



"LET'S SAY THEY'RE TALKING ABOUT MADRID": CRISTINA GARCÍA RODERO, ALBERTO GRACIA-ALIX

BEATRIZ GUERRERO GONZÁLEZ-VALERIO¹, BELÉN RAMÍREZ BARREDO²

¹CEU San Pablo, España

²Universidad Complutense de Madrid, España

KEYWORDS

*Documentary
photography,
Author's documentary,
Cristina García Rodero,
Aberto García-Alix,*

ABSTRACT

Documentary photography in Spain has been a powerful tool for capturing identity and culture across different historical contexts. Spanish photographers have used this medium to depict and explore the reality of their time, becoming increasingly aware of the subjectivity of their perspective. Likewise, there is a growing need among them to showcase their individuality and personal style, leaning more towards the author's documentary. Within this context, two National Photography Award winners stand out: Cristina García Rodero (Puertollano, 1949), National Photography Award winner, awarded in 1996, and Alberto García-Alix (León, 1956), awarded in 1999. In their personal visions of Madrid, both focus their gaze on its inhabitants, as writer Antonio Muñoz Molina notes: "In Madrid, there is hardly any landscape other than the human one, which is the privileged domain of photography" (2020).

Received: 17 / 12 / 2024

Accepted: 31 / 03 / 2025

"Birds visit a psychiatrist
The stars forget to come out (...)
Let's say I'm talking about Madrid" (Joaquín Sabina)

1. Introduction

Documentary photography in Spain has played a crucial role in the representation and exploration of identity and culture, especially during periods of socio-political change. From the exploration of new subjectivities in the post-Franco transition to the documentation of traditions and customs, Spanish photographers have used this medium to offer a profound and critical vision of their environment.

1.1. Spanish Photography in the 1980s

In the sphere of art, in the early 1980s, it appeared that the advent of democracy and the regained freedom encouraged creativity. Concurrently, a cult of youth was professed. The field of photography was distinguished in this decade for being tremendously plural and heterogeneous. In this regard, Cristina García Rodero has noted that during this period:

Spain witnessed an explosion of freedom and creativity. It appeared as though every conceivable avenue was open to exploration, and photographers felt empowered to experiment with their craft. Consequently, the global photographic community began to take notice of developments in Spain. (Baque, 2019)

In the aftermath of a period marked by turmoil, characterised by a "anything goes" approach, often marked by anarchy and simple provocation, the field of photography in Spain began to attain a certain level of maturity. Photographers began to demonstrate an increased awareness of their authorship and formal elegance, and it was during this period that they attained elevated levels of creativity and aesthetic perfection. During this period, a multitude of trends coexisted, which were subsequently given divergent names. Concurrently, individual artists emerged with considerable weight and a more reflective and coherent body of work than in previous years. Examples of this include Ouka Lele, Joan Fontcuberta, Alberto Schommer, Manel Esclusa, Ferrán Feixas, Toni Catany, Jordi Socias, Humberto Rivas, Manuel Laguillo, Manuel Sendón, Xurxo Lobato, Rafael Levenfeld, José Manuel Navia and Javier Valhonrat, among others. These photographers have been described as feeling free and not attached to any label because the group spirit of previous decades was being lost (López Mondéjar, 1996, p. 99). The prevailing individualism in the 1980s was not exclusive to the field of photography.

The city of Madrid was one of the epicentres of the photographic explosion of those years. Similarly, when discussing photography in Spain during the 1980s, it is imperative to mention the phenomenon known as the 'Movida madrileña'. This was an ephemeral and multidisciplinary movement that enjoyed significant media attention, encompassing photography, cinema, music, design, fashion, and more. The magazine *La Luna* served as its primary medium of expression. As asserted by Kurtz et al. (2001, p. 450), it was a spontaneous, carefree and boisterous movement whose protagonists desired modernity as a fiction of reality. *La Movida*, with its exuberant and uninhibited spirit, ushered in a prolific era of artistic and intellectual development in contemporary Spanish culture. In the domain of photography, notable figures such as Miguel Trillo, Alberto García-Alix, Pablo Pérez Mínguez and Ouka Lele were closely associated with these years of intense creation and cultural dynamism. García-Alix succinctly captured the essence of this period, characterising it as a youthful outburst, a drive, and a liberation from imposed norms (del Barrio, 2023). However, the 'Movida madrileña' was not the only significant photographic movement that took place in Spain during this period. As will be demonstrated below, a number of photographers continued to portray reality in a more contemporary way.

The 1980s witnessed a conceptual transformation within the realm of reportage photography, precipitated by the innovative reinterpretation of the genre by certain authors, who adapted it to

their own creative agendas. This transformation can be characterised as a quest for the utmost objectivity, yet it is also marked by the acceptance and integration of diverse photographic styles, allowing for the use of varied techniques to achieve heightened expressiveness. The thematic, technical and stylistic variety is immense. The growing demand to express individuality and personal style among photographers is driving a shift towards more personal reportage, where photographers choose subjects that reflect their unique perspective. Often, these reportages remain unpublished, instead forming part of a book or a photography exhibition. These projects are often characterised by their extensive duration, necessitating the utilisation of methodologies such as photo-essays or photographic reportage, as exemplified by the oeuvre of Cristina García Rodero.

In addition to the growing interest in photography, two notable events of the eighties were the vindication and self-promotion of photography. Despite the changes that had taken place since the previous decade, the situation of photography in Spain lagged behind that of other countries. Photographers in Spain initiated a demand for greater presence in the social and cultural fabric, as well as an elevated status within the visual arts. This new generation of photographers aspired to elevate photography to the status of a medium of artistic expression, on par with other arts. Joan Fontcuberta has noted that "the generation of Miserachs and Maspons fought for the recognition of the professionalism of their profession, and they achieved it. The subsequent generation aspired to the status of artists and creators" (López Mondéjar, 1996, p. 40).

