

Bogumiła Fiołek-Lubczyńska*

The “Salt of the Earth” documentary film by Wim Wenders as an implementation of the *text within a text* rhetorical strategy

Wim Wenders’s¹ “The Salt of the Earth” (2015) is the story of a photographer, Sebastião Salgado, who is also known as *the photographer of the gutter*. He is a doctor of economics by education, yet he abandoned his previous profession in 1970 upon returning from an official trip to the poor regions of Africa. Salgado is an anthropologist who has devoted his entire adult life to photographic projects. He learned, like an anthropologist, *from the inside* about the culture and traditions of people living in the areas he recorded in his photographs. He is a reporter travelling to the farthest reaches of the world. Wenders tries to discover for the viewers the reasons why Salgado, so willingly, discusses human fate in today’s world. The human in Salgado’s photographs is the one who suffers poverty and hunger, who works more than she/he can, she/he is a refugee, or, finally, a person living in unspoiled areas.

I am a photographer/journalist/reporter who uses photography,” said Salgado about himself. Even if my works end up in museums or galleries, I think that is because

* Ph.D., e-mail: bogumilaff@gmail.com; Chair of Journalism and Social Communication, Faculty of Philology, University of Lodz.

¹ Wim Wenders, one of the best-known directors of the so-called new German cinema. The author of fact and fiction films, a film critic, a screenwriter, a producer, and a lecturer. In his works, he returns to the motifs of solitude, themes related to the problems of inter-personal communication, the problems of the cinema in the world of the new media and broadly understood mass culture. His début film was “Summer in the City” (1970). “Alice in the Cities” (1973), “The Wrong Move” (1975) and “Kings of the Road” (1975) formed a journey trilogy, which according to N. Simsolo (1984) constitutes a two-fold study of Germany and contemporary German cinema. Other significant films: “Hamlet” (1982); “The State of Things” (1982) – the Golden Lion and FIPRESI in Venice; “Paris, Texas” (1984) – Palme d’Or in Cannes and the BAFTA Awards; “Wings of Desire” (1987); “Lisbon Story” (1995); “The End of Violence” (1995); “Buena Vista Social Club” (2000) – Oscar nomination; “The Million Dollar Hotel” (2000) – the Silver Bear in Berlin; “Pina” (2011); “The Salt of the Earth” (2015) – Oscar nominated (director cooperation with Juliano R. Salgado).

they provoke discussion, not because they are pretty objects. They can probably even move those who normally would not support humanitarian organisations. They, of course, also end up in museums and galleries, but does that mean they lose their meaning? And are the photographs too pretty? Well... Photography is a type of writing and everyone has their own style. I come from a country where light is very important, where there are many Baroque historical monuments. Just look at the language of Latin writers who smoothly transition from naturalistic description to the world of imagination. I am not pretending to be someone else. I would not be able to take different photographs...²

The significance of the work of reporters in today's world was discussed by Zygmunt Bauman in his book entitled "Między chwilą a pięknem. O sztuce w rozpadzionym świecie":

We ought to love reporters. Their stories fascinate us for two reasons: they talk about lands which we will probably never visit, and about events which we will never witness – and which they, reporters, saw live (in fact, in our most recent globetrotter times, both reasons blend into one – as the only Earth we are surely not going to visit in our lifetimes is the past, and past events are the only ones which we are never going to witness live [...]). Reporters are our only chance to glance at those distant lands and events – even if only through their eyes...³

Salgado is one of those reporters – he is a photojournalist who, like Herodotus once, travels to distant reaches of the world to tell the stories of the lands he discovers and people living there. He visits new parts of the world, not as a tourist but as a journalist, seeking the truth about the world – spending weeks, months, and years. From an anthropological point of view, he represents a cognitive attitude of the *emic*⁴ type, which is equivalent to a long-term and broad manner of observation of human behaviour, people's traditions, cultures, and religions.

The rhetorical argument in Wim Wenders's film⁵ was constructed according to Lotman's understanding of a *text within a text*. "A text within a text," according

² M. Kacprzak, "Sól ziemi. Bliżej Sebastiao Salgado", <https://wszystkoconajwazniejsze.pl/marek-kacprzak-sol-ziemi-blizej-sebastiao-salgado/> [accessed on: 25.02.2017].

³ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁴ Vide: B. Walczak, "Antropolog jako Inny", Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warsaw 2009, p. 68. Alan Barnard posited that the "emic model of the world does not equal the local model of the world, it does not bring the array of notions held by a researcher to the array of notion held by the studied, it rather constitutes an intellectual construct of the researcher erected based on local categories".

⁵ The article includes two genre terms: a film report and a documentary film/fact film. The author uses them interchangeably because an art report and a documentary film are based on the same creative attitude: a report on the reality presented according to the idea of the director/creator.

to the scholar, "is a special rhetorical structure, in which the differences in the methods of coding various text parts become factors which reveal the author's composition and the reader's perception of a text"⁶. The fact of introducing one culture text – i.e. photography – within the structure of another, a film, creates a certain dialogical nature of both texts. In the case of photography and film, one can conclude that the texts supplement each other. A film facilitates the presentation of a static image, which eventually creates an independent reality. Thus, it enhances the film's message. The narrative strategy present in that case was minutely discussed by Małgorzata Pietrzak. She stated that performing arts such as theatre or film can utilise common compositional frames to introduce into a culture text another text which offers a specific narration, thus assigning it the frame of a certain rhetorical order⁷. Such an order results from the application of the principles of composing a text which discusses art. The narration of the film was organised in such a way for the theme and form of the presented photographs not to lose their meanings. In the documentary, Wenders discusses the biography of a well-known photographer and presents his works, at the same time ensuring that the originally static photographs do not negatively influence the dynamics of the film narration, which is based on the "confessions" of the artist in front of a video camera, and his work. In that sense, "The Salt of the Earth" is a version of a documentary film – a film about art⁸. The main goal of such documentaries is, according to Jadwiga Głowa, to explain artistic phenomena⁹. Zbigniew Czeczot-Gawrak identified four types of documentary variants of films about art, which usually focus on the works of contemporary artists. The author of: *Filmowa prezentacja sztuki* wrote:

It (the film) is often mainly a portrait of the artist, yet usually a confrontation of the work with its creator, her/his technique, and the social and natural environments which inspire the artist. Reports developed in a workshop or on site tend to not only reproduce the spiritual personality of the creator, but also record for the contemporary people and future generations her/his technique, her/his reality¹⁰.

⁶ Y. Lotman, "Tiekst w tiekstie", *Trudy po znakovym sistiemam* 1981, Issue 14, p. 13, as quoted in: S. Świontek, "Norwidowski teatr świata", Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, Lodz 1983, p. 107.

⁷ Vide: M. Pietrzak, "Retoryka. Narzędzie w twórczej komunikacji. Teatr i film", Wydawnictwo DiG, Warsaw 2012, p. 175.

⁸ Vide: Z. Czeczot-Gawrak, "Filmowa prezentacja sztuki. Architektura, malarstwo, rzeźba, grafika, sztuka ludowa, rzemiosło artystyczne", Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, Warsaw 1979 and J. Głowa, "Klasyka polskiego filmu o sztuce. Dwie tendencje", *Estetyka i Krytyka* 2007/2008, Issue 1/2 (13/14), pp. 47–61.

⁹ J. Głowa, op. cit., p. 49.

¹⁰ Z. Czeczot-Gawrak, op. cit., p. 20.

The researcher went on to add:

As a classical *film on art* we shall [...] consider those films (usually short films or medium-length films) of the documentary type, in which film techniques include: film framage, shot angle, camera movement, penetration, montage with possible adding of a word or music layer, there are works of art presented existing outside of film, which possess their own material or aesthetic existence outside of it, etc. – which exist aesthetically outside of film or camera¹¹.

The idea to present individual, photographic, works of art, their creator and his biography was the reason why in Wenders's documentary both the image and word layers served the goal of describing the subject and his output.

The narrator, who speaks in the film in the first person singular, constitutes a special *alter ego* of the director. He states, directing his words directly to the viewers, that he admires the film's main character. He calls him, using a metaphorical expression, "the salt of the Earth". This information about the admiration of Salgado is expressed directly by the documentary's creator, which is why the viewers can easily relate the narrator's words with the director's views.

