

Julian Stallabrass

Sebastião Salgado and Fine Art Photojournalism

‘Sebastião Salgado and Fine Art Photojournalism’, *New Left Review*, no. 223, May-June 1997, pp. 131-160.



Serra Pelada, State of Para, Brazil

Black-and-white photographs of a vast pit, its sides cut into a giant's stairway and scaled by crude ladders, its surface covered with figures, most bearing large sacks; scanning the space between foreground and distant background, the effect is dizzying—there must be thousands of these figures.* The pictures are of an open-cast gold mine in Brazil, named Serra Pelada. No mechanical diggers or trucks are to be seen. Instead, so we can read in

* I would like to thank Robin Blackburn, Sebastian Budgen, Robert Garnett, Kitty Hauser and Elena Lledó for their comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

texts which accompany the pictures, there are workers who dig out the ore with shovels, load it into sacks—weighing between thirty and sixty kilos—and haul them up ladders and mud slopes to the authorities waiting at the top. They make as many as sixty trips a day, and for each climb they are paid twenty cents. Fifty thousand workers toil here, dreaming of the chance find that could make them rich.¹

For those who make up the ‘golden billion’, that fifth of the world’s people whose lives are reasonably comfortable and free, and those who, for the most part, are the viewers of these photographs, the scale of the scene is difficult to grasp; it is reminiscent of Bosch perhaps; or of accounts of the great nineteenth-century engineering projects, or of ambitious Soviet constructions like the Fergana Grand Canal in the days when nothing seemed impossible, but, in truth, it is harsher and more reliant on raw human labour than either of these. Our immediate reaction is to think that these must be pictures of the distant past, but actually they bear the date 1986.

While from afar the workers resemble the living elements of a vast insect colony, uniform in colour and packed tightly together, up close—though mud-mired from head to toe—they reveal their human aspect, and the physical extremes to which they push themselves. These pictures of Serra Pelada by the Brazilian photojournalist Sebastião Salgado have become quite renowned, and have been widely published, though perhaps more in exhibition catalogues and books about photography than in the mass media. They are plainly a powerful metonym of the struggle for gold in which everyone is, in some way, obliged to engage. They are also an image of the Latin American history of the exacting and violent quest for gold to which so many lives have been sacrificed in the long centuries since Columbus’s band stumbled on those shores, the name of that base metal on their lips. But to see the pictures only in this way, outside their immediate context as documentary, is to take the view from afar, and to forget the fate of the individuals present in the photographs, of their lives in that mine at that time—and, indeed, of those who work there even now.²

¹ Sebastião Salgado, *Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age*, Phaidon Press, London 1993, ISBN 0-7148-2931-5, £70. For information about Serra Pelada, see the supplementary booklet to *Workers*, pp. 19-20, and the disgracefully entitled anonymous picture feature, ‘Brazil Nuts’, *Photography*, December 1987, p. 14. This short text also notes that there are many fatal accidents at the mine.

² A new and larger vein of gold has been discovered at Serra Pelada, and thousands of fortune-hunters are back. See the article by Carlos Ravelo, ‘Gold Fever’, placed on the web site www.brazzil.com.

So abstracted is the scene of Serra Pelada from anything in our experience, claims Arthur Danto, that ‘you can’t locate it in history ... You’re astonished that anything like that could happen in the contemporary world.’³ It is certainly true that Salgado’s photographs do not settle easily into a culture dominated by neoliberal doctrine. According to its various and influential accounts of the ‘end of history’, humanity has reached a Hegelian terminus where, aside from minor tweaking or local amelioration, we cannot expect anything better. We really are, claim their authors (twentieth-century heirs of Pangloss), living in the best of all possible worlds, in which ‘all of the really big questions have been settled’.⁴ Even some of those who criticize such ideas, while retaining a deconstructive or postmodern point of view, would have us believe that it makes no sense to talk of such grand concepts as ‘class’ or to dare any longer to imagine any overarching project of improvement—and, indeed, some have long and consistently maintained this position.⁵ So part of the immediate shock of Salgado’s work is simply to present contemporary scenes which should have long been banished from the perfectible neoliberal state; to show in a supposedly post-industrial world, scenes of vast pre-industrial labour; in a time of ahistorical bliss, scenes of naked exploitation and oppression.

Why Fine Art Photojournalism?

Given the quotidian interest of these pictures, an immediate question arises: why are they better known in the world of fine art than in the mass media? In part, it is to do with the end of the illustrated magazines as a dominant visual news medium in the face of competition from television. But the retreat from the tradition of ‘straight’—that is, direct and unmanipulated—documentary image-making was the result of much more than simple technological change.

Serious photojournalism and documentary photography seem unsuited to a neoliberal climate. The early documentarians did work against an atmosphere of predominantly conservative ideas; Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine made pictures of slums and workplaces before liberal social reform had been widely attempted. Now, however, when the liberal and certainly the social-democratic alternative seem struck from the agenda—tried out

³ Cited in Miles Orvell, ‘Documentary and the Seductions of Beauty. Salgado’s *Workers*’, in *After the Machine: Visual Arts and the Erasing of Cultural Beauty*, Jackson, Mississippi 1995, p. 101.

⁴ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York 1992, p. xii.

by the powers-that-be, and ruled unviable—capitalism red in tooth and claw returns to the First World. This neoliberal consensus has simultaneously exacerbated and been the product of a tendency apparent in the Western media for some years: the concentration of ownership. Analyzing this tendency, Ben Badgikian has shown how, as ever fewer owners come to govern ever fewer but ever greater media companies, this, as a matter of course, hands power not only to proprietors but to advertisers, filling the pages of even once serious publications with ‘features’ on food, fashion, cars and the lives of TV personalities.⁶ Obviously, the prospects in this mass media for a photojournalism which disturbs the contemporary myths of the market are not good—nor are they for anything which might disrupt the ‘buying mood’.

These changes in political orthodoxy and media ownership have had a highly detrimental effect on photojournalism, to the extent that some photographers and critics have predicted its demise.⁷ Their concern is not only with simple exclusion but with newspapers’ and magazines’ control in editing, selecting and presenting images so as to stress the spectacular at the expense of the critical.⁸ Although it was, and still is, regularly used for conservative ends, photojournalism had its roots in radical political and cultural movements and was always, therefore, a suspect practice.⁹ Any suspicions that the elite might have harboured about photojournalism were confirmed when it played an important part in turning the US public against the Vietnam War. While this could only occur given the collusion of certain elements in big business, particularly in the mass media, it set a very dangerous precedent. Many photographers, such as Don McCullin (one of the Vietnam culprits) have complained that it is no longer possible to get serious work published—and indeed his international reputation did not prevent him being sacked from the *Sunday Times* after Rupert Murdoch took over, for the new regime demanded ‘no more starving Third World babies; more successful businessmen around

⁵ See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York 1994, p. 15.

⁶ Ben H. Badgikian, *The Media Monopoly*, 4th ed., Boston 1992. See also the series of articles on this subject in the *Nation* which includes details of bodies formed in the US to counter this anti-democratic tendency. *The Nation*, vol. 262, no. 22, 3 June 1996.

⁷ For a recent discussion, see Carol Squiers, ‘The Truth of Our Time’, *American Photo*, vol. vii, no. 5, September-October 1996, pp. 54-7. The issue also carries pictures from stories which never made it into the mainstream US press.

⁸ See Fred Ritchin ‘The Lyric Documentarian’, in Sebastião Salgado, *An Uncertain Grace*, New York 1990, pp. 110ff.

⁹ The founders of Magnum, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Capa and David Seymour (‘Chim’) all worked on *Ce Soir*, the communist daily edited by Aragon. On Cartier-Bresson’s engagement with radical politics and Surrealism, see Peter Galassi, *Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Early Work*, Museum of Modern Art, New York 1987, especially pp. 22-5; on Capa’s communist sympathies, see Richard Whelan, *Robert Capa: A Biography*, London 1985.

their weekend barbecues'.¹⁰ The Hayward Gallery exhibition tracing the history of Magnum clearly showed how the agency had declined from the heights of the pre-war and wartime periods, when its members had produced images of extraordinary political and aesthetic concentration, into the frivolities and cool eccentricities of the 1960s and beyond.¹¹ Yet the position of Salgado's work within this development was very peculiar. In its strong formal qualities, its manifest compassion, its concentration on the graphic qualities of black-and-white pushed to the limits, it was as though the intervening years had vanished without trace. But there was an important difference: Salgado did not appear as part of a broad movement, as had Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Capa and George Rodger—in his work, these features became part of a deliberately backward-looking, individual artistic style.¹²

The move into galleries and book publishing has been one of the few ways for photographers to step around the restrictions imposed by the mass media. Salgado is hardly the only photojournalist who has been pushed to the borders of the fine-art world—many others have tried to make broad, synthetic work outside the daily pressures of conventional news coverage.¹³ While the Serra Pelada pictures certainly make an immediate impact, the work of these photographers tends to be reflective, dealing with long-term issues, and dwelling on the visible aspect of structural problems. They often work with sequences of pictures rather than going for the single shocking or striking example.

¹⁰ For this account of the *Sunday Times*' policy and the decline of photojournalism in general, see Don McCullin, *Unreasonable Behaviour: An Autobiography*, New York 1992, pp. 268ff, 272ff. See also Fred Ritchin, *In Our Own Image. The Coming Revolution in Photography*, New York 1990, p. 38ff.

¹¹ Magnum is one of the oldest and most prestigious photographic agencies. It allows its members a good deal of freedom to pursue their own projects, and markets the results. See William Manchester, *In Our Time: The World as Seen by Magnum Photographers*, American Federation of Arts/ South Bank Centre, London 1989.

¹² Salgado appears less isolated if seen within the context of Latin American photography in which committed social documentation is still pursued: see, Fred Ritchin, 'The Future of Photojournalism', *Aperture*, no. 100, p. 42-53, especially the reproductions of Juca Martin's photographs, *The Search for Gold*, Brazil, dates unknown, which bear a strong similarity to Salgado's Serra Pelada pictures. Also see the work of Eniac Martinez on Oaxacan illegal immigrants in California, in Trisha Ziff, ed., *Between Worlds: Contemporary Mexican Photography*, London 1990, pp. 37f.

¹³ Among them Philip Jones Griffiths, Susan Meiselas and Gilles Peress. See Ritchin in Salgado, *An Uncertain Grace*, p. 148. See also Andy Grundberg, 'The "New Photojournalism" and the Old', in his *Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography, 1974-1989*, New York 1990, pp. 185-90. While most of these photographers have a background in photojournalism, some have come from the art world, the academy and photographic theory to make work which uses documentary elements, among them Alfredo Jarr who has used pictures taken at Serra Pelada in large-scale light-box installations, and Allan Sekula who has combined documentary photography and theoretical writing. See Allan Sekula, *Fish Story*, Düsseldorf 1995. Solomon-Godeau lists a number of others in *Photography in the Dock*, p. 183.

