



The “Wicked Problem” of Child Soldier Media: Toward an Activist Anthropology of Film

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The “Wicked Problem” of Child Soldier Media:
Toward an Activist Anthropology of Film

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A Thesis in the Field of Anthropology & Archaeology
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

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Abstract

While child soldiers are not new to conflict, their use worldwide has escalated at an alarming rate in the last forty years. Media creators capture images, write books and articles, draw cartoon child soldier heroes, and produce documentaries and films about these children to bring attention to this issue. Most media products of child soldiers create some awareness but more often serve as archetypes in storytelling or as a vehicle to generate an alarm or showcase their misery. This study sought to understand representations of child soldiers in film through an anthropological lens. Data for this study included two child soldier films, ethnographic interviews with the directors of those films, and a focus group in which participants watched and responded to one of the films. The qualitative analysis tool chosen was thematic analysis focusing on critical realism. The themes of the two films are largely synchronized. The films, rich in signs in the form of icons, indexes, and symbols, created a layered and complex message and were understood by the focus group. The theme of life and death of the characters, for the directors, and for the focus group were powerful indications of the importance of this issue. The set and setting in both films created tone and understanding of the situation these children find themselves in and were powerful signifiers of the problem writ large. Both directors intentionally developed their characters, whether real or fictional, in a balanced way that was understood by the focus group and highlighted the problem of child soldiers for the focus group in a way they had not previously understood. While the message sent was the message received, neither director intended a call to action directly,

and the focus group did not express that they knew how to help the children except to express their dismay. The study concludes that while a film about child soldiers can have a powerful, immediate impact, it may not create action.

Dedication

To child soldiers who live on, and who have died, may your suffering be acknowledged, and may you forgive a world that did not protect you. To those who fight in the best way possible, to eliminate the use of children as weapons of war, grow not weary in the lack of progress you feel. Be emboldened to know you have saved lives. Your dedication stops trauma. Know that one life saved, makes all this work matter to one or many, their families, and for the generations to follow in their footsteps. You do this work because you must, and it gives meaning to your life while honoring another's.

Acknowledgments

There are mountains on which I stand in my life that take my breath away. While I have never climbed a mountain alone, that moment of reaching the peak is when I see the beauty of the journey and am thankful for my guides and partners.

I would like to thank the Harvard professors who did not see a student forty years out from a bachelor's degree obtained in 1981, but a student willing to learn from them and their unfailing desire to teach what I did not know. Specifically, the late Dr. Paul Farmer, whose work I knew of in Rwanda and with whom I took my first class in Global Health Equity. Dr. Farmer exemplified a fierce and effective activist and anthropologist. Dr. Orlando Patterson never wavered in his advocacy message for anyone enslaved. In his class, I realized I wanted to explore my connection to child soldiers further. Dr. David Carrasco's passion for culture and incredible storytelling style brought other cultures to life and relevance and inspired my work.

For the research portion of this project, I had the excellent fortune to meet two directors, Bryan Single and Marian De Pontes. Their work on behalf of their films and their impact on this world has just begun. To the focus group participants, your ability to articulate in powerful and subtle ways your wisdom and perspective left me speechless. It confirmed the power of a small group of people to accomplish the extraordinary.

Undoubtedly, I would not be standing at this peak without the help of my family and friends, who have always believed in me. Tara Trabosh Niemann and Tim Trabosh led the loudest cheering section in the family for the last forty-one years. My nephew, Joshua Hoering, continues his journey in art and academia and brings his art to the world, and his soul's faith in his aunt. Tara Backes, I do not know how I could have created this

