

# Sebastião Salgado:

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## The Modernist Deconstruction of Cynicism

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The Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado has been criticized for aestheticizing poverty and suffering. The issue is not in the subject's aestheticization, but rather in the lack of properly constructed narrative to give the images an unconstrained context for understanding. The insistence that such images should, as art objects, "stand on their own" is to allow the predominant ideological framework to reinterpret or dismiss these images as exploitative or paralyzing.

## Sebastião Salgado: the Modernist Deconstruction of Cynicism

Ingrid Sischy really hates the photography of Sebastião Salgado. The former editor of *Interview* and *Vanity Fair* and current *Vogue* contributor launched a scathing postmodernist salvo aimed at Salgado's work (and his character) in her 1991 piece, "Good Intentions," published in the *New Yorker*. The ironic title contains the one positive word to be found in the entire article. It was reprinted and given the imprimatur of serious academic criticism in *Illuminations: Women Writing on Photography from the 1850s to Present* whose editors describe Sischy's article as "an eloquent deconstruction of the concept of 'the concerned photographer'." Calling it a "deconstruction" gives this broadside a gravitas it in no way deserves. Sischy must have resorted to the thesaurus on more than one occasion to itemize her loathing. Salgado's photography is at once "too uncompromisingly serious," too sentimental, too earnest, schmaltzy, too pretty, too full of Christian symbolism, "manufactured poetry," aestheticized, "derivative," "empty," "formulaic," "too caught up in itself," "kitschy," gimmicky, "meretricious," "oversimplified," "heavy-handed," exploitative of his subjects, too concerned with composition and the formal aspects of the photograph. Salgado himself is taken to task for being "pretentious," "self-aggrandizing," a "button-pusher," "hooked on displaying his artistry," demonstrating a "distorted humanism," and "opportunistic." You get the drift.

It *really* bothers her that Salgado has somehow managed to be shown extensively (two shows six months apart at the ICP in Manhattan and at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art at

the time of her article), and that his “greeting card stuff” has been published in numerous books with Aperture and Phaidon. She is outraged that his naïve admirers have bought into the “Salgado mythology,” - a result of having been manipulated by “photography that runs on a kind of emotional blackmail fuelled by a dramatics of art direction.” To admire a photograph by Salgado is to be a liberal naïf who has been unwittingly blackmailed, guilt-tripped, and anaesthetized by Salgado’s photographic formalism. Sischy’s contempt for Salgado’s audience is palpable: “Typical of the comments I overheard during several days of visiting the show at the ICP was one made by a young woman standing in front of this image: ‘I can’t look at this picture. It makes me cry.’ Yet she looked at it, and she didn’t cry.” Naïve *and* dishonest. Would that there could have been a Sischy-led deconstruction intervention to restore this misled woman back to a more normal state of alienated anomie.

Paring away all of the vitriol there is an argument within Sischy’s “deconstruction” that merits comment. Sischy and others are interrogating two aspects of Salgado’s project: 1. Can aesthetics (in this case art photography) be part of a call to action? 2. Should profound human social struggles and suffering be the subject of art photography or is this more appropriately relegated to “straight” photojournalism? What does it mean that Salgado’s images of starving children in the Sahel or the mud-coated miners of Serra Pelada have found their way into the pages of sumptuously bound editions for the coffee tables of the First World’s bourgeoisie?

David Levi Strauss in his short, trenchant essay, "The Documentary Debate: Aesthetic or Anaesthetic?" locates Sischy's argument in the Marxist debate of the 1930s to the 1950s involving Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukàcs, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. (Strauss, p. 6) Sischy (unwittingly?) was appropriating Benjamin's argument regarding the aestheticization of poverty. Originally an objection to the German *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) movement in literature and art, Benjamin objected to a movement that had "succeeded in turning abject poverty itself, by handling it in a modish, technically perfect way, into an object of enjoyment," and was guilty of transforming "political struggle so that it ceases to be a compelling motive for decision and becomes an object of contemplation." (Strauss, *ibid.*) Strauss argues correctly that this critique in no way applies to Salgado's photography. Quoting Eduardo Galeano's essay, "Salgado, 17 Times:"

Salgado photographs people. Casual photographers photograph phantoms.

