

NARRATIVES OF SUFFERING: HIJACKING THE SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE IN CONFLICT PHOTOGRAPHY

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**HPHI4903: 'PATHWAYS TO EVIL': GENOCIDE - HISTORY, THEORY AND
DENIAL**

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I acknowledge the use of ChatGPT (<https://chat.openai.com/>) on April 6, 2005 to assist with the drafting and refining of my essay. The prompt(s) used were:

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To look, but not to see or think,¹ even 'shock can become familiar.'² Analysing one of Lynsey Addario's photographs from Darfur, this essay aims to explore how meaning in conflict photography lies not only in the content itself, but in the structures that mediate its reception, exploring the composition and narrative it conveys.



FIG. 1. Sudanese women sit and await food and non-food items being distributed by international humanitarian organizations in the village of Selea, which was recently bombed along with two other villages north of Geneina by the Sudanese government and simultaneously attacked by armed men on camels, horseback and donkeys, otherwise known as Janjaweed, in West Darfur, Sudan. Photograph taken by Lynsey Addario on February 28, 2008, All Content © Lynsey Addario. Published in *Of Love & War* (Penguin Press, 2018), p. 155; also available at Lynsey Addario, <https://www.lynseyaddario.com> [accessed 1 April 2025].

Lynsey Addario is an American photojournalist who has covered every major conflict and humanitarian crisis of the 21st century³, focusing her lens on women's issues in male dominated societies and human rights advocacy. Her career was shaped by the Global War on Terror, which she describes as the catalyst for a new generation of war journalists with 'a sense of mission' that consumed their lives,⁴ with both great loss⁵ and gain.⁶ All of it with the knowledge that 'cameras introduce tension,'⁷ and 'photography is invasive,'⁸ but with the belief that 'if a viewer is offered an intimate perspective, then that viewer can better identify and empathize with victims of even the most horrific, incomprehensible crimes.'⁹ She recognised the

¹ Karin E. Becker, 'Photojournalism and the tabloid press' *The Photography Reader*, ed. by Liz Wells, Reprint (Routledge, 2009), pp. 291–308 (p. 295).

² Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Picador, 2003), p. 44.

³ Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Lebanon, Darfur, South Sudan, Somalia, the DRC, Yemen, Syria, and the ongoing war in Ukraine.

⁴ Addario, *It's What I Do*, p. 18.

⁵ Kidnapped twice, was sexually assaulted, and has lost friends in combat operations.

⁶ She received a MacArthur Fellowship in 2009 and went on to become one of the five most influential photographers of the past 25 years in 2015, among the many awards she has received over the years. See 'Lynsey Addario', *International Center for Journalists* <<https://www.icjf.org/lynsey-addario>> [accessed 5 April 2025].

⁷ Addario, *It's What I Do*, p. 33.

⁸ Addario, *Of Love & War*, p. 181.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

importance of documenting injustice,¹⁰ 'to live in peace and witness war,' 'to experience the worst in people but to remember the beauty.'¹¹

In her craft, beauty was the tool by which she aimed to prevent people from looking away¹² and bear witness through her visual testimony to one of the most pressing conflicts: Darfur. She is 'one of the very few photographers to consistently cover the conflict there from 2004 to 2009,'¹³ coming to understand the conflict intimately—through 'the plight of refugees, villages on fire, ransacked homes, victims of rape'¹⁴—but mostly, 'with a reality that is too tangled to unwind and too dark to fully illuminate'¹⁵ in which 'every side was responsible for murder, for rape, and for pillage, and all the players were guilty.'¹⁶

Year after year, she returned to Darfur to report for the New York Times and the New York Times Magazine, and a grant from Getty Images.¹⁷ It was in the New York Times where the photograph discussed in this essay appeared on July 15, 2008, same year the photograph was taken.¹⁸ It was later published in her memoir and collection, in 2015 and 2018, respectively.¹⁹ Her reportage of Darfur is more of a collective and collaborative nature and there is no single image that encapsulates the conflict and the suffering and that can elicit a reaction from the public, it is rather a 'combination of photographs and beautifully reported articles...[which] elicited significant reactions from readers, from UN and aid workers, and from policy makers' and 'the correlation between persistent coverage and the response to that coverage by the international community.'²⁰

Before analysing the photograph, it is essential to contextualise it in its time, February 28, 2008, and place, the village of Selea (Silea, Seleia). Prior to the shooting of the image, on February 8, the towns of Abu Suruj, Sirba, and Selea, all located in the 'northern corridor' close to the Chadian border were attacked by Sudanese government forces.²¹ Selea was ransacked by government forces and the Janjaweed militia, in an attack preceded by air strikes. The casualties were comprised of mostly women and children. The clashes between the government forces and rebels of the Justice and Equality Movement were attributed to a significant military base in Selea, and the insecurity was making both the towns of Jebel Mun and Selea largely inaccessible to humanitarian agencies, forcing the delivery of aid to be airborne.²²

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹¹ Addario, *It's What I Do*, p. 253.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 140–41.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

¹⁵ *Darfur Genocide: The Essential Reference Guide*, ed. by Alexis Herr (ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2020), p. 8.

¹⁶ Addario, *It's What I Do*, p. 40.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

¹⁸ The photograph just accompanies the article, that reports on what was the first time the ICC would seek charges against a sitting head of state, al-Bashir, since its creation in 2002. See Marlise Simons, Lydia Polgreen, and Jeffrey Gettleman, 'Arrest Is Sought of Sudan Leader in Genocide Case', *The New York Times*, 15 July 2008, section World <<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/15/world/africa/15sudan.html>>.

