



Aesthetic Witnessing and Its Limitation in Sebastião Salgado's *The Salt of the Earth*

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Abstract:

This paper examines self-reflexive meditation on the ethics of documentary photography in Wim Wenders and Juliano Ribeiro Salgado's documentary *The Salt of the Earth* (2014). The documentary is analysed through the lens of aesthetic witnessing, which treats visual beauty and ethical responsibility as compatible rather than opposite. Drawing on Ariella Azoulay's concept of the civil contract of photography and Susan Sontag's warnings about the numbing effects of aestheticised suffering, the paper argues that the central formal device of *The Salt of the Earth* (i.e., Salgado narrating his own photographs from inside a darkened room) stages a debate that existing scholarship on his work has largely conducted separately. By examining this particular debate, the paper offers a close reading/analysis of the photographs from the Serra Pelada, Sahel, Rwanda, and Bihar sequences. Furthermore, *The Salt of the Earth* honours the civil contract of Azoulay at the level of production while leaving open, and in the Rwanda sequence actively testing, the limits Sontag identifies in the numbing effects of aestheticisation. The documentary reaches its own exhaustion and makes its most significant contributions to current debates on photographic ethics.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Documentary, Photography, Civil Contract, Suffering, Witnessing.

Introduction

Sebastião Salgado spent four decades photographing miners, refugees, and famine victims across five continents. He has also spent nearly as much time defending his work against a recurring charge: its formal beauty gets in the way of the suffering it depicts. Ingrid Sischy raised objections early in a widely read 1991 review (Sischy 89), and the debate has remained open since then. Wim Wenders and Juliano Ribeiro Salgado's documentary *The Salt of the Earth* (2014) does not settle this debate surrounding beauty and suffering. Instead, it situates the question within *The Salt of the Earth* and its structure. It allows viewers to engage with the debate rather than leaving it for critics to discuss afterwards.

The documentary is an instance of what can be called 'aesthetic witnessing'. This phrase brings together two terms often treated as opposites. The aesthetic refers to the visual and formal qualities of an image, the way it is composed, lit, and arranged. Witnessing, as defined by Ariella Azoulay, refers to the mode of looking that accepts ethical responsibility for what it observes. This concept emphasises a civil contract among the photographer, subject, and viewer (Azoulay 21). To speak/discuss of aesthetic witnessing is to refuse the assumption that these two activities are in conflict. Can visual beauty, when handled with care, carry the ethical relationship Azoulay describes? Or does it, as Sontag fears, inevitably distance the viewer from the historical conditions a photograph claims to record? (Sontag 77). *The Salt of the Earth* offers a profound understanding of these two questions. The documentary is an extended meditation on the way photographs are made, what they record, and what they do when viewed.

The main argument of the paper is to look at the documentary while honouring Azoulay's civil contract at the level of photographic production. This involves considering the conditions under which Salgado worked and the patience inherent in his method. However, this achievement

is complicated once the photographs step outside the negotiated relationship of their creation and are showcased in galleries, books, and on screens. In the Rwanda sequence, Salgado describes how he is losing his ability to keep photographing. It marks the limit of both Azoulay's and Sontag's frameworks. It is this limit, rather than any resolution, that makes the documentary most valuable in its portrayal.

The Documentary as Meta-Text

The Salt of the Earth is co-directed by Wim Wenders and Juliano Ribeiro Salgado. The documentary runs for 110 minutes and begins with a still photograph of the Serra Pelada gold mine in Brazil. It prompts the viewer to contemplate this single image for longer than typical cinematic pacing usually permits. *The Salt of the Earth* makes one decision that sets it apart from other biographical documentaries: it places photographs of Salgado at the centre rather than at the edges. Most documentary portraits of artists tend to treat their work as illustration or evidence of what the artist has accomplished. In contrast, the documentary is concerned with the life surrounding the work. Nevertheless, Wenders and Juliano Ribeiro Salgado reverse this approach. In their documentary, the photographs take centre stage, while Salgado's voice serves as commentary on them.