"I first saw this picture here, in a gallery, more than 20 years ago," stated the director when the camera was aimed at the photograph entitled "Serra Pelada Gold Mine". I had no idea who took it. Whoever it was, had to be a great photographer and an adventurer, I thought. There was a stamp on the back and a signature: Sebastião Salgado. The curator pulled out other pictures by the same photographer from a drawer. What I saw, profoundly moved me.

The author's commentary constitutes a common practice in documentary films and is known as the clarifying documentary method¹². The commentary introduces significant information and expands the context of the image presentation. Through it, the cognitive function is implemented in the film report. However, when the narrator expresses his own opinions regarding the presented reality, the document includes reflections. The viewers hear the opinions from the beginning of the film: "What I saw, profoundly moved me...; so one thing I knew already about this Sebastião Salgado: he really cared about people; it still moves me to tears (one of the photographs)." Such information carries an emotional load and cannot remain insignificant to the viewers' reception of the

¹¹ Ibid., p. 15.

¹² Vide: "Metody dokumentalne w filmie", D. Rode and M. Pieńkowski (eds.), Wydawnictwo Biblioteki Państwowej Wyższej Szkoły Filmowej, Telewizyjnej i Teatralnej, Łódź 2013.

film. Film is a rhetorical genre¹³ and thus communicatively focussed on efficiency. The director’s ethos, pathos or the argumentative topic may be the source of persuasion in a report on art. It is clearly visible that the director of “The Salt of the Earth” utilised in the verbal commentary his own authority¹⁴, and shared his own opinions on Salgado’s works.

After the verbal introduction, there is a blackout, and then there emerges another photograph: a portrait of a blind dark-skinned woman. It is one of the best-known portraits by Salgado. “A portrait of a blind Tuareg woman”, says the narrator. It still moves me to tears, even if I see it every day as it’s been hanging over my desk ever since. So one thing I knew already about this Sebastião Salgado: he really cared about people. That meant a lot in my book. After all, people are the salt of the Earth”. The photograph of the blind woman is blacked out and instead there emerges a static and long held frame (vide: Photo 1). It presents a landscape with mountain ranges, and on a stone, with his back facing the camera, there is a man in a summer hat. The viewers can get the impression that the shot is a photograph, but the trees and the bushes move with the wind. The shot is black and white. And all Salgado’s photographs are like that: they utilise all the shades of grey, because they were made using light and shadows¹⁵. The frame presenting Salgado includes an important message to the viewers: it announces a film story about the work and life of the main subject of the report. Within the same shot, the photographer talks about his subjective view of the world and people.

“Put several photographers in one place,” said Salgado, “and their photographs will always be very different”. Because by definition they come from very different places. [...] Each of them has developed a different way of looking at things depending on her/his experiences. As for me, my way of looking formed right here. This is the perfect planet. I used to go with my father for long walks in this land. [...] this is where I dreamt, I wanted to walk through all the mountains, discover.

The photographs made by Salgado, because they were quoted in the film, form something of an additional information channel for the viewers. The photographs fulfil a double function: on the one hand, they fulfil the aesthetic function, on the other, they convey information on the perception of the world by their creator.

¹³ Vide: M. Przyłipiak, “Poetyka kina dokumentalnego”, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, Gdansk–Słupsk 2004.

¹⁴ Wenders is a globally acclaimed director of feature films and documentaries. His works are identifiable through the recurrence of certain themes and motifs, e.g.: human journey, mass culture, America, solitude, inability to communicate, the role of images in our lives, the situation of the cinema and new technologies.

¹⁵ The word photographer came from two Greek words: *phos* (light) and *gráphein* (write, draw). A photographer is a person who draws with light – a person recording the world using light and shadows.

One might say that there are two narrators in “The Salt of the Earth”, and that the narration features a frame structure. That is particularly visible in those fragments of the film when the camera presents the meaning-rich photographs accompanied by Salgado’s discussions. The director gave that narration structure an additional shape when the photojournalist’s face is reflected in the glass of a clip frame. The viewers can have the impression that the creator of the admired works is emerging from them. That device knocks the viewers off balance, and works as a visual exclamation mark. The photographs work in the documentary with increased strength, as if in response to the verbal (restated) utterance of the director-narrator, who explains his role in the process of creating the film. He addresses the viewers with these words:

Father and son Salgado¹⁶ invited me to joint them and continue this film together. To add an outside view to their adventure, I guess. I didn’t hesitate a bit. What else could I ask for? I would finally get to know this man, find out what was driving him, and why his work had left such an impression on me. Little did I know that I was going to discover much more than just a photographer.