Consequently, in the absence of adequate infrastructure, photographers were compelled to address the prevailing deficiencies, thereby giving rise to the emergence of diverse roles and specialisations within the field. These included the gallery photographer (e.g., Pablo Pérez Mínguez), the photographer-historian (e.g., Publio López Mondéjar), the photographer-essayist (e.g., Joan Fontcuberta), the photographer-curator (e.g., Alberto García-Alix), and the teacher (e.g., Cristina García Rodero). Similarly, in 1981, the magazine *Photovision* was established, with a focus on reflection and debate on contemporary photographic creation (Vega, 2017, p.667). The magazine's founding contributors included four photographers, and it became a prominent promoter of the various aesthetic currents of that period. As Fontcuberta emphasised, "it was necessary to create a platform suited to the new airs of the 1980s when there were already other magazines in Europe" (Fontcuberta, 2001, p. 47).

It is paradoxical how, despite the fact that a number of photographers rejected the testimonial value of photography, the new Spanish society of those years was profiled and outlined by various figures in the field of culture. In the realm of literature, authors such as Eduardo Mendoza and Manuel Vazquez Montalbán encapsulated the essence of Spain in the 1980s through their literary creations. In the realm of cinema, directors such as Pedro Almodóvar and Carlos Saura employed the medium to reflect and interrogate Spanish reality. In the domain of music, prominent figures such as Joaquín Sabina and Rosendo have served as vocal representatives of the concerns and aspirations of Spanish society. Photography too saw the emergence of a new school, exemplified by Cristina García Rodero and Alberto García-Alix, who, despite being critical of the testimonial value of photography, were interested in the representation of reality. García Rodero's documentation of Spain's traditions and rituals in the 1980s, and García-Alix's depiction of urban life and counterculture, exemplify the diversity and dynamism of Spanish culture during this period. This diversity reflects the richness of Spanish culture in the 1980s, where different forms of art and expression contributed to the construction of a new society, despite divergent assessments of photographic testimony.

1.2. Madrid through Photography

Despite its status as a capital with a rich historical tapestry and a vibrant cultural milieu, Madrid has received comparatively less attention in the realm of photographic documentation when contrasted with other European cities such as Paris, London, or Rome. A contributing factor to this underrepresentation is the paucity of publication and dissemination of works by photographers who were interested in Madrid, remaining within the local sphere. Notable exceptions include the

Welshman Charles Clifford (1820-1863) and the Frenchman Jean Laurent (1816-1886), who established their photographic studios in Madrid, thus following the prevailing passion for portraiture that characterised the first half of the 19th century. In addition to portraits, they produced extensive photographic catalogues with photographs of landscapes, views, engineering works and reproductions of works of art (Vega, 2007, p. 176). However, as the writer Antonio Muñoz Molina (2020) points out, photography and the modern city were born simultaneously, but it took a long time for them to meet (p. 21).

These pioneering photographers were followed by numerous others who focused their attention on Madrid. However, a significant proportion of these photographers remained anonymous, due to the artisanal nature of photography in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Trapiello, 2020, p. 494). Not until the advent of the 20th century did a photographer by the name of Alfonso emerge. This was the name under which four photographers, all belonging to the same family, were grouped. This photographic dynasty was comprised of the patriarch Alfonso Sánchez García and his sons Alfonso, Pepe and Luis Sánchez Portela. Together they founded the Alfonso agency, which became the most prestigious in the field of graphic press and portraiture in the first half of the 20th century.

From the outset, the focus was on the people of the city. This commitment to capturing the authentic life of the community is exemplified by the press photographs that document events such as street parties, the washerwomen of Manzanares, children bathing in the river, football, car races, and bullfighting, as well as the seamstresses of the time. (Corroto, 2021)

Other noteworthy individuals include Conde la Ventosa (1881-1950), whose career commenced within the pictorialist tradition but evolved towards documentary photography, capturing the quotidian life and landscapes of Madrid; and Nicolás Campúa (1897-1975), whose street reportage serves as a reflection of the society of his era. José María Díaz Casariego (1896-1967), a photojournalist, is noteworthy for his work in Madrid and his collaboration with prominent publications of the era; the Mayo brothers, a group of Galician photographers, are distinguished for their depictions of Madrid during the civil war; Martín Santos Yubero (1903-1994), whose images adeptly captured the evolution of the city and its inhabitants. Francesc Català Roca (1922-1998), whose images cover Madrid in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Manuel Urech (1904-1985), a photojournalist who worked for more than 30 years for the now-defunct newspaper "Madrid" (El País, 2012); the Hungarian Nicolás Müller (1913-2000), noted for his humanist approach; Juan Gyenes (1912-1985), who was also of Hungarian origin, and in addition to portraits of personalities, photographed the cultural life of the capital: The following artists are of particular note: de la Fuente (2012) focuses on theatre, dance and bullfighting; Paco Ontañón (1930-2008), who arrived in Madrid in 1957 to devote himself to photographic reportage, capturing not only everyday life, but also social events; and Paco Gómez (1918-1998), noted for documenting the architectural evolution of Madrid. Gabriel Cualladó (1925-2003), during his most prolific years, from the 1950s to the 1970s, was to produce a series of emblematic photographs of Madrid; and, finally, Enrique Sáenz de San Pedro (Vitoria, 1942), whose work on the Gran Vía and the suburbs of Madrid is particularly emblematic.

Among the works dedicated to Madrid published by some of these photographers, it is worth mentioning that by Francesc Català Roca, commissioned by the Barcelona publishing house Destino, entitled *Una guía de Madrid* (A Guide to Madrid) published in 1954 with text by Juan Antonio Cabezas. It is noteworthy that the text occupies a more substantial role in this publication compared to the photographs. Another noteworthy work is that of Paco Gómez (1918-1998), published in 1961, entitled *Madrid*, with texts by the writer and humourist Miguel Mihura. The combination of documentary photography with literary texts offered a unique and poetic vision of Madrid. In the 1960s, Ramón Masats (Barcelona, 1931) published *Neutral Corner* in 1962, photographing the atmosphere of the capital's gyms and boxing matches, with texts by Ignacio Aldecoa.

Among contemporary photographers, Luis Baylón (1958-2023), born in Madrid, merits particular attention for his series *Madrid en plata* (Madrid in Silver), which documents the city between 1984 and 2017, arranging the images in diptychs and triptychs. Another noteworthy figure is José Manuel Navia, who, in 2009, published "Un Madrid literario" (A literary Madrid) in collaboration with the writer José Manuel Caballero Bonald. Javier Campano (Madrid, 1950) is another noteworthy figure, who in 2010 published *Madrid* in which, through photography, he explores the towns and landscapes of the Madrid region. He has also recently had an exhibition on Madrid entitled *Barrios, 1970 - 1980* (Neighborhoods, 1970-1980) and a book published by the publishing house La Fábrica (2024).

