibitions and the publication of books and magazines. This archaeological work is inexhaustible. This work amplifies what is obvious today, but which is not sufficiently stated or highlighted: the absence of women in hegemonic art histories, together with that of women photographers in histories of photography, in which they always occupy a secondary place.

What is clear is that women photographers, aware of their value, even as subordinates in patriarchal society, have whenever possible claimed a different life, as demonstrated by the ‘world’s first group exhibition of women photographers’ (Lenot, *Artcapital*, 2021). This took place in 1906 in Hartford and was mentioned in the stimulating exhibition held in 1975 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, *Women in Photography: A Historical Survey*, which innovatively retrieved the work of women photographers.

Let us recall that in inter-war Europe, and especially between the 1920s and 1950s, women adopted photography as a form of professional and artistic expression. They produced invaluable visual testimonies that reflected both their personal experiences and the extraordinary social and political transformations of the time. This was the case of Maria Lamas, a Portuguese journalist, writer and political intellectual who excelled in the development of women’s literature; the enquiry into the social position of women; the struggle against the fascist regimes of her time, and was the author of the photographic reportage *The Women of My Country*, the subject of recent studies (Subtil, 2024, Calado, 2024, Cabral 2021, 2017).

Women photographers were at the forefront of artistic experimentation, whether in studio portraiture, fashion and advertising, street photography or photojournalism, as well as embodying an ideal of female emancipation by making revolutionary changes in life and art.

The powerful expression of modernity in the work of avant-garde Russian women photographers and their contribution to the potentially liberating

agenda of Soviet culture has only recently been discovered. The circulation of their photographs in the mass press, in exhibitions and in books throughout the international communist movement and the challenges they faced continue to amaze us today. For example, in a recent work, Giulia Strippoli highlights the role of Tina Modotti (1896-1942), Lisette Model (1901-1983), Elizaveta Mikulina (1903-?), Julia Pirotte (1908-2000), Gisèle Freund (1908-2000) and Gerda Taro (1910-1937). Their photographic work 'is today part of the international documentation of anti-fascism', of the history of workers' movements and of the denunciation of social injustices (Strippoli, 2024, pp. 1-2); as well as of the catastrophic effects of the wars they observed. When the Nazi party in Germany and the fascist and authoritarian parties in other European countries took power, however, the emancipation of women photographers was quickly but temporarily limited.

After the end of the Cold War, following a period of European reconstruction and the inter-war period, it was in the 1960s and 1970s, along with the flourishing of the *New Left* movements in the United States, plus the protests against the Vietnam War, and the events of 'May 68' in France, that the *Women's Liberation Movement* emerged. Artists and historians then began to feel the need to intervene from a feminist point of view. Women did intervene, introducing a real epistemological revolution by reflecting on something that had been totally repressed until then: sexual difference (Mayayo, 2005, p. 16). The feminist interventions of those years would significantly alter the relations between men and women, redefining women's status and the social roles of both sexes.

That said, according to Griselda Pollock, the feminist conviction is that women's place in history is always a socially constructed and negotiated condition (Pollock, 1998). Women have been involved in photography since its inception. They were attracted to the medium, professionally and personally, finding it emancipatory and effective for expressing ideas and feelings, as well as for earning a living. The ability to create images then became available to more women, especially as cameras became smaller and mass production brought prices down. Photography also offered women fewer barriers than in

the traditional fine arts, and sometimes they were even recognised more quickly than in those artistic disciplines. Today, women disarticulating the discourses and practices of art history itself and, consequently, of the history of photography, are active negotiators within the world of art and photography. These aspects are transversal in this monograph's articles, which has been structured, for reasons of presentation, into four main issues or chapters: 1. Women Photographers: Legacies and Impact; 2. Women Photographers: Biographies in Perspective; 3. Documentary Photographers and Committed Photojournalists; 4. Photography and Cinema: Approaches and Hypertexts.

1. Women Photographers: Legacies and Impact

The first Chapter compares the legacy and impact of several European women photographers and opens with the text, "Images of late Portuguese Colonialism through the Lens of Fotógrafas", by Inês Vieira Gomes, who questions the absence in Portuguese historiography of women photographers in the Portuguese colonial context, while refuting the labelling of 'women' as a homogeneous category. The author argues that many of them were relegated to the domestic space and the family, especially Portuguese women, whose work was less visible. She also concludes that most of them were foreign and white, and many of them worked alongside their anthropologist husbands. While the husbands did the research in the field, the women stayed in the lab or worked as assistants. As documentary photographers engaged in the production of knowledge and as active agents in the Empire, Vieira Gomes highlights the case of Margot Dias (1908-2001), a German woman, wife of the anthropologist Jorge Dias, who filmed and photographed a Makonde ethnic group in Mozambique between 1956 and 1961. However, Dias became 'the wife of the anthropologist Jorge Dias' and her photographs are the least visible part of her work.

