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BLACKBOOK

# Wim Wenders and Juliano Ribeiro Salgado on Capturing 'The Salt of the Earth'

Speaking with filmmakers Wim Wenders and Juliano Salgado about their Oscar-nominated documentary, its rocky collaborative beginnings, the injustice of aestheticizing misery, and their necessary radical approach.



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"My reason from the beginning, and why I made this, is that I like something so much and want to share it with other people. That, in the end, is the basic drive," says iconic German filmmaker **Wim Wenders** when speaking to me about his Academy Award-nominated documentary *Salt of the Earth*. As an essential presence in cinema for nearly a half-century, in recent years it's Wenders' documentary features—such as 2011's *Pina*—that have begun garnering as much acclaim as his incredible body of narrative films. Whether it's his Palme d'Or-winning masterpiece of endless longing *Paris, Texas*, his an existential poem of morality *Wings of Desire*, or an innovative ode to Pina Bausch with *Pina*, Wenders' films possess a melancholy and emotional undercurrent that stems from his complex passion for his subjects.

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With *The Salt of the Earth*, Wenders collaborated with filmmaker **Juliano Ribeiro Salgado** to investigate the life and work of his father, acclaimed photographer **Sebastião Salgado**. For over four decades, Sebastião has been traveling the world on an artistic and anthropological mission to capture the ever-changing face of humanity. Through his beguiling black-and-white photos, featured in his countless photo series and books, he has witnessed many of the major historical world events of the last 50 years—his journey as a

photographer and the experiences he's endured on his travels as harrowing and emotionally devastating as they have been rewarding. Now in a new period of his ever-evolving career, Sebastião is embarking on an epic project to re-discover nature's beauty across the globe, and to restore the land on which he was raised in Brazil.

Composed of Sebastião's photographic work, his expeditions into some of the most undiscovered locations in the world, and intimate meditations on his emotional and artistic experience, *The Salt of the Earth* beautifully merges Wenders and Juliano's sensibilities as filmmakers. Visually-stunning in its own right, we're given, not only a look at Sebastião's staggering work, but a portrait of the man behind the images and strength in which it took to make them come to life.

A few months back, I sat down with Wenders and Juliano to discuss their rocky collaborative beginnings, the injustice of aestheticizing misery, and their necessary radical approach.

**Juliano, how and why did you decide upon this project as your next film? Did you have any reservations about making a film about your father and penetrating the artistic space between the two of you?**

**Juliano Ribeiro Salgado:** That's the most difficult question you could ask, actually. I didn't want to make a film about my father, I thought it was too early to actually get there. But there was a succession of happy events that led to making the film. In 2009 Wim came through with some Italian friends and my father called me and told me, "Guess who's coming to dinner?"

**Wim Wenders:** Yes, it all started when I met Sebastião in 2009. These Italian friends of mine knew him, and I told them it was a crying shame that for a long time he had been my favorite photographer yet we had never met. So I asked them if they could make a connection. When we met, there was no thought of a movie, it was strictly to get to know each other. [turns to Juliano] Then I met you at this dinner. Father and son had a project going and Father and German friend were about to eventually have a project going, and then we threw all our cards together. We just tried to make our lies match. We have different recollections of how it all started.

**I take it you knew of Wim's work before to meeting him.**

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**JRS:** Of course, he's an amazing filmmaker. His films have marked me very strongly—*Alice in the Cities*, *The State of Things*, *Wings of Desire*, *Paris, Texas*, and *Pina*. Not only is he a great filmmaker, but he's one of the great documentary filmmakers as well. So I wanted to do something with Sebastião, but at the time I felt it was a bit dangerous for me to get that close to my dad. We went to Brazil together and I was following him as he was doing one of his Genesis projects. I really didn't want to go, because I thought it would just be him and I and something would go wrong, but I filmed him and things were actually quite nice. When I came back I showed him the footage I'd edited and he was very touched. Something started happening through those images, so I traveled with him again.

## **How did you collaborate while shooting and merge your footage?**

**WW:** We didn't.

**JRS:** Well we did, but that was four years after that meeting.

**WW:** It was four years because we never shot together. He did his shoot mostly in remote places and I did my shoot in Paris and Brazil over the years.