It should be said that there is a distinction between photojournalism and documentary photography, although the categories overlap. Documentary pictures, generally associated with liberal politics, especially from the 1930s onwards, were not necessarily made for immediate publication, and often formed part of a series or a larger body of work. Documentary was, some have argued, by definition tied to some social project.¹⁴ In the heyday of the illustrated magazines, however, documentary and photojournalism were closely identified; the work of W. Eugene Smith, the most celebrated photojournalist of the time, was published in mass-circulation magazines, particularly *Life*, and was seriously engaged with pressing social issues, notably the struggle against racism. It is this committed and concerned photojournalism which has been largely driven from the market. Salgado's work is plainly of this kind, and when critics attack documentary as a genre, they would include his photographs in the charge.

The shunning of photojournalism and documentary photography is composed of two opposing forces. The trend in the commercial news world has been to strip such photography of its critical function, to produce a photography which reports, but only what is novel and up-to-the-minute, what is sensationalist or bloody, and to do so in flash-lit, often highly mannerist styles which change from year to year.¹⁵ The trend in academia, by contrast, has generally been to criticize documentary photography for being insufficiently critical, particularly of its own practice, and to move towards work which is more self-reflexive, and based on an interrogation of signs and representation. The postmodern critique of such documentary work has had some role, if only of intellectual justification, in its being driven from the mass media.

The academic criticisms, which are quite various, run broadly as follows: that such work is one-sided, the subjects being mute and passive victims of the photographer; that the photographer is in no position to presume to speak for the people depicted; that such work bears an uncomfortable relation to anthropological documents of the past, making of its subjects objects of knowledge so as to further enslave them, and that the relation between photographer and subject, or indeed viewer and subject, is based on a crude idea of difference; that such work has no objective content—despite the point made above—but is mere rhetoric; that documentary photography has been an expression of

¹⁴ See Solomon-Godeau, *Photography in the Dock*, p. xxix.

¹⁵ These changes can be tracked in the yearbooks of the World Press Photo Foundation; the latest being Kari Lundelin, ed., *World Press Photo Yearbook*, London 1996.

a liberal consensus in which its compassion is qualified by its attitude that ‘poverty and oppression are almost invariably equated with misfortunes caused by natural disasters: causality is vague, blame is not assigned, fate cannot be overcome.’¹⁶

The photographic historian, John Tagg, proceeds even further than these forms of condemnation. Much influenced by Foucault’s views about systems of discourse (and unfortunately also by his prose style), Tagg presents ‘documentary’—which includes documentary photography—as ‘a liberal, corporatist plan to negotiate economic, political and cultural crises through a linked programme of structural reforms, relief measures, and a cultural intervention aimed at restructuring the order of discourse, appropriating dissent, and resecuring the threatened bonds of social consent.’¹⁷ In this retrospective view which entirely discounts the beliefs of those individuals involved—including some who were committed to overthrowing capitalism—the complex and diverse currents of documentary photography serve the conspiracy by which the system survives. So, despite its sometimes critical content, all documentary supports the larger structures of power which it inhabits: the issue, says Abigail Solomon-Godeau, is ‘the structural limitations of conventional documentary imagery to disrupt the textual, epistemological, and ideological systems that inscribe and contain it.’¹⁸ All ‘straight’ documentary must be subject to these limitations. Salgado’s work, a refashioned documentary modernism, can perhaps provide a test for these postmodern claims.

¹⁶ Martha Rosler, ‘In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)’, in Richard Bolton, ed., *The Contest of Meaning. Critical Histories of Photography*, Cambridge, Mass. 1989, p. 307. This is one of the most influential of these critiques.

¹⁷ John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation. Essays on Photographies and Histories*, Basingstoke 1988, p. 8.

¹⁸ Solomon-Godeau, *Photography in the Dock*, p. 171.

Other Americas



Atillo, Ecuador, 1982

At first sight, Salgado's book, *Other Americas*, the result of his extensive travels about South and Central America, appears to conform to at least some of the academy's critiques. Work on the book had been preceded by a period of exile for Salgado, whose passport had been revoked by Brazil's military dictatorship which he opposed.¹⁹ *Other Americas* marked a return for him in which he tried to re-establish contact with his native land, and attempted to discover something of what he took to be its essence.²⁰ In this book, Salgado generally depicts remote rural communities, Indian and mixed-blood peasants, and the settlers of Brazil's most undeveloped region, the Northeast—especially the gathering of pilgrims at Juazeiro do Norte; and within this emphasis, there is a preponderance of pictures of children, old people and even the dead. In striking contrast to his later work, there is almost nothing about commerce or mass-production. Instead, the photographer concentrates on those who have slipped through the net of modernity.

¹⁹ The dictatorship which assumed power in 1964 formally surrendered it to civilian authorities in 1985, but this was preceded by a lengthy period of transition, marked by a loosening of restrictions during which Salgado made his photographs.

²⁰ See Alan Riding, 'Introduction', in Sebastião Salgado, *Other Americas*, New York 1986, p. 7.

Salgado wrote that during his exile he would ‘dream of the Sierra Madre and its dense fog, its mushrooms and peyotes, its dead so alive in the imagination of the living: that place where it is so difficult to know if we are of this world or another, where death is the inseparable sister of everyday life.’²¹ The book is marked by a strong sense of mysticism, a search for the spiritual expressed in surreal scenes. This cultivation of the ineffable owes much to other photographers—sometimes earlier Magnum photojournalists, and sometimes art photographers like Diane Arbus.²² Obscure religious rites are held in the wilderness; an ancient woman and two children are framed by a doorway, inexplicably placed in open countryside; figures are dwarfed and seem threatened by the blades of a giant cactus. The obvious way of thinking about such works, given their subject matter and Salgado’s Brazilian background, is to talk of ‘magic realism’, comparing them with Latin American literature and photography. Actually the photographic source is older and is not specific to Latin America, though magic realism may have incorporated it. Surrealism’s concerns with just these issues go back to the very roots of European photojournalism. Photographers such as Cartier-Bresson and André Kertész explored the streets to snatch evidence of the marvellous from the banal, ‘found objects’ etched in silver, seizing on moments of apparent ecstasy and the loss of reason, on strange coincidence and telling juxtaposition. Their early predilections marked the tradition of photojournalism, and still do so today. So Salgado’s photojournalistic concerns here are very familiar—rituals, marriages, deaths, graveyards, childhood; this is the territory of many a photographer.²³

In *Other Americas*, and in marked contrast to some of Salgado’s later work, there is much play with veiling, with mist or fog indeed, with shadows and concealed faces, with mysterious but somehow significant gestures. The people in these pictures are doing something and thinking something, but Salgado is not much concerned with telling us exactly what; rather, the viewer’s fantasies about these strange folk are mapped onto the obscure subject of the pictures.²⁴

²¹ Salgado, preface to *Other Americas*, p. 10.

²² For portraits in Arbus’s fashion, see *An Uncertain Grace*, p. 109, 126.

²³ For a contemporary example, see the comparable black-and-white pictures of Spanish rituals by another traditional photographer of great skill, Christina García-Rodero in her book *España Oculta*, Barcelona 1989.

²⁴ For an argument that this is just what Salgado wants, even in his later work, and that this is a subjective reflection on the limits of representation, see Susan E. Edwards, ‘Photography and the Representation of

If we think of what was going on in South and Central America when the pictures were taken in terms of urban and industrial growth, the degradation of the environment, increasing inequality, social struggle and revolt, and the continuing suffering of indigenous peoples, Salgado's subjects seem strangely undisturbed. Take Salgado's home country, Brazil, which has a vast economy, and the world's most unequal distribution of income. In an exhibition catalogue published in 1990 which included some of the photographs from *Other Americas*, Eduardo Galeano raised the point eloquently:

How many does the development of Brazil develop? The statistics show spectacular economic growth over the last three decades, particularly through the long years of the military dictatorship. In 1960, however, one out of every three Brazilians was malnourished. Today two out of every three. There are 16 million abandoned children. Out of every ten children who die, seven are killed by hunger. Brazil is fourth in the world in food exports, fifth in area, and sixth in hunger.²⁵

Salgado's people, though, seem to persist unchanged, living out their tough, often short, lives much as they had always done. In part, however, this effect is an ideological matter external to the photographs: there is a strong presumption among the golden billion to think of poverty as eternal, to imagine that the benighted South was always hard on its inhabitants—though we only need to recall descriptions of the great wealth of pre-colonial India or indeed of the civilizations of South America to realize that this is not so, to understand that the environment itself has been ruined, and that this was a process which colonization initiated or at least greatly exacerbated. Brazil's Northeast, for instance, was once the heart of the Spanish colony, but its soil was impoverished and eroded by the intensive cultivation of sugar, and today it is largely, and poorly, agricultural, plagued by periodic drought.²⁶

the Other. A Discussion Inspired by the Work of Sebastião Salgado', *Third Text*, nos. 16-17, Autumn-Winter 1991, pp. 157-72.

²⁵ Eduardo Galeano, 'Salgado, 17 Times', *An Uncertain Grace*, p. 15. Ronald M. Schneider, a conservative commentator sympathetic even to the military dictatorship, notes the same effect in terms of 'income concentration': in 1960 the top 10 per cent of earners received 39.6 per cent of total income, while the bottom 10 per cent got 1.9 per cent; in 1991 the figures were 48.7 as against 0.8 per cent. Ronald M. Schneider, *Brazil. Culture and Politics in a New Industrial Powerhouse*, Boulder Co. 1996, p. 172.

²⁶ Schneider, *Brazil*, p. 28; Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America. Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, trans. Cedric Belfrage, New York 1973, pp. 74-5.

Salgado trained not as a photographer but as an economist, and one who specialized in problems of development, so he is well aware of the detail of the economic interdependence of First World and Third.²⁷ When he began photojournalistic work in 1973, it was, he says, because he was moved to show the concrete reality that lay behind economic statistics. So, at first sight, it is curious that he should have produced such a conventional book, disembodied from the social and economic changes that were transforming the continent.

Other Americas seems to present its readers with a generalized and highly differentiated 'other'. Its likely readers and buyers, it seems to say, are mostly 'civilized', commercialized, urban, atomized social beings; its subjects are rural, poor, superstitious and highly socialized. Yet there are times when Salgado does establish an explicit communication between viewers and his subjects; not just a matter of the wealthy looking on the lives of the poor with wonder, but something more in the manner of an exchange.

