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Sebastião Salgado in Sahel: critical discourse in contemporary photography

*Sebastião Salgado em Sahel: O discurso crítico na fotografia contemporânea**Sebastião Salgado en El Sahel: Discurso Crítico en la fotografía contemporánea*

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Abstract

Photographic images have their own language and can convey narratives and discourses. Based on this principle, this article aims to improve understanding of photographic language by presenting analyses and reflections on how certain photographs express beliefs and values associated with Critical Humanist Discourse, as defined in this article. First, the main characteristics of this discourse were defined. Then, ten images from Sebastião Salgado's 1986 book *Sahel: The End of the Road* were analyzed to confirm whether they can be classified as belonging to this discourse. In this text, we present a thorough analysis of one of the selected images — the one that best exemplifies how photography can express the beliefs and values associated with Critical Humanist Discourse.

Keywords: Photography; Critical Humanist Discourse; Sebastião Salgado.**Resumo**

A imagem fotográfica tem sua linguagem e pode ser portadora de narrativas e discursos. Partindo desse princípio, este artigo pretende contribuir para o melhor entendimento da linguagem fotográfica, apresentando análises e reflexões sobre como determinadas fotografias podem expressar crenças e valores associados ao que é definido nesse artigo como Discurso Humanista Crítico. Para realizar essa proposta, primeiramente foram definidas quais seriam as principais características pertencentes a esse discurso e, em seguida, analisadas imagens do livro *Sahel: the End of the Road* (1986), de Sebastião Salgado, com o objetivo de confirmar se essas imagens podem ser classificadas como pertencentes a esse discurso. Neste texto, será apresentada a análise completa de uma das imagens escolhidas, exatamente aquela que melhor exemplifica como a fotografia pode expressar crenças e valores associadas ao Discurso Humanista Crítico.

Palavras-chave: Fotografia; Discurso Humanista Crítico; Sebastião Salgado.**Resumen**

Las imágenes fotográficas poseen un lenguaje propio y pueden transmitir narrativas y discursos. Partiendo de este principio, este artículo busca contribuir a una mejor comprensión del lenguaje fotográfico, presentando análisis y reflexiones sobre cómo ciertas fotografías pueden expresar

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All data analyzed during this study are included in this published article (and its supporting information). The original images used in the analysis are the property of their respective copyright holders and licensing agencies (Contrasto / Amazonas Images / Christie's). The links and identification codes to locate the works in the official archives have been provided in the body of the text.

Ethical Considerations:

This research was conducted in strict compliance with the ethical principles of scientific production and intellectual property. Because this is a study based exclusively on the analysis of previously published and publicly accessible documentary visual material, there was no need for submission to the Research Ethics Committee (CEP), under the terms of CNS Resolution No. 510/2016. The analysis of Sebastião Salgado's photographs fully respects the authorship of the works, attributing due credit to the copyright holders. Furthermore, the study is guided by respect for human dignity and the memory of the populations portrayed, addressing the records of social vulnerability from a strictly academic, analytical, and historical perspective, without any commercial purpose or sensationalist exploitation of the images.

Gender and Race Considerations:

In compliance with ethical standards and SAGER (Sex and Gender Equity in Research) guidelines, the authors declare that this study is based exclusively on the hermeneutic analysis of secondary and publicly accessible iconographic sources, exempting it from a clinical opinion and ensuring respect for human dignity and the intellectual property of historical records.

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creencias y valores asociados a lo que aquí se define como Discurso Humanista Crítico. Para llevar a cabo esta propuesta, se definieron primero las principales características de este discurso y, posteriormente, se analizaron diez imágenes del libro *Sahel: el fin del camino* (1986), de Sebastião Salgado, con el fin de confirmar si dichas imágenes pueden clasificarse dentro de este discurso. Este texto presenta un análisis completo de una de las imágenes seleccionadas, precisamente aquella que mejor ejemplifica cómo la fotografía puede expresar creencias y valores asociados al Discurso Humanista Crítico.

Palabras clave: Fotografía; Discurso Humanista Crítico; Sebastião Salgado.