**JRS:** Sometimes we shot in Brazil at the same time but with a different crew. However, we had an intuition in common. So what really made the bond or the link between us was the common idea that the stories Sebastião tells in the film, when he comes back from his trips, they had a very powerful message. Also, there was something to transmit from those stories about his experience that was unique. Although we didn't know how we were going to shoot it, there was this idea that those stories, mixed with the photography, was a very important thing to share and it could be very powerful cinematic material—the sounds, the voice, those images, all subjective. So we started with this idea and we had a faint idea of what the general story would be, but it really all happened between the edits and the shoots.

## **Did the film's structure come about as it went along or did that happen in the editing process?**

**WW:** We didn't have a structure; we both shot as much as he could. Each of his shoots had a structure in itself because of where they traveled, but combined with my shoots, it didn't make a movie. There wasn't an arc and it didn't have dramaturgy, so we only started to make a movie together when we were editing and realized we'd never make a common movie that way. With his material and mine it would never be a movie unless we took a radical approach.

**JRS:** It was actually really difficult to share and sit together and decide on the cuts and the content. It's quite unusual, as a director, you never have someone that's doing exactly the same thing. It took us a year.

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**WW:** And you don't want anyone else to tell you where to cut. We didn't get along for a while, then we realized if we could possibly get along we would make a much better movie than each of us could do alone.

**Wim, can you tell me about the first time you came across Sebastião's work and why it moved you so strongly?**

**WW:** Rewind to the late 80's. I didn't know the name Salgado, and I didn't know his work. I lived in Los Angeles and walked by this gallery on La Brea Avenue, saw these photographs in the window, and went straight in. These were pictures from the Goldmine series. They were in the window of the gallery, and I went inside and saw the whole series. As it was a commercial gallery, I decided to buy one. It took me a while to decide because they were all fabulous, and this photographer was really something. I thought he must have been a great adventurer because you don't make a series like this in a place that insane if not. So then I bought this print and as I was about to leave, the gallerist got cocky and told me there were more pictures of his and pulled another series from the drawer. Those were pictures from very different scenery with a very different subject.

Shooting in the goldmine was adventurous, but the subjects in those photographs were there on their own free will. It was wild, it was the wild west in Brazil. But these other pictures were from a very different place and from a humane mission to report on the famine. This series touched me even more than the Goldmine series and I walked out of the gallery with two prints—which was far more than I could have possibly spent, but I wanted these two pictures and have lived with them in my room ever since. I hung them right away and for a while those were the only two pictures I had hanging in my work room. They traveled with me whenever I moved. From then on I made sure I knew all his books and exhibitions. I actually almost met him once in Brazil in the 90's. There was a rumor that he was somewhere and I was in Brazil at the time, so I made an effort but as it turned out he had already left again.

**JRS:** When you go to Wim's place in Berlin, the first thing you see in his office is actually the photo of that lady in Sahel

**WW:** She's traveled with me for a long time.

**In your documentaries, the subjects that you choose are other artists, those whose work has hit you in a very visceral way. Would you say what compels you to make these films is a desire to explore the depths of the work of someone you admire, as well as to understand just why they've affected you so?**

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**WW:** There are a lot of reasons to make a documentary, and for a lot of people, it's because they don't agree with something or they want to shed light on an issue that needs attention. Sometimes it's criticism, which is an important reason to want to make a documentary, but my reason from the beginning, and why I made this, is that I like something so much and want to share it with other people. That, in the end, is the basic drive. That's why I went to Cuba for Buena Vista or Tokyo to meet Yohji or Wuppertal to shoot with Pina and Paris for Sebastião. I want to spread a virus that caught me, these good viruses. I seriously think the last great adventure left on this earth is the adventure of creation more than anything else. I'm very curious how other people in different professions get there and how they have their creative adventure.

**Juliano, your mother has always been a tremendous driving force in your father's work yet is considerably less known. Was it important for you to honor that and show her influence?**

**JRS:** There are two things. One is that my parents really shared a lot of their decisions together, as we say in the film. They shared life decisions and artistic decisions—how to conceptualize the work, what photos to choose, etc. She designs the books, chooses the sequences for the books, but also the exhibits. There's also all the things we don't speak about in the movie, like Sebastião not being there for a long time, but she was always there, and she's really the center point for all this family story. So she was very, very important, but usually people don't want to know about her because they only want to know about who took the photos. So it was very important for us to bring her back into the picture and make her part of the story, which is only fair.