Among the most recent works is the exhibition catalogue of the German photographer Peter Witte, entitled *Photographs of Madrid, 1965-1990*, comprising 101 black and white photographs in which Madrid and its inhabitants take centre stage. A more recent publication is the book entitled *Madrid. Retrato de una ciudad*, published in 2020 by La Fábrica, is a compendium of images by prominent photographers. This volume, which comprises 150 photographs from the 19th century to the present day, features a prologue written by Muñoz Molina. In 2023, La Fábrica publishing house released a book dedicated to the French photographer Bernad Plossu (1945), entitled *Madrid*, which comprises 150 photographs from the 1970s to the present day.

While Madrid has not been the subject of as many photographic works as other European capitals, the city has nevertheless possessed a photographic tradition that has captured its essence. This tradition can be traced back to work of pioneers such as Charles Clifford and Jean Laurent and continues through the contributions of the Alfonso dynasty and other prominent photographers including Martín Santos Yubero and Francesc Català Roca. More recently, the work of contemporaries such as Luis Baylón and Javier Campano has further expanded upon this legacy, offering unique perspectives on the essence of Madrid life. These works not only document the evolution of the city but also reflect the diversity and cultural richness of Madrid, as Muñoz Molina (2020) states, "a city is too plural a spectacle to be told by a single voice, to be portrayed by a single gaze. The polyphony and cacophony of the city demands the collective" (p. 24).

2. Methodology

In order to carry out a research of these characteristics, a qualitative methodology will be adopted, based on comparative visual analysis and content analysis, with an interdisciplinary approach integrating art theory, visual studies and social-historical analysis.

Initially, a bibliographical and documentary review will be conducted to establish the theoretical and conceptual foundations of photography in Spain during the 1980s, with a particular focus on documentary photography and reportage. To this end, a review of the literature on the evolution of photography, with a particular focus on Spain during the 1980s, will be conducted. Key sources such as books, academic articles, essays and interviews on image theory, photography in Spain and the work of the two photographers who are the subject of this research, Cristina García Roderó and Alberto García-Alix, will be used. The study will also draw upon the expertise of renowned scholars in the field, including Publio López Mondéjar, Professor Carmelo Vega, Marie-Loup Sougez and Joan Fontcuberta, whose contributions are instrumental in enriching this research. Notable publications devoted to photography in Spain include the *Summa Artis* volume, which provides a comprehensive overview from its origins to the 21st century and was coordinated by Gerardo F. Kurtz, Joan Fontcuberta, Isabel Ortega and Juan Miguel Sánchez Vigil (2001). Other noteworthy publications include the numerous books published by López Mondéjar, including *Fotografía y Sociedad en la España de Franco. Las fuentes de la memoria III* (Photography and Society in Franco's Spain. The sources of memory III) (1996) and *150 años de fotografía en España* (150 years of photography in Spain) (1999), as well as the book coordinated by Marie-Loup Sougez, *Historia General de la Fotografía* (General History of Photography) (2007) and, more recently, the book by Carmela Vega, *Fotografía en España* (Photography in Spain) (1839-2015) published by Cátedra in 2015.

A critical analysis of the aforementioned sources, as well as academic articles on photography in Spain in the 1980s and those that have studied the work of either of the two photographers under scrutiny, will be carried out. Additionally, we will draw upon interviews conducted by various media with Cristina García Rodero and Alberto García-Alix. These interviews will offer a direct insight into the authors' perspectives, thereby facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of the context in which their images were developed, as well as their motivations and objectives. This will serve to enhance the critical analysis.

Subsequently, a visual analysis will be undertaken, with the aim of comparing and contrasting the style, techniques and intentions of both photographers. This strategy will be based, first and foremost, on the selection of a representative sample of works by Cristina García Rodero and Alberto García-Alix that were produced in the 1980s and that refer to the city of Madrid. In the case of Cristina García Rodero, the focus will be on her work entitled *Europa el Sur* (Europe, the South), published in 1992. This publication was the result of an initiative by the Madrid Consortium for the Organisation of Madrid as European Capital of Culture, which organised an exhibition and financed the publication of this book containing 100 images, coinciding with Madrid's capital status. However, the focus of this study will be limited to the final images in this publication, as they were taken in Madrid. With regard to García-Alix, the book dedicated to Alberto García-Alix, published in 2017 by PhotoEspaña as part of the collection *Esenciales de la fotografía española* (Essentials of Spanish Photography), with text by Chema Conesa, has been selected for study.

The analysis of the images will also draw upon interviews with Cristina García Rodero and Alberto García-Alix, which have appeared in the media, as these provide unique details and first-hand information on the works of these authors, their creative processes and intentions, which are not available elsewhere. Furthermore, the utilisation of the words of the photographer themselves will serve to validate interpretations and analyses of their works, thereby engendering authenticity in the research.

3. Objectives

The primary objective of this article is to examine the subjectivity of the gaze and the personal vision of Cristina García-Rodero and Alberto García-Alix, two renowned figures in the realm of Spanish photography. In this research, the focus will be on Cristina García Rodero for several reasons. Primarily, it was during the 1980s that she trained as a photographer and developed the corpus of her work in Spain. Following the publication of "España Oculta" (Hidden Spain) in 1989, she proceeded to photograph other countries and cultures. Secondly, García Rodero has been the first in many things: the first woman in Spain to receive the National Photography Award (1996), the first photographer to receive the gold medal of merit from las Bellas Artes (2006), and the first Spanish photographer to be part of the Magnum Agency (2009). This has made her a reference in Spanish culture (Peralta & Menéndez, 2019, p. 65). Conversely, Alberto García-Alix has been selected as an object of study because most of his work from the 1980s is concentrated in Madrid and, as Chema Conesa (2017) observes, "he has become an icon of the aesthetic and cultural impulse of a specific period" (p. 3). It is also noteworthy that during the 1980s, both photographers produced a substantial and consistent body of photographic work.