It is there particularly in a picture of a boy standing before a goat sacrificed in some ritual which remains unexplained; it is in the boy's constant and violent gaze at the camera, through the lens at Salgado, and through the photograph at the viewer.²⁸ It is a look repeated again and again in Salgado's later work. Here, in the context of *Other Americas*, it might be explained away by seeing these people as dangerous beasts closer than us to nature, violent or resentful for no particular reason, just as they are loving or tender or joyful for no particular reason. Later, this minimal mode of communication, a claim that the conventional 'us' and 'other' are linked by far more than the photograph, will be made more specific.

Nevertheless, in general, it seems with these pictures, so far, so typical. Photojournalism and documentary photography often concentrate on people who have been passed by—or who have refused—the commodity culture in which its audience is immersed. They are perhaps simply too poor to participate, or have temporarily been removed from it by some ancient ritual or moment of carnival, or they are ill at ease with their environment,

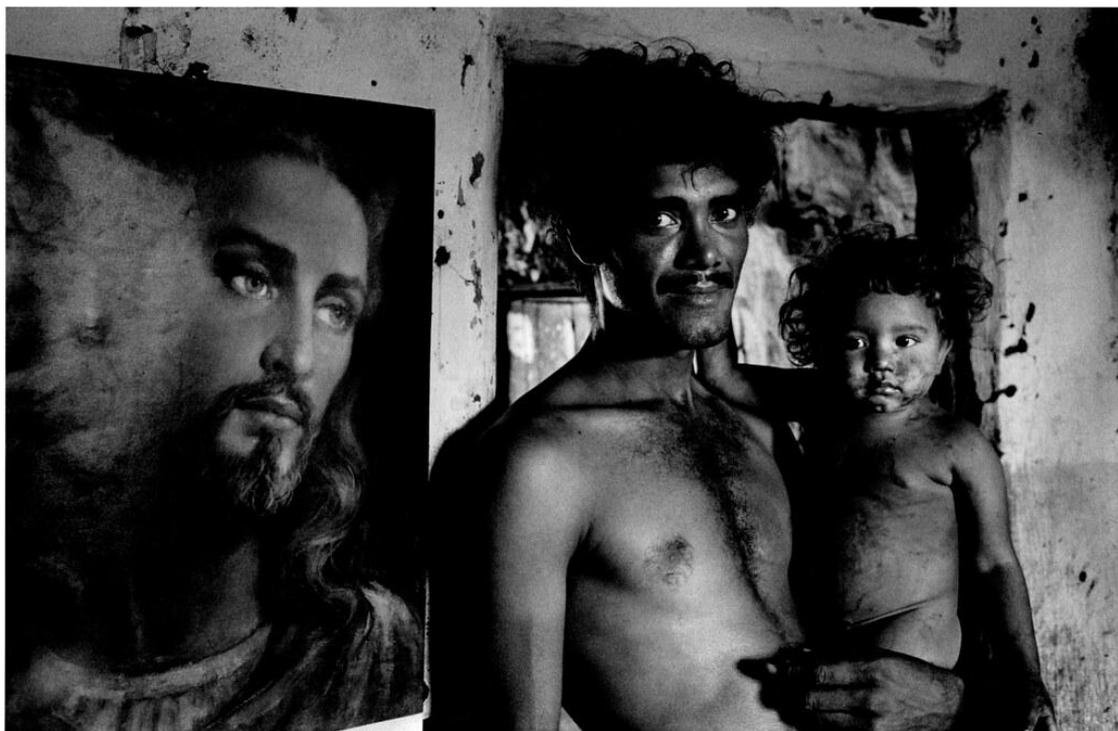
²⁷ Salgado received a master's degree from the University of São Paulo, worked for the Brazilian Ministry of Finance, and did course-work for a doctorate at the National School of Statistics and Administrative Economics in Paris. Later he worked for the International Coffee Organization on the diversification of coffee monocultures in African plantations.

²⁸ 'Religious sacrifice of a goat, Tarahumara, Mexico', 1984; *Other Americas*, pp. 48-9.

migrants or exiles who bear in their minds and bodies the memories and customs of another world. Photography brings these people in their pristine state to the image market as commodities; their likenesses are distributed in books, magazines and newspapers, or as fine prints sold in limited editions to edify the wealthy.

Yet there is a positive aspect even to this reverent engagement with mysterious subjects, which explains its persistence in photography, despite all the critique: it is that such people still sustain close-knit communities, have a strong historical and generational sense and maintain their indigenous traditions. While these communities are, of course, very diverse and complex, in the view from the First World they are bound together because they allow people to participate in an alternative to the overweening capitalist economic and cultural system, to possess something which those immersed in commodity culture have lost, and are acutely aware of losing. These people's tenacious survival is based on the strength of their 'other' cultures which this book celebrates. It is an unavoidable strength and weakness of such pictures that they exhibit something real but unaided can say little about it, except that it exists; the pictures reify, display, and sell back to their viewers the husk of what they have abandoned.

Altered Images



Sertão da Ceara, Brazil, 1983

Beyond this conventional display of images of the ‘other’ in the First World, there is another reading of *Other Americas* which is more specific to the Brazilian context. This is indicated even in the title, for ‘other’ refers less to postmodern theory than echoes José Martí, who wrote of that ‘other America’ south-east of the Rio Grande. The military dictatorship which governed Brazil for over twenty years, particularly when led by General Emílio Garrastazu Médici, imposed resolutely technocratic policies. It was committed to swift industrialization, and sought to quiet political opposition with economic growth, and by instilling a mood of modernizing national optimism.²⁹ Given this, Salgado’s concentration on the economically marginal or apparently unproductive, on the rural, on close contact with the soil and with spirits—above all, on those times when people are able to escape from work—was a political act rejecting the values of the dictatorship, and embracing what he took to be an indigenous alternative. Further, his concentration on religion was far from apolitical, for the Brazilian Catholic church was strongly anti-capitalist, and became more so under the dictatorship. The church denounced not only the military government and its abuse of human rights, but the entire programme of modernization as unjust and based on oppression. It was not merely one of many forces opposing the neoliberal policies of the government but, after the eradication of the underground Left in the 1970s, it appeared ‘in the eyes of civil society and of the military themselves, as the main adversary of the authoritarian state...’³⁰ Sympathetic pictures of the church’s adherents and rituals took on a political edge, for in them could be seen the face of the opposition. A critique of these pictures which maintains that documentary photography can only relate conventional truths is in no state to explore such local meanings. Making a virtue of ignorance, it effortlessly and endlessly fulfils its own prophecies.

As is well known, the narrative power of photographs is often weak and can be easily turned one way or another by text and context. So, although in *Other Americas*, Salgado had produced a quite conventional book, this did not mean that its photographs had to stay within that frame—and indeed as Salgado changed, the pictures were recast. When in 1990 various pictures from *Other Americas* were republished in the catalogue to Salgado’s exhibition, *An Uncertain Grace*, a transformation took place. In *Other Americas* the pictures were described only by brief captions which, in a manner typical of such

²⁹ Schneider, *Brazil*, pp. 93-4.

photography books and participating in a tradition stretching back to the origins of photojournalism, named only country and year. Indeed, Salgado was tempted to omit even this information so as to ‘underline the irrelevance of both national boundaries and the passage of time’.³¹ These captions, little more than a geographical and temporal stamp, a talisman of the real, need tell the viewer almost nothing, since the photograph should speak for itself. Yet even descriptions such as these are not entirely empty, or even simply evidential, as Salgado’s concern about them shows. Raphael Samuel has described how the simple naming of a place—and, we can add, a date—can allow a single image to stand in for a larger whole, so that a mere back alley in a photograph by Bill Brandt comes to stand for the constellation of ideas, images and associations that cluster about ‘Limehouse’ as a whole.³²



Crateús, Northeastern Brazil, 1983

In *Other Americas*, there appeared a disturbing but beautiful picture of a dead child in its coffin, its dress perfect, its lips rouged, and its glazed eyes open, the caption reading simply ‘Brazil 1983’. When republished in *An Uncertain Grace*, however, the caption was different: ‘In the interior of Brazil’s Northeast, children are buried with their eyes open

³⁰ Michael Löwy, *The War of Gods. Religion and Politics in Latin America*, Verso, London 1996, pp. 81f, 87.

³¹ Riding, ‘Introduction’, *Other Americas*, p. 7.

³² Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, Verso, London 1994, p. 365.

so that they can more easily find the way to the heavens. Crateús, Brazil 1983.³³ In general, the captions had become longer and described aspects of the particular social situations depicted.³⁴ Furthermore, essays by Eduardo Galeano and Fred Ritchin, both as much concerned with what was depicted as how, flanked the selection of photographs. In this catalogue, then, the picture of the dead child became less a surrealistic vision for aesthetic delectation than a representative of what Ritchin tells us are the forty thousand children in the Third World who die each day of readily preventable and curable diseases;³⁵ its open but unseeing eyes less a matter of the Surrealist obsession with blindness than a sign of the particular traditions of the people who nurtured it. Another picture of two boys playing with toy animals among a number of carefully laid out bones also takes on a similar meaning alongside Salgado's new caption: 'Children's games in Brazil's Northeast during the great drought at the beginning of the 1980s. Brazil, 1983.'³⁶ Or, to take another example, a strange picture of a corpse lying in a pit as a man steps over it, which in *Other Americas* was known only as 'Brazil, 1980', bears this caption in *An Uncertain Grace*: 'In Juazeiro do Norte there is a service that rents the coffins to be used for wakes and to carry the dead to the cemetery. At the moment of burial the body is taken out of the coffin so that the coffin can be used several times.'³⁷ What was a disturbing, uncanny spectacle has also become a specific remark about poverty.

Hunger in the Sahel

Salgado's next project was to photograph the famine in the Sahel region during 1984 and 1985, including that in Ethiopia which received much media attention in the West. He was prompted to do this by working on a story about starvation in Brazil in 1983 which had made him realize that hunger was a global problem requiring a global solution.³⁸ Famine was suited to Salgado's particular skills because it is less an act of nature than an economic phenomenon, precipitated by acts of war or ecological damage, but above all being a matter of prices and income. Compared with *Other Americas*, the pictures in *Sahel*.

³³ *Other Americas*, pp. 36-7; caption, *An Uncertain Grace*, p. 154.

³⁴ The same is true of Salgado's exhibitions. In 1990 at the Photographers' Gallery, London he showed pictures, including those of the famine in the Sahel, without captions; in the South Bank show of pictures from *Workers* three years later, there were long captions and other textual material.

³⁵ Ritchin, *An Uncertain Grace*, p. 148.

³⁶ *Other Americas*, pp. 94-5; caption, *An Uncertain Grace*, p. 154.

³⁷ *Other Americas*, p. 31; caption, *An Uncertain Grace*, p. 154.

³⁸ Salgado, 'The Sight of Despair', *American Photo*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1990) p. 39.

