

Sebastião Salgado: Ways of Seeing Latin America

John Mraz

Sebastião Salgado has become a legend of photojournalism. Born in Brazil to middle-class parents, he was educated as an economist and worked briefly for the Ministry of Finance, but left his homeland in 1969 because of his involvement in the student struggle against the military dictatorship. He relocated in Paris, where he did coursework for a PhD in economics between 1969 and 1971, a time during which he discovered photography thanks to a camera his wife, Léila Wanick, had bought for her studies in architecture. Employed by the International Coffee Organization based in London, he began to take photographs on his numerous trips to Africa while investigating the diversification of coffee plantations, and he was hooked irrevocably: 'When I came back to London, the pictures gave me ten times more pleasure than the economic reports I had to write'.¹ He wrestled with a career decision for a couple of years, and finally left his job to dedicate himself to photography. He started as a freelance photojournalist for Sigma and Gamma, eventually entering Magnum, the most prestigious agency, and home base for such greats as Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Eugene Smith, to mention only a few. In 1994, he left Magnum, and formed Amazonas Images. Aside from the ubiquitous appearance of his pictures in magazines and newspapers, he has published books of significant distribution, mounted photographic exhibitions as expansive as they are important, and received recognition commensurate with his production.²

Though he has covered wars in Angola and the Spanish Sahara, Israeli hostages in Entebbe, burning oil wells in Kuwait, and the attempted assassination of Ronald Reagan, Salgado is best known for his long-term documentary projects on hunger, workers and migrants around the world. Despite the wide net he has cast, Latin America has been a touchstone for him, and he would argue that he has always perceived, and pictured, through Latin American eyes: 'Finally, you photograph with all of you. I come from an underdeveloped country where the social problems are very strong. And so it's inevitable that my photos reflect

1. 'Sebastião Salgado, A Lecture', ed. Stephen Perloff, *Photo Review*, 16, 4, Fall 1993, p 3.

2. For a listing of Salgado's awards as of 1995, see Amanda Hopkinson, 'Sebastião Salgado', in *Contemporary Photographers*, ed. Martin Marix Evans, New York, 1995, p 991. Since that time, his accolades have included the 1998 Legend Award, one of the Alfred Eisenstaedt Awards that *Life* gives annually (see *Life*, 21, 5, May 1998, p 154).

3. Jonathon Cott, 'Sebasti o Salgado, The *Rolling Stone* Interview', *Rolling Stone*, 619-620, 12-26 December 1991.
4. Subsequent references to photos and their page numbers will be in relation to the English version, Sebastião Salgado, *Other Americas*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1986.
5. *Sahel: L'Homme en Détresse*, Prisma Presse, Sainte-Genevieve, 1986.
6. *Workers, An Archeology of the Industrial Age*, Aperture, New York, 1993.
7. *Migrations, Humanity in Transition*, Aperture, New York, 2000. A significant part of *Migrations* deals with Latin America, and will be considered below.
8. Sebastião Salgado, *Terra, Struggle of the Landless*, Phaidon Press, London, 1997. The profits from *Terra* are donated to the *Sem Terra* movement.
9. An earlier version of this article appeared as 'Sebastião Salgado's Latin America' in *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe*, 9:1, Tel Aviv, 1998, in an issue dedicated to 'Visual Culture in Latin America'. The title I have chosen here is an intentional tribute to the lovely, path-breaking work by John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Viking, New York, 1972. Among the better essays on Salgado are Julian Stallabrass, 'Sebastião Salgado and Fine Art Photojournalism', *New Left Review*, 223, 1997, and Ingrid Sischy, 'Photography, Good Intentions', *New Yorker*, 9 September 1991 (reprinted in *Illuminations, Women Writing on Photography from the 1850s to the Present*, eds Liz Heron and Vall Williams, I. B. Tauris, London, 1996). For a Latin American

that.... I think there is a Latin American way of seeing the world. And it's something you can't teach, because it's just a part of you'.³ He began making images of Latin America during 1977, and his first book, *Other Americas*, focused on this area, appearing simultaneously in English, French and Spanish during 1986.⁴ The hunger he observed in Northeast Brazil moved him to later return to photographing famine in the Sahel region of Africa (where he had initiated his photojournalist career in 1973 by covering the region's drought), and in 1984-85 he collaborated with the French group, Médecins sans frontières, to produce the book, *Sahel: L'Homme en Détresse*.⁵ From 1986 to 1992, he dedicated himself to photographing labour around the world, an undertaking that resulted in a huge exhibit and a large book, both entitled *Workers*.⁶ In 1993, he turned his cameras on the plight of refugees and migrants, producing the enormous exhibition and book, *Migrations*, published and exhibited in 2000.⁷ While working on these international projects, he has not neglected Latin America: Salgado became actively involved with the *Sem-Terra* movement, the revolt of Brazil's dispossessed peasants, a commitment which resulted in his second book on this region, *Terra: Struggle of the Landless*.⁸

While Salgado's imagery has provided much grist for the mills of intellectuals and critics, they have rarely singled out his representation of Latin America, and its transformation over time.⁹ Reflecting on how Salgado has depicted his homeland offers a unique opportunity to examine the ways in which a first-class image-maker from this area chooses to picture the community from which he has sprung. Here, I will highlight his characterisation of Latin Americans by contrasting their portrayal in *Other Americas*, *Terra* and *Migrations*, for I believe that a major shift of tone and emphasis occurs in the trajectory of these works. I will also compare his forms of imaging his native land with that of selected Mexican photographers such as Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Nacho López, Héctor García, and what I have described as the New Photojournalists.¹⁰ Overlapping these divergent visions will enable us to silhouette different ways in which this area has been, and can be, represented.

Salgado spent seven years (1977-84) roaming about in Latin America to produce what he has described as 'a meditative exploration of peasant cultures and cultural resistance'.¹¹ His good intentions notwithstanding, the overwhelming impression left by Salgado's photographs in *Other Americas* is that all is sadness, misery and doom. Hand in hand with this focus on the tragic is a dominant tone of mystery. Everything is enveloped in an incomprehensible and inexplicable delitescence that makes *enigmatic* the hunger, poverty and death that appear in this book. Evidently, these social cancers are not the result of the area's tremendous class differences, because these are not documented in the book's photographs. Neither are they the product of living in overpopulated and dirty mega-cities that lack minimal services, for these ever-expanding slums do not appear either. The urban workers and their families that live and labour in the metropolises – and which today constitute the majority of the population – are absent in Salgado's *Other Americas*.¹² Rather, by aiming his camera at rural cultures, he asserted that these problems are simply part of the landscape. What is the meaning of this focus?

perspective, see Eduardo Galeano, 'Salgado, 17 Times', *An Uncertain Grace*, Aperture, New York, 1990. Naomi Rosenblum published a perceptive review of *Other Americas* in *Aperture*, 109, Winter 1987.