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Dr. Richard Martin has been my extraordinary guide in taking this thesis from passion to purpose. I am here today because of his support, guidance, expertise, and wise counsel. I gratefully acknowledge his part in allowing this thesis to become a part of the permanent record of my life's work.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge that Clackamas County is located in the traditional homelands and tribal territories of Kalapuyan, Upper Chinookan, and Molallan tribes and people. I recognize the historic and ongoing relationships of Kalapuyan, Upper Chinookan, Molallan, and other tribal people within Clackamas County.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Dedication	v
Acknowledgments.....	vi
List of Tables	xii
List of Figures	xiii
Glossary	xiv
Chapter I. Introduction: A Camp like No Other	16
Chapter II. How We Got Here	28
The International Voice of Humanity	31
Conflict as Catalyst	40
Advocacy Does Not Cease, and Healing Is Constant	45
Beyond Rage to Healing and New Perspectives	49
Summary	50
Chapter III. Media Anthropology and Its Role in Creating Change.....	53
Media Anthropology’s Value to Solve a “Wicked Problem”	55
How Times Have Changed	62
Media: Its Use, Misuse, and Effectiveness	66
Ishmael Beah.....	66
<i>Monos</i>	68
Anime.....	69
Message Received. Or Is It?	70
<i>Kony 2012</i> More Harm than Good?	72

Media Appeals and Pitfalls	76
Advocates Convene	77
Summary	79
Chapter IV. Research Methods	82
Theoretical Framework and Analysis	82
Chapter V. Film Analysis	86
<i>Etana</i>	86
Introduction.....	87
Film Summary	87
Analysis.....	89
Evaluation	93
<i>Children of War</i>	94
Introduction.....	94
Film Summary	95
Analysis.....	97
Evaluation	101
Summary of <i>Etana</i> and <i>Children of War</i>	102
Chapter VI. Analysis: One Subject, Two Directors, Three Themes.....	104
Directors: Bryan Single and Marian De Pontes.....	105
Bryan Single, Director, <i>Children of War</i> Interview.....	108
Marian De Pontes, Director, <i>Etana</i> Interview.....	111
A Common Message from Both Directors	113
Theme 1: Set and Setting	115

Subthemes Set: Mind, Spirit, Archetypes	116
Subthemes Setting: Ideology, War, Mother.....	119
Summary of Set and Setting	121
Theme 2: Fear and Freedom	122
Static and Dynamic Characters	122
Subthemes Fear: Mind, Body, Spirit.....	124
Subthemes Freedom: Mind, Body, Spirit	127
Summary of Fear and Freedom.....	130
Theme 3: Signifiers and Signified	131
Subthemes Signifiers: Clouds, Colors, Dreams.....	132
Summary of Signifiers and Signified.....	136
Summary of Interviews.....	137
Chapter VII. Analysis: One Focus Group, One Film, Three Themes.....	139
Participants.....	140
Materials	140
Procedure	141
Theme 1: Set and Setting	143
Subthemes Set: Mind, Spirit, Archetypes	144
Subthemes Setting: Culture, Authority, Circumstances	149
Summary of Set and Setting	150
Theme 2: Fear and Freedom	151
Subthemes Fear: Mind, Body, Spirit.....	152
Subthemes Freedom: Mind, Body, Spirit	155

Summary of Fear and Freedom.....	156
Theme 3: Signifiers and Signified	157
Subthemes Signifiers: Guns, Water, Beetle.....	157
Summary of Signifiers and Signified.....	161
Summary	163
Chapter VIII. Analysis: <i>Etana's</i> Audience and Director Meet	164
Introduction.....	164
Summary	170
Chapter IX. Collective Impact: We Fight So They Don't	171
The Anthropologist Activist Seeks to Learn How They Can Be of Service	178
Conclusion: Back to the Beginning at Lake Muhazi	180
Appendix 1. Focus Group Demographic	186
References.....	190

List of Tables

Table 1. ICC Indictment & Convictions 2005-2021	38
Table 2. Director Themes and Subthemes	114
Table 3. Focus Group Themes and Subthemes.....	143
Table 4. Comparison of Director and Focus Group Themes and Subthemes.....	167