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Introduction

For decades, photography was understood as a mirror of reality and was used primarily for documentary and archival purposes. Today, however, it is difficult to find any researcher in the field of communication who still holds that the photographic image is an exact copy of reality. The vast majority of theorists from the various fields concerned with photography consider, in their analyses and reflections, that photography possesses a language that can be studied and classified not only from a formal point of view, but also according to the beliefs and values it conveys.

This article seeks to contribute to a better understanding of photographic language by presenting analyses and reflections on images that express beliefs and values associated with what is here termed the Critical Humanist Discourse. In summary, this type of photography tends to represent the human being in a non-affirmative, and at times tragic, manner. These are images with strong expressive impact, produced with the intention of denouncing the hardships and food insecurity to which people are subjected in various parts of the world. Through this denunciation, these photographers seek to raise awareness among the members of their society and encourage them to participate in actions that may help solve these problems.

The text also presents a critical reflection on the work of the renowned Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado, focusing on his use of “surviving images” (Warburg, 2013) as a rhetorical and aesthetic resource to produce images that express beliefs and values associated with this discourse. Sebastião Salgado was chosen because, from the beginning of his career, he has used photographic language as an important resource in his struggle against the tragic effects produced by the capitalist system: inequality among human beings, the exploitation of workers, wars, and excessive consumption, which together have gradually been destroying the planet (Caujolle, 2009; Nair, 2011¹).

Among Salgado’s various works, which are believed to express these characteristics, the book *Sahel: The End of the Road* (1986)² was selected for analysis. This work contains 115 black-and-white images that predominantly depict the suffering of the African Sahel population, devastated by a severe drought in the 1980s³. From this set of images, this text will present an analysis of only one photograph, chosen because it is considered the most representative of the critical discourse we refer to and because it also serves as a good example of how the Brazilian photographer uses Christian iconography as a rhetorical and aesthetic strategy.

The selected photograph was analyzed through a semiotic-based method, which considers the image as a sign—and therefore as an imperfect representation of reality—and photography as a language whose combined elements/signs can express values, beliefs, and sensations. This method is concerned not only with the analysis of the image itself, but also seeks to investigate the relevant texts, both visual and written, connected to it within the culture in which it is embedded—in this case, Western culture.

To reflect on the results of the analyses, the article uses as theoretical operators the concept of discourse developed by Michel Foucault throughout his work and the concept of *Nachleben* — surviving images — developed by Aby Warburg in the early twentieth century and updated in recent years by Ginzburg (2003) and Huberman (2013). Foucault’s notion of discourse was used as the basis for structuring the concept of Critical Discourse. The notion of the surviving image, in turn, helped to clarify the Christian iconography used by Sebastião Salgado rhetorically and expressively.

The article is divided into three parts. The first presents the theoretical concepts chosen to guide the reflection on the analyses, with particular emphasis on explaining how Foucault’s notion of discourse was used to structure the concept of Critical Discourse. At this stage, the concept of the surviving image (*Nachleben*) is also examined in greater detail, relating it to Salgado’s rhetorical use of Christian iconography. In the second part, the semiotic-based methodology is described in more detail, along with an enumeration of the results of the initial analyses in accordance with the previously established

¹ In his interviews, exhibitions, and even in the introductions to his books, the native of Aimorés, Minas Gerais, consistently states that the main objective of his work is to reform society through social awareness—one of the principal characteristics of photographers who produce this type of image,

² First published in 1986 by the French publisher Prisma Presse, the book analyzed in this article was published in 2004 by the University of California Press, California.

³ In 1984, the famine in the Sahel “affected 200 million people in twenty African countries” (NAIR, 2011, p. 59).

methodological parameters. Still within this section, the first reflections are developed and supported by the theoretical framework of the previously selected concepts. Finally, the article presents its conclusion.

