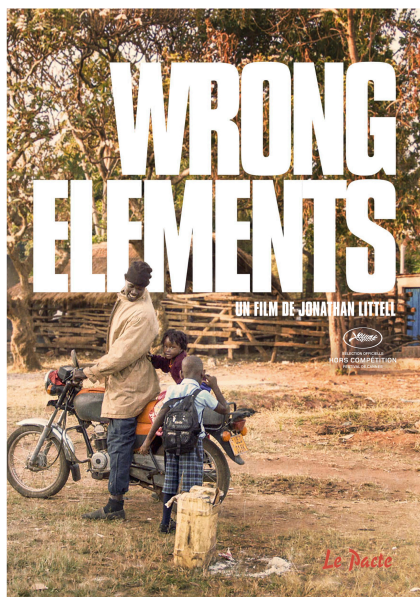


## HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

“Barbarity is well shared: no religion exerts  
a monopoly over it”

Interview with *Jonathan Littell*



Jonathan Littell was born in 1967 in New York. Brought up in France, he entered humanitarian aid in 1993 and spent seven years on the field with Action against Hunger, mainly in Bosnia, Chechnya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Afghanistan. His novel *Les Bienveillantes* (*The Kindly Ones*) published in 2006, was awarded the same year the French Goncourt literary prize, since followed by several essays and reports in areas of conflict. *Wrong Elements*, a documentary released in April 2017, the subject of which is child soldiers, is his first movie. During his fieldwork in the 1990s, Jonathan Littell met Benoît Miribel, whose questions he has now kindly accepted to answer here. He also shares with us his personal thoughts on the special behaviour patterns of children who have fallen into the grips of an Ugandan mystical rebellion, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

**Humanitarian Alternatives** — *Your first film, Wrong Elements, reports on the situation of LRA child soldiers in Uganda. What got you started to take on such a project?*

**Jonathan Littell** — Several times between 2008 and 2012, I had the opportunity to write various stories in Africa, and there, I came face to face with the reality of child soldiers, mainly in Uganda. Once, while on an assignment with a photographer for a feature article for *Le Monde Magazine*, we were accompanied by Ugandan soldiers, some of whom were former LRA members who had joined the national army. It was my first contact with former LRA officers – all very experienced. We had fascinating discussions around the issue of accountability. I am not thinking in terms of “good” and “evil”, but they had taken me to tell me that a former commander of the LRA, a criminal of bloodthirsty reputation wanted by the International Criminal Court, was looked up to as a “fine” person by former soldiers of this army. I later mentioned this in the article I was writing, and it led me to think about individual and collective responsibility of LRA headmen who forcibly recruit young people. As a coincidence, a producer contacted me about shooting a documentary film, and I thought of this as an opportunity to look into the world of LRA child soldiers. There were other child soldiers elsewhere in Africa, but one of the specific traits of the LRA was to be a very rigid and puritanical sect. One main rule forbidding soldiers to consume alcohol or drugs constituted a major difference, considering that most child soldiers in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and the Democratic Republic of Congo were on the contrary obliged by their superiors to abuse these substances. For this reason, LRA child soldiers were therefore

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more conscious of their actions and of the vicious cycle in which they were engaged, with their memories differing greatly from those of other child soldiers.

**H. A.** — *Do you find any similarity between LRA's methods of exacting violence and imposing discipline, and those that we see today with Daesh?*

**J. L.** — I began this project in early 2013 before Daesh existed, at least in its present form. It is true that we can find similarities between the violent practices of LRA and of Daesh that are based on the disciplinary and religious approach used to indoctrinate children and forcibly push them to take action openly. We can see very similar things happening elsewhere, which is an indication that Daesh's scope of action is not confined to radical islam. Excesses do occur, whatever religions themselves may profess.

**H. A.** — *In view of the various forms of human violence that you have observed, do you believe that there is one type that is specific to Africa?*

**J. L.** — Most of my work deals with political violence, mass violence, and group violence exerted against people. Marguerite Yourcenar has written: "Each region has its own war: its a local product, like rye or potatoes."<sup>1</sup> Each conflict has indeed specificities that shape its own forms of violence. But aside from those that are locally, culturally specific, and sometimes folkloric, I fail to see anything fundamentally, anthropologically different between different forms of violence. Any kind of belief, however structured or, on the contrary, naïve it may be, can constitute the driving force behind political and religious violence. In my view, different forms of violence each have their own "technical" specificities, but the motivating forces that set violence into motion all seem to look the same – often, moreover, in their absurdity. What rather interests me is going beyond the local level to try to understand the universally shared traits. Barbarity is well shared: no religion exerts a monopoly over it. The instruments of violence may differ, as the level of knowledge on the techniques of violence, but the motives can generally be compared. And generally speaking, limitations are not set, unless leaders, or the society that exerts this violence, say otherwise. Few people are able to resist being drawn into a chain of events. Barriers are socially defined, as I mentioned in *The Kindly Ones*.

**A. H.** — *Wrong Elements carries a message of hope for the recovery of these child soldiers who may have often been both victims and killers. Nearly 30,000 children have managed to escape from LRA's internment of violence. Did you identify any key factors for this recovery?*

**J. L.** — Above all, a social dimension has made it possible for child soldiers to be reintegrated into their communities. Thanks to a willingness to recognize them as victims and to amnesty them, these children are made to feel welcome in a social group, so as to avoid leaving them on the wayside as is often case. This community effort to overcome violence and enable children to reintegrate society is part of the specific context of Uganda and of the Acholi community. You only have to compare this reception with the one reserved for the American veterans returning from Vietnam who were globally treated like outcasts. And this resulted in the consequences that we know of today. A strong social mechanism was put into place to accept children who had been soldiers of the LRA. Of course, each child's personality becomes a factor in this "recovery plan", which means that there are various behavioural patterns. I really wanted to show that, on the one hand even though these children were capable of being both executioners and victims

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<sup>1</sup> Marguerite Yourcenar, *Le Coup de grâce*, Gallimard, 1939.

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and, in the other hand this strong social resolve to avoid considering them as “kids gone bad”, that is to say wrong elements, in any case not completely.

**A. H.** — *Do you have any other recommendations that humanitarians can implement in Africa in light of what you experienced in producing this film?*

**J. L.** — Each time humanitarian action meddles with politics, it ends up abandoning its mission and finds itself at fault. This point of view is not new in my mind, as it goes back to the time I was in the field. Even today, it is a crucial factor to consider so that the capacity for humanitarians to intervene can be sustained.

### Interview by Benoît Miribel

Managing Director of the Mérieux Foundation, Honorary President of Action against Hunger

*Translated from the French by Alain Johnson*



Jonathan Littell and Geoffrey, a former child soldier, during filming in Uganda, summer 2015.

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To quote this article: Jonathan Littell, “'Barbarity is well shared: no religion exerts a monopoly over it'”, *Humanitarian Alternatives*, n°5, July 2017, p. 116-121, <http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2017/07/03/interview-with-jonathan-littell-barbarity-is-well-shared-no-religion-exerts-a-monopoly-over-it/>

ISBN of the article (PDF): 978-2-37704-249-4