The analysis of these two photographers will allow us to explore and exemplify the individualism that characterised the field of photography in Spain during the 1980s, which generated a greater dispersion in comparison with previous decades, and which gave rise to a wide repertoire of creative attitudes, despite the fact that they were based on the observation of reality.

This analysis will entail an examination of how both photographers interpret and represent reality through their work, with a particular focus on their personal view of Madrid. A secondary objective of this study is to identify the elements that define the individuality and expressive resources that each uses to achieve greater expressiveness, both thematically and stylistically.

4. Analysis

4.1 Cristina García Rodero

Born in 1949 in Puertollano, Ciudad Real. She graduated in Fine Arts, but as she herself indicated, "it was easier for me to use the camera than the brushes" (Moreno, 2000). Nevertheless, her solid aesthetic training is evident in her images with regard to composition.

García Rodero, in conjunction with a select group of fellow photographers, opted to document festivals and traditions, a departure from the norm at the time. As early as the 1980s, she was concerned about the deterioration that certain customs were suffering, with the danger that they might become extinct in the face of the advance of industrialisation and urban culture (Guerrero Glez-Valerio, 2019, p. 104). This choice was not without its challenges, as she noted a certain lack of understanding from her peers and the wider community. In the 1980s, the pursuit of modernity was a priority, with many seeking to keep pace with Europe (García Rodero, 2023, p. 13).

Having spent over five decades in the pursuit of photography, the recognition of his work can be seen in the presence of his works in the most important museums, in the numerous national and international awards he has received (Dr. Erich Salomon Prize in 1990, National Photography Award in 1996, Gold Medal for Merit in Fine Arts in 2005, Gold Medal for Merit in Work in 2014, among others), in his exhibitions (with numerous exhibitions around the world), and in his publications, most of which are monographs, he has published 13 individual books.

Cristina García Rodero eschews the use of prepared and static scenes, as well as excessive formal rigidity. Instead, she seeks to capture images that exude spontaneity and naturalness, whilst also fostering a sense of closeness, both physical and emotional, between herself and the subjects she photographs. This approach serves to enhance the strength and impact of her images. As the writer Manuel Rivas (2010) points out in the prologue to *Transtempo*, "what emerges in Cristina García Rodero's world is the other place. The invisible, that which metamorphoses, that which inhabits the timelessness of time".

It is evident in her oeuvre that festivals and religious practices are frequently employed as a pretext, as her true interest lies in the human condition. As she herself stated,

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

Despite taking photographs in public settings, García Rodero requires a high level of intimacy with his subjects, as he is interested in expressions and individualities. This is why he rarely resorts to large general shots. Above all, she requires to be moved: "I need emotion to be able to photograph and be moved by what I have experienced" (García Rodero, 2023).

4.1.1 The Madrid of Cristina García Rodero

Cristina García Rodero did not only focus on the festivals and rituals of Spain, but after the publication of *España Oculta* in 1989, she extended her work to other Mediterranean countries. This Southern European project was exhibited in 1992 to mark Madrid's status as capital city. The exhibition was accompanied by the publication of a book of 100 black and white images entitled *Europa: El Sur* (Europe: The South). This publication brings together images taken by Cristina García Rodero over a number of years, mainly during the 1980s. In addition to southern Europe, towards the end she also includes photographs of Madrid. This is a complete change of scene, abandoning the countryside for images of a big city. As in her previous publications, García Rodero does not make folkloric photographs, nor are they idealised images. This is what Christian Caujolle points out in the prologue to this book, when he emphasises "Cristina García Rodero's persistence in documenting social practices beyond any folklorisation" (1992, p. 7).

The style and photographic composition of this second publication by Cristina García Rodero are very reminiscent of *España Oculta*, it could be said that it is an extension of Cristina García Rodero's first major monographic work. Many of the characteristics of her previous photobook are repeated in this new project, with a predominance of portraits in action and a search for expressiveness, emotion and feeling. Cristina García Rodero's fine sense of humour is also evident in this book. Another characteristic aspect of Cristina García Rodero's work is the inclusion of everyday or sometimes absurd elements in her images. The importance she attaches to the world of children is also striking; children are very much present. In addition to her obsession with open mouths, which, as she herself has commented, "over time I realised that the mouth is as expressive as the eyes, perhaps much more so" (Yugo, 2017), her inclination towards tenderness can also be seen, for example, in the scenes of mothers with their children.

Most of the images of Madrid are scenes of everyday life, with little focus on festivities. As is typical of García Rodero, she focuses on anonymous people, as Cristina García Rodero explained: "I focus on those who build, not those who run a country. I have never been interested in celebrities. Anonymous people are more sincere, more hospitable, they express their feelings more" (Lenore, 2012).

In her photographs of Madrid, she turns her attention to the people, focusing, as is characteristic of this photographer, on individuals and expressions, because the masses as such do not interest her (Yugo, 2017). In these images of Madrid, she photographs everyday characters, but looks for anomalous situations, sometimes full of humour, sometimes bordering on irony. In this sense, the streets of Madrid are the ideal setting for observation, as this is an environment where people move freely, protected by the anonymity that big cities offer. García Rodero shows, as is her wont, that she has patience, that she knows how to wait and search in order to find what is different, the "Madrid oculto" (Hidden Madrid) and the unusual, or at least what is ignored or unnoticed, even by those who live in this great city. As she herself said in an interview, "I like to photograph when they are distracted or don't see me. That's when I can capture the real hidden scenes or family moments" (Baque, 2019).

An image that perfectly illustrates Cristina García Rodero's ability to focus on what goes unnoticed is the one entitled *Las cuatro zapatillas* ("The four slippers"), which at first glance seems to show that the main character has four legs. The search for the unusual, the amusing, can also be seen in the photograph entitled *El hombre de las trenzas* ("The man with the braids"), which shows a gentleman wearing a wig with braids. There is a sense of humour in these two images, and we can see that Cristina García Rodero can laugh at the everyday and its absurdity.

In this sense, we can also mention the photo entitled *El Rastro*, in which we see a person pointing a gun, or *Dama con palillo* (Lady with a toothpick), which, as the title suggests, shows a lady of a certain age with a toothpick in her mouth, which is unusual. In both pictures, we can also see Cristina García Rodero's speed in taking photographs, so as not to lose the scene. We can also see her interest in photographing people in motion.