It is important to note that, although this article is limited to the interpretive analysis of a single work by Sebastião Salgado, this delimitation does not seek to exhaust either his vast production or the plurality contained in *Sahel: The End of the Road*. The choice of a case study is justified by the semiotic depth required to reveal the complexity of the Critical Humanist Discourse. Moreover, because it is circumscribed to a single image and to a photographer whose visual grammar is strongly authorial, the analysis should be understood as a case study guided by a specific interpretive hypothesis. Any future expansion of this model would require its comparative application to other images, photographic series, and authors to verify its consistency, limits, and possible variations.

Theoretical Framework

Salgado's Visual Grammar

This text is based on the semiotic premise that access to the world outside the human subject occurs indirectly, through imperfect representations conventionally called signs (Nöth, 1995; Santaella, 2002). From this perspective, signs constitute the basis of any language—whether written, visual, sonic, and so forth—and, because they are imperfect representations of what they represent, they have the potential to convey beliefs and values. Beliefs, values, and social practices form the basis of what will here be called Discourse.

This broader understanding of the concept of Discourse is close to the way it is understood in Foucault's work (1999; 2006). For the French thinker, discourse is more than a set of words or statements; it constitutes a form of social construction that can express social relations and values existing within a community (Foucault, 2006). Each discourse would propose distinct ways of perceiving the world, with analytical categories that translate reality through specific filters. From this point of view, photographs would be formed by a set of signs with culturally predefined meanings which, however, may vary in signification over time and/or according to the context in which they are inserted. This implies considering that the values and beliefs associated with photographic signs are neither natural nor universal, and that their meanings may vary depending on the way they are organized in the image, the historical moment in which they are used, where they are circulated, and the subjectivity of those who interpret them (Sekula, 2013; Butler, 2015).⁴

Photographic language is understood as a set of photographic signs—which will also be referred to here as “elements”—and the code that orders them. According to the choices and combinations each photographer makes regarding these elements, he or she creates a visual grammar of their own, through which, consciously or not, they express their beliefs and values. The main elements of photographic language that stand out in Sebastião Salgado's work—and that will be addressed in the image analyses in this article—are composition, framing, the use of light, and the choice of black-and-white photography, which he rarely abandoned. The use of black and white is a choice observed in all the images of the series selected for analysis, as well as in most of Salgado's work. According to the photographer, this choice is consistent with his perception that black and white is a more poetic visual language than “color” and that these sober tones are more appropriate for dealing with humanitarian themes (*Revista Prosa, Arte e Verso*, 2022).

Since childhood, Salgado had been fascinated by light and its effects, which contributed to light's prominent place in his work. Most of the time, he uses light to create a dramatic effect, highlighting a tragic scene. However, always attentive to the expressive possibilities offered by the scene before him, the Brazilian photographer also does not hesitate to use light to suggest the manifestation of the divine, especially in unexpected places, emphasizing it as a sign of hope, as can be seen, for example, in Figure 1.

⁴ Hence the need for an analysis of the context in which the photograph is embedded, in order to determine the meaning of each sign within that context.

Figure 1 - Tigray, Ethiopia (Kalema Camp, Ethiopia or Tigray Exodus).



Source: Author: Sebastião Salgado. CHRISTIE'S - <https://onlineonly.christies.com/s/photographs/sebastiao-salgado-b-1944-178/254004>. Reproduction for academic purposes. Image description for accessibility: Documentary photograph by Sebastião Salgado in a refugee camp in Tigray, Ethiopia, 1985. Dozens of people wearing light-colored blankets seek shelter under two large trees with thick trunks and exposed roots. Diagonal beams of sunlight cut through the air thick with dust and mist, illuminating the group scattered across the ground of dirt and branches.

Another important detail regarding Salgado's visual grammar is that, even though he did not attend courses on Art History, his work clearly reveals his familiarity with the archive of canonical Western forms, which he uses to produce images with strong emotional appeal and also to create beautiful compositions. Much of the impact of his photographs stems from the drama suggested by his artistic use of light. Still, another part, just as important as the expressive use of light, has to do with the appropriate selection of Christian forms in his work.