At the same time, Vieira Gomes questions the apparent invisibility of the war in the public sphere, which does not mean that it had no impact on the private

lives of many Portuguese. One of the cases she points out is that of Portuguese soldiers' photographs taken in the war context. There were those who photographed the bodies of semi-naked indigenous women, "bodies available to them, a kind of performance of masculinity". Photographs, she writes, sent to their families or just kept as an object and a document that memorized a period of their adult life, far away from their homeland. However, she underlines that the war was not the only the field of men. One of the examples of this, in the history of the liberation movements and after the beginning of the colonial war in 1961, was the activism and emancipation of black women, many of whom became guerrilla fighters. One of the photographers who bore witness to this emancipation and was present during decolonisation was the German journalist Ingeborg Lippman (1927-1988), naturalised American, who worked for the *New York Times* in Portugal and travelled the country photographing, after 1975, the women of the Agrarian Reform in the Alentejo. During the transition to independence in Angola and Mozambique, she recorded and questioned aspects of Frelimo women's lives. The relationship between colonial photography and gender is thus questioned through the historical and social relations that determine the women's role.

The following article by Beatriz Guerrero González-Valerio and Laura González Díez presents a study of two women photographers who represent two significant moments in documentary photography in Spain, both being photographers of the Magnum Agency and winners of the Spanish National Prize in 1996 and 2017, respectively. The essay "Documentary Photography, between Evidence and Creation. Cristina García Rodero and Cristina de Middel" allowed them to explore the tensions inherent in contemporary documentary photographs and, at the same time, to understand how both, starting from a common path – the observation of reality – reached new horizons, turning the medium into a mode of artistic expression and social commentary.

The first, Cristina García Rodero (b. 1949), devoted herself to capturing the essence of Spanish traditions, intimate moments and human feelings; as well as the different cultures of other countries. The second, Cristina de Middel (b.

1975), through the interplay between reality and fiction, truth and creation, questioned the idea that documentary photography should be a faithful reflection of the world.

2. Women Photographers: Biographies in Perspective

This chapter analyses the interrelationships between the life and work of two women photographers, highlighting the importance of thorough biographical knowledge. Imanol Sánchez Díez presents a study on “The Photography of Eulalia Abaitua as a Study of the Identity of Basque Women”. The author highlights the ethnographic and historical facet of this photographer, who worked between the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century and was one of the first to document the customs, traditions and ways of life of the Basque people.

A woman traveller, Eulalia Abaitua (1853-1943) set up her own laboratory, which enabled her to carry out experiments that placed her alongside photographers such as Ana Atkins (1799-1871), Constance Talbot (1811-1880), and even her contemporary, Amélie Galup (1856-1919), with whom the author draws parallels. Abaitua’s photographic archive is reviewed, highlighting her techniques and aspects of culture and identity, especially when portraying women (the ‘Basque matriarchy’). The protagonists of Abaitua’s gaze are the textile workers, such as the *lenceras* and the linen spinners; or the fisherwomen, such as the *vendedoras*, the *sardineras* and others. The author argues that Abaitua’s work gave dignity and empowerment to these women, thus highlighting the subject of working women as worthy of being documented.

In his text on “Elisabeth Francart or ‘Madame Disdéri’, a Pioneer of Photography erased by History (and by a scraper)”, Emiliano Cano Díaz advocates rehabilitating the figure of Elisabeth Francart (c. 1818-1878). To do so, he reviews the documentation already known to reinterpret her now “stripped of some gender stereotypes that have fortunately been overcome” in the light of his research. The life and work of the famous photographer André

Adolphe Eugène Disdéri (1819-1889), like that of Elisabeth Francart, are brought to life from his perspective. While André Disdéri went down in history as the photographer who revolutionised the photographic industry by patenting, in November 1854, a system to reduce the cost of producing *cartes de visite*, Mme Disdéri was to be forgotten.