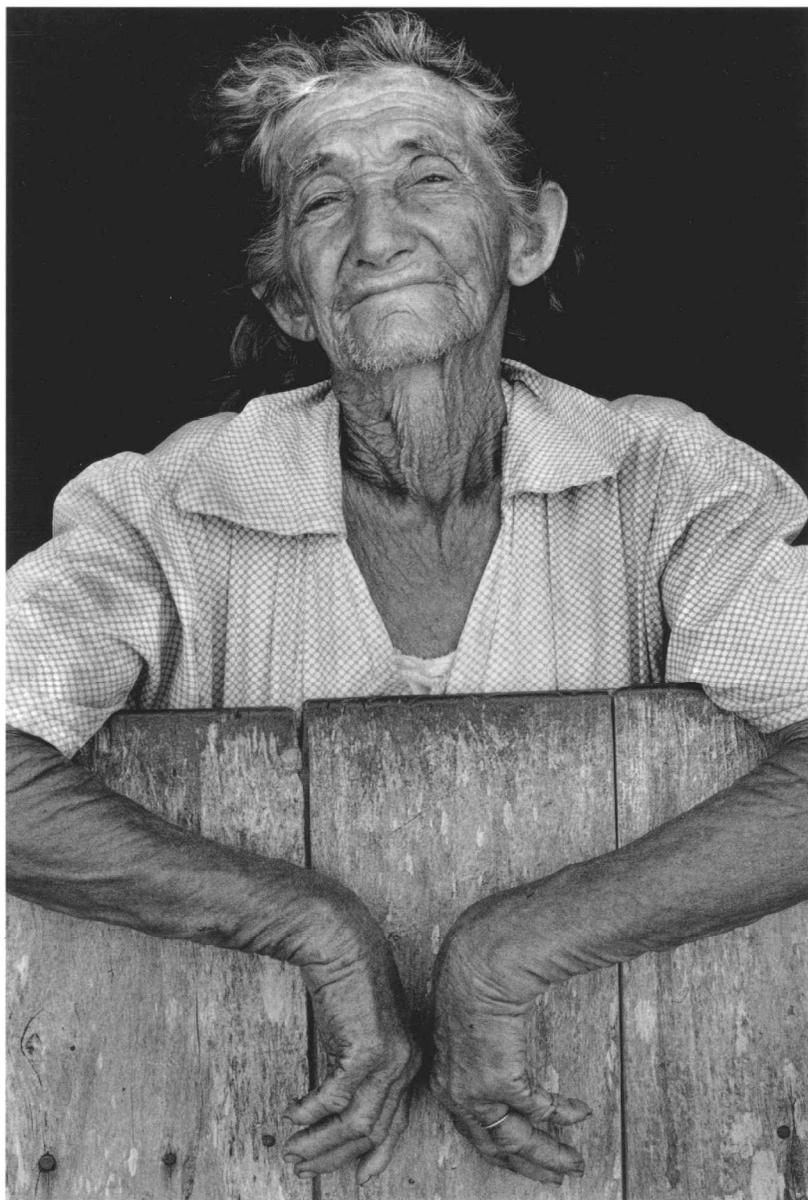
10. On the New Photojournalists, see John Mraz, 'Mexico, The New Photojournalism', *History of Photography*, 22, 4, Winter 1998.
11. This quote is taken from the biography on his website: www.terra.com.br
12. Salgado has claimed, 'I spent about six years doing this work...in the mountains of Latin America, never in cities, because it was forbidden for me to go back to Brazil', Perloff, 'Sebasti o Salgado: A Lecture', op. cit., p 3. Nonetheless, this argument is disingenuous, for he was certainly not forbidden to photograph in Mexico City, for example.
13. I have discussed the poles of picturesque and anti-picturesque photography in *Envisioning Mexico, Photography and National Identity*, Working Paper No. 32, Duke-University of North Carolina Program in Latin American Studies, 2000.
14. *Other Americas*, pp 44–5, 62–3; 74–5; 66–7.
15. *Other Americas*, pp 26–7. In *An Uncertain Grace* we find out that the photo was taken during Carnival, something which makes the man's expression even more difficult to understand.
16. *Other Americas*, pp 68–9; *Terra*, p 27.
17. *Other Americas*, p 106–107.
18. Robert Frank is a Swiss photographer who published *The Americans* in 1958 (Paris) and 1959 (New York).

The most immediate and important connotation is that these problems are *natural* to Latin Americans, rooted in their most traditional forms of being. When Salgado was producing *Other Americas*, I do not think he really believed that this region's misery is the product of nature rather than historical forces such as dependent capitalism, imperialism and neo-liberalism. Rather, I am tempted to opine that he fell into a trap common among Latin Americans who feel they must represent their homeland in the picturesque, even grotesque, terms that often form the accepted discourse in the developed countries for talking about the Third World – a tendency which has been evident in many representations of Mexico from the 1920s up to today.¹³ In *Other Americas*, Salgado gave his consumers in Europe and the USA what they expect and want, just as did the first really successful vendors of this visual stereotype: the Mexican film director, Emilio 'El Indio' Fernández, and his cinematographer, Gabriel Figueroa, whose movies – peopled by strange little Indians in white pyjamas, *charros* (cowboys) on horseback under wide sombreros, and peasant women wrapped in exotic shawls – began to catch the eyes of judges in foreign film festivals some sixty years ago.

However, in *Other Americas*, Salgado took it a step further by linking alienation to peasant cultures. Sadness, misery, death and enigma are omnipresent in the content of his images, but estrangement is conveyed essentially through formal structures: beams and shadows separate individuals from one another, windows and doors divide people rather than communicate them, gazes cross but do not meet.¹⁴ From whence such alienation? We commonly associate it with industrialisation and urbanisation, with the mechanisation of life, but Salgado largely ignored modern Latin America in this book, focusing instead on rural life. In this way, he could sell to the developed world the estrangement it knows so well, but with the interesting touch of dressing it in exotic clothing and setting it against picturesque backdrops. The Europeans and 'Americans' who buy his published imagery would have little interest in photographs of Latin America's industrial proletariat, for they know them only too well in their own societies. But the alienation of individuals who embody an 'Orientalist' otherness is evidently a horse of a decidedly different colour.