List of Figures

Figure 1. “Appearances Can Be Deceiving” 1946.....	22
Figure 2. Timeline of international actions combating the use of child soldiers.....	33
Figure 3. CRC Defined Six Grave Violations Against Children and the International Legal Resources to Support these Violations	35
Figure 4. Demobilization Ceremony in South Sudan	52
Figure 5. 11-year-old Civil Defense Forces (CDF) Soldier, Kono State, Sierra Leone ...	55
Figure 6. Scenes from Etana	86
Figure 7. Scenes from <i>Children of War</i>	94
Figure 8. <i>Etana</i> and <i>Children of War</i> Analysis.....	105
Figure 9. Focus Group and Film	139

Glossary

AGDA Armed Groups and de factor

ANSA Armed Non-state Actors

CRC Convention on the Rights of the Child

CRC Committee on the Rights of the Child

CSPA The Child Soldiers Prevention Act

DRC Democratic Republic of the Congo

ELN Ejército de Liberación Nacional

EPG Eminent Persons Group

FARC Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia

FNI Front des Nationalistes et Intégrationnistes (located in the DRC)

FPLC Forces Patriotiques pour la Libération du Congo (located in the DRC)

FRPI Force de Résistance Patriotique de l'Ituri (located in the DRC)

ICC International Criminal Court

ICL International criminal law

IDP Internal Displaced Person

IGO Inter-governmental organization

IHL International humanitarian law

IHRL International human rights law

ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (No. 182, 1999)

ICRC International Committee of the Red Cross

LRA Lord's Resistance Army

MCU Marvel Cinematic Universe

NGOs Non-governmental Organizations

NHRC National Human Rights Commission

NHRI National Human Rights Institutions

NPA New People's Army

NRA National Resistance Army

NRM National Resistance Movement

OPCRC Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of a Child

PRIO Peace Research Institute of Oslo

RDRC Rwanda Demobilisation Reintegration Commission

RPF Rwandan Patriotic Front

RUF Revolutionary United Front

SDG Sustainable Development Goal

MHHRI Mental Health and Human Rights Info

UNGA United Nations General Assembly

UNSC United Nations Security Council

UNCRC United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

UNICEF United Nations Children's Fund

UNODC United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Chapter I.

Introduction: A Camp like No Other

In 2007 I stood in a beautiful, peaceful lakeside camp outside of Kigali, Rwanda, at Lake Muhazi, the site of a former military training camp. There was no equipment being moved. No sign of drills or steady beat of marching in unison. The soldiers were all less than seventeen years old, child ex-combatants, some as young as seven years old. They were not there to be trained but to be rehabilitated through the program directed by the Rwandan Demobilization and Reintegration Commission (RDRC) at Lake Muhazi Centre (Muhazi). It was my second trip to Muhazi. The children previously in the camp had been moved back to the villages from which they had been taken. Others moved to places where they were strangers; they either did not know from where they were taken, or the stigma of the reputation of a young boy's acts preceded him and precluded him from going home. When I left Rwanda and wrote blog posts about those two visits, I told their stories from my perspective, not theirs. I sought to increase awareness of their plight to raise funds to support my foundation program's needs, not theirs. Though I was a witness to their plight, I wondered what more I could do. Since that time, I have been determined to find out what more I can do to help.

My interest in child soldiers stems from my international work assisting women and children, which began in Rwanda. In 2005 I co-founded and was president of the *Itafari* Foundation (*Itafari* is Kinyarwanda for brick). *Itafari's* mission was to transform, empower, lead, and grow Rwanda in alignment with Rwanda Vision 2020 (GGKP 2012). By engaging our global strategic partners and volunteers, we developed and maintained enduring financially stable programs for the people of Rwanda. *Itafari* closed in 2016 after successfully reaching its goals. Through this work, I was personally introduced to child soldiers at Muhazi. I visited twice. Once to tour, and then came back a year later and with six of the children, cooked a complete meal for all the children and staff. Many children had never seen a white woman, and my interaction with them was life-changing for me. I knew they were labeled killers and violent, yet our day together became personal. We laughed and connected through food and cooking; by the end of the day as a mother, I viewed these boys as my sons. One of the boys stated he wanted to become a chef.

