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ENTERTAINMENT

"Salt of Earth" a tribute to photographer Sebastiao Salgado

Jay Weissberg, *Variety*

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Photo by Sebastião Salgado, Courtesy of © Sebastião Salgado/Amazonas Images/Sony Pictures Classics (Provided by Sony Pictures Classics)

Wim Wenders' mastery of the documentary form is again on display in "The Salt of the Earth," a stunning visual ode to the photographer Sebastiao Salgado, co-directed by the shutterbug's documentary-making son Juliano Ribeiro Salgado. Long recognized as one of the camera's great artists, Sebastiao's sculptural use of light and space is combined with a deep empathy for the human condition, resulting in richly complex black-and-white images that capture the dignity within every subject. "Salt" guides the viewer on a visual odyssey through the photographer's career, enriched by Wenders' monochrome footage and Juliano's color.

Wenders hit upon an exceptionally clever, cinematic way of filming Sebastiao discussing his work, by projecting the master's photographs onto a semi-transparent mirror that allows audiences to see both image and man. In this way, Wenders teases out memories of various monumental projects, turning normally banal talking-head visuals into a more interactive device.

Sebastiao didn't start as a photographer: Born in the Brazilian mining state of Minas Gerais, he studied economics, even working with the World Bank after his exile in France in 1969, in the wake of Brazil's military coup. Looking for more fulfillment, he and his wife, Lelia, invested in high-quality camera equipment, and in 1973 Sebastiao left for Niger, where he began his portfolio chronicling nobility in the face of suffering.

The film doesn't start chronologically: Wenders first has Sebastiao comment on his most recognized images, from the Serra Pelada mine that formed part of the "Workers" series of the 1980s. The photos have a haunting, plaintive monumentality (made even more so when blown up onto the bigscreen), akin to frieze reliefs in the way they combine an

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architectural precision with tensed muscles and energetic forms. It's fascinating to hear Sebastiao discuss their genesis and the emotions he felt while shooting in this vast, Inferno-like expanse.

Several series came before, starting with a photographic essay on South America that enabled Sebastiao to get close to his native Brazil without crossing the border, until a return from exile in 1980. He followed that up with "The Sahel, the End of the Road," his first major exploration of communities suffering from deprivation, and also the first time he worked in conjunction with Doctors Without Borders. After that came "Workers" and then "Exodus," a project that unavoidably left him psychologically scarred by the horrific misery he witnessed and recorded. Designed as a record of the displacement of populations through famine, war and economic deprivation, the series coincided with the civil war in Rwanda and unimaginable horrors.

Influential critics such as Susan Sontag and Ingrid Sischy accused Sebastiao of turning misery into an aestheticized object for Western consumption, yet reducing these photographs merely to beautiful images corrupts their intent and meaning. Certainly he has a trained eye for striking compositions, but his artistry lies in the way he combines beauty with sensitivity to the inner strength and dignity of even his most wretched subjects. The satisfying beauty of the shot doesn't work against empathy but rather ennobles those he photographs, resulting in moving, synergistic compositions of deep humanity and drama.

After "Exodus," Sebastiao no longer believed in mankind's salvation. Returning to Brazil with a desperate need to assuage his bitterness, he was faced with the desiccated remnants of his family's formerly verdant farm, parched from drought. With Leila, he began an experimental program of replanting; their technique proved so successful that the project, called "Instituto Terra," has now reforested parts of Brazil's Mata Atlantica and is a model for similar efforts worldwide. The experience reinvigorated the photographer for his most recent project "Genesis," a collaboration with son Juliano that encompasses parts of the globe retaining their primeval aspect, from Wrangel Island in Siberia to the highlands of Papua New Guinea.

As a young man Sebastiao must have seemed a strange sight, his long blond hair and bushy red beard a striking contrast with the appearance of the indigenous people he was photographing. Away for long stretches of the year due to his insistence on living with his subjects, he relied on the remarkably patient Leila to organize their home and

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professional life, and the docu makes clear she's a vital force behind all his projects. For Juliano, his largely absent father was an almost legendary figure, so their collaboration on "Genesis" has a satisfying pertinence.

Although "The Salt of the Earth" contains numerous scenes of Sebastiao shooting, there's little discussion of his working methods and zero mention of artistic influences. Wenders' narration contains more than a few choice platitudes — "he looked into the heart of darkness" and such — but the visuals and subject are so strong that they're easily ignored. What audiences cannot fail to notice, once again, is the director's exceptional eye for black-and-white, combining his own sensitivity to the form with the influence of Sebastiao's work (they both have an intense appreciation for skies decorated with clouds in an array of gray tonalities). Juliano's color lensing also has a sweep and appreciation for light and reflection. The photos look fantastic enlarged on a cinema screen.