A Bolivian father is hugged by his daughters: why does he look so surly and resentful as he returns the camera's gaze out of the corner of his eye?¹⁵ People are gathered for a wedding feast in Brazil: why are they so overwhelmingly dour?¹⁶ An Ecuadorian couple hold a furry white puppy and a tiny bird in their arms; the beclouded mountains behind form a backdrop: what makes them appear so anguished, so distressed, so exhausted?¹⁷ I cannot help but wonder if his creation of 'Other' Americas was not, in part, an attempt to apply the existential aesthetic of Robert Frank's *The Americans* to Latin America.¹⁸ Frank's portrayal of the United States as a harsh, sad and alienated culture was a vision of that culture not seen before its publication in the late 1950s, and he is considered to have virtually redefined US photography in this famous work, which has been reprinted many times. It would not be unusual that Salgado found inspiration there for constructing the visage of *Other Americas*.

T E R R A



SEBASTIÃO SALGADO



PHAIDON

Sebastião Salgado, *Terra: Struggle of the landless*, Phaidon Press, London, 1997.

Comparing the representation of particular themes in *Other Americas* with their treatment by Mexican photographers will enable us to distinguish certain differences of emphasis. For example, Salgado is obsessed with death: it is sometimes grotesque – a Brazilian man straddles a grave in which a woman's body lies without coffin;¹⁹ at other times it is pure anguish – Mexican women weep at a funeral;²⁰ often it is enigmatic – a Peruvian Indian makes an incomprehensible gesture in a desert cemetery;²¹ and it can also evidence estrangement – Brazilians are posed so that they are standing on separate tombs, thus emphasising their separation from one another.²² A reflection of its ubiquity, death has been an important subject for Mexican artists, and cultural expressions of great richness have arisen around it, such as José Guadalupe Posada's famous lithographs of *calaveras*. Frida Hartz, for one, captured death's inconsolability in her photo of Mexican widows of *campesinos* who were killed for insisting on their rights.²³ However, in *Other Americas*, Salgado did not seem to recognise that death, above all in a context where so many die for economic reasons, is part of life.²⁴ But, if death is not necessarily to be celebrated, you can at least laugh in its face, as did Nacho López in his image of a man, a smile barely visible, who is being measured in front of a coffin shop.²⁵ Another option is the sort of droll commentary for which Manuel Alvarez Bravo is justifiably famous: In 'Signal, Teotihuacan', girls stand as if transfixed, apparently staring at a large advertisement painted on the wall for a local funeral home. Between the words 'CAJAS' and 'MORTUARIAS' a black hand with an extended finger indicates where caskets can be acquired, and seems to point the way to the great beyond.²⁶ A watch around the hand's wrist could serve as a macabre reminder of the time we all have left, but for the fact that it is ridiculously tiny, as if a man were wearing a woman's timepiece. One girl seems to catch her breath in the face of mortality, her hand raised to her mouth, and two – ghostlike because of their movement – appear to be already on the way to the Promised Land.

The insistence displayed in *Other Americas* on documenting the futility of solace in Latin America is manifest in an image of All Saints' Day (*Día de los Muertos*). Taken in a Mexican graveyard, the opaque, misty tone creates a veiled and inscrutable image in which a dog dominates the foreground, while the people are lost in the fog behind.²⁷ Though the presence of a dog in a cemetery may be shocking to US sensibilities, there is nothing mysterious about it on All Saints' Day, a time when the families gather to clean the graves and reunite with their departed loved ones. Thus, *Día de los Muertos* is essentially the opposite of what Salgado represented in this image, and this can be seen clearly by comparing it with the many photos by Alvarez Bravo, Nacho López or the Hermanos Mayo of families joined together in graveyards on this date. The lively spirit of this celebration, its gay challenge of mortality, is well represented in pictures such as Alvarez Bravo's smiling girl who holds a sugar skull in her hands, the word AMOR written across the forehead.²⁸

The *Other Americas'* infatuation with demise and despondency can be seen in the Brazilian children who lie on a floor, playing with animal bones.²⁹ Here, while alluding to death, Salgado also emphasises the evident poverty in the absence of 'real' toys. The photo's psychological

19. *Other Americas*, p 31; *Terra*, p 61.

20. *Other Americas*, pp 38–9.

21. *Other Americas*, p 101.

22. *Other Americas*, pp 70–1. Another view of this scene appears in *Terra*, pp 72–3.

23. *Fotografía de prensa en México, 40 reporteros gráficos*, Procuraduría General de la República, Mexico City, 1992, p 75.

24. In his 1991 interview by Jonathon Cott, Salgado says explicitly, 'Remember, I come from a place where death is a part of life'. Jonathon Cott, 'Sebasti o Salgado, The Rolling Stone Interview', op. cit., 6.

25. See the cover of *History of Photography*, 20, 3, Autumn 1996.

26. Susan Kismaric, *Manuel Alvarez Bravo*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1997, p 203.

27. *Other Americas*, 42–3.

28. Kismaric, op. cit., p 97.

29. *Other Americas*, p 94–95; *Terra*, p 6–7. Another view of this scene appears in *Terra*, p 67.

tone is set by the solemn expressions on the children's faces and their prostration on the floor. In capturing this scene from above, Salgado makes his message clear: What response other than resignation is possible in the face of such misery? Nacho López's photo of poor children playing with a rat provides one answer.³⁰ There we see children trapped in one of Mexico City's poorest neighbourhoods, also without toys and reduced to finding them where they can; in this case, a rat becomes their plaything. López denounces this situation, but refuses to remain fixated on how depressing it is. The image exposes the precarious sanitary conditions in the slum and demonstrates the children's poverty, but it also shows how creativity can flower in the midst of want. Moreover, López emphasises the children's initiative through two formal strategies: on the one hand, the low angle chosen by the photographer gives the kids power in the frame instead of peering down on them from on high; on the other, the children interact with López, and look at the camera.

The death of animals in *Other Americas* is charged with inexplicable affliction. A Mexican boy stands next to a goat that has been killed, skinned and hung to a tree.³¹ A rope sustains the goat's head – permitting the dead animal to return the camera's gaze – and holds one hoof up as if the animal were signalling mysteriously. Next to this morbid spectacle the boy stares fixedly, lips pursed, at the camera that looks down from above at the scene. Compare this image with Nacho López's chicken vendor, who totes a veritable mountain of dead fowl on his head, his face almost covered by their defeathered necks.³² Though López's image is startling, it is neither grotesque nor enigmatic; the *pollero* is simply transporting his merchandise in order to sell it. Moreover, this image demonstrates the touch of ironic humour that infused López's documenting of the inherently surreal juxtapositions that so often present themselves in Mexico.