However, she was her husband's partner and financier even after their separation. In addition to pursuing a career as a photographer in Brest, she always supported and helped her ex-husband, despite his financial problems, by directing, decorating and photographing, at least between 1857 and 1865, the Disdéri & Cie. studio in Paris, where André was a partner. An active participant in the introduction of *cartes de visite*, Elisabeth Francart was co-responsible for the success of the format. According to Francart's client records, consulted by the author, he found a significant number of clichés produced by the photographer. However, only a small number of *cartes de visite* bore her name, and on others it had been "methodically erased" on the cardboard of the photographs.

In view of the analyses made by the authors of these texts, let us remember Naomi Rosenblum, who had the merit of writing one of the first, if not the very first, histories of women photographers in the 1990s, at a time when there was a dialogue about second- and third-wave feminism. In the book whose title we have quoted above, Rosenblum drew attention to the invisibility of women's work in photography and the consequences of its devaluation. The statistics on which she relied revealed the small percentage of women photographers represented in publications, museum collections and exhibitions.

3. Women Documentary Photographers and Committed Photojournalists

Chapter 3 opens with the essay, "Letizia Battaglia Valiente_Patient and Silenced for Decades: Heroine of the Magic Lens". Pilar Yébenes and Nieves Álvarez situate the photography of Letizia Battaglia (1910-1972) in a specific spatio-temporal framework: the city of Palermo, Italy, from the early 1960s to

the late 1980s, a period marked by great socio-cultural instability and the crimes that ravaged the country. From this setting, the authors' methodology integrates testimony, denunciation and the unmasking of violence. Within these three axes, they have analysed five sets of photographs that they have entitled: 'Mafia', 'Women and Children', 'Iconic', 'Souls entangled in abysses' and 'Unravelling'.

These are photographs from the period between 1970 and 1989, highlighting biographical elements: Battaglia's statements in interviews and her thoughts, allowing the authors to reflect on Mafia violence and how it was also patriarchal violence. They also highlight Battaglia's use of the wide-angle lens, which set her apart from her peers. Her documentary work, in black and white, captured the decisive moment and a terrible reality. For the authors, this allowed her to 'unmask' social realities in which violence coexisted with consent and indifference, silence and the hypocritical complicity of institutions in the face of injustice.

The third essay, by Cristina García Rodero, Alfonso Freire-Sánchez and Montserrat Vidal Mestre, "Humanist Documentary Photography and Magical Realism *Transtempo*", analyses the work, *Transtempo* (La Fábrica/CEGAP, 2010) by the Spanish photographer Cristina García Rodero. Taking up the theme of the photographer already mentioned by Beatriz González-Valerio and Laura González Díez - the themes of traditions, festivals and rituals in Spain - the authors propose a particular analysis of the work, combining a semiological visual deconstruction, an anthropological-contextual analysis and a critical-conceptual definition with an art-historical approach.

The aim was to see how García Rodero's humanist documentary approach, in capturing the everyday or the extraordinary, comes close to magical realism. *Transtempo* is, therefore, an example that invites "a multifaceted reading and a multidisciplinary reflection" because it allows us, they conclude, to find hidden meanings in things, transcending the mere documentary and even artistic record; and its images are testimony to traditions that are disappearing.

The place and importance of documentary photography in photojournalism is addressed in “Women Photojournalists: the Work of Sandra Balsells through *Balkan in Memoriam* (1991-2001)” by María Peralta Barrios and María Isabel Menéndez Menéndez. The text discusses photojournalism in terms of gender equality in the profession, theorising about the male war reporter and the construction of the Western stereotype with which he is associated, through the characteristics of virility, resistance, as well as the search for truth and justice. Attempting to deconstruct the idea that “making and seeing war is a man's business”, the authors conclude that, as in other fields, gender equality in the profession remains a utopia. However, the case study of the photography book, *Balkan in Memoriam* (Blume, 2006) by Catalan war photojournalist Sandra Balsells (b. 1966) is, the authors believe, a challenge to this stereotype because it “makes a difference” by going beyond “mere war reportage”.

The images, a photographic documentary on the escalation of the conflict in the Balkans, from the disintegration of Yugoslavia in 1991 to the fall of Milosevic in 2000, are contextualised and analysed. Balsells presents herself as a creator of images of undeniable documentary, aesthetic and emotional value. Her photographs denounce the violence of the conflict and are a diary of the journeys she made during the ten years of the war. As a graphic and photographic legacy, Barrios and Menéndez conclude, it is of incalculable historical value for future generations.