As an article of consumption poverty is a source of morbid pleasure and much money. Poverty is a commodity that fetches a high price on the luxury market. Consumer-society photographers approach but do not enter. In hurried visits to scenes of despair or violence, they climb out of the plane or helicopter, press the shutter release, exploded the flash: they shoot and run. They have looked without seeing and their images say nothing...Charity, vertical humiliates. Solidarity, horizontal, helps. Salgado photographs from inside, in solidarity. (Eduardo Galeano, essay prefacing Sebastião Salgado, *An Uncertain Grace*.)

Human, internationalist solidarity is the starting point for Sebastião Salgado. In this cynical post-postmodern era, it almost seems a quaint, nostalgic point of view. On guard for any appeal to the emotions, Sischy homes in on this possible motivation for Salgado – his Third Worldist empathic distortion. It becomes one of the most disturbing sections of her essay as she makes

the cultural relativist (and borderline racist) declaration that Salgado, as a Brazilian has no claim to a vantage point for representing his subjects in the Third World:

When Salgado's admirers want to make the point that he understands what it is like to be outside the spheres of power, they bring up the fact that he lived in Brazil before moving to Paris. But since when did being a Brazilian qualify someone as the voice of Africa or of India – another assumption that creeps through the Salgado myth? (Sischy, p. 281)

Were it solely a matter of his nationality, Sischy might have a point. However, she fails to mention that Salgado's move to Paris was prompted by the Brazilian military junta's seizure of his passport, forcing him into exile. Similarly, Eduardo Galeano, Salgado's collaborator on *An Uncertain Grace* was exiled from Uruguay from that country's military dictatorship for having "ideological ideas." Beyond the circumstances of his birth and background, Salgado's approach to his photography differs fundamentally from that of most photojournalists. His projects are usually self-assigned (he is part of the Magnum Group); his photography takes place in the course of his own activism and volunteer work among the people he is photographing. For the Sahel project, he worked for 15 months as a volunteer for the French relief organization Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders.) The proceeds from his books, *Migrations* and *An Uncertain Grace* are donated to the organization. His newest work, *Terra: The Struggle of the Landless*, is devoted to the Brazilian peasant land-occupation movement, the MST, with which he has long been involved. This new work signifies a major change in his approach, as he is clearly seeking to put his art at the service of a movement.

These pictures will not, at least initially, be seen in conventional gallery displays. Rather, they have been exhibited as posters, not photographic prints,

simultaneously in many venues all over Europe, including churches, the buildings of charities and in galleries that want them. The production of the posters, in a large edition of 5,000 and sold for £10 each, was financed from Salgado's royalty for the book, and the money raised from their sale will go to the MST. The venues, the quality of the poster reproductions, the likely audience of charity workers and political activists as well as art-lovers, indicate that this is not exactly, or not only, a fine art display. The pictures are also changed when the MST uses them independently; I first saw a few of them as photocopies stuck to the door of a meeting house at the EZLN's Encuentro last summer. Since in those circumstances what was of overriding importance was the subject matter, there was nothing to say that they were the work of Salgado, or even of a single photographer. (Stallabras, p. 43)

This is not the stuff of the CNN drive-by or poverty tourists.

Levi Strauss wonders whether Galeano and Sischy looking at the same images. They are clearly not viewing them from the same worldview or with the same contextual assumptions. Galeano and Salgado both as writer and artist juxtapose a modernist formal approach and an unashamedly Marxist political framework while working within the context of a decidedly cynical postmodern era that rejects the very concept of beauty as relevant for our times. Their ideas occur to critics of this era as quaint or naïve. Internationalist solidarity is a concept that collapsed with along with the Berlin Wall. They cannot see it when it is put before them. It is a foreign construct outside of capitalist derived constructs of "foreign aid" (at the level of nations) or "charity" (at the level of civil society.) Galeano and Sischy are viewing images across paradigms. Is there sufficient information within these images, standing on their own, that can bridge this divide? What does the viewer bring to the table? Does s/he possess sufficient interpretive means, or are artist and viewer in essence speaking different languages?