Christian Iconography and *Nachleben*

Since the beginnings of Christianity, Christian visual forms have been used to assist in teaching and strengthening the devotion of the faithful, as the vast majority were illiterate. During the Middle Ages, this investment in visual language was reinforced through the production of stained-glass windows, frescoes, sculptures, and other religious objects, which were integrated into church architecture for both aesthetic and pedagogical purposes. Recognizing the expressive potential of images, the Council of Trent (1545–1563) established official guidelines for the creation and use of sacred images, reaffirming their role as a valuable educational and devotional tool for the Catholic Church's dissemination of its dogmas and doctrine (Newal, 2009). The presence of Christian iconography in churches and museums around the world, as well as the frequent use of these visual forms over the centuries in various other fields, contributed to their stabilization within the Western symbolic universe, granting them great semantic power, even when they are not consciously identified. According to Aby Warburg, the German art historian, this would occur because these images are “surviving forms,” or *Nachleben*.⁵

The concept of *Nachleben*, coined by Warburg in the early twentieth century, was revitalized at the end of that century and has since been used across fields, including Art History, Cultural History, and Image Theory. The German historian developed the concept of the surviving image in order to analyze the influence of classical antiquity on Renaissance art. He was particularly interested in certain images, symbols, and ideas from the past that had survived within culture and were reinterpreted over time in Western culture.⁶ For those familiar with Art History, it is not difficult to perceive that the logic used by Warburg to reflect on the survival of classical images in the Renaissance can also be applied to Christian images, especially those that have a strong presence in the Western symbolic imagination, as is the case with consecrated visual forms such as the Virgin and Child, *Virgo Lactans*, the *Pietà*, among many others.

The use of visual forms derived from Christian iconography facilitates the reader's understanding of and adherence to the message Salgado seeks to convey, even when the reader is unable to identify them consciously. In this way, the visual grammar of the Brazilian photographer—highly effective at producing

⁵ The term *Nachleben* literally means “afterlife.”

⁶ In his book *Mnemosyne Atlas*, Warburg brought together a collection of images from different historical periods, showing how ancient images were used and reinterpreted in later eras.

dramatic photographs that sensitize viewers—has its rhetorical and expressive power reinforced by the conscious and effective use of surviving Christian forms.

Critical Humanist Discourse or Critical Discourse

In the twentieth century, the tragedy of the Second World War intensified distrust in the unlimited uses of reason and science. This distrust had already emerged in the nineteenth century through the Romantic movement. In addition to the realization that humanity had failed to achieve the universal fulfillment of Enlightenment values, the tragedy of war contributed to the development of a critical way of thinking about reality, strongly influenced by Marxist beliefs and values. From this foundation of beliefs and values, practices and works developed that proposed a more critical view of society, thereby constituting a discourse to be called in this text Critical Discourse.

Thinkers and artists who still believed in Enlightenment ideals but were not satisfied with the results produced up to that point by the prevailing system adhered to this perspective, creating works that opposed what they considered the perverse consequences of capitalism. Their productions sought to denounce the social problems caused by this system's hegemony in the Western world, aiming to create the conditions under which Enlightenment values could be extended to all human beings.

In this way of understanding reality, the basic premise is that the compliant behavior of a large part of society in the face of social inequalities and capitalist exploitation occurs mainly because these people lack the necessary categories to understand reality. This fact would prevent them from perceiving the domination imposed by the ruling class, as well as the terrible consequences of the prevalence of the capitalist system: hunger, war, and poverty (Wood, 1998).

Critical Discourse in Photography

Photography professionals associated with this discourse focused on covering so-called humanitarian themes: war, hunger, and disease (Rouillé, 2009). Through the exhibition and circulation of these images, these photographers sought to sensitize the greatest possible number of people to the existence of such calamities. Salgado belongs to this tradition, which began with Jacob Riis at the end of the nineteenth century (Freund, 2010, p. 109; Higgins, 2012). According to Freund (2010), Riis was the first photographer to use photography as a “weapon” in the struggle to improve the living conditions of the poor sectors of society.