This reversal is made possible by a specific formal choice. Wenders did not film Salgado in a standard interview setup. He built a darkened room in which photographs of Salgado were projected on a screen. This screen was visible to him but not to the camera. Salgado was filmed describing his photographs as he looked at them, his face lit only by their reflected glow. The viewer encounters each photograph in three stages: first, as Salgado experiences it; then, as a recollected memory; and finally, as it is presented to the viewer. Guy describes this as a deliberate

strategy that enables the photographs to be examined through the photographer's memory rather than through the usual format/conventions of the talking-head interview (Guy). Kacprzak, drawing on Lotman, reads this layered structure as a "text within a text," where the photographic elements are held within the cinematic framework, and the relationship between the two becomes a distinct focus of analysis (Kacprzak). This approach is significant for an analysis concerned with ethical witnessing: the documentary prompts the viewer to confront what photographs can and cannot convey, rather than allowing images to be perceived as self-explanatory.

The voiceover works in the same direction. Salgado narrates his own work, which is an uncommon practice in documentary filmmaking. He describes the circumstances surrounding the creation of his photographs, the people he encountered, and the negotiations he had to undertake to be present at those moments. This voice does not pretend to be neutral; it carries the weight of personal experience and emotions. At certain moments, particularly in the Rwanda sequence, the voice falters, and this falter is intentionally left unedited. This refusal of seamless narration is consistent with the documentary's broader theme that photography is a human activity influenced by specific circumstances, rather than a neutral mechanism of representation.

The Serra Pelada Sequence

The longest sequence in *The Salt of the Earth* concerns Serra Pelada, the Brazilian gold mine that Salgado photographed in 1986. The sequence opens with a single still image. This sequence begins with a single still image. At first glance, the aerial shot appears to capture a vast crowd of tiny figures climbing wooden ladders out of a pit (see fig. 1). The viewer needs several seconds to comprehend the scale of what is shown: the pit is enormous, the figures are men, and there are thousands of them. Salgado's voice describes his arrival at the edge of the mine, comparing the scene to the building of the pyramids and the Tower of Babel. The photograph captivates the

spectator in a way that typical photojournalism rarely does, demanding deeper attention.

The Serra Pelada sequence is useful for discussions of ethical witnessing due to this inherent tension. Salgado's photographs of Serra Pelada have sparked debate throughout his career, as their formal beauty sits uneasily alongside the brutality of the conditions they depict. The miners worked in catastrophic conditions, climbing impossibly long wooden ladders with sacks of mud on their backs, receiving very little pay for labour that took as severe a toll on their bodies. The closer shots in the same series depict miners covered in mud, struggling under the weight of their burdens (see fig. 2). Salgado presents this scene with the visual conventions of religious painting: the figures are arranged in compositions reminiscent of Renaissance frescoes, and the light falls on them with a sense of reverence. The viewer is asked to acknowledge both the depicted suffering and the beauty of its presentation simultaneously.

The documentary does not resolve this tension; instead, it allows it to remain visible. When Salgado describes the miners, he portrays them as individuals engaged in a struggle that he could only understand by spending considerable time with them. He describes the social organisation within the mine, the rules the workers imposed on themselves, and the individual people he encountered. The photographs, presented alongside this narration, serve as records of an encounter Salgado has not forgotten, and the documentary asks the viewer to remember it as well. According to Azoulay, the conditions of production are significant: Salgado was not a tourist at Serra Pelada. He was given access by negotiation, lived among the miners during his stay, and captured the photographs through the kind of patient engagement that a civil contract entails. The miners are not anonymous figures in a play of light and shadow; rather, they are individuals bound to Salgado through a negotiated, ongoing encounter, not a one-sided act of extraction, and the images bear the trace of that relationship rather than the weight of formal consent (Azoulay 101). The documentary

poses a question without providing an answer: Do viewers honour that agreement by truly engaging with the photographs, or do they merely glance at them?