Photo 1. Salgado presented in Wenders’s film on the family estate. He discussed how every photographer sees a specific fragment of reality differently; 7’33”



Source: own screenshot.

¹⁶ Juliano Ribeiro Salgado, son of Sebastião Salgado, was the other director of “The Salt of the Earth”. He documented with a video camera his father’s most recent project entitled *Genesis*. The material was used in the film. Material from journeys to unspoilt locations appeared twice in Wenders’s film.

Salgado's face "emerges" several times during the presentation of the photographs. Those moments are informatively valuable and they are emotionally loaded. It occurs for the first time during the introduction to the documentary when Salgado talks about the photographs taken in the gold mine. The author explained:

In front of me, there is Serra Pelada, a Brazilian gold mine. When I stood at the top of the huge hole, all my hair stood on end. I have never seen anything like it. I felt that in a fraction of a second the whole history of humanity passed before my eyes. The construction of the pyramids, the Tower of Babel, King Solomon's mines... Not a single machine could be heard, only the voices of 50,000 people in a great hole. Conversations, noise, human murmur...

After that statement, the photographer's face appears reflected in the glass of a clip frame. Thus Wenders created a portrait of the man whom he presented to the viewers. He himself continued:

...mixing with the noise of the work. I found myself at the dawn of time. I could almost hear as gold whispered in the hearts of the workers. You get the impression that they are slaves, yet there was not a single slave there. If someone was a slave, then only to the desire for wealth. Everyone was dreaming about wealth. People of all sorts were there: intellectuals, university guys, farm hands, urban workers. Each of them was looking for their break. [...] Anyone who touches gold once changes for ever.

Through his work and what he says, the Brazilian photographer indicates the similarities between his contemporary times and those of antiquity and Biblical times. Together with the commentary, the photographs become an allegory describing human history and the human condition in the contemporary world. Salgado the commentator is a demiurge viewing the world through the lens, and, at the same time, a translator of the rules governing global civilisation. Another narration device of this type was included during the presentation of photographs taken when documenting the drought in Niger (1973). The film image is filled with a succession of photographs and figures of black women with children waiting in Tahoni for water and food. When Salgado is talking about the effects of the drought of 1973 in Niger, a reflection of his face once again "emerges" as a clip frame reflection. The closing shot of the scene presents the photographer sitting on a chair in a gallery, with his back facing the camera, staring at his photographs from Africa. It is clear how focussed he is on contemplating his own works, what they depict. For the third and final time, the viewers can see the face "emerging" from a clip frame during the presentation of photographs taken during

his journey deep into Brazil (1981–1983). He begins the story about his homeland and his people with the issue of mortality among infants that die before they are baptised. The film presents photographs of children in small coffins brimming with flowers. The children look like porcelain dolls. The images are contrasted with the statement that each coffin is re-used several times. At that moment, there appears a photograph of a child lying in the grave without the coffin followed by a photograph of a coffin shop/rental. That part of the report evokes high emotions among the viewers. The utilisation of the topos of the death of a child leads to the psychological stimulation and evoking of affection specific for pathos. That is the time for the sudden “emergence” of Salgado’s face from the clip frame as he moves closer to the photograph to view it in detail. At that moment the following words are spoken: “[...] in the church, there is a coffin rental, yes..., shoes were lying there, they had everything there. In that part of the world, life and death are close to each other”. Many little coffins for small children, piles of used shoes for rental for the funerals next to sweets and bread for sale, and the photographer’s words sounding as if it was something absolutely normal. The reporter’s words help break the reflection and grief coming from the Brazilian photographs. They serve the purpose of comforting the viewers – as much as any comforting is possible when one talks about death.