L'homme en détresse show people in far more active and clear-cut situations: caring, fleeing, hiding, grieving, and burying their dead.³⁹ Salgado photographed the giant relief camps, housing as many as 120,000 people, who grouped themselves by region or village, or were grouped by the degree of their maladies. Many diseases preyed upon these refugees from war and hunger, and almost as lethal was the cold of the desert night. Some of Salgado's pictures in *Sahel* are direct and profoundly disturbing depictions of these people's suffering from cholera, leprosy and, above all, starvation. They are extremely hard to look upon in any sustained manner, or to talk about. Yet, in one sense, our identification with them is immediate, for famine leaves little room for the exercise of culture, and everyone knows at least a little about hunger.

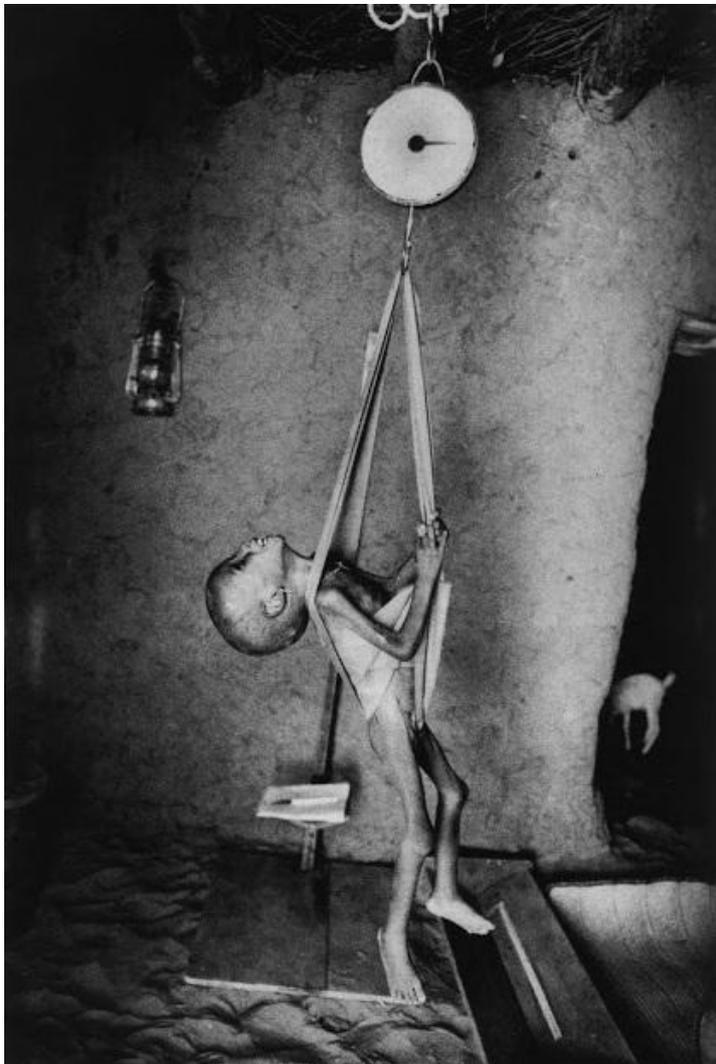


Sahel: A Refugee from Eritrea, Carrying his Dying Son, Arrives at Wad Sherifai Camp. Sudan, 1985

Many of the people in these pictures were at the end of their resources, were becoming like objects as death approached, and Salgado chose to seize on the most fugitive gestures of resistance or mutual support to pit against the inhuman spectacle of their plight, so suited to depiction by black-and-white photography. Dark, fragile figures are lost against expanses of the lightest grey, the sands of a once-productive land, while the coarse grain of the film unifies figure and ground. In pursuing these extreme contrasts,

³⁹ See Xavier Emmanuelli's essay in Salgado, *Sahel. L'homme en détresse*, Paris 1986, n.p.

carried from picture to picture, Salgado exploits the tendency of photography to suggest endlessness, for ‘its frame marks a provisional limit; its content refers to other contents outside that frame; and its structure denotes something that cannot be encompassed—physical existence.’⁴⁰ In this way, the enormity of the tragedy was suggested. Unnatural transformations are fixed upon, the old perversely take on the tautness of youth, and the young become aged; men and women become indistinguishable asexual beings.⁴¹ Bodies take on the look of stone or wood or hide, aided by the unifying tendency of photography, its simultaneous solidification of shadows and dematerialization of solids. Yet, against these forces of reality and representation which would turn these people into objects, Salgado brings out their active resistance.



Mali, 1985

⁴⁰ Siegfried Kracauer, ‘Photography’, in Alan Trachtenberg, ed., *Classic Essays on Photography*, New Haven 1980, p. 264.

⁴¹ This point is made movingly by Galeano. See *An Uncertain Grace*, p. 7.

In one horrifying picture, a child hangs in a harness, apparently in terrible pain, unable to support the weight of its head, hands weakly grasping one of the straps which holds it; a picture of torture, and at the same time of the grossest objectification, of weighing and recording, perhaps for the purposes of triage.⁴² Deliberately or not, Salgado has tilted the picture—this can be seen by comparing the orientation of the doorway to the picture's edge—so that the child's body remains upright; this in sympathy with the subject suspended, disoriented, in the air, but still nonetheless holding on. In another, two terrifyingly wasted men lie side by side on the ground. Their heads are turned towards each other, and one reaches out to lay his hand upon the wrist of the other.

If we compare such work with the flash-lit, brightly coloured pictures of the newspaper and magazine photojournalists, each striving for an individual and marketable style, then the contrast is clear. Unlike the photojournalists from most of the news agencies, Salgado, working as an unpaid volunteer for Médecins sans Frontières, spent many months taking these pictures. Salgado says that during the three to four weeks he spent in one Ethiopian camp over forty TV teams quickly came and went: one US crew flew in, chartered a bus to the camp, spent two hours there, and flew home. In other less newsworthy countries of the Sahel, he saw only one other journalist. In such cases, he says, there is 'no time to identify the reality you are photographing' so you only 'bring back what you bring with you'.⁴³

In discovering his subjects' 'reality', Salgado produces traditionally beautiful pictures out of squalor, pain and death, and immediately the question is, why? 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. Should one show such events using an anti-aesthetic form of photography, one which strove to be as ugly as famine itself? Salgado's works stand at the opposite end of the photographic spectrum from the 'abject'—itself become a matter for high-art appropriation.⁴⁴ They show an expenditure

⁴² 'In a Nutritional Centre, Mali', 1985; *Sabel*, p. 26.

⁴³ Ritchin, *An Uncertain Grace*, pp. 146-7.

⁴⁴ The abject is a currently fashionable theme in contemporary art, especially that which uses photography. Such work often draws upon the writing of Julia Kristeva. Among many diverse examples, one might think of Helen Chadwick, Cindy Sherman and Joel-Peter Witkin.

of time and skill which may be taken as a homage, especially when compared with the speedy gathering of horrific images by the newspaper photographers. Further, to make a judgement about this issue, we need to be more specific about the style of the pictures. Salgado's work owes a good deal to W. Eugene Smith—both formally in its luminous monochrome tones, and in subject matter, especially in the grace of the people represented and their tenderness with each other.⁴⁵ 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: it is as if Diane Arbus, Robert Frank and the photography of alienation, along with all subsequent developments, had been wished away.

Poverty and Beauty

For Salgado, beauty elicits sympathy: 'I wanted to respect the people as much as I could, to work to get the best composition and the most beautiful light ... If you can show a situation this way—get the beauty and nobility along with the despair—then you can show someone in America or France that these people are not different. I wanted Americans to look at the pictures of these people and see themselves.'⁴⁶

Further, thinks Salgado, beauty is not simply produced by the camera or the photographer, for there is something inherently aesthetic about the people themselves. As in *Other Americas*, this aesthetic quality is linked to poverty which, in removing its sufferers from consumer culture, also takes them beyond reach of commercial vulgarity. Of his Latin American subjects, Salgado wrote: 'dignity and poverty ride on the same horse. The struggle for survival is very difficult, and man, a hard beast, faces it from birth till death, always with signs of resolution—fighting the barrenness of the land, the long droughts, and the still-feudal agrarian structure.'⁴⁷ And of the subjects of *Sabel* themselves: 'Sometimes we from the Southern hemisphere wonder why you in the North think you have the monopoly of beauty, of dignity, of riches. Ethiopia is a

⁴⁵ Ritchin makes this point in *An Uncertain Grace*, p. 148. The comparison is closest with Smith's best-known works such as 'Country Doctor' (1948), 'Spanish Village' and 'Nurse Midwife' (both 1951). There are also other points of comparison: Smith's view of photography as a socially responsible, deeply personal practice which required from the photographer a great deal of knowledge of its subjects led him to spend months, even years, on his projects. See Glenn G. Willumson, *W. Eugene Smith and the Photographic Essay*, Cambridge 1992, pp. 235f.

⁴⁶ Salgado, 'The Sight of Despair', p. 39.

⁴⁷ Salgado, *Other Americas*, p. 12.

country in crisis, where the people are suffering so acutely, yet Ethiopians are probably among the most beautiful, most noble people in the world. There is really no point in going there to deny this reality.’⁴⁸

In ‘Nutritional Centre for Children, Douentza, Mali’, 1985, two horribly starved babies are held symmetrically at their mother’s withered breasts.⁴⁹ Here a traditional subject, the mother and child, is recast in horror. Modernist formal concerns with doubling and symmetry collide with a terrible image of care ravaged by want. There is a suggestion here of instrumentalism; it 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.⁵⁰ 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.

Modernism is further used to imply that behind the image of dignified poverty lies that of the ugly and bloated West, with its indulgent cultural pluralism acting in symbiosis with consumer society. Martin Parr’s brash colour photographs of food, eating and shopping, of the fine distinctions of snobbery traced out in goods graded by price, and of the uncertain navigation of over-sized consumers around minor obstacles, are as different from Salgado’s work as documentary pictures can be, but even so the two bodies of work are negative images of one another; what is registered in one being printed in complementary tones in the other.⁵¹

If there is a theme which connects *Other Americas* and *Sabel*, it is the constant presence of death. In the first book, there is much play with shadows, effacement and, when we are not shown actual corpses, with sleep as a premonition of death. In this way, is implied

⁴⁸ Salgado cited in Amanda Hopkinson, ‘Sebastião Salgado’, in Martin Marix Evans, ed., *Contemporary Photographers*, New York 1995, p. 992.

⁴⁹ *Sabel*, p. 23.

⁵⁰ See for instance, ‘Hospital of Gourma-Rharous, Mali’, 1985; ‘Blind woman from the region of Gondan, Mali’, 1985, *Sabel*, pp. 30, 22.