This tradition would continue with the sociologist Lewis Hine, who produced images to raise public awareness and promote social change regarding child labor in American textile factories (Sousa, 2004, p. 59). This was also the type of photograph that Roy Stryker, director of the Farm Security Administration (FSA), had in mind when he hired a group of photographers in the early 1930s with the aim of sensitizing the American urban population to the economic and social crisis faced by their compatriots living in rural areas. Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (1936), for example, is a good example of this type of image.⁷

In summary, the objective of photographers associated with this discourse is to use the photographic image to denounce injustice or serious social situations affecting human beings anywhere in the world. Thus, humanitarian themes are the ones most frequently mobilized by them, and the images generally depict scenes capable of producing a strong impact and evoking strong emotion in the viewer, thereby arousing pity and compassion.

In general, this type of image expresses the following characteristics:

- It addresses humanitarian themes, that is, those related to the struggle for human dignity and to the protection and well-being of people.
- It denounces an injustice that needs to be repaired. It is a form of photography that exposes the tragic reality of people living in conditions of poverty and inequality.
- It is a poignant image. It is strong enough to draw the viewer's attention and produce an emotional impact, sensitizing the viewer to the drama experienced by the subjects portrayed in the photograph.
- It is tragic. It portrays a sad or terrible event in a serious and dignified manner.

⁷ *Migrant Mother* (1936) is one of the most striking images in history, taken by Dorothea Lange during the Great Depression in the United States. It portrays Florence Owens Thompson, a migrant mother with her children, who became a symbol of the vulnerability and strength of poor working mothers.

Methodology

The constitution of the analytical corpus took place in two stages. Initially, an exploratory reading of the 115 photographs in *Sahel: The End of the Road* was carried out in order to identify images with greater adherence to the parameters defined for the Critical Humanist Discourse. The selection of the initial ten photographs was guided by criteria derived from the theoretical framework: the presence of a humanitarian theme; the representation of suffering, precariousness, or inequality; the potential to denounce a historical or political injustice; expressive intensity capable of producing emotional impact; and tragic visual treatment, understood as the serious and dignified figuration of an extreme condition. Priority was therefore given to images in which at least two of these characteristics were perceptibly manifested, whether through the theme itself or through the articulation among framing, composition, light, contrast, and the arrangement of bodies within the photographic space.

Subsequently, an internal comparison of these ten images was conducted to identify the photograph that most consistently captured the four central traits of the Critical Humanist Discourse: humanitarian theme, denunciation of injustice, expressive poignancy, and tragic dimension. The chosen photograph was the one that, in addition to meeting these criteria, presented the greatest density for the article's interpretive hypothesis, insofar as it articulates Sebastião Salgado's visual grammar with the use of a surviving form of Christian iconography. Its selection, therefore, resulted from its capacity to function as an exemplary case for observing how formal, rhetorical, and iconographic procedures may express beliefs and values associated with the Critical Humanist Discourse.

In the analytical stage, corresponding to the first moment, to identify which meanings might be related to the signs that compose the image, we considered Salgado's visual grammar and gathered as much information as possible about the photograph. At this stage, we analyzed the main elements of photographic language that stand out in this image and sought to identify how the selected photograph related to Art History, more specifically to Christian iconography, as well as to the History of Photography. Considering that the meaning expressed by the sign in the context of the analyzed images is not necessarily the same as the meaning it possesses within culture, this type of research, which takes into account visual forms already existing in the symbolic universe, is fundamental for establishing a more precise investigation of the meanings that the sign may express in the specific context in which it is inserted.

In the second, synthetic moment, the concepts previously selected in the theoretical framework were mobilized and applied to the inferences produced in the first moment, with the purpose of making the analyses more complex. It is important to emphasize that the legitimacy of the claims and of the reflection developed in the synthetic moment is strongly anchored in the information and observations produced in the first, more objective moment, so that the inferences produced during the analytical stage were confirmed, corrected, or further developed in the subsequent interpretive moment.

Analysis

Figure 2 - Mali, 1985. Twins being breastfed at the nutritional center.



