

Blog # 6 Vulture Stalking Child

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The photo “Vulture Stalking Child” sends chills down the spines of its viewers. “Vulture Stalking Child” was taken during the famine in Sudan. I wrote a visual rhetorical paper on this iconic image in a Writing, Rhetoric and Discourse class I took last year.

The idea the image portrays is the extent of how severe the famine was. Vultures generally scavenge the dead, the little girl; stranded, hungry and weak, has essentially been mistaken for a meal. The photo emphasizes this idea through two strategies; the close up sharp appearance of the girl, and the use of color. The background of the image is obscure, while the resolution of the girl is purposefully most clear. It is sunny outside, but further back where the shrubs are it's gloomier. The light is used to highlight the detail of the girl and vulture, though no specific details are paid to the shrubs and hay in the background. This immediately draws the focus of the audience to the girl, gradually drifting the focus to the vulture and then to the surroundings. There are no vibrant colors shown in this image, neither is the picture black and white. The colors are rather neutral and earthy; depicting a natural and realistic environment. The photo doesn't need to be visually modified in any way; the disturbing reality of the image is all that is needed to convey the idea.

In March 1993 Kevin Carter made a trip to Sudan. Near the village of Ayod, Carter found a girl who had stopped to rest while struggling to a United Nations feeding centre, whereupon a vulture had landed nearby. Careful not to disturb the bird, he waited for twenty minutes until the vulture was close enough, positioned himself for the best possible image and only then chased the vulture away. At this point Carter was probably not yet aware that he had shot one of the most -or even the most- controversial photographs in the history of photojournalism.

The photograph was sold to The New York Times where it appeared for the first time on March 26, 1993. Practically overnight hundreds of people contacted the newspaper to ask whether the child had survived, leading the newspaper to run a special editor's note saying the girl had enough strength to walk away from the vulture, but that her ultimate fate was unknown. On April 2, 1994 Nancy Buirski, a foreign New York Times picture editor, phoned Carter to inform him he had been awarded with the most coveted prize for photojournalism; the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography.

As with many dramatic photographs, Carter came under criticism for this shot. He was blamed for just photographing - and not helping - the little girl. The St. Petersburg Times in Florida wrote: "The man adjusting his lens to take just the right frame of her suffering, might just as well be a predator, another vulture on the scene". The attitude that public opinion condemned was not only that of taking the picture instead of chasing the vulture immediately away, but also the fact that he did not help the girl afterwards -as Carter explained later- leaving her in such a weak condition to continue the march by her self towards the feeding centre. Carter committed suicide two years after receiving the Pulitzer Prize.