⁵¹ See Martin Parr, *The Cost of Living*, Manchester 1989; *Signs of the Times: A Portrait of the Nation’s Tastes*, Manchester 1992; Martin Parr and Nicholas Barker, *From A to B. Tales of Modern Motoring*, London 1994.

the passing of a people, and perhaps of an entire way of life. Especially when set against Brazil's forced, foreign-driven industrialization, the book is in part an elegy. Yet set against this, there is the theme of persistence, of forms of life which resist the purely instrumental, present in the fixity of the photographs themselves, permanent ghosts. A dialectic of persistence and transience is inherent in a medium which makes spectres of its subjects, and this dialectic points to memory, to a living persistence, a consciousness of history and process held before the mind. It is a way of thinking close to that of Galeano, stoking memory with accounts of passing, committed to the idea that as long as there continue to be oppressed people, there will be no forgetting.⁵² In *Sabel* the same dialectic is in operation but is brought to a painful acuity: each picture is a fragment, a specimen of suffering, held as if on a microscopic slide, both a piece of matter and a metonym of a wider and continuous state. It is the very extremity of suffering which ensures the persistence of memory.

The discomfort with which we view these photographs is not just to do with their subject matter, however, but also with their presentation, and this takes us back to the postmodern critique of all documentary, whether it depicts child workers or migrant mothers:

We must ask whether the *place* of the documentary subject as it is constructed for the more powerful spectator is not always, in some sense, given in advance. We must ask, in other words, whether the documentary act does not involve a double act of subjugation: first, in the social world that has produced its victims; and second, in the regime of the image produced within and for the same system that engenders the conditions it then re-presents.⁵³

On this schema, documentary photography, far from having even a limited positive effect, is complicit in the very system of repression it describes. In the face of such an objection, various questions are raised. Who or what can avoid complicity in the systems they inhabit? To admit complicity is a first step, not a final condemnation. If documentary seems weak and complicit, how much is this to do with documentary itself, and how much with hostile—one is tempted to say reductive—readings of it? The disturbance in the face of such images is perhaps necessary to their effect.

⁵² This is the major theme of Galeano's great book, *Memory of Fire*, trans. Cedric Belfrage, London 1995.

In any case, Salgado's images of the Sahel did not settle easily into the 'regime of the image', at least in the world of the mass media. They were not much published in the United States.⁵⁴ Even when they were, it was a few pages here and there in magazines which were otherwise devoted to trivialization. Seen in such a context, Salgado's images may draw the reader up short and produce a sense of shock, but they are presented as just another (repellent yet achieved) wonder among a world of wonders offered up for consumption. The humanism of *Life* or *Picture Post*, conservative though it was in many respects, cannot be replaced with such isolated gestures. Fred Ritchin notes of these pictures, and this is very significant: 'Paradoxically, it is only with distance from the events of 1984-85 and the photographer's increasing fame that the work becomes more widely available—an unfortunate tendency to elevate the messenger while denying the message.'⁵⁵ Through the unmarketable pictures of the famine in the Sahel, we glimpse the unspoken rule of contemporary democracy: say what you like, so long as no one hears.

An Archaeology of the Industrial Age

Salgado's next and largest project, which took him six years, was no less than a mapping of the world of work, from the most arduous of manual labour, including the mining at Serra Pelada, to the supervision of the computer-controlled manufacturing and transport systems of the First World. What are we to say of the result, *Workers?*—this large, finely printed volume, so tastefully made, so expensive, £70 takes it well beyond the pockets of many photographic enthusiasts or political activists, let alone students. It makes an immediate and profound impression as its pages are turned, dramatic monochrome glimpses of so many ways of living, a dizzying impression of the spinning globe of the economic order, embracing coal miners in India and tea-pickers in Rwanda, US slaughterhouses and Cuban sugar-fields.

Salgado supplies a great deal of contextual material to the pictures which appears in a separate booklet of detailed captions. It was, it seems, felt necessary to preserve the

⁵³ Solomon-Godeau, *Photography in the Dock*, p. 176.

⁵⁴ Two pages appeared in the *New York Times* and four in *Newsweek*. There was no gallery display of the work in the US. See Ritchin, *An Uncertain Grace*, p. 149. See also the discussion in Edwards, 'Photography and the Representation of the Other', p. 172.

⁵⁵ *An Uncertain Grace*, p. 149.

status of these pictures as art by isolating them from the taint of text. The booklet describes the activities shown in the photographs along with their economic and historical background. In it, Salgado has much to say about specific matters—of unsafe working conditions amid ramshackle machinery; of workers' facilities, union organization and humane working conditions in Soviet factories; and of the vast, ecologically laudable Chinese bicycle industry.

Compared to Salgado's earlier practice, in *Workers* there is a greater evolution of picture sequences, each forming mini-stories in the style of the illustrated magazines. With much emphasis on meaningful links between individual pictures, and on the willing and manifest participation of the subjects, the association with W. Eugene Smith becomes stronger than ever. While *Life* sequences would usually concentrate on stories from single places, Salgado sometimes draws together material from different countries for comparison, indicating the operation of a unitary economy on a global scale. Again, the provisional limit of the frame is used to suggest the workings of a system which can be captured in no single picture. In Serra Pelada the workers appear to function as the component parts of a complex weight-moving mechanism; individuality is apparent, but is subsumed to the purpose of the economic machine in a metaphor for the brutal functioning of the world economy. Similarly in *Workers*, each picture has a strong and often striking individuality, but gains a function only within the whole, a sequence of many sequences.

Even these sequences are themselves grouped into large thematic sections devoted to such subjects as mining, manufacture and construction. The book starts with a string of picture sequences on various monocultures—sugar-cane, tea, tobacco, cocoa. The booklet reads: 'The history of cocoa farming is similar to that of tea, coffee, sugar, and cotton: all these monocultures are farmed almost exclusively in Third World countries and are subject to price dictatorships fixed by markets in countries that usually have never produced an ounce of the product.'⁵⁶ The reader is taken directly from the portrayal of a variety of concrete circumstances to an economic factor that unites them.

Why have the prices of such goods, not just agricultural produce but also other raw materials, fallen so sharply and for so long? As with the causes of famine, it is hardly an

⁵⁶ *Workers*, supplementary booklet, p. 5.

act of nature. The burden of Third World debt, built up especially in the 1970s and 1980s, has forced these countries to gear their economies towards producing exports to meet their loan payments. This is why Brazil exports vast quantities of food while millions of its people go hungry. Ever more exports chase static First World markets, driving prices down. At the same time, these cheap exports, founded on poorly paid labour and unregulated working conditions, force First World industries into bankruptcy. Since Third World countries must maintain huge positive trade balances with the First World to pay their debts, they are reluctant to import, so exporting industries in the First World also suffer.⁵⁷ While the effect on countries like Britain in terms of unemployment and social deprivation is certainly bad enough, in many countries of the 'developing' world it has been disastrous. In *Workers*, Salgado set out to illustrate the human consequences of such a process.

Workers is a realist book in the sense that it organizes its visual material so as to give concrete form to circumstances which can only be known about through the study of, say, the economy. It does not merely provide information but gives that information an immediate form: in realist art, 'even though the surface of life is sufficiently transparent to allow the underlying essence to shine through (something which is not true of immediate experience in real life), it nevertheless manifests itself as immediacy, as life as it actually appears.'⁵⁸ The particularity of photographic recording, abstracted and unified to an extent through the use of black-and-white, is placed in a structure where it can create meaning.

The Extinction of Work

In line with the fine-art orientation of Salgado's work, however, the book is presented as an 'archaeology', dedicated to a species, manual workers, which is vanishing. A page among the front matter of the volume bears only these words: 'This book is an homage to workers, a farewell to a world of manual labour that is slowly disappearing and a tribute to those men and women who still work as they have for centuries.' Fine art claims for its own anything which is on the point of death, and photography, in particular, has a strong disposition to transform its images into memento mori.

⁵⁷ See Susan George, *The Debt Boomerang. How Third World Debt Harms Us All*, London 1992, pp. 93f.

⁵⁸ Georg Lukács, 'Realism in the Balance', in Ernst Bloch et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, Verso, London 1980, p. 39.

Yet is it really true that the ways of life shown are challenged? They are becoming more difficult, certainly, and some of the livelihoods Salgado shows—like the tuna fishers of Sicily—are certainly under threat; but that very difficulty is often a condition for their survival. The general idea behind the book, and it is widely held, is that human labour will be discarded as work becomes increasingly automated, as the computer-controlled robots which today assemble cars move into all realms of manufacture. Such machines are hugely expensive to develop, and even to purchase, but surely the advent of these tireless, efficient, apolitical beings will mean the end of manual labour.

But consider the sulphur workers in Indonesia whom Salgado photographed. They climb the steep slopes of a volcano, seven and a half miles uphill takes seven hours, and then make the dangerous descent into the volcano's crater from which they chisel out chunks of sulphur, breathing the poisonous air. Then these men carry their loads, which weigh rather more than they do, back up the side of the crater. As we have seen, there has been a long-term decline in the price of raw materials, and sulphur is no exception; in 1981 the sulphur-diggers were paid \$6.50 a load, when *Workers* was published in 1993, it was \$3.50. Does it seem likely that corporations will expend vast sums to manufacture some mechanical alternative as long as they can hire these highly sophisticated, fleshy robots, which power, maintain and even reproduce themselves, for such minimal payment?⁵⁹

Just as a cat will pounce on a slowly moving piece of string only when it is about to disappear from sight, so there is a powerful aesthetic urge to grasp the fugitive at the moment of its extinction. It is a regular feature of the old anthropological activity of bringing information and images about 'other' peoples to the Western knowledge market. James Clifford has written tellingly about the tendency to bemoan the passing of the 'last x', whether it be some native craft or authentic ritual which the anthropologist or photographer claims to salvage at the moment before its irrevocable disappearance. As Clifford puts it, 'Authenticity in culture or art exists just prior to the present (but not

⁵⁹ Actually the proportion of industrial workers to the workforce as a whole has shown a modest *increase* world-wide in the period 1960-90, that increase being most marked in the developing countries. See United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 1996*, New York 1996. The idea that robots will replace manual workers ignores the fact that it is much easier to get a computer to play a decent game of chess than to govern a robot climbing a flight of stairs, or reliably tell a dog from a cat. Current robot production takes place in highly controlled environments where everything is kept in its proper place.

so distant or eroded as to make collection or salvage impossible)'.⁶⁰ This persistent activity makes authenticity appear to be continually on the verge of disappearance. A tendency to salvage is apparent in some of Salgado's statements and in his ambition to provide a universal image of a disappearing working world. It is strengthened by photography's action in seizing moments from time, so that each image is a record of salvage, freezing actions and fixing beings against their transience, and objects against their decay or destruction.

