

Pulitzer Prize Photograph Brings Awareness—At a Price

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PULITZER PRIZE PHOTOGRAPH

Joseph Pulitzer is most renowned for the award that is given annually in his name to outstanding pieces of American journalism. His work as a journalist and newspaper publisher was forthright and revealing; his reputation as “a passionate crusader against dishonest government” was irrefutable (Topping, 1999). Pulitzer established the prizes to honor journalists who demonstrated excellence in their work. There are twenty-one different categories in which a piece can be placed, including fiction, drama, poetry, music, and of course, journalism. The prestigious prize is so coveted that the reputation of winning such an honor is of higher value than the cash prize given alongside the certificate of honor.

In the year 1994, Kevin Carter submitted a photograph he had taken during a trip to Sudan to cover the civil war that was ravaging the country. He had no idea at the time that he would eventually win the coveted Pulitzer Prize. He had even less of an idea that soon after receiving the award, he would succumb to depression. The photograph, although it brought about Carter’s untimely death, showed the world a tragedy occurring in Sudan. It shattered the complacency that existed among people generally walled off from such struggles. It was a disturbing call to action to help those in other parts of the world that truly needed it.

The confrontational photograph was taken during the early 1990s when Sudan was engaged in its decades-long civil war. The country had always had an enormous budget deficit as well as a large national debt, given the fact that in its early colonizing years, Britain had opted to slow down Sudan’s industrialization efforts (Metz, 1992). Famine struck the poor country as it tried to pull itself out of a terrible debt and economic ruin. The United Nations had already begun to aid the country by establishing food centers and helping teach the citizens other ways to grow crops and speed up the economy. However, Carter published this photograph originally in *The*

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New York Times to show people how there should be more effort put into helping the people of Sudan.



Photo retrieved from <http://pulitzerprize.org/files/2009/07/kevin-carter-1994.jpg>.

His photograph cast an uneasy light on the problems Sudan and its people faced, and was confrontational in that it addressed the biggest problem: poverty. It depicts a young, starving girl crawling toward a feeding center set up by the United Nations. However, there are many subtle details in the piece that make the boldness of its message powerful. The background shows a barren wasteland with no other signs of human life or past human activity; it looks more like a place where little vegetation had grown or where a disaster had struck. This was probably due to the harsh sun that causes drought in Sudan for many years at a time. A little closer to the viewer is a vulture, which is obviously stalking the main object in the photograph—the child. The starving child is collapsed on the ground, seemingly paralyzed by hunger, given the protrusion of the child's rib cage from her chest. Whether or not the child was actually smaller than the

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preying animal behind it, the way in which Carter angled the spacing of the two creatures gives the appearance that the vulture was as big, if not bigger than, the human child. The lighter colors of the environment around the child and vulture give them an even bolder contrast in the photograph, making the eye immediately jump to the two characters in the picture.

The photograph and the story of the fate of the photographer show how powerful a picture and its message can be. Philosopher Stephen Toulmin gives us strategies and language to use to understand how a text operates on readers or, in this case, viewers. For example, warrants, according to Toulmin, are the ways in which an artist constructs an image to appeal to people's beliefs, values, and cultural and innate predispositions. This image's implicit warrant is that people cannot stand to see innocent children suffer. It is only natural for humans to feel an inclination to help someone in need. The explicit warrant in the photograph was that people, more specifically the children, in Sudan were starving. This combination of the obvious and the subtle messages creates strong *pathos*; that is, they affect the emotional side of the viewer. The *pathos* causes so much anguish within viewers that they feel an obligation to find ways to help those suffering in Sudan.

Tragically, Carter committed suicide three months after the photograph was published and only a week after being awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Carter's death is speculated to have been a result of one of two things: either he could not handle the fame that was brought on by the photograph and the award, or he could not bear the guilt of not helping the child in the photograph. In a *Time* magazine article following Carter's tragic suicide, the piece relayed the guilt that Carter felt and how "even some of Carter's friends wondered aloud why he had not helped the girl" (MacLeod, 1994). The guilt he had felt afterwards for not helping the little girl seemed to be too much for the man to handle.

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When Carter and the newspaper company published the photograph, they as journalists knew full well the potential impact the photograph could have on those who saw it. The publisher, as well as the photographer, knew that the audience for the most part would find the scene it depicted to be disturbing. The photograph was indeed tragic, but what made it that much more horrific was the audience's knowledge that the setting and the images were not set up or manipulated in any way; this was the starving child's reality. The photograph was intended to draw attention to a tragedy and to encourage more humanitarian intervention.

Carter could have chosen to submit a video of the starving girl to the Pulitzer Prize foundation; however, a photograph seemed to be a better means of conveying the message. A photograph allows viewers to use their own imagination; it begs the viewer to attempt to picture what happened outside the frame and what happened after the picture was taken. The image was chosen because Carter felt it captured the isolation and desperation the people of Sudan felt at the time. He had come to Africa to capture the story of the Sudanese economy and the devastation caused by it.

However good the reasons as to why Carter published this picture, his method of capturing that heart-rending moment invited criticism. In an article relaying Carter's tragic death, Macleod recounted the details that Carter had told their mutual friends about the scene he photographed:

He wandered into the open bush. He heard a soft, high-pitched whimpering and saw a tiny girl trying to make her way to the feeding center. As he crouched to photograph her, a vulture landed in view. Careful not to disturb the bird, he positioned himself for the best possible image. He would later say he waited about 20 minutes, hoping the vulture would spread its wings. It did not, and after

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he took his photographs, he chased the bird away and watched as the little girl resumed her struggle. (Macleod, 1994, par.10)

This patience for the perfect shot created the spacing and lighting needed to have the desired effect on the viewer. But in order to get the best possible shot, Carter ignored his responsibility to help the struggling girl. His professional detachment seemed to override his own humanity and morals. His decision would have a lasting effect on the world, as well as a lasting and overwhelming effect on Carter himself.

Following his death, some saw in the photograph parallels with Carter's own death (MacLeod, 1994). The starving child in the foreground of the photograph symbolized Carter himself, and the vulture preying on him from behind represented the angel of death that would soon consume him through depression (Macleod, 1994). Although there will forever be speculation as to the true reason why Carter killed himself, one can take a guess that it was a collection of reasons, including the backlash generated by the photograph. It seemed in the end, unfortunately, that both the child and Carter suffered equally, in different senses, and eventually succumbed to a similarly tragic fate.

Carter's suicide seemed to bring even more notoriety to the photograph, by making his own tragic feelings something that others could feel compassion for alongside the child herself. Carter wanted to bring attention to society how the Sudanese people were struggling. Although his life ended tragically, the photograph itself endures as an indelible symbol of the famine and suffering in the world and as a call to action to the rest of the world.

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