¹⁹ She has made no further elaboration on the photograph apart from the summary that reads like the file information of the digital image.

²⁰ Addario, *It's What I Do*, p. 139.

²¹ Jehanne Henry, "'They Shot at Us as We Fled'", *Human Rights Watch*, 2008 <<https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/05/18/they-shot-us-we-fled/government-attacks-civilians-west-darfur-february-2008>>.

²² By February 28, the population was fleeing to Jebel Mun or Chad, and by April, only 20% of the population in Selea remained. See Henry, "'They Shot at Us as We Fled'".

That year, discussions surrounding 'the age beyond the photograph'²³ were taking place within the photojournalism sphere as an answer to a rising attention economy. Bearing witness wasn't enough²⁴ and event-based news images were becoming the primary vocabulary by which humanity interpreted itself.²⁵ The medium of photographers became a means to answer ethical and political questions,²⁶ and interest on the craft was something of the past.²⁷ The public's cognitive capacities were being economised at the expense of its ability to form a subjective experience.²⁸ The information and entertainment divide closed over time as the economic and political rationale expanded. This can be seen in the revocation of the 'right of reply'²⁹ and the decline in credibility,³⁰ and best illustrated in the 'uncomfortable' history between photography and journalism³¹: 'photographs have no meaning independent of their relationship to the words, graphic elements and other factors in the display.'³² In this sense, photographs become more than just 'representations of fact,'³³ they come burdened with "a culture, a moral, an imagination."³⁴

Addario is part of this 'postphotographic' world that regards narratives as a form of representing and constituting reality³⁵ and places images within a broader context of mass communication, one that doesn't necessarily rely on written or verbal communication, but is rather compositional. The amount of information in the frame is then subject to Addario's composition and deconstruction of the image is essential to construct the narrative. She takes three aspects into account: light and expression, guided by narrative.³⁶

Light sets the tone and subject. Addario's 'darker' photographs convey an individual or intimate story, whereas the communal and collective ones are brighter. The sun shines on the faces of these women as some of them look up to the sky witnessing the delivery of aid, the same sky from which bombs had descended twenty days before. The brightness and openness is claustrophobic in that context: the aftermath of war crimes laid bare and accessible for the public while those same crimes isolate Selela.

²³ Jon, 'By Any Means Necessary', *FOTO8*, 9 May 2008 <<https://www.foto8.com/live/by-any-means-necessary/>>.

²⁴ Michael Kamber, "'Restrepo' and the Imagery of War", *Lens Blog*, 1277179233 <<https://archive.nytimes.com/lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/22/behind-44/>>.

²⁵ Jon, 'By Any Means Necessary'.

²⁶ Liam Kennedy, 'Photojournalism and Warfare in a Postphotographic Age', *Photography and Culture*, 8.2 (2015), pp. 159–71 (p. 166), doi:10.1080/17514517.2015.1076242.

²⁷ Kamber, "'Restrepo' and the Imagery of War".

²⁸ Samuel Kinsley and Patrick Crogan, 'Paying Attention: Towards a Critique of the Attention Economy', *Culture Machine*, 13 (2012), pp. 1–3.

²⁹ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, 20. anniversary ed (Penguin Books, 2006), p. 69.

³⁰ The New York Times was criticised for its refusal to acknowledge its misrepresentation of the realities in West Darfur. 'Obduracy at the New York Times: Refusal to Acknowledge Errors or Problems in the Representation of Realities in West Darfur', *Sudan Research, Analysis, and Advocacy*, 15 April 2012 <<https://sudanreeves.org/2012/04/15/obduracy-at-the-new-york-times-refusal-to-acknowledge-errors-or-problems-in-the-representation-of-realities-in-west-darfur/>>.

³¹ Wells, *The Photography Reader*, p. 291.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 302.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

³⁵ Jerome Bruner, 'The Narrative Construction of Reality', *Critical Inquiry*, 18.1 (1991), pp. 1–21 (p. 5), doi:10.1086/448619.

³⁶ 'How Do You Make People Want to Look War in the Face?', *Big Think* <<https://bigthink.com/videos/lynsey-addario-on-the-power-of-photographs/>> [accessed 6 April 2025].

The expressions displayed on their faces are ambiguous, thus, the emotion lies in the symmetry and balance being disrupted by the triangular shapes due to the different colours of the thobes. The eye oscillates in the crowded space between each of them. The ambiguity and movement distances the viewer from the women involuntarily, in a way that it slowly renders the realisation that one does not know these women, and as the group is gathered there waiting for aid, one comes to know these women as victims, and victims only.

Representation of the 'the lived experiences of women in war' entails political and economic implications that lie outside the 'journalistic package.' The observer's ability to engage with 'the multiple and intersecting axes of oppression'³⁷ that shape those lives relies on the narrative of the picture, unmediated, and for that, attention is crucial.

In conclusion, the meaning of photographs like the one analysed in this essay lies within a broader political context of mass communication that mediates the subject and the medium, ultimately hindering the viewer's subjective experience and independent access to the narrative the image itself constructs.

³⁷ Aida Abbashar, 'Unseen Frontlines: Narratives on Sudanese Women in War', *E-International Relations*, 1 March 2025 <<https://www.e-ir.info/2025/03/01/unseen-frontlines-narratives-on-sudanese-women-in-war/>>.

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