In *Other Americas*, even the Latin American landscape is anguished. Cactus, for instance, is a plant that has often served as a vehicle for photographers' reflections on Mexico and *mexicanidad*. In Salgado's image, an agave isolates the Mexican children, who are photographed within the sharp points that seem to threaten and imprison them, a symbol for the quotidian pain of living in this part of the world.³³ This is not the connotation that Edward Weston gave to the century plant in images that portray it as a majestic and exuberant form.³⁴ Neither is it among the meanings which Alvarez Bravo has ascribed to this vegetation in his various explorations of this national symbol, perhaps most humorously when he 'modernised' an agave by making it appear as if the central flower stem that sprouts from these plants has been converted into a television antenna.³⁵ Salgado's rendering of cactus here lacks the critical complexity of Héctor García's photo, 'Crown of thorns'.³⁶ In García's image, a worker on a *henequen* plantation struggles under the heavy load of sisal he supports with a head band; by capturing the labourer at the moment in which the living plants in the background form a crown, García created a powerful metaphor of political and religious concatenations.

Does *Other Americas* offer any way out of the dispiriting discourse created by its images? Could politics or religion provide an answer to the oppression pictured in *Other Americas*? The book neglects both

30. See John Mraz, 'Nacho López, Photojournalist of the 1950s', *History of Photography*, 20, 3, p 214.

31. *Other Americas*, pp 48–9.

32. Nacho López, *Yo, el ciudadano*, Fondo de Cultura Económico, Mexico City, 1984, p 33.

33. *Other Americas*, pp 54–5.

34. See Amy Conger, *Edward Weston in Mexico, 1923–1926*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1983, p 62.

35. Jane Livingstone, *M. Alvarez Bravo*, Corcoran Gallery of Arts, Washington, DC, 1978, plate 77.

36. Héctor García, *Escribir con luz*, Fondo de Cultura Económico, Mexico City, 1984, p 63.

SEBASTIÃO SALGADO



An Uncertain Grace

Essays by Eduardo Galeano
and Fred Ritchin

Eduardo Galeano and Fred Ritchin, *An Uncertain Grace: Photographs by Sebastião Salgado*, Aperture, New York, 1990.

37. Salgado's comments can be found in 'Sebastião Salgado', an interview by Ken Lassiter, *Photographer's Forum*, September 1994, p 26.

38. William Shawcross and Francis Hodgson, 'Sebastião Salgado, Man in Distress', *Aperture*, No. 108, Fall 1987. David Levi Strauss remarks 'The sacred lies behind nearly every image' of Sahel, 'Epiphany of the Other', *Artforum*, 29, 6, February 1991, p 98. Julian Stallabrass also refers to the 'strong religious current' of Salgado's photography, 'Sebastião Salgado and Fine Art Photojournalism', op. cit, p 150.

39. *Other Americas*, pp 86–7.

40. *Other Americas*, pp 18–19 and 24–5.

political and class struggle. Though Salgado himself has explicitly stated that he is not a religious person, and does not believe in God, others have been ready to ascribe religious significance to his imagery.³⁷ For example, William Shawcross and Francis Hodgson have asserted that 'Many of Salgado's pictures seem to be placed in the long Christian tradition of the iconography of suffering'.³⁸ Nonetheless, it is a suffering in which there is no salvation, because religion is only another burden for the Mexicans who carry beams like crosses on their backs.³⁹ In *Other Americas*, either religion provides no solution – something evident in the shrugged shoulders and quizzical expression of the Mexican *campesino* who stands in front of a fog-shrouded church – or it presents simply another opportunity to portray the enigmatic, as in the image of Ecuadorians who cover their faces with a religious banner.⁴⁰ The imagery of *Other Americas* contains neither the apparent religious faith of Nacho López's devout poor, kneeling before the Virgin of Guadalupe, nor the curious mix of religion and modernity seen in Guillermo Castrejón's photo of a nun who sustains a tiny television set on her head, on which the pope appears during his visit

to Mexico.⁴¹ Obviously, none of *Other Americas*' images links religion to progressive projects, such as Liberation Theology, or revolution, as was the case in El Salvador.

Given the fact that Salgado appears to be genuinely concerned with the plight of the powerless, perhaps most of all in his native land, we might ask: Where does *Other Americas* go wrong? How is it that such good intentions have been led so far astray? And, most importantly, what can we learn from his mistakes? The picturesque and grotesque conventions for representing Latin America must surely have exercised some effect over Salgado, and the possible influence of Robert Frank's imagery cannot be dismissed out of hand. However, the problem may lie as well in Salgado's adherence in this book to the fine arts tradition of displaying imagery with minimal explanations (he limits himself to noting the country and the year in which the picture was made). While this is useful in allowing an image to stand on its own and be judged according to its formal qualities, it runs counter to the fact that a photograph is naturally, perhaps essentially, particular; that is, a photograph is necessarily always taken of a precise individual (or individuals) in a specific context during a highly selected fraction of a second.

In *Other Americas*, the narrative form Salgado chose was more attuned to constructing universal and eternal symbols than to elucidating the particularity of that which appears in the photographs. Published in a way that leaves a sense of historical vacuum, the images in *Other Americas* lose their specificity of referent. We might say that they are *symbols* rather than *documents*, or – to take the question further – *metaphors*. One way of describing different kinds of photojournalism is in terms of the continuum between the poles of information and expression. Traditional photojournalism is more concerned with information; its images are documents which are predominantly limited to presenting particular situations. As such, they often lack the expressivity to transform themselves into statements which transcend the individual case. Conversely, fine art photojournalism such as Salgado's leans more toward the expressive pole, and its images are often symbols that can fail to adequately present the particularity of specific situations, because they lack the information with which it could be constructed. Though conscious of the risks of such gross generalisations, we might say that, in general, fine art photojournalists make photos that tell us more about the photographers than the photographed, while the images of traditional photojournalists tell us more about what they are photographing than about those who have taken them.

Perhaps the best photojournalism fuses information and expression, document and symbol, in such a way as to create a metaphor: an image that retains the particularity of its referent but, at the same time, stands for a broader truth which transcends that immediate context. A revealing example is offered by Salgado's reportage on the *garimpeiros*, the gold miners of Serra Pelado, Brazil, which he began shortly after the publication of *Other Americas*, and that constitutes a chapter of *Workers*.⁴² In penetrating photos, he captured the insanity unleashed by the frantic search for instant wealth in inhuman living conditions: faces full of dementia and delirium, running battles between the half-crazed miners and the soldiers sent to police them, landscapes where ant-like men under cumbersome burdens trod on the feet of those in front of them.

