

WRONG ELEMENTS

A FILM BY JONATHAN LITTELL



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PRESENT

WRONG ELEMENTS

A FILM BY JONATHAN LITTELL

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IMAGE RATIO: 1:1.33 (DCP IN 1:1.85) - SOUND: 5.1

INTERNATIONAL SALES

Le Pacte
5, rue Darcet
75017 Paris
Tel +33 1 44 69 59 59
www.le-pacte.com

INTERNATIONAL PRESS

LES PIQUANTES
Alexandra Faussier
& Fanny Garancher
In Cannes:
+33 6 14 61 48 41/+33 6 20 87 80 87
presse@lespiquantes.com

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SYNOPSIS

Uganda, 1989. A young Acholi rebel guided by spirits, Joseph Kony, forms a new rebel movement against the government: the LRA, The Lord's Resistance Army. An "army" that grew by abducting teenagers – more than 60 000 over 25 years – of which less than half came out of the bush alive.

Geofrey, Nighty and Mike, a group of friends, as well as Lapisa, were among these youths, abducted at 12 or 13. Today, in their effort to rebuild their lives and go back to normal, they revisit the places that marked their stolen childhood. At the same time victims and murderers, witnesses and perpetrators of horrific acts that they did not fully understand, they are forever the "Wrong Elements" that society struggles to accept.

Meanwhile, in the immensity of the Central African jungle, the Ugandan army still continues to hunt the last scattered LRA rebels. But Joseph Kony is still out there, on the run...

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Why, then, the LRA? I believe this particular case puts something essential at stake: our very conception of the notions of “torturer,” “killer,” and “crime.” What happens with the concept of wrongdoing and responsibility when the perpetrator, kidnapped as a child, becomes, within the only system of reference left to him, a willful killer? For the generation of children raised by ISIS, the question will be the same, for a long time, as it once was for the children raised by the Nazi, Stalinist, Maoist and Khmer Rouge regimes. The issue, we can see, is far from a strictly African problem.

Why a movie, then, rather than a book? Because in a film, and especially with the way this one has been staged, it is the former LRA members themselves, and not some outside observer, myself or anyone else, who work with the question and contribute fragments of an answer, their answer in any case. And these answers are brought forth by all the means offered by moving images and sound: not only in words, necessarily limited, but also in gestures, intonations, hesitations, looks. The truth that the film brings them to reveal is as much the truth of their bodies as of their words.

Thus the need for a very structured, very elaborate form. Beautiful, as they say, yet not for the sheer esthetic pleasure, but rather to render the protagonists' emotions as closely as possible, as well as the richness and the density of the environment in which they grew up and suffered. The city, where they return to ordinary life; the village, from which most of them were abducted and where so many of their crimes were committed; and the bush where they lived for so long, savannah or jungle, the source of so many fears, so many anxieties, so many fantasies. The choice of a 4:3 aspect ratio is in keeping with this logic, framing the landscapes like paintings, recreating the suffocating sense that comes from having one's horizon walled off by trees or tall grass, and pulling us right up against the faces of the protagonists and the feelings that run through them.

Of course, some might say, it could have been a fiction. And it's true that I have already dealt with such questions in works of fiction. But here it wouldn't work. Western fictions about Africa, however much they try to adhere to the reality there, can never shake off a peculiar distance, a sort of glass wall that always brings to mind the zoo. Whereas in a documentary, not only is it the subjects' truth that is brought into play rather than the filmmaker's, but furthermore his point of view — necessarily exterior — can be fully built into the *mise en scène*, to form an integral part of the way the film is staged.

Of course there is a risk. The risk that the staging doesn't work as planned, or else that what those who speak reveal turns out, in the end, a far cry from what one was looking for. The risk that the film grows far beyond the original idea one had of it. But that too is the beauty and magic of documentaries. You go looking for something, you know what you're looking for, but you don't always know what you're going to find. Just like in the bush.

