



A Time of Violence

The Film, *The Bang-Bang Club* was shot on location in Thokoza township by South African filmmaker Steven Silver. It is the story of four famous photojournalists and their coverage of the violence in the townships between 1990 and 1994.

Snapshots from a Hidden War

The film is based on the book published in 2000: *The Bang-Bang Club: Snapshots from a Hidden War*, by two of the surviving photographers: Greg Marinovich and Joao Silva. The other two members of the group, Kevin Carter and Ken Oosterbroek are both deceased. Greg Marinovich worked as a consultant on the film.

Victims of Friendly Fire

Ken Oosterbroek was famously killed by the National Peace Keeping force on 18 April 1994. Greg Marinovich was also severely wounded by the Peace Keepers in this high profile fire-fight. The shootings were all captured on camera, showing the panicking, incompetent National Peace Keeping Force, which attempted to make soldiers out of ex-terrorists. In July 1994, Kevin Carter committed suicide.

Award Winning Photographers

Two of the members of the Bang-Bang Club won Pulitzer prizes for their photography. Greg

Marinovich won the Pulitzer for Spot News Photography in 1991, for his coverage of the hideous killing of Lindsay Tshabalala in 1990. Kevin Carter won the Pulitzer for Featured Photography in 1994, for his 1993 photograph of a vulture stalking a starving child in Southern Sudan.

Living on the Edge

The name, *The Bang-Bang Club*, was born out of an article published in the South African magazine, *Living*. Conflict photographers refer to gunfights as *bang-bangs* and so this colloquialism was applied to the four young combat photographers who routinely undertook extreme risks to show the world the violence in the townships-in-transition in post-apartheid South Africa.

Inkatha and the ANC

The film is painstakingly detailed in its recreation of iconic events and images as it portrays the violent clashes between ANC supporters of Nelson Mandela and the Inkatha Freedom Party supporters of Dr. Mangosuthu Buthelezi.

Brutal Clashes

The gritty film has lots of shocking on-the-ground recreations of the brutality of these faction fights and pitched battles in the streets. There is no attempt to show the big picture of what was happening in South Africa, or why it was happening, but it is essentially the story of four photojournalists working in a dangerous environment.

Moral Quagmire

It raises lots of moral questions, which are never answered. The substance abuse by the photojournalists, drunkenness and drug taking, and stream of foul language, along with their frequently callous indifference towards the victims of the violence that they were recording, makes it hard to be too sympathetic. This is particularly true for Kevin Carter, who was frequently irritated by people asking, what happened to the little girl in the picture with the vulture?

Withholding Evidence

Some of the moral dilemmas discussed in the film include withholding photographic evidence

from the police wanting to investigate the murders. The photojournalists determined to keep their photographs identifying the perpetrators of the necklace murders out of the hands of the police, so that they could continue going back into the townships for further photographic opportunities.

The Case of Kevin Carter

Kevin Carter started as a sports photographer in 1983, but soon turned to recording the political strife. Carter was described as a man of tumultuous emotions, who could go from the heights of elation, to the depths of depression in short order. Kevin Carter seemed to have had trouble taking responsibility, including for his own daughter, and for the consequences of his self-centeredness.

The Girl and the Vulture

When asked what happened to the little Sudanese girl in the picture that he took, Carter responded that he did not know as his job was just to take photographs. Later he told an interviewer that he sat under a tree, smoked a cigarette and cursed God. Yet he did not bother to carry this malnourished girl to the UN feeding centre 300 metres away, where his plane was waiting. Carter could have carried this little girl into the aircraft to be flown out to the Red Cross Hospital in Lokichoggio. There she could have been placed on a drip and may have survived. One editorial in the St. Petersburg Times, commented: *"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."* All Kevin Carter carried into Sudan was his camera equipment. All he carried out of Sudan was the pictures. All he left behind in Sudan were cigarette stubs.

Pulitzer Prize

14 months after capturing that scene of the vulture ominously poised in the background behind the malnourished Sudanese girl, on 23 May 1994, Kevin Carter received the Pulitzer prize for Featured Photography . It was in the classical Rotunda of Columbia University's Low Memorial Library. He wrote back home: *"I swear I got the most applause of anybody! I can't wait to show you the trophy. It is the most precious thing, and the highest acknowledgement of my work I could receive!"*

Popularity and Fortune

People lined up to ask for his autography in restaurants and in the street. Carter was signed up with Sygma, a prestigious picture agency representing the world's 200 best photojournalists.

From Fame to Failure

Kevin Carter's drug taking caused him to smash cars and lose film of key events. He botched several assignments from Sygma, including shipping his photographs over the French president Francois Mitterrand's visit to South Africa. The film arrived too late to be of any use and the quality of the photographs were too poor to offer to Sygma's clients. When he missed his flight for an assignment in Mozambique, on 20 July and then later forgot his package of undeveloped film on the aircraft seat, he planned his suicide.

Suicide

Two months after receiving his Pulitzer, Carter killed himself with carbon monoxide poisoning in Johannesburg. He parked his red pick-up truck near a small river, attached a green hosepipe to the vehicle's exhaust and funnelled the fumes inside. A documentary film entitled, *The Death of Kevin Carter: Casualty of The Bang-Bang Club* was nominated for an Academy Award in 2006.

Casualties of War

Although Greg Marinovich survived the shooting by the National Peace Keeping Force in Thokoza township in 1994, he was wounded several more times during photojournalism in Angola and the Middle East. On 23 October 2010, Joao Silva stepped on a landmine in Afghanistan and lost both legs below the knee.

Built on Sand

One cannot avoid the conclusion that the photojournalists of The Bang-Bang Club lacked solid moral foundations to cope with the human depravity and cruelty they were witnessing and recording, and to determine what was right, for example, concerning withholding evidence from the police and prosecutors when they had witnessed heinous crimes and murders in the streets.

Unfortunately, the extreme excess of foul language and offensive scenes, makes it hard to recommend this film, which is a great pity, as it provides some valuable insights into a troubled part of our recent history.

"Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise, but as wise, making the most of

every opportunity, because the days are evil. Ephesians 5:15-16

Dr. Peter Hammond

Frontline Fellowship
P O Box 74 Newlands 7725
Cape Town South Africa
Tel: 021-689-4480
E-mail: mission@frontline.org.za
Web: www.frontline.org.za

See also:

[How Propaganda Changes Perceptions and People](#)
[The Battle for South Africa](#)
[The St. James Massacre](#)