Gold Mine, Pará State, Brazil, 1986. From the *Workers* series. Amazonas Images.



Fig. 2. Sebastião Salgado, *Going Up the Serra Pelada Mine*, Pará State, Brazil, 1986. From the *Workers* series.

Amazonas Images.

The Sahel Sequence and the Question of Aestheticisation

The Sahel sequence raises the question of aestheticisation in its most critical form. The famine occurred in the mid-1980s, making it one of the worst humanitarian crises of the twentieth century. Over a million people died, and many more were displaced due to drought and political violence across a band of Africa stretching from Mali to Ethiopia. Salgado worked on this project with Médecins Sans Frontières, and his photographs were intended from the outset to draw international attention to a catastrophe the global media had largely ignored.

In the documentary, the Sahel sequence is among the longest and most challenging to watch. The photographs are presented one after another, with Salgado describing the camps he

visited and the children who died in front of him. The images are visually striking: the light is dramatic, the compositions formally careful, and the figures are given a tonal depth that lends them an almost sculptural quality. The images from the Korem camp (see fig. 3) carry the weight that Sontag warns against. In her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, she cautions that beauty can distance the viewer from the historical context that a photograph records. This is because the image can transform into an aesthetic object, which in turn absorbs and neutralises the moral demand that depicted conditions should evoke (Sontag 77). Read in that light, Salgado's monumental style risks doing exactly what Sontag fears: the children who are dying are tonally beautiful, and that beauty makes them harder, not easier, to meet as the historical victims of specific historical conditions (Sontag 78-79).

The documentary does not let this reading go unchallenged. The narration prevents the viewer from pausing to admire the images in simple admiration. Salgado refers to the children individually by name, describing specific families, specific deaths, and specific moments in which he could do nothing beyond making a photograph. In the children's ward (see fig. 4), a mother cradles her child, and the viewer is left in the position of someone who arrived too late to help and can only observe. Salgado speaks directly to the limits of the photographic response: the beauty of these images should be seen as a substitute for the reality they depict. The aestheticisation in the film is not smoothed over; it is acknowledged within the film's own framework. Throughout this sequence, it becomes apparent that the documentary format performs an interpretive function that a single photograph, when taken out of its narrative context, cannot accomplish on its own.



Fig. 3. Sebastião Salgado, *Refugees in the Korem Camp*, Ethiopia, 1984. From *Sahel: The End of the Road*.

Amazonas Images.



Fig. 4. Sebastião Salgado, *Children's Ward in the Korem Refugee Camp*, Ethiopia, 1984. From *Sahel: The End of the Road*. Amazonas Images.

The Rwanda Sequence

In the Rwanda sequence, the capacities and limitations of photographic testimony become most visible. Salgado documented the aftermath of the genocide and the resulting refugee crisis in eastern Zaire, where many refugees died of cholera, dysentery, and exhaustion. After decades of capturing human tragedy through his lens, Salgado reached a breaking point where he could no longer continue taking pictures. In the documentary *The Salt of the Earth*, he describes leaving Rwanda feeling lost and devoid of hope for the salvation of the human species.