In Salgado's frequent depiction of the limits to work spaces, indicated by doorways or windows and the scenes beyond, work is seen as confinement or a prison term; workers in these photographs often have the melancholy air of inmates, and their working clothes appear as uniforms. This is not only due to an awareness of the passing of their lives. Compared to the heroic and confident bearing of the Soviet workers, depicted in photographs by Arkady Shaiket or Boris Ignatovich—to which Salgado's work is in some ways stylistically similar—it is as if these workers of the postmodern age, now tragically heroic, are also aware of their own passing as a type. In general, Salgado's workers strive, not against bosses or supervisors and not for specific gains, but against forces which are as eternal and unyielding as those of nature, and for nothing less than their own humanity; yet they continue in an apparently tragic and futile manner to struggle, until their very extinction.

Modernist Elegy

High modernist style, once used to glorify leviathan industry and occasionally its workers, is here turned to elegy. The relation to modernist photography is signalled in the style and subject matter of the pictures in *Workers*, which are often reminiscent of the work of Margaret Bourke-White. Here are the same masked workers, and fragile figures pressed up against gigantic machinery; here are images of a modern, heroic industry—sometimes angular and bathed in the clean light of rationality, sometimes tenebrous or swathed in smoke, the location of mysterious forces—all recast by Salgado in a period of decline.⁶¹ So in the Serra Pelada pictures, there are echoes of Max Alpert's 1939 series, *Construction Site of the Fergana Grand Canal* (the epic depiction of a huge

⁶⁰ James Clifford, 'The Others. Beyond the "Salvage" Paradigm', *Third Text*, no. 6, Spring 1989, 74.

⁶¹ Orvell notes the comparison with Bourke-White, though on different grounds. See 'Documentary and the Seductions of Beauty', p. 99.

project employing many thousands of labourers) but there is no great construction in the making here, merely a scrambling in the mud for gold.



Gdansk Shipyard, Poland, 1990

This is perhaps more explicit in the pictures of ships—they were the most archetypal of modernist motifs, lauded by Le Corbusier, amongst many propagandists, for the pure beauty of their functional technology. Salgado's pictures of the Gdansk shipyards depict scenes far from the obligatory sunlight and sharp lines of the old era. Here everything is grimy, damp and foggy. The atmosphere dissolves ships' geometry, and there is much concentration on tangled masses of high-tension cables which, says Salgado, as they stretch over the bridge, 'resemble the hair of some dishevelled demon'.⁶² The faces of the ship-workers are generally hidden behind goggles or other screens, making them seem more insect than human. Even the (sideways) launching of a ship takes place on a dull day, shown in a grainy photograph in which the far landscape of cranes fades into the mist, while in the foreground a desultory group of spectators clusters under limp banners.⁶³ The name of the ship, *Nadezhda* (hope), depending on how one chooses to read it, may point to some positive potential in even these grim surroundings, or may further darken them with its futile message.

⁶² Salgado, *Workers*, supplementary booklet, p. 12.



Shipbreaking, Bangladesh, 1985: double-page spread from *Workers*

As if this is not enough, the section is followed by a sequence of pictures about ship-breakers in Bangladesh. In the introduction to *Workers*, Salgado tells how the ships are run aground at high speed, and how their hulls are cut open to let the water in, binding them to the shore. Then, he says:

the ship is attacked from all sides. Blowtorches cut through its steel skin, giant hammers break up its iron and wood structure. Everything from that giant animal lying on the beach has its use. Iron and steel will be melted down and given new roles as utensils. The entire ship will be turned into what it once carried: machines, knives and forks, hoes, shovels, screws, things, bits, pieces ... The huge bronze propellers ... will provide the most elegant of items—bracelets, earrings, necklaces, and rings, which will one day adorn the bodies of working women, as well as pots from which men will pour tea.⁶⁴

⁶³ *Workers*, pp. 198-9.

⁶⁴ *Workers*, supplementary booklet, p. 13.

And in this sequence there are dramatic images of strenuous labour, of mighty hammer blows struck and great weights borne, not to make some grand vessel, but to take one apart.

These workers ‘work as they have for centuries’, yet far from it being a matter of eternal, unremitting labour, their lives are getting harder—and Salgado, with his economist’s training, understands this better than most. The tendency of photography to dehistoricize, to build its subjects into *Family of Man* stereotypes, however, contains a qualified truth, only made an untruth by accounts which claim that this aspect is all that these pictures have to say, or can say, or that it is their essence.⁶⁵ From the photographs in *Workers*, we do feel a strong sense of human presence and activity, of physical strain and fatigue, of dust and sweat, which we can all understand by virtue of being human and having to work.

Heaven and Hell

There is a Manichean tendency in Salgado’s photography in which ordinary people in their places of work are seen as saints and angels in hell—not only at Serra Pelada and in the sulphurous volcano, but also at a lead foundry in Kazakhstan. Again we are reminded of W. Eugene Smith, especially of his four-year project to document the industry of Pittsburgh in which the city, as Solomon-Godeau put it, is seen as ‘a Blakean nightmare of satanic mills populated by workers who, when goggled, resemble demons, and, when unmasked, are the resident population of the damned.’ This description leaves out Smith’s depictions of emotion, however, for he populated his vision of hell with the angels of sentiment.⁶⁶

Accompanying such images, there is a strong religious current which runs through Salgado’s entire work, and certainly does not subside in *Workers*, where there are fishermen who gaze into the distance as if witnessing a vision, reminders of the crucifixion, and Madonnas. A miner appears, like an apparition, as a light-giving saint set against the blackness, his drill bit become a staff; there are welders who seem to struggle

⁶⁵ Held in 1955, *The Family of Man* was an exhibition of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, New York curated by Edward Steichen and devoted to portraying the essential unity of mankind. Billed as the ‘greatest photographic exhibition of all time’, it toured internationally.

⁶⁶ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, ‘W. Eugene Smith and the Humanist Icon’, *Art in America*, Summer 1981, p. 43.

towards an intensely lit doorway as if blinded by the presence of some deity; and a ship-breaker who bears on one shoulder the dead weight of a metal halo.⁶⁷



Shipbreaking, Bangladesh, 1985

To an extent, Salgado may be drawing on diverse art-historical sources which have long established particular poses as indicative of particular emotions, and which are only contingently religious—even so, the references are frequent and insistent. Salgado seems to be appealing to a quasi-religious humanism, to our empathy on the basis of the fact that we, too, are human, though using specific and traditional cultural means—the forms of Catholicism, here taken to be universal. Behind the corrupt and ruinous forms of work, of national and ethnic division, and utilitarian categorization, photography hopes to reveal a universal, transparent and comprehensible experience.

This is an old-fashioned attitude, of course, and is congruent with Salgado's style and subject matter. It may seem to sit strangely with the concentration on detail and economic statistics. However, its collision with highly specific situations is perhaps the point: Salgado appeals to a universal base against which the particular is offset, and this is

⁶⁷ See *Workers*, pp. 268, 186-7, 216-17. There is a fine passage on this aspect of Salgado's work in David Levi-Strauss, 'The Epiphany of the Other: Sebastião Salgado', *Artforum*, February 1991, p. 98. Salgado,

because the mainstream political basis for an agreement on universal rights, certainly on any right to resources, has fallen out of favour, leaving a call to human feeling as the only apparent recourse.

Nevertheless, there is a danger in this appeal. The marketing of Third World imagery in the First World media generally relies upon the two realms remaining strictly separate, so that the introduction of one to the other produces a picturesque and marketable current. It may produce in the wealthy viewer a simultaneous frisson and comfort, like listening to rain lashing the windows. What is excluded from such a schema is any reminder of the extensive interdependence of the two worlds. Given this, Salgado's 'retro' aspects could be seen as self-defeating, though they may also be a necessary aesthetic device which enables him to smuggle a dissenting view into the market, by tying it to an old-fashioned beauty. On that level, at least, the strategy has been highly successful, since from 1982 onwards Salgado has regularly received prizes and grants for his work, and over the years has become perhaps the best-known documentary photographer.⁶⁸ This is the result not simply of nostalgia or conservatism, but is a matter of invoking a time when photography was the hegemonic medium, and restoring its power over—but also for—its subjects.

Yet, beyond this, there is a slyer and more specific aspect to these religious elements which seem expressive of universal humanism. Among the darkest images in *Workers*—both literally and metaphorically—are those of the teams trying to cap the oil wells fired by Iraqi troops as they retreated from Kuwait. Here, in photographs of lone workers approaching vast, intense fires against black skies and oil-sodden ground, are truly images of hell. But also, in the picture of a worker knocked unconscious by the force of a blast, so he lies open-mouthed before a cap spurting oil, or in another of two figures, one standing, as if in shock with open hands, the other kneeling before a capped well in the black rain, it is obvious that these are worshippers before the great god Oil.⁶⁹ And this is surely part of the point about the pictures of workers before fire, or fumes or giant machinery, that these involuntary neophytes are sacrificed to the numerous

however, says that he has no religion. See Ken Lassiter, 'The Sebastião Salgado Interview', January 1996; file posted on the Web at [/rtt.colorado.edu/~keivom/salgado.html](http://rtt.colorado.edu/~keivom/salgado.html).

⁶⁸ These include the City of Paris/Kodak award for *Other Americas* in 1984, the prize for the Best Photographic Book of the Year for *Sabel* in 1986, and the Arles International Festival prize for the Best Photographic Book of the Year for *Workers* in 1993. For a full list of Salgado's numerous awards and prizes, see Evans, ed., *Contemporary Photographers*, p. 991.

⁶⁹ *Workers*, pp. 338-9, 342-3.

deities—commodities and corporations—of the capitalist cosmos. In this sense, to present workers as battling against forces beyond their control is to tell an uncomfortable truth. While humanity may be one, the gods, like those of the ancient world, are many and warring, and reckless in the use of their human charges.

The Gift of Images

We have seen that the old documentary style came under attack from both business and the academy. Among the most damaging criticisms was that it was ineffective, that it was too rhetorical, that it patronized its subjects, that its separation between subject, photographer and viewer was too great—even, as we have seen, that it somehow contributed to its subjects' oppression. Salgado has something to say about the separation of photographer and subject: 'The picture is not made by the photographer ... the picture is more or less good in function of the relationship you have with the people you photograph.' This relation extends well beyond the moment when the picture is taken. In the Sahel he preferred to travel by bus; if you arrive by car, says Salgado, 'it's a disaster—you are a guy with a car', a rich guy and not 'with the people ... You need to be accepted by reality.'⁷⁰

The picture, then, is the result of an explicit collaboration: 'My photographs are all a gift from the person you see. It's when you establish a relationship with them that they really have the power to offer you something.'⁷¹ (In W. Eugene Smith, too, there was much collaboration with his subjects, and entire projects, like *Minamata*, are an explicit product of and tribute to this process.)⁷² There is a development of such collaboration in Salgado's work: in *Other Americas* the subjects sometimes appear to be unaware of having their pictures taken, while in *Workers* and his latest book, *Terra*, there is a more explicit fore-grounding of the relation between the subject and the photographer.⁷³

⁷⁰ Cited in Ritchin, *An Uncertain Grace*, p. 146.