Photographs from later visits to Ethiopia, Tanzania, Congo, Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Mali are presented and discussed through voice-over. Salgado appears as a physical figure dressed in a black shirt and shot in close-up. That was deliberate as in that part of the documentary, the Master revealed to the viewers his emotions associated with reactions to evil with which he came into contact in various parts of the world. He visited many places in Africa thanks to the Médecins Sans Frontières organisation. In front of the camera, he presented facts about the migrations of entire peoples fleeing conflict and drought, i.e. hunger and thirst. The photographer’s face (only) changes in two parts of the film story as a result of his recollections from Yugoslavia (1994–1995) and Congo (1994 and 1997) “[...] in the middle of Europe”, Salgado spoke with difficulty to the camera, “at the end of the 20th c. – violence, brutality, death... One of our hallmarks is extreme brutality. It is a story without an end, a story of madness”. He then reports on events from Congo, on the fact that during the Tutsi and Hutu migrations, approx. 15,000 people died each day of cholera raging due to a lack of food, drinking water and hygiene. At that moment the viewers can observe, thanks to a close-up on Salgado’s face, sadness in his eyes. That is confirmed by the words aligned with the images: “[...] everyone should see those images to see how terrible a species we are. [...] I left that place seriously ill, I was physically falling apart. I was not suffering from any infectious disease. It was my soul that was ill.” In 1997, Salgado documented the fleeing of nearly 2 million people from Rwanda. Few returned after six months spent in the jungle. Many died of

exhaustion, others lost their minds, some were murdered. The photographer talks about those events and closes his eyes, while the verbal layer includes accusations: “When I returned, I could not believe in anything. I did not believe in human salvation. You cannot survive something like that. We did not deserve to be living. No one did. How many times did I put my camera down to cry over what I saw”. After those words, the film is blacked out, and the narrator’s words form a coda: “Sebastião had seen into the heart of darkness”.

The use of close-ups (including close-ups of the face) are the most common source of film artefacts. It has even acquired a name within the history of film studies: the visual topos of the face. The face and close-ups, or details were discussed by Béla Balázs when he created the catalogue of basic film devices. “A close-up enables one to discover and reveal new views of items, but most of all”, as Jacek Ostaszewski stressed, “it discovers and presents the human face, as it is in a close-up that one can grasp the physiognomy and facial expressions, which are the most subjective means of human expression [...]”¹⁷ Balázs rejected other close-ups than those associated with the close-up of one’s face. In the context of the studies developed by the researcher, it should be stressed that a close-up of a face enables one to reveal the psychological content of the person being presented, which in turn is a strong source of artefacts. Gesche Joost called a close-up of one’s face the “index of human psyche” and the “artefact carrier.” He referred in particular to silent films, but he also stressed that a person’s face in close-up can be treated as a **visual topos**¹⁸. Gilles Deleuze, a post-modernist philosopher of cinema, offered a similar classification of the close-up of a person’s face. He identified film images of perception, action, and images of emotion. “Emotion-image is a close-up shot, while a close-up is a face”¹⁹. As the basis of his reflection, the philosopher considered the work of esteemed silent film directors, e.g. Sergei Eisenstein and David W. Griffith, and their experiences with montage and selection of shot. “The face is an oval nerve plate, which sacrifices the main content of its general ability to move and which gathers or expresses with ease all types of minute local motions, which are usually suppressed by the body”²⁰. A close-up of the face of the artist talking about his works enabled Wenders to show the price Salgado had to pay for making the effort to discuss social problems. Salgado’s works became the source of information on people inhabiting distant countries. Those featured in his photographs often possess external features which confirm their resolve

¹⁷ A. Helman, J. Ostaszewski, “Historia myśli filmowej”, Wydawnictwo Słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdansk 2010, p. 50.

¹⁸ Vide: G. Joost, “Die audio-visuelle Rhetorik des Films”, Transcript, Bielfeld 2008.

¹⁹ Vide: G. Deleuze, “1. Kino. Obraz – ruch, 2. Obraz – czas”, Wydawnictwo Słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdansk 2008, p. 99. “Image – emotion” I call “emotional image” due to the rhetoric significance of emotion in successful communication.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