Source: Author: Sebastião Salgado. CONTRASTO - contrasto.it. Reproduction for academic purposes. Image description for accessibility: Close-up and high-angle documentary photograph by Sebastião Salgado, focusing on a mother's lap as she simultaneously breastfeeds her severely malnourished twin babies. The baby on the left is in profile with a shaved head, while the baby on the right lies on their back. Textured dark fabrics from the mother's clothing and light-colored wraps partially envelop the children's bodies.

Salgado created this image in 1985 on the outskirts of Douentza, Mali, in a refugee camp administered by Médecins Sans Frontières. This camp functioned as a nutrition center for children and breastfeeding mothers. The framing used by the Brazilian photographer — a close-up — suggests that the viewer should focus on the children. The use of the close-up flattens the planes of the image, producing a visual unification of the children so that they are perceived as two similarly oval and mirrored forms, which may lead the viewer to infer that they are twins or siblings of similar age. Natural light casts a diffuse luminosity over the boys, giving their skin a lighter tone that contrasts with the dark clothes worn by the woman breastfeeding them. This contrast highlights and frames the children. The emaciation of their bodies also helps to accentuate the suggestion of disproportion between the children's bodies and heads, indicating both their young age and their weakened physical condition.

The most evident visual quality of the children is their thinness, which may prompt a viewer to reflect on the food insecurity they face. Particularly striking are the clearly visible rib bones and the wrinkled wrist of the baby occupying the right side of the photograph, as well as the skin beneath his arm, full of folds. This wrinkling is probably a consequence of his extreme thinness and of the difficult life to which he has been exposed since his earliest days. On his almost bare head, one sees only a tuft of sparse hair and protruding veins, indicators that he has not received the care necessary for healthy development. Despite the food insecurity to which they had previously been subjected, at the moment of the photograph, the children were being fed, which may also provoke in a potential viewer a feeling of hope for a better fate for this pair of infants, at least for those who find themselves in nutrition centers such as those administered by Médecins Sans Frontières.

The children were positioned at the center of the photograph, close to the areas known as golden points, while the woman's head, breastfeeding them, was cut off by Salgado's framing.⁸ This framing defines for the viewer who the subject of the image is. Although the composition prioritizes the children, a more detailed investigation of this image reveals important information for its interpretation. Visually, little is conveyed about the woman: her breasts are withered, and her state of health does not seem to be the best, but even so, she is willing to care for the children. Beside the head of the boy, located on the right side of the image, one can perceive a bare, light-colored foot blending into the ground, probably belonging to this woman, suggesting that she is seated directly on the sand, without any kind of support to provide her with comfort, such as a chair or a bench. Her body is covered by a dark and worn fabric, with grains of sand caught on the surface of the cloth, probably carried by the wind. This fabric forms a large black mass that dominates the left side of the photograph and helps frame the children. Although the two children bear some physical resemblance to one another, it is not possible to determine whether they are siblings, relatives, or even whether the woman is the mother of either of them, since the only available information about this photograph is a text found at the end of the book *Sahel: The End of the Road*, which reveals that the image was produced in a nutrition center that provided food for children and for nursing mothers.

The term *nursing mothers*, although ambiguous, may help us better understand the photograph. The most obvious translation of the term is "mothers who are breastfeeding," but in the 1980s, this expression was also used to refer to women who breastfed children who could not be cared for by their biological mothers. These women were responsible for providing a welcoming and safe environment for babies who had been separated from their mothers.⁹ In addition to breastfeeding, nursing mothers were also responsible for changing diapers, bathing the children, and preparing complementary food for them. During the 1980s, in a context of food scarcity and high levels of child malnutrition, these women performed an essential function in saving the lives of thousands of babies. This practice, known as cross-nursing, was crucial in ensuring that these children received affection and essential nutrients from breast milk even when their biological mothers were not able to breastfeed.

⁸ The golden points are key elements in visual composition, derived from the Golden Ratio, which is an irrational mathematical constant, approximately 1.618, represented by the Greek letter phi, ϕ . Golden points are points of intersection that emerge when the Golden Ratio is applied to a rectangular area, such as a painting canvas or a photographic frame.