These images of the mass graves and the refugee column stretching toward the horizon (see fig. 5) are among the most difficult in his body of work. The formal qualities of the work remain consistent with Salgado's visual language, but they are not offered as things to be admired. Instead, they serve as an account of what the photographer could barely bear to witness. While Salgado's voice is steady in earlier sequences, it falters here, and the documentary chooses not to edit out the break. It allows the audience to experience, to some extent, what it means for an individual to endure atrocities and for someone to attempt to document these moments, regardless of the difficulty. This sequence showcases an aspect that is seldom directly addressed in theoretical discussions about photography: the position of the witness is unstable, and can be broken. After his experience in Rwanda, Salgado found himself unable to continue working in the documentary mode he had practised for thirty years. His turn toward *Genesis* (an eight-year project focused on landscapes and pristine nature) was less an artistic choice and more a survival strategy. The documentary presents this not as a retreat from his earlier commitments but as a continuation of them in a different form. Azoulay's civil contract assumes that spectators can continue to engage with a photograph, and this engagement can produce a civic response (Azoulay 25). In contrast, Sontag's caution implies the moral feelings of the spectators are the variable at play (Sontag 105-06). However, neither framework/ or perspective fully addresses what happens when the act of witnessing exhausts the witness. The documentary's willingness to show this exhaustion is one of its most significant contributions to the ongoing debate.

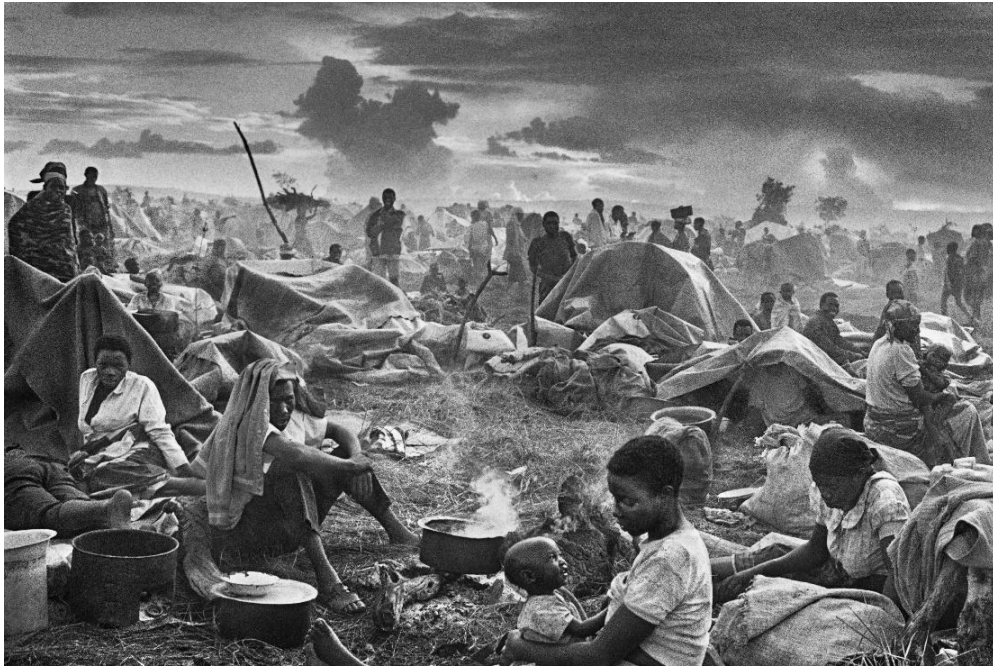


Fig. 5. Sebastião Salgado, *Rwandan Refugees Awaiting Water Distribution*, Eastern Zaire, 1994. From the *Exodus* series. Amazonas Images.

A Brief Reading of the Bihar Photograph

Among the photographs from the Workers series included in *The Salt of the Earth* is an image of coal miners emerging from a pit in Dhanbad, Bihar, taken in 1989 (see fig. 6). In the foreground, three men are positioned, with the central figure wearing a thick cloth turban and holding a pickaxe over his shoulder. He faces directly toward the camera. The composition is formal but not monumental. The viewer is positioned at the level of men, creating a sense of equality. The central figure meets the camera's gaze with steady attention, neither asking for pity nor performing dignity. He looks directly at the photographer, who is also looking back at him.

