

David Levi-Strauss: *The Documentary Debate: Aesthetic or Anaesthetic?*

[...] The September 9, 1991 issue of the *New Yorker* carried an article by Ingrid Sischy, titled “Good Intentions,” on the work of Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado. Sischy upbraids Salgado for being too popular and too successful, and also for being too “uncompromisingly serious” and “weighty”; for being opportunistic and self-aggrandizing, and also too idealistic; for being too spiritual, and also for being “kitschy” and “schmaltzy.” But Sischy’s real complaint about Salgado’s photographs is that they threaten the boundary between aesthetics and politics. The complaint is couched in the familiar terms of a borrowed political critique:

Salgado is too busy with the compositional aspects of his pictures—and with finding the “grace” and “beauty” in the twisted form of his anguished subjects. And this beautification of tragedy results in pictures that ultimately reinforce our passivity toward the experience they reveal. To aestheticize tragedy is the fastest way to anaesthetize the feelings of those who are witnessing it. Beauty is a call to admiration, not to action.

The substantive critique upon which this by now conventional criticism is based can be found in the classic debate within German Marxism that occurred from the 1930s to the 1950s, involving Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukacs, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno.

The principal source for the “aestheticization of tragedy” argument is Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Author As Producer,” in which he speaks of “the way certain modish photographers proceed in order to make human misery an object of consumption.” What is often forgotten by those who appropriate this critique is its historical context within this debate. Benjamin’s criticism here specifically refers to certain products of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) movement in literature and art, which was itself a reaction against Expressionism, professing a return to objectivity of vision. When Benjamin charges that “it has succeeded in turning abject poverty itself, by handling it in a modish, technically perfect way, into an object of enjoyment,” he is referring to the well-known picture book by Albert Renger-Pazsch titled *Die Welt ist schön* (The world is beautiful). And he is expressly referring to the New Objectivity as a literary movement when he says that “it transforms political struggle so that it ceases to be a compelling motive for decision and becomes an object of comfortable contemplation.” There are contemporary photographers who are heirs to the New Objectivity, but Salgado is not one of them, and to apply these criticism to his work is a politically pointed inversion.

The distinction is made eloquently, and in a way that Benjamin would surely have appreciated, by Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano in his essay “Salgado, 17 Times,” which appeared in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art’s catalog to the 1990 Salgado show:

Salgado photographs people. Casual photographers photograph phantoms.

As an article of consumption poverty is a source of morbid pleasure and much money. Poverty is a commodity that fetches a high price on the luxury market. Consumer-society photographers approach but do not enter. In hurried visits to scenes of despair or violence, they climb out of the plane or helicopters, press the shutter release, explode the flash; they shoot and run. They have looked without seeing and their images say nothing. Their cowardly photographs soiled with horror or blood may extract a few crocodile tears, a few coins, a pious word or two from the privileged of the earth, none of which changes the order of their universe. At the sight of the dark-skinned wretched, forsaken by God and pissed on by dogs, anybody who is nobody confidentially congratulates himself: life hasn't done too badly by me, in comparison. Hell serves to confirm the virtues of paradise.

Charity, vertical, humiliates. Solidarity, horizontal, helps. Salgado photographs from inside, in solidarity.

Are Galeano and Sischy looking at the same images? What is the political difference in the way they are looking? In another part of his essay, Galeano (who was forced into exile from his native Uruguay for having “ideological ideas,” as one of the dictator’s functionaries put it) locates Salgado’s transgression: “From their mighty silence, these images, these portraits, question the hypocritical frontiers that safeguard the bourgeois order and protect its right to power and inheritance.”

This is the disturbing quality of Salgado’s work that so divides viewers. Like all politically effective images, the best of Salgado’s photographs work in the fissures, the wounds, of the social. They cause those who see them to ask themselves: *are we allowed to view what is being exposed?* In an essay on “Active Boundaries,” the poet Michael Palmer relates Salgado’s work to that of Paul Celan, and notes:

The subject of Salgado’s photojournalism, we must continually remind ourselves, is not there, is not in fact the visible but the invisible: what has been repressed and will not be spoken. It appears always at the edge of the frame or in the uneasy negotiation among the space of origin, the framed space of the work, and the social space to which it has been removed, which is also a cultural space, of the aesthetic.