⁹ The nutrition centers administered by Médecins Sans Frontières aimed to provide nutritional and medical assistance to populations in situations of humanitarian crisis, such as famine and malnutrition. Thus, when a mother was unable to breastfeed her baby, whether for health reasons, malnutrition, or other circumstances, nursing women played a crucial role by offering their breast milk to feed these infants.

Surviving Form

This scene, in addition to the strong visual impact of the children's physical appearance and the role of the woman who feeds them, has great symbolic power, linked to the religious character evoked by the visual form. This image may be understood as a derivation of the Christian iconography known as *Virgo Lactans*. In Christian culture, the earliest manifestations of this visual form are related to the image of the goddess Isis feeding Horus. This pagan representation would later have been Christianized by Coptic art and incorporated into the Christian religion in its early years, finding strong resonance among the first believers due to its emphasis on maternal love and the divinity of the child. In Catholic iconography, the dissemination of this visual representation was encouraged to awaken emotional responses in Christians, evoking feelings of love, care, protection, and compassion. The Church believed that this image could help the faithful connect with Jesus' humanity and with his compassion for all human beings.

There is no specific work that may be considered "the" Western iconographic reference for representing the *Virgo Lactans*. In the Middle Ages, the Byzantine style depicted this visual form in a stylized manner against a golden background, suggesting the symbolic importance of this image, as can be seen, for example, in the mosaic on the façade of the Church of Santa Maria in Trastevere (1290–1310) in Rome. In the Renaissance, although Mary and Jesus were portrayed in a more realistic and less aristocratic manner, especially in Northern Europe, mother and child continued to be dressed with celestial refinement, surrounded by gold embroidery and precious stones, as can be seen in *The Lucca Madonna*, painted by Jan van Eyck in 1437.

Until modern times, regardless of the style in which they were depicted, the bodies of the mother and her divine child were predominantly represented in an idealized manner: healthy, well-nourished, and wrapped in fine fabrics, thus stabilizing this image within the Western symbolic imagination. Viewers' familiarity with this representation probably contributes to increasing the impact of Salgado's photograph through the contrast between the traditional Christian visual form and the precarious conditions to which the refugees portrayed by the artist are subjected. In addition to the meanings of compassion normally evoked by images of the *Virgo Lactans*, the physical condition of the subjects, as well as the environment of scarcity in which they are situated — in contrast to traditional Christian images — may stimulate in the viewer, consciously or not, an even more intense feeling of compassion, especially if the viewer considers the possibility that these children may not be this woman's biological offspring and that she is taking them in as an act of charity.

Another relevant updating of the Christian visual form is the inclusion of a second baby in the traditional Christian scene. This gesture, in addition to reinforcing solidarity, also connects this visual form to the idea of donation. The viewer is faced with a woman who, despite her precarious state of health, is willing to breastfeed not only one but two children whose parentage is not made explicit — neither of them may be her biological child.

Considerations

In most of the images chosen by Salgado to compose the book *Sahel: The End of the Road*, it is possible to observe the emphasis the photographer places, through his chosen framings, on the precariousness to which the inhabitants of that region were subjected. This choice, which would probably already be sufficient to awaken compassion in most potential viewers, is intensified by the use of consecrated visual forms from Christian iconography. Even if viewers cannot immediately perceive the origins of Salgado's visual forms, they may still be indirectly affected by them due to the long persistence of these images within the Western symbolic universe.

It is important to emphasize that Salgado not only refers to Christian visual forms but also updates them. Although not all the images in the book present surviving visual forms from Christian iconography, the vast majority of these photographs have as their main objective the awakening of a feeling of solidarity in the viewer. The photographic rhetoric present in this set of images, especially those that combine religious and secular references — Art History and the History of Photography — aims to make clear to a potential viewer the tragic situation these people in the Sahel region face. This choice is based on the belief that, upon becoming aware of this tragic situation, people will act and transform this reality.