As has already been mentioned, the presence of children and open mouths are recurring themes in Cristina's work, and in this sense, it is worth highlighting the photograph entitled *Ariadne Sleeping*, taken in the Prado Museum, which captures the astonished face of a child looking at the naked breast of the marble goddess. This image is also an example of the agility of the shot, as well as the search for spontaneity and emotion that characterises García Rodero's work. And how it seeks closeness, avoiding general shots.

Many of his subjects convey a sense of tenderness, such as the protagonist of the photograph *El gato ciego* (The Blind Cat). Leganés, 1991 (image 1). This image creates a play between the title, the subject in the foreground and the painted wall in the background, and makes us stop and ask ourselves who is really blind: the cat, the woman with big eyes painted on the wall in the background, the man in the foreground or us, the viewers? Cristina García Rodero explained in an interview that the fact that she uses close-ups and medium shots is often due to her desire to be close to people, to understand them, to comprehend them (Yugo, 2017).

Figure 1: The blind cat, 1991



Source: Cristina García Rodero, *Europe: the South*

In addition to tenderness, loneliness and isolation are two themes that are very present in these photographs of Madrid. Cristina García Rodero said in an interview that "what interests me is the behaviour of people. I am interested in their need for comfort when complications arise, and they feel very lonely" (López, 2020). In this sense, two moving photographs are *Cementerio de la Almudena* (The Almudena Cemetery) and *El cómico* (The Comedian) (Figure 2). The latter was taken in El Retiro Park in Madrid, and despite the title, we see a comedian who is not playing a funny role, but on the contrary, is sitting on a bench, dejected, with a sad expression on his face. The two pictures are wisely placed in the book, on a double page, side by side, which helps to emphasise them. In both, the protagonists are seated, distressed, self-absorbed and oblivious to the photographer. With great sensitivity and observation, Cristina García Rodero has managed to capture the isolation and loneliness of a big city like Madrid. We cannot overlook the fragility of the human being in the background of many of her images.

Figure 2: The comedian, 1991



Source: Cristina García Rodero. *Europe: the South*

To further deepen the game of irony, he repeatedly uses the titles that appear below the images. In addition to the aforementioned *El comico* (The Comedian), another example is the so-called image entitled *Conferencia por la paz* (Peace Conference). Madrid, 1991, which refers to the Middle East Peace Summit that took place in Madrid that year; despite the fact that the title includes the expression "for peace", in the foreground we see a soldier inside a tank with the Palacio de Oriente in the background. The sense of humour that characterizes Cristina García Rodero's work is also present in the photograph entitled *Un guarro blanco* (A White Pig).

4.2. Alberto García-Alix

He was born in León in 1956, but at the age of eleven he moved to Madrid, where he still resides. In 1976, he began to take his first photographs, as he himself admitted in an interview, "it was very difficult for me to learn because I didn't know photography. I didn't know anything" (del Barrio, 2023). His father had given him a camera, and soon after he ran away from home and went

to live in the Rastro with a friend who took photos and had set up a laboratory in the pantry. "It was there that I fell in love with photography and began my self-taught career" (Pinteño, 2023). In another interview, he emphasised that "there I met other people and began to take photographs. Despite the absence of financial compensation, I was passionate about photography. I was able to see again what I had seen, which seemed to me like magic" (del Barrio, 2023). It was in 1981, after his first exhibition, that he began to become aware of photography. This awakening was precipitated by an exhibition devoted to the German interwar photographer August Sander. "He went up to five times to see it, he says he was even shaken at times" (Pinteño, 2023). This exhibition facilitated his comprehension of the autonomy of the gaze. This notion was articulated by García-Alix in an interview, where he stated, "you see like this, like this and like this," subsequently adding, "since 1981, photography has been for me the independence of the gaze. Creation" (Villalón Vara, 2024).

Indeed, García-Alix considers himself to have become a professional photographer in 1986. This transition occurred subsequent to an exhibition that garnered him a certain degree of renown and subsequently led to commissions for projects such as album covers and work for various media outlets. García-Alix himself has acknowledged that "my great photographs have been commissions. The crux of the matter is that they transcended and were valued in the art world" (Villalón Vara, 2024). Subsequent to this, in 1998, coinciding with the inaugural edition of PhotoEspaña, he curated a major retrospective exhibition that met with resounding success. A year later, in 1999, he was awarded the National Photography Prize by the Spanish Ministry of Culture.

It is also noteworthy to mention his close connection to France, where he resided from 2003 to 2006, and was honoured with the title of Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French government. Departing for Paris signified a pivotal shift in his photographic style, as García-Alix elucidated, "Observing Paris expanded the subjectivity of my perspective. This shift signified a departure from his earlier style of photography" (Villalón Vara, 2024). This transition, precipitated by his relocation to Paris, is characterised by an enhancement in composition and portraiture, accompanied by a discernible shift in his photographic style towards expressionism and abstraction. This shift can be characterised as a more incisive perspective. In an interview, García-Alix further elaborated on this evolution, stating, "Yes, I have evolved; the gaze evolves, it is educated" (Villalón Vara, 2024). He further elaborated on this evolution, stating that "experiences of pain and depression have contributed to a shift in his artistic style, characterized by increased abstraction and introspection. The dialogue with the subject of my observations undergoes a transformation. In order to see myself in it, what I look at has to come back. Introspection and abstraction take place" (Villalón Vara, 2024).

During his period of residence in France, García-Alix also initiated his foray into the medium of video, a format which he has continued to develop until the present day. His work has been exhibited in a number of prestigious national and international museums, including the "Maison Européenne de la Photographie" in Paris, the "Photographers' Gallery" in London, the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de León, and the Museo del Prado, to name but a few. García-Alix has combined his photographic work with publishing. He is currently co-founder of the publishing house Cabeza de Chorlito with Frédérique Bangerter, through which he has published some of his most recent works.

Among his most recent publications is *Archivo Nómada, Vol. 1*, a book that brings together 2,000 unpublished photographs from 1975 to 1981, covering from the Transition to the beginning of the Movida, constituting a photographic diary, "exhaustive and intimate of Alberto" (Villalón Vara, 2024). As the artist himself has noted, "this book does not cover the Movida, which really began when this book ends; it is the Underground, which was perhaps more of a revulsion than the Movida" (Pinteño, 2023).