⁷¹ Amanda Hopkinson, interview with Salgado, *British Journal of Photography*, no. 6762, 29 March 1990, p. 12.

⁷² W. Eugene Smith and Aileen Smith, *Minamata*, New York 1975. This renowned work documented the Japanese victims of industrial poisoning and their fight for compensation.

⁷³ Salgado, *Terra. Struggle of the Landless*, Phaidon Press, London 1997, ISBN 0-7148-3636-2, £35.



Walker Evans, *Graveyard, Houses and Steel Mill, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, November 1935*

Sometimes this collaboration is so evident that it becomes the theme of the photograph. Workers, treated as components, living out their lives in factory rooms, are nevertheless often lively before the camera. Some of the pictures in *Workers* are partly about the pain of the contrast between this fate and the brief distraction which the camera provides. In one of the very few depictions of work in *Other Americas*, Salgado took a picture of a truck full of workers with a walled graveyard in the background.⁷⁴ Like Walker Evans's famous picture, *Graveyard, Houses and Steel Mill, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, November 1935*—which showed, moving from background to foreground, factories, the town, the graveyard—there is an obvious message in the Salgado, reinforced by the comparison of the workers penned in by the sides of the truck, and the headstones encircled by the graveyard wall. Yet the workers' faces, smiling each one, are turned upwards at the camera, beaming because of the novelty of having their picture taken.

Exchanges of this kind rule out the absolute respect for the discrete nature of the 'Other' common in some strands of postmodern theorizing. Such an attitude of purity

⁷⁴ 'Workers Leaving a Pewter Mine, Oruro, Bolivia', 1977; *Other Americas*, p. 83.

and separation involves the suspension of judgement, not only about what members of such a discrete group do, but even over what is done to them. For who is to say when a condition has not become a part of the culture which it helped to form? As Kate Soper argues, there can be no ‘extension of empathy or solidarity to the victims of oppression which is not “guilty”—if that is the word—of reading or representing their plight in the light of our own identity; in the light, that is, of a conception of how it would be for us were we to be in their condition, of what we would feel if we were to suffer their fate.’⁷⁵ Photographs such as Salgado’s are based upon just such an act of imagination.

If this book, *Workers*, is disturbing it is partly because it says a good deal about the interdependence of rich and poor—in the captions which contain much economic material, but also in the very tones of the book which appear to unite its diverse subjects. Salgado makes this global interdependence his subject, proclaiming, ‘It is time to launch the concept of the universality of humanity. Photography lends itself to a demonstration of this and as an instrument of solidarity between peoples.’⁷⁶ Maybe this is where the positive aspect of the aesthetic charge lies; thinking of the (only apparently paradoxical) grandeur of the figures in *Sahel*, of dark forms against the blanched landscape, Jean Lacouture writes of their ‘progression abstraite, intemporelle, délivré de la pesanteur’.⁷⁷ Universality is suggested by their stillness and the abstract means used to describe them—in this way, the particular is led to yield universality without losing itself. That universality is as much to do with the global economic system as it is with human sympathy. Ritchin recounts how Salgado said—with an air of bitter humour—that ‘he is fulfilling a Marxist dream—the workers of the world, at least on paper, will finally be able to unite before, in their present form, they disappear.’⁷⁸

In some pictures, there is a strange dissolution and revelation of the subject by light: or rather the dissolution of one subject and the revelation of another. Light beams weave forms like ectoplasm in smoke or dust, while the human subject is further dematerialized by photographic grain. Given the unified surface of the monochrome prints, there is a

⁷⁵ Kate Soper, ‘The Limits of Hauntology’, *Radical Philosophy*, no. 75, January-February 1996, p. 28. This essay is a comment on Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx*.

⁷⁶ Amanda Hopkinson, interview with Salgado, p. 11. See also his remarks on the Sahel pictures of which he wrote: ‘My idea was to produce a large body of pictures that people in the wealthy countries could use as a base for reflection. I wanted to show that the world does not consist of many people ... but just one people.’ ‘The Sight of Despair’, p. 39.

⁷⁷ Jean Lacouture, preface to *Sahel*, n.p.

⁷⁸ *An Uncertain Grace*, p. 150.

quality which leaps from picture to picture, so that they all appear as exemplars of a single unity. In this dissolution of hard forms, and people, and the brief revelation of the barely material, a dialectic is established which serves as a metaphor for the disappearance of the world of work and the ghostly premonition of some alternative.

Looking Back

From much concealing of faces and gazes in *Other Americas*, in *Workers* Salgado moved to their broad and straightforward revelation. Here people look back at the camera, the photographer and the viewer.⁷⁹ These looks, contentless when divorced from their place among other pictures, slip out of the world of cliché and picturesque matter—of the wisdom of age or the innocence of youth—and take on meaning as a sign of communication and interdependence.⁸⁰ If workers' looks seem accusing or resentful, viewers might be led to ask why. Within the structure of *Workers*, sense is built from the fragments of an apparently arbitrary reality. Shards of the merely apprehensible are brought together to produce a complex mental image of the real. The book reminds its readers that every time they buy a jar of coffee, strike a match or climb into a car they are participating in the running of a global economy in which their wealth and comfort is founded upon poverty and pain among people distant and near. Through *Workers*, the golden billion may look on the grey eyes of these nameless workers upon whose shoulders they stand.

Modernist composition, the arrangement of formal elements to interact and make a larger sense, is analogous to this realist construction. Photography, shrinking the 'real' in size and depth, can make it seem amenable to reason and management.⁸¹ Yet there is also an opposite tendency in this reduction of the world's richness to a carefully composed series of black-and-white instants. And that, an effect of Salgado's realism, of his suggesting links, through sequences of pictures, and sequences of these sequences—for as each page is turned, the complexity of the links is further augmented—is the

⁷⁹ 'Sugarcane Workers in their Quarters, Havana Province, Cuba', 1988; *Workers*, pp. 30-1.

⁸⁰ For an argument based on the Formalist notion of dialogism which claims, against the Foucauldian position of Tagg and Sekula, that photographs can simultaneously contain many voices, not just that of the photographer, see Steve Edwards, 'The Machine's Dialogue', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1990, pp. 63-76.

⁸¹ See Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography in the Dock*, p. 159.

perception of something ungraspable within the frame: the synthesis of subjective and objective elements, of economic statistics and human experience.

Working for the MST

Nevertheless, there was still a discomfort in the fine-art aspect of Salgado's work, whether or not it was a strategy to overcome the media monopoly: to peruse in a gallery, as one would any work of art, large, finely printed photographs of starving people and suffering workers was an experience at once moving and disturbing.



In his most recent book, *Terra*, and the exhibitions which accompany it, Salgado has recast the context, as well as the content, of his work. The book is dedicated to the cause of the Brazilian land-occupation movement, the MST, with which Salgado has long been involved.⁸² The long section devoted to the movement in *Terra* documents the plight of the landless camped out along the highways of Brazil, waiting to occupy land; the communities that they build when they have done so, especially their schools and crèches; and the dramatic occupations themselves, as when a column of thousands of

⁸² See James Petras's account of the MST in this issue of the NLR: 'Latin America: The Resurgence of the Left', pp. 9-11. For Salgado's involvement with the MST, see the interview with Salgado, 'Man of the People', *Amateur Photographer*, vol. 189, no. 16, 19 April 1997, pp. 26-7.

peasants breaks through the gate of a *latifundio*, ‘scythes, hoes and banners ... raised in the unrestrained avalanche of hope...’⁸³ (see back cover) Salgado also witnessed the massacre of peasants by police at Pará last year, and photographed the bodies, the wake, and the mourners.

Terra once again recasts Salgado’s earlier pictures of Brazil—including some from *Other Americas*—by building them into a definite narrative. Beginning with indigenous, still tribal inhabitants of the forest, then recapitulating his documentation of the ‘workers of the land’, including agricultural labourers and miners, and of drought and famine, then moving to (a new subject for Salgado) the city, concentrating on migrants and the urban poor. This is the context for the final section which deals with the landless, and the MST who are seen as the solution to the problems of the hunger, exhaustion, the breakdown in social cohesion and the powerlessness of ordinary people shown in the previous sections. Older pictures often acquire a new role in this carefully composed book: for instance, two pictures of the face and hands of an old woman, the texture of dried mud, become signs for the land in general and drought in particular.⁸⁴ Photographing in the city, Salgado shows crowds at bus stations, the homeless living under motorways, crack- and glue-sniffing children in their cardboard homes, prisoners, a large group of abandoned babies, and congregations praying over loaves of bread. In his pictures of these people and indeed the landless, Salgado has abandoned the interest in purity which was such a strong feature of his former work; these people are in touch with, and are to a degree ruined by, modernity but in this book—in marked contrast to *Other Americas*—they are seen as sharing in the same complex of problems which affects the remote rural poor and indigenous peoples. Salgado’s work has always been committed to progressive social change in a general sense, but in *Terra* the claim is far more explicit. This produces a qualitative change in the work: here is a set of photographs, which are certainly meant to be seen as art, placed at the service of a political 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

⁸³ *Terra*, caption, p. 143. Since no one could be sure that these invasions would not be resisted by the police or the landowners’ gunmen, and since it is clear that Salgado positioned himself ahead of the MST column, these pictures were taken at some personal risk.

⁸⁴ *Terra*, p. 21.

want them.⁸⁵ 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.

That these pictures were not immediately recognizable as Salgado's is an interesting matter in itself. In depicting MST settlements and facilities, land invasions and the burying of their dead, Salgado has stood back from his more extreme stylistic solutions, and let the extraordinary subject speak for itself. The pictures of the land invasions, in particular, are strikingly straightforward.

In the pictures of MST settlements, Salgado is photographing people for whom hope has in a modest way materialized, though both subjects and photographer seem painfully aware of its fragility.⁸⁶ A family pose beside their kitchen ware, their children as polished as their pans—again, this can be compared to an earlier picture in which worn-out parents pose with their eleven offspring, slumped in a shabby corner of their house.⁸⁷ Befitting activist photography, the focus has shifted from past to future. It may be that Salgado has pursued this interest a little too self-consciously in a sequence of photographs of children of the landless, most of them close-ups of very beautiful kids looking into the lens, who appear to have a melancholy knowledge of their likely fate well beyond their years. It is not that death has retreated; these portraits are brought into contrast with pictures of scenes following the massacre at Pará, and a terrible earlier photograph of an aged child with warped bones and swollen joints, and of a funeral procession where the coffin is small enough to be borne on one shoulder.⁸⁸ The pictures are at once fixed on present tragedy and warn of a future which may hold more of the

⁸⁵ The venues in Britain include St. James' Church, Piccadilly, London, the University of Essex Gallery in Colchester and the Pollock Shaws Library, Glasgow.