The plasticity of Sebastião Salgado's images should not be interpreted as an aestheticization of misery that alienates the viewer, but rather as a rhetorical strategy of engagement. It must be acknowledged,



however, that the aesthetic effectiveness of these images does not eliminate the ethical questions raised by the representation of others' suffering. By transforming hunger, precariousness, and bodily vulnerability into images of great compositional force, Salgado operates within a zone of tension between political denunciation and formal beauty. On the one hand, aesthetic elaboration — visible in the framing, the expressive use of light, tonal contrast, and the approximation to consecrated iconographic forms — contributes to the dignity of the subjects portrayed and to intensifying the viewer's ethical response.

On the other hand, this same elaboration may increase the risk of aestheticizing pain, that is, of reducing a historical situation of violence, abandonment, and inequality to an object of visual contemplation. In the case analyzed, this tension should not be understood as an insoluble contradiction. Still, rather than a constitutive dimension of humanitarian photography, its critical power depends precisely on its ability to make an injustice visible without reducing the photographed subjects to passive emblems of suffering. Thus, the beauty of the image does not necessarily neutralize its political dimension; rather, it may function as a rhetorical resource for moral mobilization, provided that it is articulated in ways that preserve the dignity of those portrayed and explicitly recognize the historical conditions that produced their vulnerability.

Indeed, these photographs, together with other equally important international initiatives, such as the single "We Are the World" — written by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie and produced by Quincy Jones — and the Live Aid concerts — featuring major singers from the United States and England¹⁰ — both produced in 1985, helped create a sense of global *Caritas* and raised significant sums of money, which contributed to effective improvements in the condition of Africans in that region during the 1980s.¹¹

Conclusion

This article aimed to contribute to a better understanding of photographic language by presenting analyses and reflections on how certain photographs can express beliefs and values associated with what has here been termed the Critical Humanist Discourse. Starting from the premise that the photographic image possesses a language and may carry narratives and discourses, the article analyzed an image by Sebastião Salgado from the book *Sahel: The End of the Road*. Salgado was chosen because he is an internationally recognized photographer whose images are at once beautiful and dramatic and address themes linked to the Critical Humanist Discourse, such as labor, migration, childhood, and war.¹²

After the analyses, we consider that the initial objectives were achieved, since the correspondence between the main characteristics observed in the analyzed image and those previously defined as typical of Critical Discourse was confirmed. The manifestation of a humanitarian theme was identified — hunger and its consequences — as well as the denunciation of an injustice — the abandonment of the Sahel population by the world's major economic powers. In addition, it is an impactful photograph due to its dramatic composition and the use of consecrated visual forms, and a tragic one insofar as it can awaken compassion and solidarity in viewers.

The application of the concept of *Nachleben*, combined with a semiotic-based method, made it possible to better understand how Salgado used a consecrated Christian form to create a rhetorical and aesthetic strategy that intensified the critical dimension of this image. It was concluded that the choice of Christian visual forms is very likely related to the long prevalence of these forms within the shared Western symbolic universe, which increases the likelihood that they will be identified by potential viewers, consciously or unconsciously, and that these viewers will therefore be more likely to be affected by the photograph's message.

A possible development for this article would be to research other photographers who also use Critical Discourse as a reference in creating their work, so that this typology can be tested and better understood. Research such as that presented in this article contributes to a better understanding of photographic language. It aligns with the current moment by enabling a more appropriate understanding of visual language and of contemporaneity itself, which is profoundly shaped by language and visual forms.

¹⁰ In 1985, Bob Geldof and Midge Ure organized two simultaneous concerts to raise funds to fight famine in Ethiopia: one at Wembley Stadium in London, England, and another at John F. Kennedy Stadium in Philadelphia, United States.

¹¹ Officially, Live Aid raised around £150 million, and the single "We Are the World" and its related products — album, music video, and merchandise — raised more than US\$80 million for humanitarian aid in Africa and the United States.

¹² Even though, in the early twenty-first century, Salgado decided to replace the tragic focus with a style that ranges between the epic and the idyllic, his photographs remained aesthetically beautiful from a classical perspective, and his political project continued to be that of sensitizing the public in order to transform the world so that humanist beliefs and values may be realized (author).

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