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The Boston Globe

Combining two perspectives in "Salt of the Earth"

SEBASTIÃO SALGADO/AMAZONAS IMAGES/SONY PICTURES CLASSICS (TOP); THIERRY POUFFARY/AMAZONAS IMAGES/SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

"The Salt of the Earth."

By Christopher Wallenberg

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NEW YORK — Juliano Ribeiro Salgado and Wim Wenders were nearly ready to come to blows. They were in the middle of editing their documentary film, "The Salt of the

Earth," about Salgado's father, the celebrated Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado, and the process had become a minefield of ego and pride.

At first, they hoped their combined perspectives would make for a richer film that would reveal new and unexpected facets of a man they both greatly admired, who spent decades photographing the ravages of famine, war, and refugee crises in Africa and the plight of manual laborers. They'd bonded over their love of soccer, filmmaking, and a mutual admiration for Sebastião's deeply empathetic, black-and-white images that called worldwide attention to the suffering of people across the globe.

THIERRY POUFFARY/AMAZONAS IMAGES/SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

From near right: Wim Wenders, Juliano Ribeiro Salgado, and Sebastião Salgado.

But the two men had shot most of their footage for the documentary separately — Juliano traveling with his father on several expeditions to remote corners of the planet and Wenders, the maverick German director of "Paris, Texas" and "Wings of Desire," interviewing Sebastião about his life and work. So when they began piecing together their initial edits for "Salt of the Earth," which opens in the Boston area on Friday, they had vastly different visions for the material.

"We were ready to give it up, because we couldn't figure out how to combine our footage," said the director after a March screening of "Salt of the Earth" at the Museum of Modern Art. "And we fought to the bone. We really almost fought physically."

Wenders, who's become as well-regarded for his documentaries ("Buena Vista Social Club," "Pina") as he is for his narrative features, can be fiercely stubborn and combative, says Juliano. "I'll gladly admit to that," the 69-year-old director acknowledges, with a sly smile.

After editing their own versions of the film separately and going back and forth trying to hash out a finished product, they realized they had to change methods. Their solution was to work alongside each other in the editing suite and assemble the film together, from scratch.

"That was very difficult, because it was an exercise in accepting and letting go, but also defending your most important ideas. And at some point, we just synchronized, and there were no battles anymore. We were just doing this film together," said Juliano, in a phone interview from Austin, Texas, where he was attending the South by Southwest Film Festival. "It was quite crazy because we had a year of fierce fighting when it was really terrible. Then suddenly, we sat together and things got easy, and we finished the movie in a few months."

Sebastião's photography, Wenders said, had always been "based on the belief that he could give a voice to people who were treated as worthless and that being a witness mattered. It was built on the optimism that he could be instrumental in changing things.

"But it came to a grinding halt for him when he went through the experience of the [1994] Rwandan genocide and realized his photos were not changing anything anymore. He was just a bystander, and he couldn't take it. That's when he put his camera down and never picked it up again as a social photographer."

His experiences left him psychologically scarred. So he and his wife, Lélia, who was instrumental in developing and managing her husband's career, moved back to his small Brazilian hometown to try to re-cultivate his father's barren cattle farm, which had been devastated by deforestation. They planted a few thousand trees, and over time the once drought-stricken ground became transformed into a lush green paradise. The Salgados founded the Terra Institute, an ecological organization dedicated to sustainable

development, and spearheaded a program to plant millions more trees in the surrounding valley.

“It was miraculous that at the darkest hour of his life, when he lost his faith in humanity, he found healing in a place he did not expect. And out of that came a whole different person and a whole different photographer and whole different interest in the world,” said Wenders, who first became a fan after seeing Sebastião’s otherworldly photographs of a Brazilian gold mine teeming with thousands of people hoping for a windfall.

Finding fresh inspiration in the natural world, Sebastião picked up his camera again and embarked on a new project, “Genesis,” to capture the many corners of the globe unspoiled by human development.

“A man who had photographed every human atrocity on the planet started to turn around and photograph everything beautiful in the natural world,” Wenders said. “And that transformation became what we slowly realized was the arc of the film.”

“Salt of the Earth,” which earned an Oscar nomination for best documentary, also provided a healing balm for father and son. Their relationship had become strained and difficult since Juliano, now 41, first began navigating adulthood.

“I think that’s what happens with a lot of young men and their fathers. How do you deal with each other as two adults?” said Juliano, whose first documentary, made when he was just 22, was about the use of anti-personnel mines in Angola. “When I think of it now, the distance between us had to do with the fact that he’d been away so much during my childhood and that somehow I must have held a grudge against him. But I never formulated it like that before. I was just angry.”

Their relationship first began to shift after Sebastião invited his son to accompany him on trips to photograph isolated tribes in remote areas of Amazonia and Papua New Guinea as part of his work on “Genesis.” Initially, Juliano worried their dynamic would be akin to director Werner Herzog’s infamously explosive battles with actor Klaus Kinski during the making of “Fitzcarraldo” and “Aguirre: the Wrath of God” in the South American jungles. Instead, the tranquility of the Amazon’s Zo’é tribe dissipated any

tension between father and son. When they returned home, Juliano showed his dad the footage he shot.

“Sebastião was very touched to see the way I was filming him and how I saw him. . . . His eyes filled with tears, and he couldn’t speak anymore. I understand Sebastião so much better now, and I realized it was finally a good time to make a film about him.”

Unlike many news or war photographers, Sebastião was able to cultivate an intimate rapport with his subjects after spending long periods of time with them. So his silvery, sculptural images are suffused with a dignity and grace for the people he’s capturing, serving as a counterpoint to the often impossible conditions they’re forced to endure.

Juliano believes that his father’s deep well of empathy can be traced to his own poverty-stricken upbringing. Not everyone, though, was a fan. Cultural critics Susan Sontag and Ingrid Sichy, among others, argued that Sebastião’s photographs aestheticized human tragedy, distancing the viewer from the image and diminishing the suffering and destruction. Juliano respectfully disagrees.

“When you are able to achieve a more intimate perspective, you can break that distance,” he said. “I think the power of Sebastião’s photos, but also sometimes what’s disturbing about them, is that you can’t really protect yourself as a viewer. The people in his photographs, we see them not as an illustration of a tragedy that’s happening in the world that we should know about but as human beings.”