Furthermore, García-Alix has cultivated portraits and self-portraits. He perceives portraits to be more challenging due to their intricate and tense nature, which, in his own words, "constantly entail a confrontation" and a form of dialogue (Villalón Vara, 2024). A significant proportion of these portraits are captured using a medium format camera, namely a Hasselblad, which produces

square format images. This requirement forces him to engage in more thoughtful composition, reflecting on the intricacies of framing and composition. These portraits are distinguished by their low-contrast imagery and the incorporation of individuals from his immediate surroundings. With respect to self-portraiture, the artist has remarked, "I have always worked around myself; in fact, I have never been shy about my own nudity" (Rodríguez, 2017). In a manner akin to many artists of this period, he photographs himself, engaging in self-worship. However, his images transcend the confines of conventional self-portraits, delving deeper into the exploration of his identity and the articulation of his personal philosophy and emotional state.

4.2.1 *The Madrid of García-Alix*

García-Alix has engaged with a diverse array of subjects, with a unifying theme being the depiction of the city of Madrid as a recurring motif. However, as the artist himself has stated, "I don't have favourite places in anything. Somethings make you vibrate" (del Barrio, 2023). The photographs of Madrid, therefore, constitute his photographic diary and, concomitantly, offer a vision of the city during that period. These photographs serve as a documentation of the social and cultural transformations experienced in Spain since the 1980s, approached from an autobiographical perspective and from his own viewpoint, thereby distancing himself from conventionalisms or stereotypes.

In this sense, Alberto García-Alix can be considered as one of a series of photographers who continued to document reality, tackling urban themes, specifically the behaviour of the people who lived in the city and its decorations. Drawing inspiration from the works of Robert Frank (1924-2019) and William Kleim (1926-2022), this generation of photographers embraced a neutral stance, recording their observations without imposing their personal opinions or judgments. "The author's presence is no longer felt in morals, but in forms" (Lemagny & Rouillé, 1988, p. 200). While they do adhere to the thematic approach characteristic of William Klein, their approach to subject matter is distinct. While Klein's work is characterised by exuberance, these photographers adopt a more detached and cold perspective, as if perceiving society through a veil of detachment.

A distinguishing feature of García-Alix's work is its unadorned realism, eschewing any softening of subjects, and crossing the threshold of moderation and modesty. While his interest lies in reality, the subjects he photographs are not directly related to significant events. His photographs do not align with the prevailing social or political concerns of his era. Instead, he focuses on the lesser-known aspects of the cultural effervescence of Madrid in the 1980s, while portraying his immediate surroundings, including friends, characters of the time and urban landscapes. These individuals, often anonymous, "really shaped the Movida" (Villalón Vara, 2024).

Figure 3: San Isidro afternoon, 1987



Source: Alberto García-Alix. Cabeza de Chorlito publishing house.

As illustrated in Figure 3, Alberto García-Alix's oeuvre is characterised by its depiction of street life, passers-by, the emergence of youth subcultures, and the vibrant cultural milieu of that period. As García-Alix himself observes, "at all times there was the yearning of young people who were proud to be young" (García-Alix, 2019). The square format of the image, captured using a Hasselblad medium-format camera, necessitates a more deliberate and considered composition, as compared to the spontaneity characteristic of other photographic formats. The subject of the image is the defiant young woman in the foreground. The surrounding audience, by contrast, serves merely as a backdrop. His photographic quest leads him to minority groups, a practice that distances him from stereotypes and encourages him to seek anonymous, unknown faces.

García-Alix's perspective on his oeuvre is that a significant proportion of his images do not fit the conventional portrait mold, as the subjects depicted are more akin to decorative elements. In his own words, "In general, when I take photos in the street, they are not portraits. "Therefore, I steal, but the people are like a street set, not a portrait" (del Barrio, 2023). Furthermore, it is evident that the subjects of his photography evoke no emotional response from him.

García-Alix is attracted by private, intimate and personal matters. In this sense, it is noteworthy that García-Alix aligns himself with the documentary trend of that period, a tendency that, as Jean-Claude Lemagny observes in his analysis of reportage in the early eighties, "leaves the impression of a irresistible tendency towards autobiography" (Lemagny & Rouillé 1988, p. 211). Through his images, García-Alix also tells us about his inner world (Conesa, 2017, p. 7). In fact, García-Alix himself defines photography as a territory in which he finds himself (Rodríguez, 2017).

Figure 4. Willy and Carlos at the door of the Bobia, 1979



Source: Alberto García-Alix. Cabeza de Chorlito publishing house

In the accompanying image (figure 4), Alberto García-Alix's two younger brothers, Carlos and Willy, are depicted standing together at the entrance to the eponymous establishment known as 'Bobia'. This photograph was selected by Alberto García-Alix himself as one of his most favoured photographs, due to the fact that, as he himself noted, "it is exciting and in the end, photography comes down to that, to emotions" (Riaño, 2014). At the time of the photograph's capture, García-Alix had just reached the age of 24 and had been engaged in peregrinations throughout Madrid for a period of four years, his camera in tow. "Until Willy disappeared due to an overdose. He portrayed him shooting himself and gave him memory by photographing his favourite shirt, crumpled on the floor" (Riaño, 2014).

The photographs taken during this period serve as a biographical account, offering a profound introspection into the life of the author. In an interview, the photographer himself remarked, "I was fortunate enough to be completely free. The greatest contribution that photography has given me is freedom" (Villalón Vara, 2024). In addition to recording his experiences with images, these simultaneously act as an X-ray of the historical and social context in which they were captured. Through his lens, García-Alix not only documents personal moments, but also encapsulates the cultural, political and social dynamics of the time, providing a visual testimony that transcends the merely aesthetic to become a valuable historical document (Smith, 2022).

