

He recounts traversing a segment of road stretching over one hundred miles toward Kigali, which was littered with corpses without respite. This region of Africa where such horrors were unfolding is a beautiful region, but for Salgado it was as if Hell had invaded Paradise. Yet even in the midst of the horror, he did not fail to notice and record the love of mothers for their children and the trust the children had in their mothers.

From Africa, he moved on to the Balkans, where he encountered the ethnic cleansing occurring in Bosnia. It occurred to him then that hatred was an infectious disease. He returned to Africa one more time to record evidence of some of the massacres which had taken place. He uses language during this segment of the film that can only be characterized as a secular description of total depravity, referring to humanity as a gruesome species. This was the only period of his career, he says, when he often had to lay his camera down, and simply cry.

In dire need of solace and healing for his spirit, Salgado returned with his family to the hereditary farm in Brazil. Everything was dried up. Nothing remained of the green paradise of his childhood. And then his wife Lelia once again proved to be the catalyzer of their future course. She said they should reforest the land. And so they did. The work continues to this day. This project, which was initially implemented on their own land, but which then spread into the entire region, was baptized Instituto Terra.

Unsurprisingly, the Instituto Terra provided the impetus and inspiration for Salgado's next photographic project. It was to be a modest effort, merely an homage to the entire planet. He called it Genesis. The first field trip was to the Galapagos Islands. At this juncture Salgado professes an orthodox Darwinist worldview, intoning that everything in the natural world is related and that we all have developed from the same primordial cell.

There is an irony here: Salgado came face to face with evil in his previous travels, and knows it is real. Not natural evil, such as the suffering ensuing from an earthquake or a Tsunami or a pandemic, but moral evil, where human beings willingly abused and slaughtered other human beings. A cogent argument can be made (and has been made) that moral evil cannot exist in a purely natural world.

Perhaps Salgado has never juxtaposed his vivid experience of the morally broken human world with such Darwinist presuppositions and thus has never seen any contradiction. Or perhaps he simply believes that if the Tutsis and the Hutus had been good enough environmentalists, they would not have slaughtered one another. Who knows? Suffice it to say that it is surprising that such an insightful and creative mind so passively reclines into the prevailing institutional orthodoxy.

We take leave of Sebastian Salgado as he reflects upon how his life has come full circle. He is here on the very patch of land that formed him as a youth. His pictures have told the stories of countless other people and places, and he speaks now of his hope that when he dies the land upon which he lives will again be as it was when he was born. Philosophical polemics aside, Salgado's remarkably adventurous life has produced a remarkable body of work. Whatever one believes about ultimate origins and ultimate meaning, his visual essays will always compel the deepest respect because of the honesty and compassion with which they overflow.

THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Friday Film Fest Series



Das Salz der Erde

By Wim Wenders and Juliano Salgado

May 18, 2018

• 6:30 PM •

Film, Food & Discussion

The German Society of PA

611 Spring Garden St.

215-627-2332

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Das Salz der Erde

Director: Wim Wenders, Juliano Salgado
Producer: Wim Wenders, Lelia Salgado, David Rosier
Writers: Wim Wenders, Juliano Salgado
Cinematography: Hugo Barbier, Juliano Salgado
Music: Laurent Petitgand
Release Date: May 2014
Spieldauer: 110 minutes
Narration: Wim Wenders, Sebastian Salgado, Juliano Salgado
Commentary: A. Krumm



"...my way of seeing..."

Children harbor an atavistic astonishment about life. But then they grow up and suppress this sense of wonder. It seems necessary to do so, in order to get on with life. It takes too much energy to keep this acute reverence balanced on the surface of one's consciousness. But some individuals are simply unable to release their grip on this awestruck attitude. Sebastian Salgado is such a person.

He tried to be an economist but discovered that he had to be a photographer. He has striven for decades to do with his camera what Rembrandt did with his brush and pigments, to capture the motions of the soul and the agonizingly exquisite particularities of time and place. His themes are equally biblical in scope: the grandeur of the natural world, the crippled dignity and persistent tragedy of the human world, and always, that astonishing mystery of existence which children and tribal folk so readily embrace.

