

‘Our Failure of Empathy’: Kevin Carter, Susan Sontag, and the Problems of Photography

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1. Introduction

In a discussion about images of war and suffering in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag remarks that the moral problem of the ‘educated class’ lies in ‘our failure ... of imagination, of empathy’.¹ Given Sontag’s interest in photography, a question arises: can photographs promote empathy? Given the role of photographs as *aide-mémoires* and testaments to reality, such images seem to be ideal tools for cultivating emotional identification with others. Yet the commoditization of photography also renders it banal, leading not only to what has been condemned as the opportunistic exploitation of images by consumerist bourgeois society, but also—disturbingly—the inhibition of empathy in discourse and practice. Bearing the realities of our media-saturated age in mind, I seek to initiate an inquiry about the role of photography in relation to empathy, as well as the semiotic significance and emotional influence of photographic media.

In particular, I ground my analysis by focusing on the case of a Pulitzer Prize-winning image by the late South African photojournalist Kevin Carter.² Taken during the 1993 famine in Sudan, the photograph shows a starving Sudanese girl who collapsed on her journey to the nearest feeding centre. Keeling over, she almost touches the ground with her forehead. The most distressing element in the picture, of course, is that a vulture lurks behind her, sinisterly awaiting her death. Tragically, two months after receiving his Pulitzer Prize, Carter committed suicide in Johannesburg, at the age of 33. How might the case of Carter’s photograph, in the light of Sontag’s analysis, inform our awareness of the qualities of visual media and contribute to our understanding of empathy in the process?

2. The Visual Impact of Photography

It is intuitive enough to understand how a photograph, like Carter’s, may encourage emotional identification through the means of its visual impact. Viewing a photograph involves paying attention to its subject, and any attention, no matter how feeble, is usually preferable to ignorance and apathy. When Carter’s photograph was first published in the *New York Times* on 26 March 1993, the image sparked a loud outcry around the world, with readers demanding to know the ultimate fate of the girl who gave a distinct human face to the distant crisis in the Sudan (the paper reported that it was unknown whether she reached

¹ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 7.

² Kevin Carter, *Vulture Stalking a Child*, 1993, ‘Sudan Is Described as Trying to Placate the West’ by Donatella Lorch (*New York Times*, 26 March 1993), p. A3. Accessible here: <http://iconicphotos.wordpress.com/2009/08/12/vulture-stalking-a-child/>

the feeding centre).³ As Sontag observes, ‘A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is what’s in the picture.’⁴ The photograph is, as Roland Barthes declares, a ‘message without a code’: while other arts like painting or theatre depend on a code of conventions, styles, connotations and symbols for their signifiers to produce meaning, the photograph—or at least the press photograph—is unique in that it is self-sufficient as a ‘perfect analogon’ of reality.⁵ In terms of semiotic theory in the tradition of Charles S. Peirce, the photograph serves not only as an index that points to or correlates with an external object, but also as an icon that bears a direct physical resemblance to ‘the scene itself, the literal reality’.⁶ To a large extent, the viewer’s sense of shock and moral outrage derives from the function of the photograph as such an image of reality, confirming the veracity of the horrors witnessed and implying the urgency of action needed to remedy the situation.

The relation between photography and empathy, however, remains problematic. To begin with, it is unclear whether a photograph depicting suffering provokes sympathy or empathy. Considering that empathy may be defined as the ‘power of projecting one’s personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation’,⁷ two separate but related elements of empathy can be observed – projection of the self and comprehension of the other. Empathy is not sympathy: it is not about feeling sorry for others, but about feeling ‘into them’. It is the displacement of the ego from the centre of one’s consciousness, involving the broadening of one’s understanding that results from the adoption of another’s perspective. For some viewers of Carter’s photograph, or of any image of suffering, the victim may still be Other; we see her pain but cannot feel it. Conceivably, viewers may be guilty of what Sontag describes as a ‘failure of empathy’, an inability to extend our emotional identification beyond the confines of the self.

3. How Photography Inhibits Empathy

Also one of the main responses triggered by the photograph may not be empathy, but rather horror as well as disgust directed at the photographer, questioning his ethics for capturing the image instead of rendering assistance to the victim. The *St. Petersburg (Florida) Times* argued that Carter ‘might just as well be a predator, another vulture on the scene’, especially when ‘adjusting his lens to take just the right frame of her suffering’.⁸ To give credit to Carter, however, it was reported that he waited for twenty minutes for the vulture to spread its wings, but when it did not, he took photographs of the girl and then

³ Scott Macleod, ‘The Life and Death of Kevin Carter’, *TIME*, vol. 144, no. 11, (12 Sep. 1994), <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,981431-1,00.html>, site visited 10.10.13.

⁴ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Penguin, 1977), p. 5.

⁵ Roland Barthes, ‘The Photographic Message’, *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), p. 196.

⁶ Barthes, ‘The Photographic Message’, p. 196.

⁷ ‘empathy, *n.*’, *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), <http://www.oed.com/>, site visited 10.10.13.

⁸ Qtd. by Macleod, ‘The Life and Death of Kevin Carter’, site visited 10.10.13.

chased the vulture away, watching as the child continued struggling; following that, he ‘sat under a tree, lit a cigarette, talked to God and cried’.⁹ Carter was not cold and heartless, and he was haunted by the anguish he witnessed; his pain and guilt was a price he paid for belonging to a profession that rewarded the ability to maintain dispassionate composure in the face of misery and devastation.