Throughout my education at Harvard, I was consistently reminded of the need to create change in the world and gathered tools and ideas on how I could impact the issue of child soldiers always with the camp in my mind's eye.

This long-standing determination drives me every day and led me to create this paper with an intention to understand how the impact of media can support child soldiers and become an advocate to end their use. I believe collective impact changes the world, especially for “wicked problems” in our world that are complex and filled with roadblocks and changing circumstances. The term “wicked problem” was first defined by Rittel and Webber in their 1973 article about confronting social policy problems and the

complexity of solutions and actors to create an ultimate end result. They knew professionals are usually hired to solve a problem that is “definable, understandable and consensual” (Rittel and Webber 1973, 156). Those problems can be ones that are solved through a series of steps, often dependent on those who are trying to solve them. CEOs are hired to create solutions to the problem of low sales, poor profits or taking a company to scale to have a larger market share and reach. Rittel and Webber distinguish those problems from problems that are societal in context: poverty, housing shortage, climate change to name just three. These issues are so complex that they believe there is never one solution but will be approached and solved many times over as circumstances change. An essential aspect of defining a “wicked problem” is that “every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem” (Rittel and Webber 1973, 165). How true of child soldiers. They are a symptom of conflict. Conflict is a symptom of power and control. Power and control are a symptom of war. Yet the complexity of the problem in no way allows caring human beings to give up on solving “wicked problems.” This study is meant to create awareness of the possibility of film's influence as an approach to this “wicked problem” to become one more strategy to inform, impact, and engage the world about children who are enslaved through violence.

Child soldiers exist well beyond the African continent. It is a worldwide issue that I want to understand, affect, and engage with others to realize what is being done and what steps are being used to create solutions. I am not a psychologist, counselor, or filmmaker. My understanding of the issue is based on personal experiences for seventeen years in Rwanda, which deeply informed my studies and classes at Harvard. As an anthropologist I seek to illuminate what is happening and as an activist present ideas and

solutions in a balanced and fair way that will benefit those who work tirelessly for the children of war. As in conventional in ethnographic studies, the approach to this topic with a beginner's mind willing to ask questions that may be simple but in fact can lead to alternative strategies that can assist experts in their work.

Can media messages reduce the upward trend of the use of child soldiers or further the belief in a viewer's mind that while this is a horrible situation for children, there is no action they can take? Believing an issue is unsolvable, "wicked", and too overwhelming, a general audience will not seek to be engaged in creating a solution, and more children will suffer and die. Child soldier statistics listed in three separate annual reports filed by the Secretary-General to the General Assembly Security Council outline the increase in the use of child soldiers by verified governments and Armed Non-state actors (ANSA), those operating within a country but unaffected by international law. Their reports indicate child soldiers to be 15,500 in 2016, 21,000 in 2017, and 23,982 children in 2021, representing an increase of 155% of children used as soldiers from 2016 to 2021. These reports call out Afghanistan, Colombia, Central African Republic, DRC, Iraq, Mali, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, and Yemen for their state and ANSA perpetrators (Guterres 2017, 2018, 2022). Some measures have been implemented to reduce or eliminate the use of children as soldiers. Yet this issue is not solved by the UN's resolutions, individual countries, or organizations focused solely on child soldiers. And the numbers reported are probably low given the difficulty of gathering data evidenced by the round numbers in the reports of years 2016 and 2017 in the Guterres reports referenced above. Perhaps in some cases governments and ANSAs are not interested in tracking or reporting these alarming statistics.

The upward trend in the use of child soldiers indicates that despite well-meaning organizations, actors, and states focused on this complex issue, their use continues. This lack of effective worldwide action to reduce the use of children as soldiers invites the research question: what conclusions can be drawn about media portrayals of child soldiers to assist in ending their use in conflict?

Additional research questions are:

- What do films of child soldiers reveal regarding logic underpinning viewpoints by how these images are presented?
- What is the creator's message, and how do they hope to influence their audience's interpretation?
- What is the audience's response to the creator's message, and what does that tell us about the alignment with the creator's intention?

