

# The New York Times

## Sebastião Salgado's Journey From Brazil to the World

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*Sebastião Salgado has won every major prize a photographer can receive, with his crisp, compassionate black-and-white images, many of them from war zones and other locations of human suffering, hanging on the walls of museums, galleries and private collections around the world. His books, including “Workers,” “Migrations,” “Sahel” and, most recently, the nature-oriented “Genesis,” have consistently met with commercial and critical success.*

*Now, as if to complete the picture, a documentary film about Mr. Salgado, 71, and his work is about to open in theaters across the United States. “The Salt of the Earth,” a collaborative effort between the German director Wim Wenders, who is also a photographer, and Mr. Salgado’s son Juliano Ribeiro Salgado, was nominated for the Oscar for best documentary film, won a prize at the Cannes Film Festival last spring*

and last month was also awarded a César, the French equivalent of an Academy Award.

The documentary features Mr. Salgado explaining, in French and Portuguese, how he came to take some of his best-known images, such as those from the Serra Pelada series shot in a gold mine in the Amazon 30 years ago. But it also makes clear that his path to becoming a renowned photographer was arduous: He was born deep in the isolated Brazilian interior, scrimped to get an economics degree, left his country and took refuge in France after a military dictatorship seized power in Brazil, and in the mid-1990s suffered what he called “a deep psychological crisis” after covering the genocidal civil wars in Rwanda and Bosnia and had to recalibrate the focus of his work.



Nowadays, although “my vision of the human being has not changed, I no longer think just of my own species,” Mr. Salgado, speaking in Portuguese, said in a telephone interview from his studio in Paris last month. “That’s not my only preoccupation. Today I think of the other species too, of the ants, the termites, the whales, they are as important as my own. The behavior of our species, what we do to nature, to other species, to each other, is awful, so I have the same skepticism about us that I always had.”

That broadened interest in environmental concerns is documented in detail in “The Salt of the Earth,” which shows him working on the “Genesis” project in locales as far-flung as the Amazon, the Arctic and New Guinea and also accompanies him as he tries to undo the environmental degradation afflicting his native region through a foundation he set up for that purpose, the Instituto Terra. Mr. Salgado talked about those and other subjects with Larry Rohter.

**Q.**

You’ve largely avoided movies in the past. What made you willing to do this documentary film? Was it because your son was involved?

**A.**

It wasn’t a decision taken easily in the beginning. Juliano had always wanted to do the story of his family, he’s the child of immigrants, we came here to Paris and in the beginning we were kind of refugees, it was during the time of the Brazilian dictatorship, and we remained here. You must have seen the film and noted that my father is in it. That was done around 1998 or 1999, when Juliano was very young, just starting to do cinema.

Then, around 2009, Wim Wenders came to our house, and I showed him the

photographs from “Genesis.” I said to him, ‘This is the project I am working on.’ I made a slide show, I did conferences, I put some music to it. I didn’t know anything about cinema, but I asked: Is there a way to make a film of this? That was my idea. In my head, I really wanted the images to enter into that world in some fashion.

**Q.**

Wim Wenders makes a very interesting observation in the film, saying that your training as an economist helped prepare you for the kind of photography you do. Do you think that’s true? Did it help, and if so, in what way?

**A.**

Yes, it helped. In reality, when you consider a photographer, he’s the fruit of his heritage. My visual heritage comes from the mountains where I grew up and a lot of my intellectual heritage from having been an economist. The economics I did was not the economics of business administration, it’s not micro. I did macroeconomics — the economics of public finances, political economy, I studied Marx and Keynes. In reality, that kind of economics is a kind of quantified sociology, so that kind of preparation gave me a real training. I had to study, I had to read a lot of philosophy, political science, I had to read a whole bunch of things that gave me a solid grounding, and that was something fabulous.

So when I became a photographer, I had a series of instruments for analysis and synthesis, and clearly all of that helped me.

I would also mention my origins as a Brazilian, from a country in social gestation. So I came with all of that in my head, and my photography is that. And here’s another thing: I am an immigrant, so I was also doing my own story. All of this contributes to my work. My work is the result of my training, my heritage, cultural and ideological and ethical.

**Q.**

You’re always described as a “social photographer.” Do you agree with that assessment?

**A.**

It’s limiting. Listen, I am not a social photographer. I am not an economic photographer. I’m not a photojournalist. Photography is much more than that. Photography is my life. It’s my way of life, and my language. I went to photograph the things that I had a great curiosity to see and to organize. I felt a certain revulsion, and a compulsion to show that others also have dignity, that dignity is not an exclusive property of the rich countries of the north but exists all over the planet. That’s what photography was for me, my language, my life and my way of going about and doing things.