41. *Yo, el ciudadano*, op. cit., pp 50–3; John Mraz, *La mirada inquieta, nuevo fotoperiodismo mexicano, 1976–1996*, Mexico, Centro de la Imagen–Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 1996, p 62.

42. The *garimpeiros* is a theme to which Salgado has evidently returned at different times. The images that appear in *Terra* were taken in 1986 and 1990. It is worth noting that Salgado was not the first to photograph these men. The Brazilian, Claus Meyer, had taken colour pictures of them in 1985. However, Meyer's expressive shortcomings meant that the images did not circulate much. They can be seen in *Black Star*, *60 Years of Photojournalism*, Könemann, Cologne, 1997, pp 374–5.

This reportage could well serve as a metonym for the infinite aberrations of a world with so little hope. It represents a significant advance over *Other Americas*, for here estrangement is not mysterious; rather it derives directly from the manifestly horrible conditions in which these poor devils live and work. That is not the case with *Other Americas*, whose images contain little visual information because they were taken predominantly in a way so as to eliminate social, political and economic contexts.

The *garimpeiro* images are capable of generating metaphors with little text because the sharply delimited situation requires little verbal explanation. However, the capacity to construct a narrative of particularity is usually an emanation of the accompanying written descriptions. The lack of text in *Other Americas* means that the connotation of its images derives from the relationship created between them, and the overwhelming sense of misery, despair and enigma is a result of the fact that we are given no other interpretive framework for making sense of this accumulated meaning. The absence of a clearly articulated historical context leaves the reader floating in a curiously timeless, and somehow eternal, vacuum. There is no movement in the narrative since all is given and no change is possible. This represents the sort of thing some critics from the developed world expect to see coming out of Latin America and, for them, the 'mysterious' and 'strange' photographs of *Other Americas* are related to 'magical realism – the post-modern tradition where poverty and the poor are seen mystically'.⁴³

This is a wilful misreading of his intentions. Certainly, remaining at the surface of seeing only what one expects to see runs counter to his oft-repeated argument about why he works on long-term projects. On various occasions, Salgado has articulated the necessity of getting *inside* what he is photographing:

When you work fast, what you put in your pictures is what you brought with you – your own ideas and concepts. When you spend more time on a project, you learn to understand your subjects. There comes a time when it is not you who is taking the pictures. Something special happens between the photographer and the people he is photographing. He realizes that they are giving the pictures to him.⁴⁴

Salgado's approach to photojournalism both flies in the face of perhaps the most sacrosanct theory of documentary photography and, at the same time, could offer the way out of the 'threat' which digital alteration appears to pose to the credibility of the photographic medium. Salgado has consistently taken issue with the concept of 'the decisive moment', an idea formulated by Henri Cartier-Bresson, who articulated it thus: 'I craved to seize, in the confines of one single photograph, the whole essence of some situation that was in the process of unrolling itself before my eyes'.⁴⁵ In all fairness to Cartier-Bresson, it should be noted that he has also recognised that the genre of the picture-story may require 'hours or days', and that, in photographing people, 'the photographer should try always to substantiate the first impression by "living" with the person concerned'.⁴⁶ However, Cartier-Bresson's notion of the decisive moment has become a dominant sort of hunting metaphor for photojournalists, to whom distilling in a single image the essence of an

43. See Charles Hagen, 'Not Your Typical Socially Concerned Photographer', *ARTnews*, 93, 4, April 1994, who alludes to mystery, and cites Sandra Phillips's statements about 'magical realism' and how poverty is 'seen mystically'.

44. Lassiter, 'Sebastião Salgado', op. cit., p 29. Salgado has also made this argument in Perloff, 'Sebastião Salgado, A Lecture', op. cit., p 10; in Cott, 'Sebastião Salgado, The *Rolling Stone* Interview', op. cit., and in the interview conducted by John Bloom, *Photo Metro*, 84, November 1990, p 8.

45. See Henri Cartier-Bresson, 'The Decisive Moment', in *The Mind's Eye, Writings on Photography and Photographers*, Aperture, New York, 1999, p 22.

46. 'The Picture Story', *ibid.*, p 24, and 'The Subject', *ibid.*, p 31.

event lies in having the sharpness of vision to discover and the technical capacities to capture the conflation of the socially and formally significant.⁴⁷ Salgado states: ‘I have had many fights with Cartier-Bresson because I disagree with this idea and much of this kind of documentary photography’.⁴⁸ Instead, he asserts: ‘What photojournalism requires is something different, a density of experience which comes from the photographer’s integration into the context of what he is documenting’.⁴⁹ Thus, in contrast with the ‘Decisive Moment’, Salgado proposes what he calls a theory of the ‘Photographic Phenomenon’:

You photograph here, you photograph there, you speak with people, you understand people, people understand you. Then, probably, you arrive at the same point as Cartier-Bresson, but from the inside of the parabola. And that is for me the integration of the photographer with the subject of his photograph.... An image is your integration with the person that you photographed at the moment that you work so incredibly together, that your picture is not more than the relation you have with your subject.⁵⁰

Concern with the ‘decisive moment’ is also at the heart of much digitally altered imagery. Pedro Meyer, a Mexican photographer, is a pioneer of digital imagery, and it is clear that his theories and practice of this medium are based, to a certain extent, on capturing the juxtaposition of significantly discordant elements within a frame; for example, Mexican migrant workers labour at agricultural tasks, stooped over in a field beneath a billboard which offers ‘FREE LUXURY SERVICE FROM YOUR MOTEL’, while a Roman gladiator opens the door to a fancy private taxi.⁵¹ Meyer has stated, ‘I had no intention of waiting a week, ten days or the time necessary so that something would happen, so that I could get the “decisive moment” looked for so often by photographers.... The specific “decisive moment” wasn’t to be found, it had to be created’.⁵² Whether the decisive moment is ‘found’ by the straight photographer in a coup of timing, positioning and technical virtuosity, or whether it is ‘created’ by the digital artist, the aesthetic achieved is still based on having seized an evanescent instant of visual significance. Conversely, Salgado’s idea – that the primary mediations of the documentary aesthetic are the rapport that you have been able to establish with the subjects, and the knowledge that you have acquired about their situation – offers a fundamentally different approach.