and physical strength. Their faces, as the author stated, are “etched by life” (the inhabitants of Latin America), physically exploited bodies (gold mine workers, Iranians working at Hussein’s refineries), bodies whipped by the wind and the desert sand and those exhausted through the lack of food and water (Ethiopia, Congo, Tanzania, Mali). The viewers get to know those people thanks to the camera lens. That is the function of “documentary photography”²¹. Salgado was accused of prettifying indigence, tragedy, poverty, and armed and social conflicts. Sontag even wrote once that he “aestheticised poverty”, and made it attractive enough for the viewers to become fascinated only with its artistic quality²². Reference in this accusation should be made to the question about the artistic character of the photograph. Kracauer indicated that “[...] photography has always been appreciated as a source of beauty”²³. That statement did not only apply to beauty perceived as an aesthetic quality. “Photographs often are,” he wrote, “beautiful for us because they satisfy our desire for knowledge”²⁴. Viewers come into contact with that type of beauty when they discover distant countries, which were visited and recorded on *film* by Salgado²⁵. His photographs also possess an aesthetic quality. The photographs of the *Genesis* project reflect the unique beauty of places unspoiled by human civilisation. It is clear, though, that the Brazilian photographer inscribed in almost all his works the beauty of broadly defined art, which results from the creative attitude of the creator towards reality. Salgado possesses a unique style, and he views the world through his own (creative) perspective.

A report on art which presents an artist utilises the rhetorical strategy of a *text within a text*. That was the case in “The Salt of the Earth”, but if one looks closer at other documentaries on art, one might notice that the strategy is quite common. That is so when a film quotes (presents respectively) photographs, paintings, works of architecture, or sculptures. In the case of photographs, a peculiar situation occurs. “The film was built from photographs,” wrote Czeczot-Gawrak, “and thus the film on art in one respect developed the effects achieved in static photographic

²¹ Vide: S. Kracauer, “Teoria filmu. Wyzwolenie materialnej rzeczywistości”, transl. by W. Wertenstein, 2nd ed., Wydawnictwo Słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdansk 2008, p. 41 [English version translated from Polish]. The term *documentary photography* seems a tautology, as photography itself entails a documentary nature. In the theory of photography, Kracauer used in relation to the photographer such terms as: *an artist, an anthropologist, and a reporter* who is a *witness, an observer, and an alien*. As an observer and a documenter, the photographer, according to Kracauer, “resembles a neutral mirror” as he is not involved in the events he witnesses.

²² Vide: E. Borkowska, “Sebastiao Salgado. Opowieść o fotografii, który udowodnił, że ziemia jest mokra od łez”, <http://weekend.gazeta.pl/weekend/1,152121,19070589,sebastiao-salgado-opowiesc-o-fotografie-ktory-udowodnil-ze.html> [accessed on: 15.02.2017].

²³ S. Kracauer, op. cit., p. 48.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²⁵ S. Salgado develops all his photographs in his own darkroom – once analogue, digital today.

reproductions”²⁶. The German director used photographs to talk about a world as perceived by another artist, and he did so exactly through those static images. The image layer is accompanied by narration – by the photographer talking about his journeys, or the director, when the commentary applied to Salgado’s biography or photographs of his family members. “The Salt of the Earth” twice utilised film accounts on the most recent project called *Genesis* authored by Juliano Salgado, the photographer’s son. The two film fragments presented Sebastiao at work – directly when taking photographs. A careful viewer would notice that the artist was focussed on how to best capture within a frame a selected fragment of reality. Those film fragments appeared at the beginning and the end of the main story serving as a frame for the presentation of the artist’s technique and the story told by him documented with the photographs from his journeys. In a report of the *narrative journalism* type, i.e. which discusses and seeks the truth about the world, the only genre marker is the need to present various points of view on a topic, problem, or a figure. In my opinion, Wim Wenders’s film is exactly that type of report: one which seeks the answers to important universal questions, at the same time successfully grasping the viewers’ attention.

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²⁶ Z. Czczot-Gawrak, op. cit., p. 17.

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The "Salt of the Earth" documentary film by Wim Wenders as an implementation of the *text within a text* rhetorical strategy

(Summary)

Wim Wenders's report is devoted to the output of the world-renowned photographer Sebastião Salgado. The presentation of his works in the documentary employed the *text within a text* composition, or rather *photography within a documentary*. The director emphasised the photographs and the statements by the photographer in such a way that the viewers could learn about Salgado as the author of his works and as a human, a humanist concerned about the fate of contemporary human beings. The analysis and the interpretation of the report enabled me to reflect theoretically on the definition and the specificity of photography.

Keywords: Report on art, rhetoric of a documentary, topos of the face, anthropology, ethos of a director.