The danger is that the camera inhibits empathy in a photographer by encouraging the prioritization of images above individuals; the urge is not to help others but to record their agony. As Sontag observes, ‘Photographing is essentially an act of non-intervention ... [One notes] how plausible it has become, in situations where the photographer has the choice between a photograph and a life, to choose the photograph.’¹⁰ Crucially, Sontag suggests that taking pictures is not just a sign of passivity and inaction, but a gesture that at least implicitly reinforces the status quo; to photograph is ‘to be in complicity with whatever makes a subject interesting ... including, when that is the interest, another person’s pain or misfortune’.¹¹ So not only is the photographer induced not to empathise with his subject, he also risks succumbing to a kind of *Schadenfreude*, of unconscious gratification after seizing the opportunity to capture precious images even at the expense of others.

Besides inhibiting empathy in the photographer, images of suffering may counter-intuitively hinder viewers’ emotional identification. In an age marked by the proliferation of images, the constant exposure to photographs of suffering may desensitize viewers, as the torments of others have been converted into what has been called ‘infotainment’, or the enhancement of information-based content with entertainment value in order to attract audiences.¹² As Sontag notes, photographs may shock at first but ‘the ante keeps getting raised ... Images transfix. Images anesthetize.’¹³ In other words, the standards for newsworthiness become harder and harder to meet because of viewers’ overexposure to such images, numbing their capacity for empathetic responses.

Indeed, if we accept Marshall McLuhan’s thesis that ‘the medium is the message’,¹⁴ it seems conceivable that the dominance of the Internet in our time has only intensified this anesthetizing effect. When viewing print media, the viewer can at least register the physical existence of the photograph as ink on paper – there is a sense of presence, of reality about the printed photograph which may in turn subtly suggest the actuality of the event depicted and invite deeper reflection about it. But when viewing a photograph in a virtual medium, the viewer can register no physical presence. Instead, images become fleeting displays, trivialized as pop-ups, hyperlinks, and various digital distractions that flicker across webpages – such photographs are really just ephemeral pixels on a screen, subject to greater

⁹ Qtd. by Macleod, ‘The Life and Death of Kevin Carter’, site visited 10.10.13.

¹⁰ Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 11–12.

¹¹ Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 12.

¹² Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman, ‘The Appeal of Experience; The Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Times,’ in *Social Suffering*, eds. Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 1–23.

¹³ Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 19–20.

¹⁴ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

organizational needs and commercial demands. Barthes seems to anticipate this phenomenon in *Camera Lucida* (1980) when he censures consumerist bourgeois society for reducing photographs to mere market commodities, banalizing and fetishizing them in fields like advertising.¹⁵ He comments that ‘we live according to a generalized image-repertoire ... What characterizes the so-called advanced societies is that they today consume images and no longer, like those of the past, beliefs’.¹⁶ In today’s image-consuming age, the tragic irony is that photographs intended to arouse empathy end up resulting in indifference; the emotional identification we are meant to feel when viewing the image is undercut by the impulse to sweep it aside.

4. The Influence of Photographic Media

Some might assume that viewers’ lack of emotional identification is simply the fault of the media. Surely, it seems, it is only the media’s sensationalising of photographs for commercial profit that has inured viewers to images of suffering. But maybe the situation is more complex: our ‘failure of empathy’ also stems from the ways in which our exposure to the medium of photography itself has influenced our emotional responses. This process seems to have occurred in two ways.

Firstly, photography may have changed how we view people. Sontag argues that to photograph people is ‘to violate them, by seeing them as they can never see themselves... it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed’.¹⁷ The risk is that the subject of a photograph becomes objectified and trivialized, falling prey to our voyeuristic avarice for images. Secondly, photography may have influenced how we perceive time. Our exposure to photographs fosters the idea that, as Sontag contends, “time consists of interesting events, events worth photographing”,¹⁸ which leads to a fragmented, atomized view of reality. A photograph offers ‘a neat slice of time’,¹⁹ a frozen image dispossessed of its historical and socio-political context. From Carter’s photograph alone, one simply cannot tell the story behind the girl, which may heighten the difficulty of establishing emotional identification with her.

Yet this hardly means that photography has doomed humanity to emotional atrophy. For although a narrative cannot be derived from a single image, it is perhaps unnecessary for viewers to seek such narratives in the first place. In the case of Carter’s photograph, questions abound: who was responsible for the girl’s plight? Were there any aid agencies that could have come to her rescue? The point is that the details of the story which explain the physical circumstances of the starving child are largely irrelevant; what matters is that the girl was suffering. The facts of the particular situation, laid bare by the image, trump any generalizing, historicizing narrative. As Sontag remarks, ‘A photograph is supposed not to

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 118.

¹⁶ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 118–19.

¹⁷ Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 14.

¹⁸ Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 11.

¹⁹ Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 17.

evoke but to show.’²⁰ By particularizing the figures who suffer under the oppressive weight of forces beyond their control, photographs of such victims can alert us to the reality that they are not archetypes but individuals, deeply deserving viewers’ empathy.

5. Conclusion

Ultimately, the challenge for us as viewers seems to involve interpreting such photographs in a way that allows us to cultivate our empathy, despite the obstacles to emotional identification that the medium of photography inherently imposes. Barthes advises two ways to approach a photograph: either ‘to subject its spectacle to the civilized code of perfect illusions’,²¹ self-consciously exposing it to the conceits of bourgeois society, or to ‘confront in it the wakening of intractable reality’,²² recognizing the self-evident horror and trauma of the modern world. Perhaps we should look at Carter’s photograph again. This time we just might experience a keener emotional identification with both the suffering child and the photographer who was there with her, even while we realize our complicity as viewers who fuel the media’s demand for images. In a sense, we – as consumers of images – are the vulture gazing at others’ sufferings, unless we choose to nurture our empathy and avoid the hazards of photographic objectification.

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²⁰ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 42.

²¹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 119.

²² Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 119.