In her seminal book, *On Photography*, Susan Sontag proposed that by its very nature, photography is limited in what information it can convey, based upon its limitations in time and in dealing only with appearances:

Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding which starts from not accepting the world as it looks. All possibility of understanding is rooted in the ability to say no. Strictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph ... A photograph of the Krupp works reveals virtually nothing about the organization. In contrast to the amorous relation, which is based on how something looks, understanding is based on how it functions. And functioning takes place in time, and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand. The limit of photographic knowledge of the world is that, while it can goad conscience, it can, finally, never be ethical or political knowledge. (Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 21.)

It is within this structural/formal limitation of the medium that the difficulty lays. Images presented outside a context, outside of an historical narrative are mere words without grammar. One of the real problems for Salgado is the predicament of aesthetics, of “art for art’s sake” in the current era. Behind most of Salgado’s books and exhibitions is the unstated position that the work of art should stand on its own without textual explanation. His early books are largely devoid of captions and accompanying text except for fixing the dates and locations of the images. The set of meanings for static visual images is so overwhelmingly monopolized by the vocabularies and the worldview of the ruling classes (including the lexicon of religion as a subset), a work of art “standing on its own” runs the risk of being defined by default in these terms. For most First World viewers, Salgado’s photograph of a Serra Pelada mine worker resting against a vertical plank set in the earth, is a reference to a crucifix. Images

of malnourished babies in the Sahel trying to nurse at their mother's withered breasts sadly, reference Renaissance Madonna and child icons. Absent any context or narrative such images fall into the pervasive dominant ideology as experienced and *practiced by the viewer*. To pierce it, to challenge its hegemony requires more than a static image can summon on its own. It requires interaction, a conversation between equals across a table that has been swept clear. This is especially true for documentary photography which by its nature is staked in time, and therefore in history. Sontag elaborated upon this thesis in *Regarding the Pain of Others*:

So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent--if not an inappropriate--response. To set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a consideration of how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may - in ways that we prefer not to imagine-- be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others, is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only the initial spark. (Sontag, 2004)

Salgado is attempting to set such a spark within the consciousness of viewers in the US and Europe. It is his stated aim. So why the path of the art gallery and the coffee table book? Why not "straight" photojournalism as Sischy seems to require? For one, the available means of presenting photojournalism have been shrinking steadily along with the demise of printed media. Gone are the days of *Life* magazine and the demand for the photodocumentary narrative. The transition away from printed magazines and books and into the digital has paralleled a new demand for the instantaneous -"just-in-time" delivery of information and eye-byte images that can sum up (distort/dumb down/reduce) a story in a matter of seconds. And at no time in history has the photographic image (particularly in journalism) been *cheaper*,

more suspect, and less reliable a source of truth. Most of us as adults have been duped by done-up images in the press; most children know the basics of altering photographs in Photoshop or Paint. Photojournalism has become more of an appendage to the interests of power than ever before, becoming the visual backdrop for ever more consolidated monopolies within the electronic media. The maxims of this way of reporting are access and speed of delivery. Photojournalists on a permanent floating deadline have no time for empathy or connection with their subjects. They need to uplink their images via satellite and post them on the web between checking their email and updating their Facebook pages.

Art, for the most part, does not compete with the exigency of “having it right now - yesterday if possible.” It would seem that the gallery has become a venue by default for documentary photography. The gallery invites contemplation – it is set outside of the real time of current events. Curatorial choices are not held to the same (largely false) editorial standards of reportage. The gallery can also be a cultural green zone for engaging the subversive. As the anti-intellectual, anti-political Fox-fervor of proud ignorance engulfs the rest of civil society, the realm of art has, more than almost any other public sphere, defended its right to interrogate society on its own terms. This is precisely what drives the right wing mad. For all of its limitations, the gallery can be a place for a three-part conversation between the viewer, the

photographer and the subject where ideological constraints can be loosened, if not outright challenged.<sup>1</sup>

The question then becomes, is it possible through this aestheticization of historical/documentary images and their location within the context of First World galleries to “goad the conscience,” or to “supply...the initial spark” as Sontag would put it?