This would seem to be the position he was working from when he next focused on Latin America, in his 1997 book, *Terra*. At times almost a self-criticism of *Other Americas*’ failings, *Terra* uses the extensive captions published at the end of the book to contextualise the ‘*Tristes Tropiques*’ imagery by linking it to concrete socioeconomic forces. Of equal importance is the fact that Salgado has developed a narrative that documents not only oppression but also its dialectical response: collective struggle. *Terra*’s story falls essentially into two parts. The first half of the book is composed of photographs from the 1980s – some of which were previously published in *Other Americas* – depicting the people, their land, work and privations. The images emphasise how ‘dignity and poverty are inseparable companions of the rural population’, and there is little here of the despairing and

47. As Cartier-Bresson argued at another point, ‘Photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression’, *ibid.*, p 42.

48. Perloff, ‘Sebasti o Salgado, A Lecture’, *op. cit.*, p 10.

49. ‘Sebasti o Salgado, One Second Split into 250 Images’, an interview by Brian J. Mallet, *Art Nexus*, 29, August–October 1998, p 77.

50. Salgado provides a sketched diagram contrasting what he labels ‘Cartier-Bresson’s “Decisive Moment”’ to ‘Salgado’s “Photographic Phenomenon”’ in the interview conducted by John Bloom, *Photo Metro*, *op. cit.*, p 8.

51. Pedro Meyer, *Verdades y ficciones. Un viaje de la fotografía documental a la digital*, Casa de las Imágenes, Mexico City, 1995, p 19. The photograph of the workers was taken in one location, that of the billboard in another.

52. Meyer’s statements here are made in relation to other images, but the argument is equally relevant to the example I have chosen; *ibid.*, pp 115 and 111. My translation.

mysterious misery in which they were enveloped in *Other Americas*. The pictures of gnarled hands, deeply lined faces, and people labouring in fields provide a backdrop to *Terra*'s second half: the 1996 photographs of urban migration and rural land takeovers. This structure provides a historical sense to Latin America's problems and prospects.

In photographing the movement to the cities, and its concomitant dehumanisation, Salgado himself migrates into an area he previously ignored. It should be noted that he does so successfully, for his work compares favourably with that of many of the better Latin American photojournalists for whom urban crisis has been a focus. The flight to the cities has been the typical reaction to the land monopolisation by the *latifundia* and plantations that control Brazilian rural life. Salgado's imagery documents the harsh reality and inhuman living conditions which await the migrants: homeless boys live in cardboard boxes, clutching to their meagre sustenance of bread; recent arrivals sleep next to roaring expressways or in frightfully overcrowded nocturnal shelters; beneath webs of electric lines strung from rickety home-made poles, children ride their bikes at twilight along dirt roads next to garbage piles; in an image reminiscent of Jacob Riis, people live underneath densely travelled highways on boards placed between the supporting pillars; prisons and prison-like bus stations are virtually indistinguishable.⁵³

These poignant testimonies to the failure of urban migration for both the emigrants and the larger society are underlined by the final image of the section, 'Migrations to the Cities': a conglomeration of abandoned toddlers and the cityscape behind them serve as mutually reflecting mirrors of, and metaphors for, the future. Then, Salgado makes patent his commitment to the coming generations in the portraits of children that provide a bridge to *Terra*'s final chapter on the Landless Movement (*Movimento dos Sem-Terra*, MST). These portraits are exquisite images of beautiful children whose dirty faces and ragged clothes leave a lasting impression.⁵⁴ In this context, it is worth remembering that Salgado has been criticised for aestheticising misery; however, as Julian Stallabrass remarked:

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, anesthetic mode of much contemporary photography, suited to portraying suburban ennui.... 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....⁵⁵

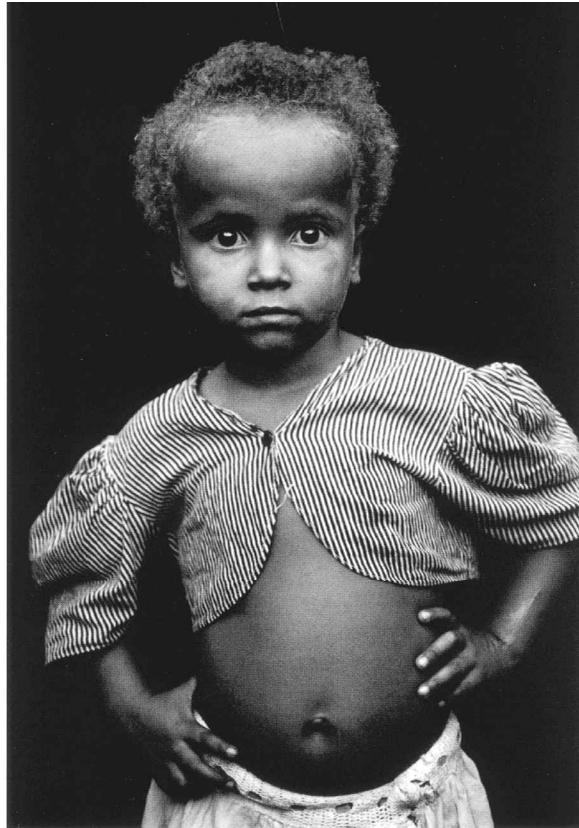
53. 'migrations to the Cities', *Terra*, pp 78–95.

54. Salgado has recently collected these, and other images of children, in *The Children, Refugees and Migrants*, Aperture, New York, 2000.

55. Stallabrass, 'Sebastião Salgado and Fine Art Photojournalism', op. cit., p 143.

Teaching people how to see in new ways is somewhat less important in this moment than the question of what is to be the future of Brazil's children; they pose that query articulately with their beseeching eyes. Hence, the real answer to the critique levelled essentially by commentators from the developed world may be that they cannot fully understand the perspective that Salgado brings to bear on this issue.

The last section of *Terra* focuses on 'The Struggle for the Land'. Here, the sad-eyed elders of *Other Americas* – mysterious symbols of



THE CHILDREN SEBASTIÃO SALGADO

A P E R T U R E

Sebastião Salgado, *The Children: Refugees and Migrants*, Aperture, New York, 2000.

demise – have been replaced by images of repression, struggle and the creation of a new life in communal schools and shiny settlement homes. Bloody bullet-ridden bodies, coffins piled in trucks and the pain of murdered peasants' mothers are linked directly to military police paid by the landowners. Meanwhile, farmers raise their scythes in triumph, as Salgado documents the land takeovers of the *Sem-Terra* Movement that have increasingly come to replace migration as an answer to landlessness.