To address these questions, examining media through the lens of misery literature, as described by David Mastey in his work on child soldiers and media, helps understand the interest in child soldier stories. Mastey uses Ishmael Beah's book, *A Long Way Gone*, is an example of this misery literature style which features child characters who suffer but eventually triumph, as is the case of Ishmael Beah, who is rescued and now is an international spokesperson for UNICEF (Mastey 2015; Beah 2007; UNICEF, n.d.). While Beah seeks tirelessly to tell his story and bring attention to the issue, one voice is never enough to sustain a movement or create lasting change. There is more misery literature than fairy tales and happily ever after is often the hope, not the reality. Defining child soldier characters through the genre of misery literature may help explain why this archetype is chosen given the interest in misery literature by the public, yet the happy

ending audiences seek does not exist for most children who are used and then traumatized in this manner. To parse this term more precisely, a new term, “misery child soldier media” may better reflect preconceptions of the misery of child soldiers, the belief of their sad but uncorrectable situation, and how we can change their real-life stories to create a better ending for them and their progeny. Misery child soldier media is not meant to define and accept the genre as is but analyze it to its subject matter and call attention to the warning of such a genre if it is not well informed in its intent and content.

When child soldier archetypes are subjects in the arc of storytelling and glorified in film, the use of children as soldier heroes may undermine the horrific reality of child soldiers in war situations. Depending on depictions in media, the work of well-meaning governments, international organizations, and NGOs to eradicate child soldiers can be improved or hindered. Those depictions can also create ignorance, misinformation, and misunderstanding. This thesis focuses on analyzing film depictions and their effect on audiences and offering possible implications of these images.

Stories we tell, are told, read, or view, might entertain, amuse, delight, horrify, create emotion, challenge, educate, or change the viewer or listener. Viewers are transported through a story passed through generations, a film we watch and become deeply engaged in, or the written word and image. Stories matter. Stories transform our awareness of possibility in unexpected ways to limit or extend our understanding of the world's potential: positive and negative. Stories can create awareness of our own history or the history and culture of others so strongly that the stories will often be remembered less for the lesson and historical truth they carry but for the characters they create.

Yet stories, just as art can deceive the audience, or the audience can miss the nuances of what is before them.

The artist Frida Kahlo used images of herself to tell a story far beyond the medium in which she created it. On its surface, the charcoal and colored pencil on paper she created in 1946 was a self-portrait and viewed at a glance may be confusing and unrelatable to the viewer. Kahlo's painting was her story of who she was beyond her clothes and face. This image is shown in Figure 1, titled "*The Broken Column*" which has multiple layers of meaning. In Berit Potter's review she wrote,

In the drawing, a transparent dress and huipil (tunic) both cover and reveal Kahlo's body with a broken column at its center that represents her spine that was injured in a bus accident, her right leg atrophied from polio, and left leg covered in butterflies—imagery that Kahlo often associated with liberation. (Potter 2021, 2)



Figure 1. “Appearances Can Be Deceiving” 1946

The Utah Museum of Fine Arts. Charcoal and colored pencil on paper, 11 ¼ x 8 in. (29 x 20.8cm). Collection of Museo Frida Kahlo. © 2019 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, México, D.F. (Museos de México, n.d.).

The history of Frida Kahlo and her art is known by many. Some may romanticize her and see an enigmatic and iconic nobility in her self-portrayals. Yet Kahlo told her version of her suffering through her art, and her complex portrayal and lack of traditional beauty could lead many to miss a more powerful message being sent by the artist herself. Kahlo associated her brokenness in the art with the images she embedded of her injuries in this portrait. She also demonstrated an emotion that allows a mind to believe all is not lost: liberation was her belief shown in the image of the butterfly. An insect that begins deep within a cocoon but fights its way out to spread its wings and share its beauty through the freedom of flight as it alights on a branch or flower for a viewer to admire. In this imagery Kahlo chose to reflect her liberation from the cocoon of pain and suffering, this complex picture can serve as a baseline to understand the imagery of child soldiers in a film. As child soldiers are viewed, we should seek to understand the multiple layers of meaning, both the horror and the liberation as complex images of these children in their plight and flight portray as the creator reveals them to the audience.