⁸⁶ For statements from MST activists about their involvement, see John Vidal, 'The Long March Home', *The Guardian Weekend*, 26 April 1997, pp. 14-20. The piece is illustrated with some of Salgado's pictures.

⁸⁷ *Terra*, pp. 130, 33.

⁸⁸ *Terra*, pp. 65, 71.

same—repression, hunger, lives passing in hard and poorly rewarded labour—or which may just hold something better.

In Salgado's previous work, as we have seen, there are often intimations of something ungraspable—of a modernist sublime, the ghostly presence of the absolute which sometimes takes the form of religious references. In the MST pictures, by contrast, Salgado settles on a utopia found in this life, not the next, and the old spectres are reworked in flesh. The change in style, then, is a consequence of shifting from photographing people's conditions to photographing people's actions to change them, from enlivening some circumstance with dynamic style to letting a subject's action exercise itself in the pictures.

The Problem of Beauty

We have seen that Salgado's work directly answers some of the academic criticisms made of documentary photography: in his insistence on establishing relationships with the people he photographs, in turning detailed knowledge of his subjects to radical ends, and in refashioning modernist documentary means for specific purposes, simultaneously aesthetic and political. Postmodern critics looking at Salgado's work are faced with a conundrum; they are forced either into ad hominem attacks on the macho, Leica-wielding photojournalist, or into admitting their conflict—David Brittain of *Creative Camera* commented on his disturbance in the face of this 'terribly competent' artist, and this terror is a natural result of being confronted with such a flagrant counter-example to one's beliefs.⁸⁹

The charge against Salgado's work of rhetoric and of an excess of beauty, however, is a strong one. What can be said to this accusation that Salgado is too artful, that the aesthetic content spoils the objectivity and thus the effectiveness of his images? In part, the charge assumes that the subjects are themselves artless, that they never act upon their representations, being innocent of the billions of images that are directed at them, or which they consume incidentally, from advertising hoardings and TV sets. Some pictures by Salgado directly refute this: in one, a bare-chested man stands holding a little child to his side, staring at the lens, while behind him a large painted head of Christ turns

its eyes towards him. The point of the picture is very much the likeness between the two.⁹⁰

David Levi-Strauss has written of the Sahel pictures: ‘The difficult questions that arise from such representations—the aestheticization of suffering and the concomitant objectification of the other—do not disappear when we look at these pictures. They are, in fact, intensified, clarified, and made more insistent.’⁹¹ It is obvious that this problem is made a theme of Salgado’s work, but it is not enough to leave the issue there. While the Nazis conducted their slaughter across Europe, in exile Adorno wrote darkly of the prospects for art: ‘there is no longer beauty or consolation except in the gaze falling on horror, withstanding it, and in unalleviated consciousness of negativity holding fast to the possibility of what is better.’⁹² While in straight reportage, suffering is represented as an ineluctable aspect of the world of brute fact which must simply be accepted, in Salgado’s work there is something about its highly formal, resolved, even excessive beauty which, finally, suits its extreme subject matter, for, while it threatens to tip over into sentimentality or mannerism, neither is quite possible given the scale of the suffering with which he is dealing. The old-fashioned formal qualities, especially the stress on the resolution of detail, even—perhaps especially—in the shadows, is married to Salgado’s faith in the significance of his subjects, something which some contemporary photojournalists and certainly artists have lost.

This ‘retro’ style, which seems excessive only in a climate of cynicism, matches an equally ‘retro’ ideology. Salgado has said that, ‘You photograph with all of your ideology’—and this ideology is Marxist.⁹³ The spectres of faith in the subject, high-art beauty and Marxism are found haunting this work together, and they are bound together by the memorial aspect to Salgado’s work,⁹⁴ obviously much suited to the fixity of photography: it explains the prevalence of death, the suitability of the subject of famine, and Salgado’s attitude towards work and remote peasant communities. Until *Terra*, the process fixed in this photography was generally one of expiry, not of becoming. This most definitely separated it from the high modernist work from which Salgado borrows so many of his

⁸⁹ See Richard Ehrlich, ‘Sebastião Salgado. The Case of the Lone Leica’, *Creative Camera*, June-July 1990, p. 27.

⁹⁰ *Other Americas*, pp. 32-3.

⁹¹ Levi-Strauss, ‘Epiphany of the Other’, p. 98.

⁹² Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott, Verso, London 1974, p. 25.

⁹³ Cited in Ritchin, *An Uncertain Grace*, p. 147.

⁹⁴ Noted in Christian Caujolle, *Sebastião Salgado*, Paris 1993, n.p.

means. Yet the style is highly appropriate: it is less a simple revival of modernist forms than their deliberate use as a retrospective mode which has come to invoke the supposed twilight of the industrial age. It is also a bringing of current realities up against the aesthetic norms and ideals of a yesterday which had promised a better tomorrow—it is a reminder of broken promises.

It might be claimed that Salgado wishes a coherence upon a world which has none. Fragmentation, the shattering of meaning, the prevalence of montage in the First World is denied, seen merely as part of an ideological superstructure which has no power once it is placed in the light. Salgado's images fail to thematize the resistance and distraction of his First World viewers—it is they (not his Third World subjects) who are in this way absent from these pictures, and coffee-table books are the result. This is an undeniable weakness, but it is hardly sufficient to leave the matter there. After all, if they wish, viewers themselves can make the necessary links, map Martin Parr, or even Sally Mann or Barbara Kruger, onto Sebastião Salgado, First World onto Third, and grasp their ideological separation, their material interdependence, and the relationship between the two. Once they do, the form of these luxurious books becomes oddly appropriate for they are manifestly consumer items founded on labour which, in Salgado's realist mode, tends to disappear as the object becomes more perfect. Here, though, the very point of that labour is to bring to the fore the labour of others, and the operation of the general process of the veiling of work in consumption.

Humanism and Liberalism

The problem of a return to liberal documentary photography can be more sharply stated than postmodern critics tend to do: it is not that the liberal project was limited to charitable action against what was seen as the 'natural' condition of poverty. Nor even that it was insufficiently critical of itself—for surely James Agee and Walker Evans were and their self-referential work (like more recent examples) found itself mired in powerlessness as a result.⁹⁵ The contradiction lies deeper: it is that the liberal, and even social-democratic, consensus was based upon the very world economical system—backed, where necessary, by force—that Salgado criticizes. The wealth and comfort of

⁹⁵ James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families*, Boston, Mass. 1941. See T.V. Reed, 'Unimagined Existence and the Fiction of the Real: Postmodern Realism in *Let Us Now*

the masses of the First World, such as it was and is, was founded on cheap labour in the South, and low prices for raw materials. The decline of the liberal system has only exacerbated the matter by driving it to further extremes: the Third World is generally more emiserated, the rich add to their billions, while the liberal middle is squeezed as jobs disappear, wages fall, and welfare programmes are cut back or withdrawn. If we see Salgado's pictures from a purely liberal point of view as the plea for a return to human decency—and, as we have seen, they are partly that—we run up against the more specific charge of his work, apparent in its detail and organization: that any such change cannot be back towards a liberal past based on the same exploitation, gentle only to those born in the right place to the right parents.

If a more radical change can only barely be expressed, or only in oblique or old-fashioned language (or, to look at the other end of the spectrum, in a language which constantly eats its own words), this highlights many issues including the media monopoly, the dumb nature of photographic realism, the capacity of fine art (especially at its most impure) to envisage the unthinkable, and the difficulty of knowing how to respond to the quotidian horror of the present situation. And what of the religious references, where workers push towards some light or come bearing it? Perhaps they too share in a tentative striving towards some utopia, some material heaven, where people are permitted to fulfil their potential, and where the suffering of the past and present is remembered, and redress is offered.

The frame of the reception of these pictures is postmodern, and they make a limited accommodation to that situation in their recasting of various old and once living themes as marketable nostalgia—to name them once more: realism, Marxism and modernism. Yet, and there is a firm opposition here, these old themes are confronted with the immediate particularity of the now of the photograph, of these people's actual conditions at the moment the shutter fell. That latter charge is one which is slowly withdrawn over time, as the pictures cease to become news and start to become history, and in this lies the importance of Salgado's success being largely retrospective.

For the time being, while those representations of 1930s Limehouse have long since helped to create and settle our mental image of that time and place, the caption, 'Brazil,

Praise Famous Men, *Representations*, no. 24, Fall 1988, pp. 156-76. In Agee's lifetime the book sold only

1986' attached to the Serra Pelada pictures acts against cliché. In Salgado, we are faced with a radically different world, or two worlds rather, though they cannot be separated in purely geographical terms. The Second World having dropped out of existence, at least in Europe, the remaining two are in constant contact and dangerous separation. They live in many time frames, together spanning the processes from the birth of capitalist primitive accumulation to the latest forms of deindustrialization. Backward looking though it may be, and obsessed with expiry, Salgado's retro style nevertheless brings us to the present.

Even in campaigning works like *Terra*, the transition from image to action, from the clear representation of a particular situation, or even of a process, to action taken to change it, is something which relies on forces that far exceed photography or art alone. Nevertheless, Salgado is dangerous because, breaking with comfortable, convenient untruths, he begins to reveal an image of the operation of global capital—seeing it as a single system with its components, human and mechanical, placed on a large monochrome map. *Workers* challenges the old clichés about the Third World, of static, helpless, universally poor, rural and pre-industrial societies whose women are suppressed and homebound. *Terra* celebrates the actions of those people to liberate themselves from economic dependency, wage slavery and hunger. Working people's poverty and production is the source of the wealth of the minority, their fate may eventually become that of more and more people in the North; and this is precisely the danger of bringing the two halves together, even in the form of coffee-table books.

There is a curious passage in Galeano's essay for *An Uncertain Grace* where he notes that in Portuguese 'salgado' means 'salty'.⁹⁶ The meaning of this can only be understood by recalling the last pages of 'Seven Years After', a section added to Galeano's book, *Open Veins of Latin America*. Writing in 1978, when the dictatorships of Chile, Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil still held power, Galeano described the moribund system of economic dependency in those countries, enforced by arbitrary terror, designed to remake their citizens as automatons. The foe of these regimes, which must appear in the minds of the living as an inescapable and eternal destiny, is memory. So, writes Galeano, 'the zombie is made to eat without salt; salt is dangerous, it could awaken him.'⁹⁷

about six hundred copies. See Rosler, 'In, Around and Afterthoughts', p. 338.

⁹⁶ *An Uncertain Grace*, p. 11.

⁹⁷ Galeano, *Open Veins*, p. 308.