Among the images from the 1980s that provide background in the first half of *Terra* are several which were originally published in *Other Americas*. This strategy opens up the issue of contextualisation for, in *Terra*, they often acquire meanings at odds with their previous connotations. Perhaps the most immediate effect of their recontextualisation is the divestment of enigma; we now understand why these people look so sad: they have no land on which to produce food, and no future for themselves or their children other than misery, illness and death. Their poverty is such that the church provides temporary coffins that are used during wakes and for transporting the dead to the cemetery, where they are buried without the casket to free it for further use. To be given information about such deprivations suddenly clarifies images which were formerly inscrutable: the photograph of a man straddling the grave of a woman laid to rest without a coffin ceases to be grotesque, and is converted into an articulate social critique.⁵⁶

Salgado also effects the reworking of imagery through publishing different versions of some scenes from *Other Americas*. He explicitly signals the 're-writing' he intends to carry out by opening *Terra* with the photo of children lying on the floor beside their 'toys' of animal bones, then later including another image of these same children in which their dynamic attitudes attest to their creativity.⁵⁷ The scene in *Other Americas* of people standing on separate tombs, evidently posed by him as a macabre symbol of their alienation, is also rescripted in *Terra*; there it has been replaced by two photos: one taken of individuals striding toward the cemetery in a funeral procession; the other an image of them moments afterwards, in which these individuals are engaged in burying a child.⁵⁸

In general, photographic analysis has concentrated on the immanent structure of images, the relations within the frame. However, photographs are by nature ambiguous and polysemic texts; their narrative capacity is weak, and their meaning is often determined by the immediate context created for their publication: the synthesis of text, titles, and – in extended photoessays such as *Other Americas* and *Terra* – the accumulated significance of the images themselves. In *Other Americas*, the absence of text and the minimal titles created a situation in which the meaning of the images was determined entirely by their cumulative effect. Because much of its imagery was of people with sombre, even distressed expressions who were often in the presence of some form of death – as well as divided from one another by formal structures – mystery, anguish and estrangement were the sensations they evoked. In *Terra*, Salgado provided a historical context for understanding the source of these maladies, and created a narrative that moves from past oppression to present struggle.

56. *Other Americas*, p 31; *Terra*, p 61. Salgado first noted that the coffins are rented in *An Uncertain Grace*.

57. *Other Americas*, pp 94–5; *Terra*, pp 6–7, and p 67.

58. *Other Americas*, pp 70–1; *Terra*, pp 71, 72–3.

Other Americas was a first step in Salgado's attempt to reconnect with his native land after going into exile. He noted that, 'For it to be possible for me to live in Europe, I had to come to Latin America'.⁵⁹ Like so many Latin Americans, he had to leave his homeland in order to discover it. He began this re-encounter by accommodating his powerful imagery to the picturesque and grotesque paradigm that seemed to be the only accredited way of talking about his culture in the developed world. Nonetheless, if *Other Americas* essentially pandered to what his audience in the developed world expected and desired, *Terra* represents an effort to help Brazilians get what they need.

Salgado's most recent endeavours to picture Latin America have led him to engage with burning contemporary issues of emigration and transculturation. *Migrations* utilises the same structure that he so successfully employed in *Terra*: images are presented in a fine art format, allowing them to stand alone throughout the book, while explanatory texts are provided in an accompanying booklet inserted at the back.⁶⁰ The photographer has devoted more than a quarter of the book to Latin America. In opening with the Brazilian Indians, Salgado attempts to use what are the last and most feeble vestiges of the destroyed pre-Columbian civilisations to construct a nostalgic allusion to what it might have been like before the arrival of Europeans.⁶¹ Here, he creates a disjuncture between idyllic images of Indian families gathered around forest pools, and texts which decry the destruction of such a paradise: native cultures have been pushed to the brink of extinction by disease and invasion, deforestation has led to disastrous erosion. Thus, he presents us with images of beautiful young Indian women, but describes how they are subject to sexual abuse from the miners who encroach on their territory; he shows us children reclining in hammocks, but tells us they are now made out of synthetic fibres, just one of the products making Indians dependent on the interlopers; he portrays a warrior chief, but warns that 'Indians are becoming beggars on their own land'.

The section on 'Abandoning the Land in Ecuador' suddenly ratchets up the process of modernisation to today's rural cultures.⁶² Some of the images are rather picturesque – tended by a little Indian girl in typical clothing, sheep graze on a hillside while a river valley stretches out below; others might well have appeared in *Other Americas* – a tiny child with a dour look labours in a field, dressed in a filthy, ragged skirt and sweater; women and children cluster outside their home, fearful expressions on their faces. However, the accompanying booklet contextualises these images, informing us that, because the most fertile land in the heart of the valley is monopolised by wealthy cattle ranchers, the men have been forced to migrate to the cities, leaving rural labour to the women and children. According to Salgado, the transformation of domestic life among the peasants is a relatively recent occurrence: 'Twenty years ago, family responsibilities were divided quite differently: women ran the households, and men worked in the fields'.

Some have chosen to resist emigrating from the land, and the response is always repression by the landowners and governments. Salgado has depicted this dialectic in the sections on the neo-Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas and the *Sem-Terra* Movement in Brazil.⁶³ There,

59. Perloff, 'Sebastião Salgado, A Lecture', op. cit., p 3.

60. He employed this form in *Workers*, though it was less effective than it is in *Terra* and *Migrations*.

61. 'The Indians of Brazil's Amazon', pp 251–63.

62. 'Abandoning the Land in Ecuador', pp 264–77.

63. 'The Zapatista Communities of Chiapas, Mexico', and 'The Landless Movement in Brazil', pp 278–307.

64. 'Honduras in the Aftermath of Hurricane Mitch', and 'Exodus to the Cities (Mexico City and Sao Paulo)', pp 308–31. Although the booklet accompanying the images is generally trustworthy, I would make one observation about the text on 'Exodus'. Salgado asserts that, 'In less than 35 years, the Mexican population has gone from 92 percent rural to 72 percent urban' (p 23). Presumably, Salgado is referring to the period from 1965 to 2000. I am not certain what criterion Salgado is employing to define 'rural', but James Cockcroft has argued that, 'By 1960 Mexico was 50 percent urban (defining 'urban' as communities of more than 2,500 inhabitants)', and Nathan Whetten stated that 22% of Mexicans lived in cities of more than 10,000 inhabitants in 1948. In both Mexico and the United States, towns of 2,500 are considered to be 'urban', though Cockcroft has rightly noted, 'there are many rural towns with slightly more than 2,500 residents that resemble "urban" areas in no way whatsoever.' See James Cockcroft, *Mexico, Class Formation, Capital Accumulation, and the State*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1983, p 151, and Nathan Whetten, *Rural Mexico*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1948, p 579.
65. Salgado refers to the steel barrier as 'America's Great Wall of China' in his photoessay, 'The Border, Scenes of Struggle and Hope on the Mexico-U.S. Border', *Rolling Stone*, 776–777, 12 December 1997–8 January 1998, p 129–37.

