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Filmmaking as Family Therapy: An Interview with Wim Wenders and Juliano Ribeiro Salgado



Film still from *The Salt of the Earth*. Photo Sebastião Salgado. © Sebastião Salgado/Amazonas Images/Sony Pictures Classics.

In a narrative voiceover at the beginning of the documentary *The Salt of the Earth*, co-director Wim Wenders refers to the etymological definition of a photographer, one who "draws with light." The characterization well befits the film's subject, Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado. For the last 40 years, Salgado has traveled the world, witnessing major historical events.

With the help of the photographer's son Juliano Ribeiro Salgado, Wenders chronicles Salgado's career, from images of the Boschian nightmare of Brazil's Serra Pelada gold mines to shots of the mid-1990s Rwandan genocide to Sebastião's most recent project, *Genesis*, which captures pristine, grandly scaled landscapes all over the world.

The Salt of the Earth, which was awarded the 2014 Un Certain Regard Special Prize at the Cannes Film Festival and nominated for best documentary feature at the Academy Awards, premieres Mar. 27 in New York and Los Angeles. Before then, a retrospective of Wenders's films at New York's Museum of Modern Art (through Mar. 17) features 20 Wenders's films, from dramas like *The American Friend* (1977) and *Paris, Texas* (1984), to documentaries such as *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999) and *Pina* (2011), a 3-D homage to German choreographer and dancer Pina Bausch.

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Wenders and Ribiero Salgado sat down with *A.i.A.* in November to discuss the challenges of collaboration and getting to know Sebastião.

JULIA WOLKOFF In the beginning of *The Salt of the Earth*, Sebastião sits on a hillside at the Terra Institute [an environmental organization he founded with his wife] and says that every photographer would shoot the same scene differently. How did your directorial visions differ? How did you reconcile those differences?

JULIANO RIBIERO SALGADO In the first part of the process, chatting about what our shared idea of the film could be, we had this intuition—but it was only an intuition, it wasn't really formalized—that there would be a handing down [of Sebastião's stories] somehow and a transformation, but we didn't know how we were going to tell it.

Then Wim shot the interviews of Sebastião as only he could, and in that way we were really blessed. I shot my trips, we went to the Terra Institute where Wim filmed sequences of planting trees, and I tried to concentrate on things that were related to the family, that dealt with my grandfather.

WENDERS He shot the grandfather sequences in '96, when he was still a kid. I didn't know this material existed, and in the middle of the editing a guy comes up and says, "Oh, I have some old footage." Can you imagine how happy I was when I saw that?

WOLKOFF The footage added continuity to a story of fathers and sons.

SALGADO There's something about transmission in this film, Sebastião passing on his stories. What he transmitted to his family, he's now presenting to a broader audience. There is the land that has been bequeathed to him and how he gives it over to the next generation.

And there's this thing that's been happening between us. Wim has been opening up very generously at some points. At the beginning, I would edit for two months, then Wim would edit for two months, then I would have a go, and then Wim. But we never managed to find the film.

After a year of editing, we realized that we weren't going to get anywhere if we didn't actually start doing this film together. And it's by doing so that we found our voices. It put us back in the places we were in 2009, when we first met: the son trying to get closer to his dad and the admirer of Sebastião's work—we were friends to be.

WOLKOFF What was the most challenging part of making a film about photographs?

WENDERS It's really impossible. We did it because Sebastião is a great storyteller, and we did it because there was a story and an arc. We had to uncover it. Sometimes it takes a long time in

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a documentary to find the structure. We had shot so much, heard so many stories. There was an abundance of photographs and hundreds of hours of footage. And then, we slowly had to start seeing the forest through the trees. See, making a film about a photographer, about photography, is really a complete paradox. It is ... How do you say that again? To turn a square into a round?

WOLKOFF To fit a square peg in a round hole?

WENDERS Yeah, something like that. Photography evades film. That's what I told Sebastião the first time he asked, "Do you think my photographs could somehow appear on the screen?" I said, "No, don't do that, don't go there. It's going to be a slideshow." I *really* had to believe in his ability as a storyteller and in his knowledge of sociology, economics, politics, of all the context that he could bring to those pictures, or I would not have made the film.

SALGADO It's not a film about Sebastião. Actually the film had to be about the witness, the guy who understood so much and witnessed so much about humanity. There was a lot he could pass on. Really, that's what the film is about: the stories and what's happening to the people that we see. And that gives movement to the photographs, because the story goes on.

WOLKOFF It's true. He depicts huge natural, social and political catastrophes, but it's almost meaningless unless you have the perspective of one relatable witness.

WENDERS That is the whole thing. You put your finger on it. It is meaningless, and actually the wealth of Sebastião's photography could also be meaningless in a movie. We had to find a way to protect it. That was his life and the life of his wife and whole family. For Sebastião, the work was never about creating art. He always strove to create contexts for the people he photographed and situations he witnessed.

