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New film: "Salt of the Earth"

Small photos on the big screen

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LIKE his best films, Wim Wenders's latest is a road movie. But this one, also a documentary, is conducted on a gargantuan scale. "Salt of the Earth" surveys the monumental work of Sebastião Salgado, a photographer specialising in depictions of humanity in extremis. Indeed, the title of Mr Wenders's science-fiction saga, "Until the End of the World", could apply to Mr Salgado's oeuvre, which spans Rwandan refugee camps, Mexican mountain villages and the man-made infernos of Kuwait's oil fires.

Mr Wenders approaches the Brazilian's work with the celebratory admiration familiar from films such as "Buena Vista Social Club", with its unstoppable, aged Cuban musicians, and "Pina", with its 3-D showcase of dance. "Salt of the Earth" is a super-album of Mr Salgado's photographs, which are given voice through his soul-stricken recollections and the director's sympathetic platitudes. Opening

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with Mr Salgado's Boschian vision of the gold mines in Serra Palada, Brazil, the stills have a stupefying effect.

That these are still photos in a motion picture takes nothing away from their force. Though capable of orchestrating thrilling motion, as he showed with the angel flight of "Wings of Desire", Mr Wenders knows when to stop and stare. Mr Salgado's photographs of human suffering contain sufficient drama; his chiaroscuro monochrome and operatic composition command the screen.

Mr Wenders does use one trick, though. At times he shows Mr Salgado talking and squinting directly into the camera, with his face seemingly super-imposed on one of the photographs. It's a ghostly effect that points to the biographical spine of the film. Mr Salgado's projects bear witness to vast political and economic upheaval, most famously in "Workers" (1986-91) and "Exodus" (1993-99), but "Salt of the Earth" is primarily about his career path. It's even a family affair: the photographer's son, Juliano Ribeiro Salgado, co-directed with Mr Wenders and is seen tagging along with his father on a shoot; Mr Salgado's career is partly attributable to the efforts of his wife, Lélia.

This personal focus does not overly narrow the viewer's experience, because Mr Salgado dwells on the richness of his encounters in the field. He marvels at the trust shown by a starving baby, and the effortless composure of a remote Amazonian tribe. Perhaps he praises the humility and bravery of his subjects a bit too much, but it's hard to doubt that he has been deeply affected. He recounts how the ravages of war in Congo and Bosnia finally wore him out, and the admission brings with it a certain catharsis for the viewer.

Yet what follows sits uneasily with the panoramas of genocide that have just been shown. Like a dinner-party host changing the topic, Mr Wenders pivots to Mr Salgado's rejuvenation through the re-forestation of his family's ranch in Aimorés, Brazil. This is where the photographer founded the Instituto Terra and created a public park. His subsequent work, "Genesis", renders the wonders of nature rather than the horrors of man.

The uplifting conclusion lends the documentary a touch of artistic self-absorption, and also makes it feel more conventional. You don't have to agree with Susan Sontag's assessment of Mr Salgado as "a photographer who specialises in world misery" to feel uneasy about this save-the-planet ending. The environmentalist optimism comes minutes after Mr Salgado has forlornly described how he lost his belief in salvation for the human species.

Il faut cultiver notre jardin, perhaps, but some deeper reckoning of Mr Salgado's work by Mr Wenders would enrich the film. Michael Glawogger, whose hypervivid portraiture owes a debt to Mr Salgado, made the laying bare of power dynamics part of his documentaries. Without that kind of effort, "Salt of the Earth" threatens to feel like a simple tour of Mr Salgado's work, with a clear beginning and a reassuring exit. Astounding photos of difficult, emotional events become memorials from a world that can be safely left behind.

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Even Mr Salgado, who was trained as an economist, describes mankind's struggles as "an endless story". Mr Wenders, meanwhile, apparently needed a break after all this: his next project was a 3-D drama starring James Franco, titled "Every Thing Will Be Fine".