The caption of Sebastião Salgado’s photograph Blind woman from the region of Gondan, Mali, 1985 reads, “With dead eyes worn out by sand storms and chronic infections, this woman from the region of Gondan has arrived at the end of her voyage”. Without reading the caption, the viewer may be taken aback by the beauty of the photograph but not realize the gravity of the subject’s situation. This effect of beauty in Sebastião Salgado’s photographs has led to criticism of his tendency to aestheticize suffering. The power of aesthetics to shape the way we perceive anguish and adversity has proved to be a powerful representational and political tool. In this essay I will explore this particular photograph’s aesthetic and formal elements and how they address complex issues of subject-object interactions, power relations, and problems plaguing socially committed photography.

Blind woman depicts a woman in contemplation, her right eye hidden by the shadow of her garment and her left eye revealed by the dramatic lighting that emphasizes her blindness. The portrait is made all the more haunting for the viewer with knowledge of her condition. Perhaps criticism of Salgado’s work stems from his penchant for imbuing the tragic with beauty that transcends the reality of the situation, but at the expense of the viewer’s immediate concern. The professional quality of the shot, one that could have been taken in a studio, also contributes to this sense of beauty obtained by subtle manipulations.

Roland Barthes’ theories about the creation of meaning in photographs are useful in analyzing Blind woman. Barthes bases his argument on the photograph’s ability to represent implied meanings without seeming to do so; our trust in mechanical reproduction makes it seem as if the photograph is pure and indisputable fact – What in the photograph is fact?

The photograph’s specious quality of factuality and supposed absence of a code leads to the assumption or mindset that the photograph was created without any involvement of a human hand when in fact there are issues of framing and aesthetics at work. The presence of the coded message is not immediately apparent, but upon closer inspection one realizes that the photograph is the most subtly deceiving/deceptive of all visual representations because it seems not to be a representation at all.

It is due to the photograph’s seeming lack of code that it is necessary to emphasize the importance of the contextual framework of sociological, historical and cultural factors that inform the photograph’s transmission and reception. The frame of reference around a photograph and its viewer determines its message and how it is received. This frame allows the photographer to create a message that transcends the image of the photograph itself. Blind woman utilizes