Jonathan Littell



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

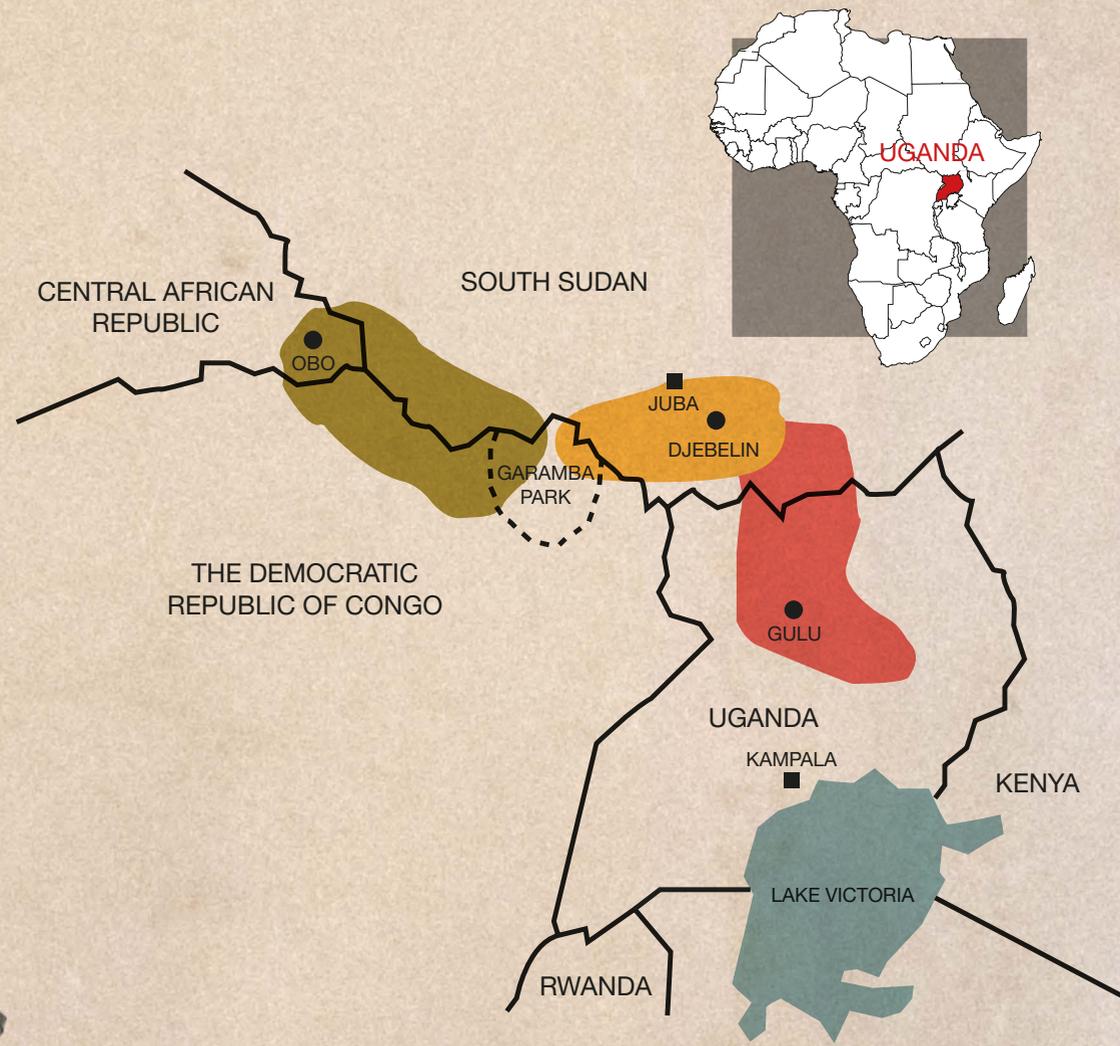
The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) is a Ugandan rebel movement dedicated to overthrowing the government of Yoweri Museveni, president of Uganda since 1986. In 1989, after the Ugandan Army defeated a first mystic rebellion led by Alice Lakwena, a young woman possessed by spirits, a young Acholi from the North of the country, Joseph Kony, was entrusted by the spirits of Lakwena with the task of continuing the struggle. But the Acholi, exhausted by war, refused to massively follow Kony, forcing him to resort to a radical strategy: to avoid direct combat as far as possible and to turn on civilians — terrorism in its purest state, according to the etymological meaning of the term. Paradoxically, the main targets of the LRA were the very people whom Kony claimed to be protecting, the Acholi, who found themselves trapped between the rebels and the army. Selective mutilations and massacres became the LRA's "hallmark," and especially the abduction of adolescents, often practiced en masse in regular or boarding schools, to recruit new soldiers and "wives."

Beginning in 1994, with the support of Khartoum, the LRA set up bases in South Sudan and served as a proxy to the Sudanese Army in its fight against the separatist guerrilla of the SPLA. But in 2002 Operation Iron Fist, a major offensive by the Ugandan armed forces (the UPDF), dislodged them and forced them to retreat beyond the Nile to the Democratic Republic of Congo. As of 2005, indicted by the ICC (International Criminal Court) for crimes against humanity, Kony managed to set up new bases there, within the vast Garamba National Park. However, weakened by his retreat from Sudan, Kony engaged in a peace process which dragged on for almost two years. Was he ever really in good faith? Many doubt it. Nonetheless, after bitter negotiations, a final peace agreement was approved by the Ugandan government that included among other clauses an almost total amnesty for all LRA fighters, except those facing an ICC warrant. Peace seemed to be just around the corner; but Kony did not turn up for the signing ceremony, set for April 10, 2008. Further negotiations to get him to sign lasted another eight months, but proved fruitless. Yet Museveni had not waited for a definitive refusal to prepare another option: in mid-December 2008, the UPDF launched a new offensive to resolve the problem of the LRA by force, once and for all.