This image offers a valuable example of ethical witnessing via the lens of a single photograph. The conditions under which the photograph was produced were evident in the image itself, particularly in the close relationship between the photographer and the subjects, as well as the calm demeanour of the men in front of the camera. The gaze in the photograph is open and transparent; the man at the centre returns the look, creating a straightforward interaction with the photographer. Additionally, the relationship between aesthetic quality and its historical context is also significant. The image is beautiful, much like many of Salgado's photographs, but that beauty does not obscure the specific historical reality it records. This photograph captures a coal mine in Dhanbad, where men work for low wages in conditions that damage/ or harm their bodies. Importantly, the photograph does not let the viewer forget this reality, while respecting the dignity of the men rather than treating them as mere subjects.

The photograph performs the kind of civil address described by Azoulay's framework, treating its subjects as participants in an encounter rather than objects of observation, and placing the viewer under an obligation that can be either honoured or refused (Azoulay 104). The question of whether the address remains relevant once the photograph enters the gallery world, in exhibitions like Shanghai, Paris, and New York, is a separate issue. The image is a part of the *Workers* series, a global study of manual labour that occupied Salgado from 1986 to 1992. It resulted in photographs taken in twenty-six countries across five continents, documenting everything from shipbreakers in Bangladesh to tea pickers in Rwanda. Salgado has spoken about spending months preparing for each project, often collaborating with local guides or community leaders. He believes that entering a community well before taking photographs is essential for building enough trust, enabling the photography to occur within an established relationship rather than feeling imposed.

When this method succeeds, the resulting photograph carries a sense of duration. The men in the Dhanbad photo appear composed, as if they have seen the photographer before and are not surprised by his presence. This is not a photograph taken by a stranger; rather, it captures a moment that was anticipated well before the shutter was released. This aligns with Azoulay's claim that the photographic act constitutes a relationship rather than an extraction, and that the resulting image bears traces of that understanding (Azoulay 11).

The more difficult question is whether this approach is scalable. The Workers series consists of 150 photographs from twenty-six countries. Despite the months Salgado spent at each location, the collection as a whole asks the viewer to confront a wide range of human situations in a relatively brief encounter. The numbing effect Sontag describes, produced by the sheer accumulation of images, poses a real risk in this context (Sontag 105-06). For instance, the Bihar photograph, when viewed in isolation, performs a powerful ethical witnessing; however, when encountered as one of 150 images in a book or exhibition, it may resonate differently. This issue is not a failure specific to Salgado; it reflects a structural condition of documentary projects undertaken on such a large scale.



Fig. 6. Sebastião Salgado, *Workers Emerging from a Coal Mine*, Dhanbad, Bihar State, India, 1989. From the *Workers* series. Amazonas Images.

Conclusion

The documentary *The Salt of the Earth* stages, rather than resolves, the long-running disagreement between Sontag's suspicion of aestheticised suffering and Azoulay's belief that photography can sustain an ethical civil contract, regardless of its formal beauty. Analysing the documentary's construction (e.g., Wenders's darkened-room device, Salgado's fragmented voiceover, the sequencing of scenes from Serra Pelada, Sahel, Rwanda, and the Bihar coal mine) reveals that this disagreement is not only a matter for critics to debate afterwards. The documentary incorporates this argument into its very form. It shows the conditions under which Salgado worked, the duration of his engagement with each subject, the personal sacrifices he made, and the visual choices that shaped the renowned photographs he produced.

The documentary does not take a definitive stance on whether Salgado's aesthetic serves or undermines the ethical project of documentary photography, and this paper does not attempt to make that determination either. Instead, the documentary carries the debate to a level of detail that abstract theory alone cannot reach, placing the photographs alongside the context in which they were created. The miners at Serra Pelada, the victims of famine in the Sahel, the Rwandan refugees, and the coal workers in Bihar are now visible in galleries, museums, and exhibition spaces worldwide; these are settings quite distant from the negotiated encounters under which the photographs were taken. While the conditions of production may honour Azoulay's civil contract, this paper only questions whether that contract survives once the images enter elite circulation.

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