“What does it mean to make of the suffering of these people a form of art? In response to this question, the first thing to ask is what the alternatives would be. It is hardly conceivable that they could be depicted with the distanced, anaesthetic mode of much contemporary photography, suited to portraying suburban ennui....In their strong formal design, Salgado's pictures revive photographic modernism with its emphasis on geometry and visual contrast. Beauty is pressed into the service of an old-fashioned humanism...” (Stallabrass, p. 143.)

Beauty is pressed into the service of an old-fashioned *Marxist* humanism that has solidarity as its core value. Perhaps it is fitting that Salgado's aesthetic harkens back to a time (not so long ago!) when internationalist revolution was very much on the agenda. There is a jarring contradiction for viewers of Salgado's work between the contemporaneousness of the subjects and the implied language that is used to examine them. The visual language of Salgado's modernist aesthetic seems almost as passé as his insistence on the possibility of a human connection between his subject, himself as photographer/agent, and the viewer. For those who have lived through the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (and had their hearts broken or, for

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, the gallery and its curators do not stand completely outside of the dominant political discourse. Stallabrass notes that Salgado's images of the Sahel were not accepted for exhibition at the time of the crisis, but only after the fact as part of Salgado's retrospective shows.

others, their Neo-Liberal inclinations confirmed) Salgado's photographs amount to a declaration from the Third World that says: "We are still here. We are hungry. We are like you." Some, as in the *Terra* series go the next step to say, "The world, *your* world, through our labor, our suffering and our struggle is going to change – with or without you." The reaction is one of incredulity, disconnect, and fear (Sischy) or affirmation/reconnection or nostalgia/longing for a sense of solidarity that was given up for dead.

Levi Strauss poses the question to Sischy: "Why *can't* beauty be a call to action?" (Levi Strauss, p. 9) Such critics begin with the assumption that the "aesthetized" is not authentic.

And this beautification of tragedy results in pictures that ultimately reinforce our passivity toward the experience they reveal. To aestheticize tragedy is the fastest way to anesthetize the feelings of those who are witnessing it. Beauty is a call to admiration, not to action." (Sischy, p. 277.)

One wonders how a society could become any more anesthetized or passive than the one we currently inhabit. Those artists sure have been busy. As such, calls to action compete in the marketplace along with most every other advertisement that gets filtered to our junk mailbox. Straight photographic images of tragedy and human suffering, the kind Sischy prefers, are so ubiquitous, so commonplace, they have become virtually indistinguishable from one another:

Iraq/Afghanistan/Rwanda/Croatia/Sudan/Haiti: it's all a blur. Given the immediacy of the earthquake in Haiti and its surrounding tragedies that were covered around the clock for weeks in every news and media outlet, why is it that I can recall precious few

scenes from that maelstrom of information other than Anderson Cooper's sweaty black t-shirt? And yet, Salgado's images have haunted me for years.

The doctrinaire right contends that politics has no place in art, while the doctrinaire left contends that art has no place in politics. Both takes are culturally restrictive and historically inaccurate. (Levi Strauss, *ibid.*)

One of the most telling examples of the ideological prism/prison through which Sischy and similar critics have viewed Salgado is in her description of one of his images from the Serra Pelada gold mine. A mud-covered miner, one of 50,000 souls who labor in this hellish pit, struggles with his burden of dirt towards the crest. In the distance below, well out of the focal plane, you can make out the ant-like figures of hundreds of other miners ascending makeshift ladders from terrace to terrace towards the top. From out of the left frame of the photograph there is the hand of the man who precedes him on the ladder. It is not reaching to help. It is just there. The miner's gaze is cast downward at his feet as to ensure his footing on the handmade ladder. He expects no help and receives none. It is every man for himself. Sischy describes the image thusly: "There's one shot, for instance, that looks like a gloss on Michelangelo's Sistine 'Creation of Adam' and 'E.T.'s appropriation of it." (Sischy, p. 281) Hers is an interpretation based on a very different cultural/ideological paradigm couched in self-congratulatory cynicism.

