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Wim Wenders and Juliano Ribeiro Salgado Talk "The Salt of the Earth"

BY CRAIG HUBERT | MARCH 30, 2015



Director Wim Wenders and Sebastião Salgado.

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In 2003 the celebrated social photographer Sebastião Salgado decided to make a dramatic shift. He'd been pushed to the edge by the emotional demands of his "Migrations" series, which took him to some of the most ravaged places on Earth while at the same time gradually piquing his interest in land conservation. Instead of taking pictures of human suffering, Salgado decided to turn his lens on places untouched by modernity. The result was the eight-years-in-the-making "Genesis" project, which focuses on wildlife, startling landscapes, and indigenous peoples. The artist's transformation is the subject of "The Salt of the Earth," a new documentary by the

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German filmmaker Wim Wenders and the photographer's son, Juliano Ribeiro Salgado. ARTINFO spoke with the pair about their unlikely collaboration, and how the most important story is the one that happened behind the scenes between father and son.

What are your first memories of Salgado's images?

JULIANO RIBEIRO SALGADO: My first memory is the smell of the chemicals from his lab, which was on the top floor of where we lived in Paris; the yellow light—it wasn't red—and the tick- tock of the clock.

Wim Wenders: In the 1980s I was walking along La Brea Avenue with something else in mind, and passed a gallery and saw from the corner of my eye some pictures that immediately drew me to them. It was a couple of pictures from the Serra Pelada goldmine series. Although I couldn't afford it, I decided to buy one of them. It was the one with a worker leaning against a post, with this insane hole behind him, and he just has crossed arms, relaxing; it looked almost like a painting of a saint. And then the gallerist, because he had already sold one, got adventurous and pulled a second set of photographs by Salgado from a drawer, from the Sahara. And as much as the photos from Serra Pelada were adventurous, these other pictures obviously had a very different background. The first series blew me away because of their power, but the pictures of the Sahara blew me away because of their emotion and deep identification with the people. I couldn't afford one, so I figured I could just as well not afford two. For a long time they were the only two pictures I owned.

How did this collaboration between the two of you and Sebastião come together?

JRS: I started filming Sebastião about two weeks after we first met Wim, in 2009. He came for dinner, and it was very clear that a project might happen between Wim and Sebastião. There was a common interest and curiosity. But I really didn't want to do a film about Sebastião. He's this guy who traveled a lot, who was almost never here. So at

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the beginning, I was quite worried about spending time with him. There was quite a bit of distance. But what happened was that I went on this trip to the Amazon because I thought it might be useful to document, because it was one of his last big projects.

When Sebastião saw the edited footage, and saw how I was watching him and what my feelings were for him, he had tears in his eyes. He got very emotional and I did, too. It opened the door for us. It gave me confidence that he accepted my gaze over him.

WW: Between Sebastião and me there was originally no thought about a movie. We were just becoming friends. I asked a lot of questions, and he began showing me some of his new work at the time, from the “Genesis” project, and finally I asked if these images could have some application on a movie screen. I didn’t think you should put them on a movie screen because that inevitably would become a slideshow. But while he was showing me all this work, he kept telling me the stories to each and every picture, and more and more, I realized what a great storyteller he is. Eventually, the three of us decided the best thing would be to throw our cards together.

One of the most striking things about the film is the way Sebastião is framed by the camera—it often seems like he’s addressing the audience directly.

WW: It was not like that in the beginning. The original things we shot were too conventional, too routine. I was wondering how I could get to this more personal experience, how I could have Sebastião connect with his memory and possibly connect with an audience. So we invented this darkroom, which was really nothing, just black walls. Sebastião couldn’t see the crew or the camera—he just saw his own photographs in front of him projected on a screen.

These sequences are among the most emotional in the film.

WW: A couple of times, tears were building up in his eyes, and we would have to take a break. That went for us behind the camera as well. But he wanted to go through it and

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realized there was also something valid in this process for him. He could really confront his work once and for all.

JRS: It's weird actually—I thought I was going to get to know Sebastião better during our travels. But it ended up happening to me when I saw Wim's material. I know so many of these stories since I was a kid, but when I saw it together, something clicked. When we met again, I realized I had moved forward by watching Sebastião through Wim's eyes. The real journey for me is not even in the film. Everything has changed, and now Sebastião and I are mates.

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