Storytellers in all mediums do not have a primary or moral duty to look after their viewers or listeners to create accurate, easily understood, socially responsible, or ethical works. Nevertheless, there is danger in creating images and archetypes in media that may have real-life consequences for the people those characters represent. Many media depictions created of child soldiers, both in art form and for use by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), draw attention to the use of child soldiers. But to what end? Images, interviews, books, anime, films, and webinars about child soldiers are all methods of telling the story of these children. Does this research indicate a collective and

productive impact in the media genre of films where child soldiers are discussed and portrayed?

To further understand the reality of these children's fate, two films: *Children of War*, a groundbreaking film, and *Etana*, a fictional film about child soldiers, were reviewed. Directors of both films were interviewed, and information gathered identifies the directors' purpose in creation and the key themes of their work. Additionally, the film *Etana* was viewed by a focus group for their reflections and theories about the film's meaning and will be compared to the director's intent. These analyses will shed light on gaps identified with the hope of adding to the understanding of how film media can affect the global issue of child soldiers. This is not an exhaustive study of all films about child soldiers and does not seek to view one as better than the other. No consideration was taken of a film's success by financial ticket gross or fan popularity. The films discussed in short or more lengthy analyses are meant to highlight a film's intention with its ultimate impact on the audience through the director's and the viewer's perspectives.

Films that include child soldiers that were reviewed show the differing impact each film made or intended to make. While stories and their characters may be intended for entertainment, action, or awareness, those storied characters may actually thwart the efforts of champions of the child soldiers who say no to the use of a child as a soldier whose body and mind become a weapon of war. A story may intend to create change for the good, but it can instill in the audience that an issue is tragic but unsolvable; another “wicked problem”, and one they cannot affect.

This thesis seeks to add to the research of the significance and consequences (or lack thereof) of storytellers' actions through their stories of child soldiers as characters observed and commented on through the lens of media anthropology.

Rodolfo Maggio speaks to the power of an anthropologist to tell a story of their work in such a way that creates a connection with the audience. This connection transcends the limited substances and themes anthropologists explore through detailed research. Storytelling is a way to structure the past so that another can understand the context of what happened with the anthropologist's story of characters, real or a compilation of characters (Maggio 2014). The content of words and images used to craft the story can create a powerful vision for an audience unaware of a culture or people in a situation they may never directly observe. With this opportunity, a media anthropologist can choose to craft a story for their audience that explicitly identifies a social cause or issue or gives light to a group of people of whom the audience is unaware.

While some may argue that telling the story of a child soldier's life may differ from their actual experience, there is a relational flow or dance between the story told about the life experienced and the life lived; without one the other cannot exist. By telling the story, life is lived through the storytelling the audience experiences. In Sarah Lamb's article "Being a Widow and Other Life Stories: The Interplay between Lives and Words," she believes the interplay or relational flow makes the storytelling as powerful as the life it recalls and makes storytelling a way to live an experience (Lamb 2001).

While creator's stories may not be killing children, children can die needlessly if not enough focused attention can be garnered in the international community to create leverage against the perpetrators of this atrocity. There is no straightforward remedy for

ending the use of child soldiers, yet any behavior that minimizes or glamorizes child soldiers may harm innocent children who never knew a movie or creative product was made on their backs for financial gain commercially or to garner donations for NGOs.