Like Rembrandt he respects his subjects. He notes that *"You don't take a photo alone, the subject contributes as well."* Hence he has faithfully followed Robert Lowell's advice to *"Give each figure in the photograph his living name."* Or as it were each tribe or animal or rain forest, or landscape or mountain chain.

And then atrocities intruded into his repertoire and his horrendous photos of such depravity can only compel a shaken viewer to exclaim with T. S. Eliot: *"I had not thought death had undone so many."* By capturing such wastelands of corpses, Salgado forces us to acknowledge that death dealt to human beings by other human beings has indeed undone so many. There is violence in the natural world, but it lacks the invasive obscenity of violence in the human world.

Wim Wenders first encountered the work of Salgado some twenty years ago, when he saw the famous collection of photos of the Serra Pelada gold mine in Brazil. He was intrigued and in conversation with the curator of the gallery, he was shown another photograph of Salgado's, that of a blind Tuareg woman. This photograph mesmerized him and he knew then that he had to one day document the life and work of this remarkable individual. This film is the result of that intention.

Wenders begins by reminding us of the Greek etymology of the word photograph, rendered literally as writing with light (*φωτός + γράφω*) and indeed all of Salgado's visual essays gain their eloquence by capturing the essence of the given subject matter through a viscerally compelling combination of light and shadow.

Wenders shares narration duty with both Salgado and his son Juliano. This approach works well, not least because Salgado is a philosopher cum photographer with a beguiling narrative style himself. He speaks of how *"... my way of seeing ..."* developed in the place where he was born and spent his childhood, and of how every photograph has its own unique history and pre-history. Thus this documentary is a tripartite treat. It not only invites you to look and listen, it makes you think, and think again.

Early on in the film, we see Salgado mingling with the Yali people of Papua New Guinea. It seems evident that there is no barrier, no wall of 'otherness' between him and them. This ability to merge and meld with his subjects is one of Salgado's gifts. His subjects trust him, because he trusts them. They like him, because his affection for them is evident. The tribesmen obviously concur with Nicolas of Cusa: *"Our sight followeth the affections of our eye and mind."*

After earning a degree in economics at the University of Sao Paulo, Salgado and his wife Lelia embarked for Europe in 1969. While they were living in Paris, she happened to purchase a camera, and he soon became hooked. His first photo was of Lelia. He had found his true calling.

Salgado's first serious photographic work was in Nigeria in 1973. In this collection we see the intense empathy he had with his subjects, which became a hallmark of his photos: we are shown mothers waiting in line to procure food for their children. Within a few years, he embarked on his next big project, returning to South America after nearly a decade's absence.

From this journey would come his next collection, Other Americas. While exploring the landscapes and people of Latin America, he met a young priest who gave him entree to many communities from which he might otherwise have been excluded. Perhaps this young priest was the catalyst for Salgado learning how to identify with his subjects. He saw how this priest, while preaching the Word to the people, also exhibited a complete solidarity with them.

His next major project linked him up with Doctors Without Borders, a humanitarian group whose principles and practices impacted him as much as had the ethos of the young priest. The book which ensued from this undertaking was called Sahel – The End Of The Road 1984 – 1986. He visited and documented life in the giant refugee camps in Ethiopia and the Sudan, which had resulted from the famine and civil war in the region. The scale of human suffering he encountered was overwhelming. His searing photos bring that suffering into a tormenting focus.

Salgado's creative productivity continued unabated in the 1990s. In Workers, he paid homage to all the men and women who have built the world we live in. In Kuwait, he recorded the ecological and economic devastation issuing from the first Gulf War, when Sadaam Hussein's forces had set afire over 700 oil wells in Kuwait. His photos capture a technologized version of Dante's Inferno, as well as the heroic efforts of firemen from all over the world to put the fires out.

Exodus 1993 – 1999 deals with the mass migrations of people in the late 20th century, whether due to war, natural disasters, economic disruption or pure demographic pressure. The most frightening segment of this story led Salgado straight into the heart of darkness which manifested itself during the genocidal conflicts in the African nations of Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania and the Congo.