**After all, it was with her camera that he took his first photo.**

**JRS:** Yeah, he took her camera and never gave it back.

**How did you both go about sorting through Sebastião's entire lifetime of work and settling on the series and photographs you wanted to expound upon?**

**JRS:** We had two shoots. There was Wim speaking with Sebastião about all the books, and then the second shoot was more specific—and that's when Wim had the great idea of bringing Sebastião behind the teleprompter and isolating him from the rest of the crew and just showing the photos. We had to select a number of reportage that would tell his story, so at this moment there had already been a time when we had to choose the photos that were significant enough. It was a lot of pictures that were very tough and a lot of moments that were very difficult, but we didn't want to have a naive point of view of the work. Sebastião had seen the work for what it is and it's very important to show that experience fully.

**How did he feel about revisiting these photographs and delving back into some of his most painful memories?**

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**WW:** I worked with him mainly in Paris. We did these interviews, slowly covering the entire range of his work for a couple of weeks, and they were done conventionally. But in these two weeks, I realized that he was a great storyteller and was much better when he forgot I was there, when he forgot the cameras were there, and when he was really in his memory. This obviously wasn't the first time he'd told these stories in his life, and somehow with this conventional method, it was less impressive than when he'd forget we were all there and it would be very intense. So I kept thinking about how we could get more to the core of that and how I can get him to forget talking to me and the camera, how he could enter his own past and the photos more purely and have a rapport with the audience instead of me and the camera.

Then one night, I don't know how I came up with it, but I thought of the teleprompter, or a reformed teleprompter where there was not text on it but photographs. The beauty of the teleprompter is that it is invisible, so Sebastião only saw his own images and he was in a dark room. He did not see the camera, he did not see another person, and I could operate the photographs from behind a computer. So together with Juliano, we made a selection. We realized we couldn't do another round with every photo, as I knew everything from the first passage, now we had a more concentrated approach.

**Seeing the photos on their own, one usually identifies with the subject, feeling the emotion they're portraying and reacting to the subject's experience. However, your film explores something we don't usually see, which is how affected the person taking the photo is—was that an idea that intrigued you?**

**WW:** That is an important argument, because you might know, Sebastião, for his entire life, has had to fight the reproach that he was aestheticizing misery. So if you work with him and you present him with his work, you realize that not even for a single second does he talk about aesthetics, framing, or beauty. He strictly talks about the people—that's his only interest. He's identifies incredibly with them, so you find a complete lack of any aesthetic intention. It comes out of him, and he has, of course, the experience and it's built into his blood, but he's not driven by it at all. That's when you realize how bloody wrong and how intellectually wrong the approach of aestheticizing misery really is; it is out of the minds of people who cannot identify with other people and that's their problem.

**JRS:** Sebastião real talent is not the black and white or the compositions, it's, as Wim said, spending a lot of time with the people. He has relationships and friendships with these people, he feels their hope or hopelessness, and he can sense when something is funny or scary. Whatever way he's feeling in the much more complex emotional palette, he's capable of putting the camera on that. When you see the photo, you see what he's seeing most of the time. They're beautiful, and there is a real bond, so that's what you're seeing in these people—his admiration or empathy.

**Coming into the film, where you interested in exploring the father/son aspect of the story?**

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**WW:** No, because it was really their own subject. I saw it, I watched it, and sometimes felt it was good that I was there as a third person present to keep them from digging too deep into the father son relationship. In a strange way it was a whole issue on its own. There are some movies like *My Architect*, but it very quickly becomes the central thing, and from the beginning we realized and agreed that it shouldn't be the focus. Being the son gave him different access and a different point of view for his father, but we all thought it shouldn't become a driving force behind the film. It was good that I was sometimes there because the two of them could have gotten lost in father / son issues, which any father and son would get any time they work on something.

**JRS:** My relationship with Sebastião actually changed after the making of the film, and it came through the presence of a third person and the fact that Wim was here and that he had shot all of these scenes where Sebastião is telling his story. When we edited the four hour long cut, seeing rough of the rough cut of all those interviews and watching him understanding all those things he went through, something clicked at that point. When we met again we were at a different stage of our relationship and we became friends. So somehow, for me, Wim's presence was so necessary.