I’m a photographer without adjectives, and that is a big privilege, because photography as an instrument for capturing images is today being totally transformed. The telephones that exist today, the majority of photographs taken now are with them, and people have completely modified them on their computers. So photography is being transformed into something else. Maybe in 20 or 30 years it will no longer exist, it will have become something else. I’m not saying this with any kind of criticism, I don’t have any bitterness in me, it’s evolution, that’s the way it goes. There are new options, so let’s go there, that’s what our society has done.

But I’ll tell you one thing: I’ve been immensely privileged to have been able for 40 or 50 years of my life to go wherever I wanted and participate in history. That’s one of the things that most surprised me in the movie, to see the proof that I had the privilege to take part in the main stories of the time I live in, to be there.

**Q.**

Should we regard the “Genesis” project, with its focus on nature and the environment, as a continuation of your previous work? Or is it a rupture with your past?

**A.**

No, in no way. I’ve always worked with stories. This is a story I wanted to do at that moment. You know, I discovered photography when I was already in Paris, preparing for a doctorate in economics. But the first images of my life, I saw them there at my father’s ranch, as a child, and they remained in my head. I took Wim to shoot there, and in the film there’s an image where I’m seated in what seems like a photograph, and then I begin to move.

That’s where my father would take me when I was a boy. The ranch was large, and it took four or five hours on foot to get to that place, since my father didn’t like to ride on horseback. We’d get there and sit, mainly at the end of October or the beginning of November, the beginning of the rainy season, when the clouds would arrive, loaded and heavy, and the light would be remarkable. It was such a variety of light, with those mountains in the distance, like you see in the film. That gave me such a sensation of pleasure, it was the most beautiful and profound thing I’d seen in my life. In reality, I only came to photography later, but the images were already there, and that light! Even today that’s where it comes from, from those places.

**Q.**

Critics sometimes say that your images are “too pretty” in their portrayal of horrible things. How do you react to that?

**A.**

It’s not my problem. I can’t do what I do in any other way. Once I was talking with [Gabriel] García Márquez, he had become a friend and helped me with certain stories, and he said to me: ‘I basically write the same thing over and over. They are different versions of the same story.’ And it’s true. He couldn’t write in any fashion other than the way he did. When you write, you have your style, you have your form. Photographers are like that too, except that our language is a formal language, an aesthetic. Because we work within a square space it’s formal by necessity. So I can’t do things any other way than my own. There are people who like that, people who don’t, people who critique. Fine. But that’s the problem of people who look at the pictures. They may be right, they may be wrong, but it’s their problem, not mine.

**Q.**

I have a philosophical question regarding how you think about what you do. Is it journalism or art or both?

**A.**

I don’t consider myself an artist. I have a concept of art that might be a little different, as something that tells the big story of humanity. The other day I was at a museum exhibition in Barcelona with my wife, a beautiful exposition of African art, of work instruments, pots for carrying water, etc. At the moment they were made, they were not art objects, but instruments for daily living that referred to that people and which today are considered art objects because they tell a story about that people.

If by chance my photographs, 50 or 60 years from now, should be considered a reference to the moment in history in which I lived, if they should remain that for future generations, then I think they might be an artistic product that made an artistic contribution and have become everyone’s heritage. But I can’t say that with the photography I am doing that I have achieved that, because that would be enormously

pretentious on my part. I have to wait for history to say whether they are or are not. I know that few people can do photography, that you have to feel that instinct within you in that fraction of a second. Not everyone can do that, I recognize this. A photograph has my story, my ethic, my aesthetic, my ideology. It's all there, my father, my mother. So it has a strong diversity, it tells stories. But you have to wait awhile to see. I feel very uncomfortable when I see a photographer presenting himself as an artist. I don't have that pretension.

**Q.**

So now that you've been involved in a movie, I was wondering: Will you ever do cinema again?

**A.**

No, once is sufficient. Enough already. Because there's something I discovered about movie people: They are on a planet that it is completely different from photography. We photographers are instinctive, when something happens, we are there, photography becomes part of the phenomenon. You have to do it in a fraction of a second, you're inside it. But when movie people are with you, oh my God, it's so slow! And it takes a lot of time and energy, because you're repeating things over and over. Cinema is very tough, very demanding. So I prefer photography.