5. Results

As most of the photographers who emerged in Spain in the 70s and 80s were self-taught, García-Alix declared in an interview in this respect, "At that time, I knew nothing about photography. I had no idea. I had no knowledge of the history of photography, its principles, or its fundamentals" (Villalón Vara, 2024). Similarly, Cristina García Rodero asserted that she too was self-taught, stating "I was ignorant, with hardly any knowledge of almost anything. It was akin to beginning from the initial stage, and I erred in every aspect" (Lenore, 2012). Similarly, what attracted her was "the power of photography to communicate with what you have in front of you, to learn it, enjoy it and then pass it on to others" (Moreno, 2000).

Both photographers honed their craft through dedicated practice and experience, and as Cristina García Rodero (2023) noted, "España Oculta" was instrumental in establishing her reputation as a reporter (p. 18). Both individuals have had lives that have been profoundly influenced by photography, as García-Alix articulated, "'photography' can't be separated from my life" (Villalón Vara, 2024), while Cristina García Rodero stated, "I've been very generous with photography, and photography has been generous with me" (Yugo, 2017).

Their artistic practice is characterised by a predilection for black and white photography, a medium that is often considered to be more enigmatic, more intimate, and more evocative. Cristina García Rodero acknowledges that the absence of colour in black and white photography facilitates effective communication and elevates a photograph to a higher standard, as it is not

influenced by additional sensory elements (Moreno, 2000). Additionally, both artists employ natural light in their work.

While both artists are interested in the documentary value of photography and, in particular, the human subject, Cristina García Rodero's work is characterised by a focus on the spontaneous, the sentimental and the anecdotal in public places. In contrast, Alberto García-Alix's work concentrates on the quotidian, his closest circle and his environment, but without judgement and without a critical eye.

Both artists have been chroniclers of the Spain of the 1980s, thanks to their patience, determination and a deep passion for photography. Despite having been engaged in photography for over five decades, both García-Alix and García Rodero continue to produce photographs with great fervour. In this regard, García-Alix has articulated the following sentiment: "I continue to pick up the camera because I believe in poetry, in the poetry of light, the poetry of the image. Moreover, I continue to do so out of a sense of curiosity and a fundamental need to observe." And the game" (Villalón Vara, 2024). For Cristina, "to photograph is to fight and also to enjoy life, it is to understand it, to comprehend it" (Yugo, 2017), while Alberto García-Alix has learned that every time he picks up the camera "it is no longer worth what I have done, but the new exercise. And I make myself pick up the camera, because the photo I can take today, I can't take tomorrow. Tomorrow it will be something else. There is no tomorrow" (Villalón Vara, 2024).

5.1 Cristina García-Rodero

Subjectivity and Personal Vision: García-Rodero's artistic approach is distinguished by a documentary style that examines popular traditions and festivities. However, his approach is distinguished by an emphasis on capturing the emotional essence of his subjects, unveiling sentiments and affections that transcend the personal to embody the collective.

Theme: His work deals with themes such as cultural identity, spirituality and human emotions in festive contexts, seeking intimacy and expression in public spaces.

Expressive and stylistic resources: García-Rodero's photographs are portraits in motion. He uses monochrome to emphasise the timelessness and universality of his subjects. His compositions are meticulous, often closing up to focus. The employment of natural light serves to enhance the authenticity and emotional depth of the images.

5.2. Alberto García-Alix

Subjectivity and Personal Vision: García-Alix offers a more intimate and unfiltered perspective on urban life and marginalised individuals. Through his photographs, he conveys his personal experiences. These photographs, when considered as a whole, constitute a personal diary of experiences, expressed through the medium of the image. His work reflects a search for authenticity, but also for vulnerability, capturing moments of introspection and rebellion.

Theme: The focus is on everyday life, marginality and self-exploration, presenting his subjects in situations that reveal their character and the environment in which they move. It is notable that Madrid is depicted exclusively as a backdrop.

Expressive and stylistic resources: The use of black and white predominates, with images that tend to have little contrast, tending towards a wide range of greys. This low contrast serves to juxtapose the harshness of some subjects, thereby accentuating the aesthetic appeal of the subjects in question. The artist's unadorned and direct style appears to be a conscious effort to establish a connection and create an impact with the viewer. The influence of punk and rock music and culture is evident.

In conclusion, both Cristina García-Rodero and Alberto García-Alix demonstrate their individuality through their choice of subject matter and stylistic resources. While García-Rodero immerses herself in the cultural and emotional richness of traditions, García-Alix explores the authenticity and vulnerability of urban life.

6. Conclusions

Documentary and experimental photography in Spain in the late 1970s and 1980s was used as a means to explore and question the new subjectivities emerging in the context of the democratic transition.

During the 1980s, numerous proposals emerged, and considerable efforts were made, resulting in the consolidation of initiatives that had emerged in previous years towards the end of the decade and the beginning of the 1990s. This consolidation was facilitated by the support of the newly established autonomous regions. Photography consequently began to acquire special relevance, both artistically and economically, and new channels of creation, dissemination and acquisition emerged. In short, a more specific market began to take shape. Since that time, photography has become one of the most significant visual languages.

Among the photographers who did not renounce the documentary value of photography and who recorded reality, Cristina García Rodero and Alberto García-Alix stood out. The distinguishing feature of both photographers' work is their curious gaze towards their surroundings. Through their subjective visions, they achieve an expressiveness that transcends the visual, inviting the viewer to reflect on the human condition.

Cristina García Rodero, in particular, has garnered acclaim for her immersive approach to documentary work, capturing the emotional depth of human beings amidst the vibrant backdrop of traditions and festivities. Her oeuvre comprises not only depictions of the festivities themselves, but also the passions and emotions of the people who participate in them. The artist's oeuvre is characterised by an emphasis on the portrait, the act of capturing likeness, and the pursuit of expressiveness and emotion.

Alberto García-Alix, in contrast, chronicles his own time through magnificent portraits, demonstrating a mastery of environmental portraiture. In his oeuvre, the document, the portrait and the landscape coalesce in each image. His oeuvre is distinguished by its heightened intimacy and unvarnished authenticity, offering a poignant reflection on the urban milieu and the marginalised denizens of Madrid. The focus on authenticity and vulnerability in García-Alix's subjects provides a sincere and often provocative vision of the city and its inhabitants.

The focus on the city's inhabitants is further emphasised by the work of Cristina García Rodero and Alberto García-Alix, who share a similar vision of Madrid. Through their photographic lenses, both artists seek to capture the quotidian life and the heterogeneity of the human condition that is emblematic of Madrid. Despite employing divergent photographic styles, both artists concur that the authentic spirit of Madrid resides in its people.