From this brief presentation of the different chapters and texts, it is evident that the common concern of the authors is to show how women have always been present as active photographers determining their lives without being prisoners of social and cultural forces. On the other hand, the authors' feminist critique is based on the metaphor of reading rather than gaze-reflection. The notion of semiotic reading and its practice offer dense meanings to be deciphered, processed and discussed. Whether amateurs or professionals, and despite the difficulties of recognition, women photographers were and are able to find their own strategies to secure their work and find success.

4. Photography and Film: Approaches and Intertexts

Chapter 4 includes essays on the role of female directors of photography in the intertextual relationship between film and photography: “Vernacular Photography and Police Archives. La memoria reconstruida en el cine de Susana de Sousa Días” by Nieves Limón Serrano; “El Uso de Fotografías en la (Re)Construcción de la Memoria Colectiva: el caso de Dundo, Memoria Colonial, Documental de Diana Andringa” by Marcio Aurélio Recchia; and “Annemarie Heinrich: Fotógrafa del Cine Clásico Argentino y Agente de Modernización Cultural” by María Aimaretti.

Contemporary studies interweaving photography and cinema open up multiple directions of analysis that examine the presence and participation of women in these disciplines. These directions include, among others, the behind-the-scenes work of women cinematographers; the work of female directors who use photography as a central element in film narrative; and the role of female photographers who have carried out film-related activities, such as portraits of actors and actresses or photographic reports on film premieres and shoots. This dossier addresses two of these three dimensions, with Limón Serrano and Aurélio Recchia analysing the films of Susana Sousa Dias and Diana Andringa, based on the use of photographic archives in two Portuguese films, as well as the cinema photography of Annemarie Heinrich. However, the absence of in-depth analyses of the work of women cinematographers should be noted, a situation which, despite its absence in this specific study, has given rise to important debates on gender issues in filmmaking.

The emerging study on film professions and female representation has shown that cinematography occupies a markedly unfavourable position for women. This is a historically male-dominated profession, which has made it difficult for women to achieve long and defined careers in the field. The professionals who manage to establish stable careers are a minority, and academic studies on their work, although scarce, are valuable. The documentary *À Luz delas* (2019), directed by Marina Cavalcanti Tedesco and Luana Farias, about the work of women cinematographers in Brazilian cinema, therefore represents a significant starting point for understanding the challenges and difficulties

faced by women in this profession (Marques and Noronha, 2023). This documentary not only makes visible the gender issues in the sector but also serves as a tool for reflection and critical analysis. The first of the two subjects explored in this dossier focuses on female filmmakers who use archival photographs as the central axis of their documentary narratives. In this case, the directors Sousa Dias and Andringa are particularly important to the analysis. Their work raises at least two essential questions:

The first is a question regarding type of production, which highlights the existence of a contemporary tendency in which women filmmakers are oriented towards the documentary genre. This could be explained by the perception that documentary filmmaking offers fewer economic and production barriers compared to fiction filmmaking, a field historically dominated by men. Documentary is thus presented as a more direct and accessible way for women filmmakers to express their ideas and materialise their creative projects.

The second is a conceptual issue, which is related to the use of documentary as a tool that is not only artistic, but also social and political. This genre allows the filmmakers to contribute to the recovery of historical memory and to address major issues, such as Portuguese colonialism and the Salazarist dictatorship.

Through their films, Sousa Dias and Andringa adopt methodologies that use photography as a key visual material to reconstruct events and situations that remain without clear answers or definitive resolutions. Moreover, the connection between photography and cinema is manifested in other ways, such as in the use of photography as a means of personal communication and promotion. In this sense, the case of Annemarie Heinrich is illustrative. Her career not only demonstrates the power of photographic documents as tools for cinematographic dissemination and distribution but also highlights the challenges she faced as a woman in the field of the visual arts. María Aimaretti's article highlights that her primary ambition was to be a photographer and how this aspiration became complex simply because of her gender.

In Heinrich's case, it can be observed how women working in artistic fields are often described with adjectives such as 'multifaceted', 'multi-faceted' or 'multi-tasking'. These descriptions reflect a reality in which women, due to the specific circumstances of their environment, often play diverse roles and face difficulties in focusing on a single creative path or developing systematic methodologies to produce their work. This phenomenon, which we can call 'transversality' in art produced by women, partly explains the absence of historical accounts and analyses that significantly include their contribution to disciplines such as photography or cinema.

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