SALGADO He acts so responsibly toward his subjects. When you make a documentary, you owe the public correct information, but you also owe something to the people whose stories you have been telling.

WOLKOFF I also really enjoyed how both of you inserted yourselves into the movie, through narration, through the interviews, through personal history, albeit in an oblique way. How did you negotiate your presences?

SALGADO [Wim] tricked me. I didn't want to be in the film. I thought I was going to get away without having to speak or be seen. Then one day I went to the editing room and there were the pictures of me as a baby and Wim was being so sweet, speaking in voiceover about his future friend and co-director. And suddenly I was there, part of the story.

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WOLKOFF But you came in as a director, so did you see filming as [an opportunity] to communicate with your father and not have it show up in the film?

SALGADO Listen, this communication thing, it happened. But it didn't happen in a direct way. It happened because of the film. There was a dialogue.

Sebastião and I, we had very separate ways, and when I became a teenager our relationship became more difficult. Now I can admit that I had a lot of anger toward him because he had traveled so much, because he wasn't here. When he came back he had a lot to give, all these experiences, but I guess it wasn't enough. And so when he saw the way I was filming him, that it wasn't angry at all, that I was trying to be true to him. He was very, very touched. And somehow he understood that there was something else other than just anger from me.

For me, the communication happened when I saw Wim's footage. Wim found this beautiful way of filming Sebastião and his experiences. When it was a rough cut, seeing all the stories that I already knew come together through somebody else's eyes, from a more neutral place, changed my way of seeing Sebastião. By the end of the film we're friends. We healed our relationship.

WOLKOFF Maybe I should make a movie about my parents.

WENDERS It doesn't always work. Make sure you have a third person with you.

SALGADO I think a third party is really important, absolutely. The whole process of making the film together was difficult. Wim and I had to accept each other, which wasn't easy. Wim's a very generous guy, because he didn't have to be part of all that. I think for him, working with Sebastião's son was more trouble than pleasure. But Wim goes for it, and that's really nice. Thank you for that.

WENDERS I always loved that song "The Son of a Preacher Man."

WOLKOFF Wim, you came in to the movie as the outsider. Did you come to see the photographs (and Sebastião) in a different way by the end of the film?

WENDERS Yes and no. Getting to know Sebastião and the dedication that brought him to take all of these photographs changed the pictures for me. On the other hand, it confirmed what I had somehow expected. Because I always assumed that this was a man who really loved people, that there was a great humanitarian behind [the work].

I do have a theory, as a photographer, that there is a built-in portrait of the photographer in his photographs, a reverse angle. And I did see a reverse angle in all of Sebastião's photographs,

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but of course you can't prove it. Now, after knowing him and after making this movie, I think that the reverse angle that I had expected of him in his pictures is totally confirmed by his persona.

There's another great song by Jonathan ... Jonathan something ... "Picasso is not an asshole."
[Actual lyric: "Pablo Picasso never got called an asshole / not like you"]

WOLKOFF Jonathan Richman?

WENDERS Richman! But I have no real protest to Sebastião. And I was stunned to really understand the enormity of Sebastião's personal investment in his photographs and the enormous amount of time he put into these trips and how often he returned to the same region. It's quite amazing when you realize something is even bigger than you expected.

WOLKOFF Speaking of "bigger than you expected," I recognized Biblical themes in the movie. There were obvious references, like Sebastião's projects titled *Genesis* and *Exodus*, but also frequent mentions of heaven and hell, and paradises turned nightmarish. Is Sebastião religious? Are you?

SALGADO I am not. Sebastião is not religious, but he has always believed in people. He always felt that there was a way of progress and that, by nature, humanity was always going to get better. He felt that way up to Rwanda, which was a very deep break for him because there was no hope at all.

Having said that, you can't escape all those references and all of the spirituality. There's a big contradiction. When you meet with Sebastião, he describes the world in a way that is informative and really rational, but when you see his work, it's just guts and intuition. My father seems to feel that everything has equal value, from a monkey to a whale. That's what comes out from his photography. But he can't formulate it [in words].

WENDERS He's actually a Marxist, but that is a touchy point. Because in his formative years, which were the first years of his photographic career when he traveled to South America, he made most of these journeys with priests who practiced what you could call a Marxist theology.

SALGADO The theology of liberation.

WENDERS This theology is really the crossroads of religion and Marxism. It's not a coincidence that Sebastião, when he traveled through South America during the years that he worked on *Other Americas*, always associated with priests. And a lot of his first jobs were for churches.

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Personally, I believe in God. And maybe the film's title, *The Salt of the Earth*, is a little romantic because of that. But I thought it would go with Sebastião's heart for a certain kind of theology. Theology as it is expressed in the Sermon on the Mount, is strictly Marxist.

My little secret about the title is that Salgado means "salty." I always got a kick out of that when we first suggested the title. It was my private subtext.