References

- Baque, I. (2019). *España Oculta: Hidden Spain*. Magnum Photos. <https://www.magnumphotos.com/arts-culture/society-arts-culture/cristina-garcia-rodero-espana-oculta/>
- Conesa, Ch. (2017). Introducción. In Alberto García-Alix *PhotoEspaña. Esenciales de la fotografía española, 03*. Madrid, La Fábrica.
- Corroto, P. (2021). *Alfonso: el gran fotógrafo represaliado tras la Guerra Civil que acabó por retratar a Franco*. El Confidencial. https://www.elconfidencial.com/cultura/2021-11-12/alfonso-exposicion-madrid_3322344/
- Del Barrio, A. (2023, June 11th). *García-Alix: "Ahora mis juergas son más pacíficas: la heroína aparece cada cinco años y ya no bebo, no tengo hígado"* [interview]. El Mundo.es, <https://www.elmundo.es/madrid/2023/06/11/64820b82fdddfffe158b45cf.html>
- De la Fuente, M. (2012, August 23rd). *Juan Gyenes, fotografía a la española*. ABC Cultura. https://www.abc.es/cultura/abci-gyenes-exposicion-biblioteca-nacional-201208230000_noticia.html
- El País (2012, December 12th). *Madrid a pie de calle. Fotografías de Manuel Urech*. El País. https://elpais.com/ccaa/2012/12/12/album/1355345467_252402.html
- Exit Media (2023, October 23rd). *Alberto García-Alix, Archivo Nómada*. Exit Media. <https://exitmedia.net/dossier/alfonso-garcia%E2%80%91alix-opera-prim/>
- García-Alix, A. (s.f.) <https://www.albertogarciaalix.com/>
- García-Alix, A. (2023). *Archivo Nómada, Vol. 1*. Madrid, Editorial Cabeza de Chorlito.
- García Rodero, C. (2023). *Ser fotógrafa, un regalo de la vida*. JdeJ Editores. FotoRuta colección.
- García Rodero (1992). *Europa: el Sur*. Madrid: Capital Europea de la Cultura.
- García Rodero (1989). *España Oculta*. Barcelona, Lunwerg editores.
- 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>
- Fontcuberta, J. (2001). *Joan Fontcuberta habla con Cristina Zelich. Conversaciones con fotógrafos*. Madrid, La Fábrica editorial y Fundación Telefónica
- Kurtz, G., Fontcuberta, J., Ortega, I., & Sánchez Vigil, J.M. (2001). *La fotografía en España, de los orígenes al siglo XXI*. Summa Artis, Historia General del Arte, XLVII. Madrid, Espasa Calpe.
- Lemagny, J.C. & Rouillé, A. (1988). [eds]. *Historia de la fotografía*. Barcelona, Martínez Roca.
- Lenore, V. (2012). Vidas anónimas. Entrevista con Cristina García Rodero. *Minerva*, 19, 41-45. <https://www.circulobellasartes.com/revistaminerva/articulo.php?id=517>
- López, I. (2020, January 16th). *Cristina García Rodero*. Vanity Fair. Cultura. <https://www.revistavanityfair.es/cultura/articulos/cristina-garcia-rodero-fotografa-entrevista-felipe-letizia/42826>
- López Mondéjar, P. (1996). *Fotografía y Sociedad en la España de Franco. Las Fuentes de la Memoria III*. [catálogo] Lunwerg Editores.
- Moreno, S. (2000, December 30th). "Me gustaría que Madrid fuese lo menos ciudad posible". *Entrevista a Cristina García Rodero*. El País. https://elpais.com/diario/2000/12/30/madrid/978179071_850215.html
- Muñoz Molina, A. (2020). Novela visible de Madrid. In A. Muñoz Molina, *Madrid. Retrato de una ciudad* (pp. 21-30). Madrid, editorial La Fábrica.
- Peralta, M., & Menéndez, I. (2019). *Cristina García Rodero y la fotografía documental: antropología visual en España Oculta*. In F. J. García Ramos y U. Felten (Eds.) *Fotografía (Femenino; Plural)* (pp. 65-89). Madrid, Editorial Fragua.
- Pinteño, A. (2023, July 4th). *Alberto García-Alix: "Desde el primer momento fui un gran compositor del plano"* [interview]. Harpers Bazaar. <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/es/cultura/ocio/a44414377/alfonso-garcia-alix-entrevista-premio-nacional-fotografia/>

- Riaño, P. (2014, December 25th). *Mi fotografía favorita. Alberto García-Alix. 26 de 32*. El Confidencial. https://www.elconfidencial.com/multimedia/album/cultura/2014-12-25/mi-foto-favorita_169526#25
- Rivas, M. (2010). Prólogo. In C. García Rodero *Transtempo*. La Fábrica editorial y Centro Galego de Arte Contemporáneo.
- Rodríguez, J.C. (2017, November 20th). *Alberto García-Alix, Premio FS de Arte: La fotografía, tal y como yo la desempeño, está en vías de desaparición* [Interview]. Fuera de Serie. <https://www.expansion.com/fueradeserie/personajes/2017/11/17/5a0d6e7fe2704e36318b457b.html>
- Trapiello, A. (2020). *Madrid*. Ediciones Destino.
- Vega, C. (2015). *Fotografía en España (1839-2015). Historia, tendencias, estéticas*. Madrid, Manuales de Arte Cátedra.
- Vega, C. (2007). Reconocimiento del mundo. In M. L. Sougez (coord.) *Historia General de la Fotografía* (pp. 117-181). Madrid, Manuales de Arte Cátedra.
- Villalón Vara, R. (2024, February 1st). *Alberto García-Alix: "La fotografía me ha dado libertad"*. Clavo Ardiendo Magazine. <https://clavoardiendo-magazine.com/mundofoto/entrevistas/alberto-garcia-alix-la-fotografia-me-ha-dado-libertad/>
- Yugo, L. (2017, January 13th). *Con la boca abierta. Entrevista a Cristina García Rodero*. [Vídeo]. Instituto Cervantes. <https://videos.cervantes.es/cristina-garcia-rodero/>