he documents the tiny communities set up by the Chiapas Indians as safe havens from the paramilitary gunmen employed by the wealthy, and trained by the Mexican army. A couple of the images taken in these camps portray a postmodern surrealism often associated with Mexico: large, sturdy plastic sheets which are used for billboard advertising in Mexico City were collected by Zapatista supporters and sent down to help provide shelter in the cold, humid climate of the highlands. Draped over upright sticks which serve as supports, these incitements to consumerism have been made into walls of the shacks housing the Indians, and the larger-than-life happy faces crowned by blond hair stand in ironic juxtaposition to the dark Indians huddled beneath them. In both Chiapas and Brazil, Salgado has powerfully represented the daily life among people who have refused to go along with the demands of neo-liberal rule, and his images of bloodied bodies and closed coffins demonstrate the price they are willing to pay in their battle for land to farm and to own.

The vast majority of Latin Americans who leave the land are pushed toward mega-cities by the rural poverty caused largely by the monopolisation of land by *latifundia*, enormous properties owned by wealthy and often-absentee proprietors, though natural disasters such as Hurricane Mitch can play a part in contributing to this emigration.⁶⁴ Salgado shows the shanty towns that have grown up in the peripheries of Mexico City and S o Paulo, documenting the family disintegration which leads to such self-destructive behaviour as the glue-sniffing and crack-smoking addictions of the young who live on (and under) the city streets. Scenes from garbage dumps where the most destitute pick through discards side by side with carrion birds, and images of little children, faces filthy and old before their time, who walk beneath rickety electric lines dangerously crowded with wires illegally hooked up, make clear how deceptive is the promise of urbanity for the poor forced to migrate to cities.

The transculturation of migrants who move to the cities is carried to yet another level by the transnational process of emigration from Latin America to the United States. Salgado reconstructs the 'Passage Through Mexico' followed by many who leave Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador to seek a better life. In the few images he provides to illustrate this theme, he focuses largely on the experiences of those who travel on the trains. His photography of the 'US–Mexico Border' is confined almost exclusively to the Tijuana-San Ysidro area, and the imagery is dominated by the 'American version of the Great Wall of China', the huge steel barrier erected at this point to slow down the illegal crossings: men peer through it toward the promised land, individuals sleep in the shadow it casts while waiting for darkness, illegal migrants detected by the Border Patrol flee toward the barrier to cross back into Mexico and escape persecution.⁶⁵ There are also photos of migrants who have been arrested, the most powerful of which foregrounds a pair of them handcuffed together, framing the US officials behind. All in all, Salgado's vision of the border is a dark one that is certainly of a piece with the rest of *Migrations*, but it seems a bit overstated among the heart-wrenching stories of Rwandans fleeing genocide, Kurds caught between Iraq and Turkey, or Palestinians still homeless after fifty years. Certainly, many Mexicans who do not wish to leave their country are forced to do

so by the lack of economic opportunities. Nonetheless, migration is an option that can also be chosen by those who do not wish to live trapped in traditional existences, and have decided to change their lives. Migrants are often the most dynamic and decisive of a population, and the optimism of Mexican Braceros in the 1940s that was captured by the Hermanos Mayo must still be at least one part of this story.⁶⁶ Most of the images of the border published in *Migrations* first appeared in the photoessay on the Mexico–US border which Salgado produced for *Rolling Stone*; however, the last picture in that article – of a man and his son who exude strength and optimism despite their difficult living conditions – was unfortunately not included in the book.⁶⁷

Salgado is a new breed of photojournalist, a title he assumes with pride. He rejects the notion that he creates art, asserting that his primary interest is reportage about the historical moment in which he is living, and pointing out that the material base for his work is provided first of all by the press.⁶⁸ He has financed his long-term projects by publishing ‘previews’ as articles in magazines such as *The New York Times Magazine*, *Rolling Stone*, *El País Semanal*, *Actuel*, *Newsweek*, *The Sunday Times Magazine*, and *Geo*. However, no other photojournalist has ever been able to command the exhibit venues, and space, that Salgado has, or to engage in projects on subjects so large and all encompassing. The enormous individual thematic exhibitions – *Workers* and *Migrations* – are unparalleled in the history of photography, let alone photojournalism, and the large, heavy books in which these images appear are equalled only by works dedicated to the entire career of the ‘classics’ of documentary photography and photojournalism such as Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson, David Seymour, Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, or Gene Smith. That a Latin American photographer has achieved such recognition is astounding. How has he been able to do this?

The trajectory of Sebastião Salgado as a documentary photographer might be characterised as that of having first followed established paths of both subject and technique, while exploring the possibilities of forging his own vision. Perhaps this can be most easily appreciated in considering the transformations of the ways he has pictured his native land. He began by reproducing the picturesque paradigm for representing what might be considered ‘deep’ or ‘authentic’ notions of Latin American rural culture, replicating the well-travelled forms of the exotic other which US and European audiences expect to see. However, he came to recognise that in order to be able to say anything really new about his homeland he would have to go beyond the stereotypes, and get beneath the surface of images. This led him to work closely with the *Sem-Terra* Movement, integrating himself with his subjects so that the rapport he developed with them became the aesthetic expression of the struggle in which they were engaged. Later, he applied this method to the contemporary issues of migration and transculturation. The validity of documentary photography and photojournalism rests on the insertion of the photographers in the realities they wish to portray. In his theory of the ‘photographic phenomenon’, his practice of commitment to the oppressed, and his capacity to stretch the limits of what is acceptable, Sebastião Salgado offers a model for photojournalists of the future.

66. See John Mraz and Jaime Vélez Storey, *Uprooted, Braceros in the Hermanos Mayo Lens*, Arte Público Press, Houston, 1996.

67. ‘The Border, Scenes of Struggle and Hope on the Mexico–U.S. Border’, *Rolling Stone*, op. cit., p 137.

68. See Salgado’s comments on art and journalism in Perloff, ‘Sebastião Salgado, A Lecture’, op. cit., p 4; Mallet, ‘Sebastião Salgado, One Second Split into 250 Images’, op. cit., p 75; and Hagen, ‘Not Your Typical Socially Concerned Photographer’, op. cit., p 152.