The anti-aesthetic tendency can easily become an anaesthetic one, an artificially induced unconsciousness to protect oneself from pain, and to protect the “hypocritical frontiers” of propriety and privilege. It is unseemly to look right into the face of hunger, and then to represent it in a way that compels others to look right into it as well. It is an abomination, an obscenity, an ideological crime.

When one, anyone tries to represent someone else, to “take their picture” or “tell their story,” they run headlong into a minefield of real political problems. The first question is” what right have *I* to represent *you*? Every photograph of this kind must be a negotiation, a complex act

of communication. As with all such acts, the likelihood of success is extremely remote, but does that mean it shouldn't be attempted? In his magnificent defense of Modern Art against Lukacs, Brecht wrote:

In art there is the fact of failure, and the fact of partial success. Our metaphysicians must understand this. Works of art can fail so easily; it is so difficult for them to succeed. One man will fall silent because of lack of feeling; another, because his emotion chokes him. A third frees himself, not from the burden that weighs on him, but only from a feeling of unfreedom. A fourth breaks his tools because they have too long been used to exploit him. The world is not obliged to be sentimental. Defeats should be acknowledged; but one should never conclude from them that there should be no more struggles.

A documentary practice that tries to avoid the difficulties of such communication is not worthy of the name. After the aestheticization argument made social documentary photography of any kind theoretically indefensible, a number of articles appeared calling for its recuperation as “new documentary.” In his essay “Toward a New Social Documentary,” Grant Kester wrote:

If social documentary can be recuperated as a new documentary, it is precisely because it was never entirely aestheticized in the first place. There must be a core of authentic practice in documentary. It seems clear that this authenticity rests in its ability to act not only as art, but also in the kind of concrete social struggles that gave it its original character.

The assumptions here are clear: the “aestheticized” (art) is not “authentic,” but always already supplementary, added on to the “core of authentic practice.” It is also supplementary, —perhaps even antithetical—to “concrete social struggles.” Isn't this just the flip side of the right's view of art: that art is inauthentic and supplementary and politically suspect? The doctrinaire right contends that politics has no place in art, while the doctrinaire left contends that art has no place in politics. Both takes are culturally restrictive and historically inaccurate.

The idea that the more transformed or “aestheticized” an image is, the less “authentic” or politically valuable it becomes, is one that needs to be seriously questioned. Why *can't* beauty be a call to action? The unsupported and careless use of “aestheticization” to condemn artists who deal with politically charged subjects recalls Brecht's statement that “the ‘right thinking’ people among us, whom Stalin in another context distinguishes from creative people, have a habit of spell-binding our minds with certain words used in an extremely arbitrary sense.”

To represent is to aestheticize; that is, to transform. It presents a vast field of choices but it does not include the choice *not* to transform, not to change or alter whatever is being represented. It cannot be a pure process, in practice. This goes for photography as much as for any other means of representation. But this is no reason to back away from the process. The aesthetic is not objective and is not reducible to quantitative scientific terms. Quantity can only

measure physical phenomena, and is misapplied in aesthetics, which often deals with what is *not* there, imagining things into existence. To become legible to others, these imaginings must be socially and culturally encoded. That is aestheticization.

When Benjamin wrote that “the tendency of a work of literature can be politically correct only if it is also correct in the literary sense,” he meant that the way something is made (its poetics) is political. Carried over into photography, that might mean that being politically correct doesn’t signify much unless the work is also visually and conceptually compelling, or rather that these two things are not mutually exclusive, nor even separate. To be compelling, there must be tension in the work; if everything has been decided beforehand, there will be no tension and no compulsion to the work. In the latter kind of imagery, the viewer’s choice is reduced to acceptance or rejection of the “message,” without becoming involved in a more complex response. Such images may work as propaganda (the effectiveness of which is quantitatively measurable), but they will not work at other points on the spectrum of communication.

Aestheticization is one of the ways that disparate peoples recognize themselves in one another. Photographs by themselves certainly cannot tell “the whole truth”—they are always only instants. What they do most persistently is to register the relation of photographer to subject—the distance from one to another—and this understanding is a profoundly important political process, as Marx himself suggested: “Let us suppose that we had carried out production as human beings.... Our products would be so many mirrors in which we saw reflected our essential nature.”