...[I]t is as if the subjects of Salgado's pictures struggle against and at the same time create the fearful beauty to which they are condemned. In other pictures there are echoes of photographs by Aleksandr Rodchenko and Paul Strand. So a thoroughly internalized modernist aesthetic leads to the recasting of particular 'classic' images. Exploiting a grim parallel between the much vaunted economy of modernist formal means and the enforced poverty of the subjects, even at the point of death, formal

economy—a concentration on the essential highly appropriate to this situation—and material poverty reinforce each other to create a terrifying beauty one can barely look upon. (Stallabrass, p. 23)

The aesthetic dimension is not the problem with Salgado's work. The problematic is one of context, and the work's placement within an overarching narrative. To be read as they are meant to be by a First World audience, particularly within a gallery they should not be expected to stand alone – it is tantamount to sending a prisoner before a jury without the benefit of an attorney. The aesthetic dimension of Salgado's images certainly comprise an entry point, as Sontag would have it, but for the uninitiated his modernist visual language can too easily be *misinterpreted* or *reinterpreted* within the prevailing ideological framework of Disney/Dreamworks/Fox News. *An Uncertain Grace* has a more profound impact for the presence of the seventeen prose poems by Eduardo Galeano. They supply enough of a critical narrative (without being didactic or propagandistic) such that the images can be read from within an oppositional grammar of anti-imperialism and solidarity.

“Good photography,” according to Lucy Lippard, “can *embody* what has been seen. As I scrutinize it, this photograph becomes the people photographed – not ‘flat death,’ as Roland Barthes would have it, but flat life.” What interests Lippard is the spatial convergence of the relationship between the photographer and subjects then, and between the viewer and the photograph now. The relationship between the viewer of the photograph and the subject is mediated by the presence/absence of the photographer. Salgado's art is the substance of that mediation in his encounters with workers, peasants, the sick and dying, the children of the Sahel. His art is his means of framing the dignity and presence of his subjects, with whom he

has connected, and for whom he now advocates. Salgado does not pretend to *represent* them; he seeks to *present* them, to mean bringing them into our, the viewer's time and place. The degree of his artistry is measured in how these images and their subjects continue to visit us again and again, in the ongoing evolution of our present time. Perhaps this does not constitute a "call to action." It can be, however, a source of connection, mediated by one who seeks out and *sees* equals. This mutual recognition of shared humanity, what the indigenous South Africans refer to in their language as *ubuntu*, is the stuff out of which action is made.

We know that information is crucial in spurring people on to take action in solidarity with others. Outside of a rational discourse, emotional "calls to action" constitute sounds with no meaning. However, the converse is also true: information without connection of that shared humanity dissipates into the barrage of the media.

The challenge for any curator or book editor in presenting images such as Salgado's is in the creation of that shared space between the viewer, the subject and the artist that Lippard describes. The inclusion of the poet/writer/historian Eduardo Galeano in Salgado's *An Uncertain Grace* was precisely what was needed to open the door (or the *vein*, as in Galeano's masterful history, *The Open Veins of Latin America*). Static images, even ones infused with as much mesmerizing beauty as Salgado's cannot be extricated or abstracted from time, place and historical context without a loss of or change in meaning, and therefore without a loss of authenticity. They do not require interpretation, *per se*, but for the First World viewer in particular, they need to be included within a deeply historicized discourse. That context may be

supplied by the artist or curator, *or it may be sought out by the viewer*. The aestheticization of images from say, the Serra Pelada, may, in fact, become the impetus for the “passive” viewer to inquire about the circumstances of these 50,000 souls and the story behind their predicament.

Surely for the most cynical and ideologically committed among us, the construction of such a framework may not be enough of a weapon to allow the terrible beauty of a Salgado to pierce the armor of consciousness. But it is certain: in these times, Beauty needs all of the allies she might find.

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