The operation, launched prematurely on a foggy day, failed, and the LRA dispersed throughout northern Congo. As usual, Kony took his revenge on the civilian population, which the army had totally neglected to protect. On Christmas Day 2008, the LRA organized a series of synchronized massacres in three villages of the Haut Uélé district, killing over 865 civilians, mostly with clubs and axes. Kony himself, together with his main lieutenants, crossed the DRC and entered the Central African Republic. But other LRA groups remained in the Congo, led by one of his most brutal commanders, Dominic Ongwen, who on Christmas 2009 repeated the previous year's massacres. Neither the FARDC (the Congolese army), poorly trained and equipped, nor the United Nations troops confined to their bases and hamstrung by their mandate, could do anything to protect the population, which abandoned its villages in droves to regroup in better-defended towns. Nonetheless, the constant pressure of the UPDF mobile squads, backed after 2011 by a hundred US Special Forces soldiers, slowly drove the LRA North, up to the borderlands of CAR, Darfur and Chad. Since 2013, Kony has sought refuge in the Kafia Kingi enclave, a contested zone at the border of Sudan and CAR. A half-dozen times, the UPDF have tried to strike at him there; each time, he managed to flee to Darfur, under North Sudanese protection. Beginning in 2014, Kony began sending his men back to the DRC to kill elephants and carry back their ivory to Kafia Kingi, where he sells them to intermediaries to finance the remains of his movement. In January 2015, his deputy Dominic Ongwen, whom Kony had threatened to kill, surrendered to the UPDF and was quickly transferred to the ICC in The Hague, where his trial for war crimes is actually underway.

But despite American spy planes and electronic detection equipment, despite the never-ending patrols in the jungle, despite the \$5 million reward recently put up by the USA, Kony and his remaining men are still on the run.



- Gulu, epicenter of the LRA uprising**
Region where many amnestied LRA have returned to live and where most of the film was shot.
- Djebelin**
Region of South Sudan where the LRA had its bases between 1994 and 2002 and where part of the film was shot.
- Obo**
Region where anti-LRA operations are still ongoing and where part of the film was shot. Dominic Ongwen surrendered here, to the UPDF.

JONATHAN LITTELL

BIOGRAPHY

A Franco-American writer and journalist, Jonathan Littell worked for many years for the NGO *Action Against Hunger*, primarily in Bosnia, Chechnya, Afghanistan and the DRC.

His novel *The Kindly Ones* (Prix de l'Académie française and Prix Goncourt 2006) provided an in-depth exploration, through the Nazi experience, of the question of institutional violence and mass murder. He has since extended this questioning through essays such as *Le sec et l'humide* (2008), as well as numerous feature pieces for *Le Monde* and the review *XXI* (often translated into English, in *The Guardian* and *The London Review of Books*): first during the 2008 war in Georgia, then in the DRC, in South Sudan and in Ciudad Juarez (Mexico).

A tireless and rigorous investigator, he has published two long features on the LRA, which ran as the cover story for *Le Monde Magazine* in October 2010 and August 2011. In early 2012, he spent three weeks in the embattled city of Homs in Syria and published a series of five long articles in *Le Monde*, before publishing his notes under the title *Syrian Notebooks* (2012, English translation 2015).

Jonathan Littell has also for many years been fascinated by images, and in 2013 published *Triptych: Three Studies After Francis Bacon* (2011, English translation 2013), in which he examines the work of the great British painter in light of the great masters who influenced him, of Byzantine art, and of the history of photography.

SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- 2008 *Le sec et l'humide* (L'Arbalète Gallimard)
- 2008 *The Kindly Ones* (HarperCollins, Chatto & Windus, McClelland & Stewart)



CREW

DIRECTED BY JONATHAN LITTELL

IMAGE JOACHIM PHILIPPE
JOHANN FEINDT

SOUND YOLANDE DECARSIN
YVES COMELIAU

EDITING MARIE-HÉLÈNE DOZO

SOUND EDITING LUDOVIC VAN PACHTERBEKE

PRODUCED BY VEILLEUR DE NUIT - JEAN-MARC GIRI

COPRODUCED BY ZERO ONE FILM - THOMAS KUFUS
WRONG MEN - BENOÎT ROLAND

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