The problem is massive and complicated, and after the analysis is completed, this paper will incorporate the work of Collective Impact as a tool to frame the solution of why the use of child soldiers in media, specifically film, is complicated and “wicked”; and though problematic to solve, needs our focus and continual attention. In the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, management consultants John Kania and Mark Kramer describe collective impact as "the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem" (Kania and Kramer 2011, 36). Further discussion in the solutions section of this thesis will clarify how the use of Collective Impact as a tool to frame a solution may be used stop the use of child soldiers. While analysis of the children's situation is necessary, awareness in itself will not affect this “wicked problem.” This research will bring the science of anthropology to the media portrayals of child soldiers that heighten the value of media anthropology as a credible and practical vehicle to move ideas forward through media depictions. Additionally, media anthropologists can call out the misuse of depictions of the same sources and their grave cost if ignored. Can the science of anthropology expand the impact a fictionalized film and documentaries bring as a partner to tell their story?

This passion to help solve the problem and create impact brings me back to my visits to Muhazi. I was fortunate enough to meet these children and that changed me. Few are so honored, and for many others film can be a window through which these children are seen. Highlighting a tool as simple and complex as a film, I aim to show the value of

a media anthropologist's ability to create action and awareness at a higher level for organizations and actors who want to stop this heinous use of a child through a tool in a conflict. I personally know how easy it is to not create change. We cannot rest, we cannot give up, and with more informed, purposeful, and nuanced messages and focus, we can change this situation. Changing one child's situation can make a difference for that child and their family for generations to come. Bringing more attention to the plight of child soldiers with an eye on adding to how images can be more effectively created can change the arc of a generation of children whose stories will allow them to change the world as they see fit.

Chapter II.

How We Got Here

My first visit to Muhazi was in 2007. The ex-combatants, aged seven to sixteen, are brought back to Rwanda from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). They have participated in the killing, raping, and atrocities accompanying combat. They were wounded, attacked, and indoctrinated through torture and spiritual threats and now are traumatized. They are expendable to those who used them as weapons and precious as children to those in the camp. In camp, the adults seek to engage them through culturally sensitive psychiatric counseling, skills training, and various therapies such as art therapy, to help them heal. The doctors, social workers, counselors, and therapists will support them during their three-month stay when they move on to reintegration into communities as they begin rebuilding their lives. The actions of so many to heal children in the aftermath prompt the question: how do children even find themselves in need of these services?

"What are we fighting for?", is the question asked by millions over the millennia. For those in the thick of a conflict, reasons have included religion, enslavement, land, resources, revenge, power, tradition, hatred, and greed. Humans created armies to fight for these causes. Battles detailed in history books may seem to be legends, not lessons students learned. Examples of conflicts that led to wars include the French Revolutionary War (1792 -1802), the American Civil War (1861 - 1865), World I (1914 -1918), World

War II (1939 - 1945), Vietnam War (1955 - 1975), and the Syrian Civil War (2011 – Present). Wars and conflicts occur in nations that many of the world's citizens may never know of or hear about unless they become a part of a news cycle, observed in a film, or a tale told in a book. These stories and legends of past and ancient wars describe handcrafted protective gear such as armor and spears. Today's combatants now use handheld weaponry, remotely controlled combat drones, nuclear and chemical warfare long-range guided missiles, and any weapon that can harm large groups of people by land, sea, and air. There are now many options to kill the enemy without looking them in the eye. Regardless of the weapon, whether local or remote, a weapon's effectiveness requires a combatant to deploy or propel it. However, in the case of child soldiers, they have become the weapon to use the weapons. Children are a weapon of choice for too many in recent conflicts, often in countries warring between local groups and those in a dispute with neighboring countries. Using children in this matter is not necessarily recognized or acknowledged by a government or military group's leaders. These de facto leaders of children use all means and measure to capture a child's mind, body, and soul for their intended purposes. While many seek solutions to end the use of children, the abuse continues for those who find the children suit their purpose. Beyond that, there is a lack of enforceable laws and convictions, difficulty in gathering accurate facts and figures on the number of children as combatants, and the challenge of bringing diverse actors, goals, cultures, and agendas together for dialogue about the issue.

In his book, *The Anthropology of War*, anthropologist Keith Otterbein distinguishes war between countries and wars within the same culture. In a conflict within a closed warfare system, within a culture speaking the same language, the internal

wrangling is about beliefs such as religion, genocide, rights, tribes, and land, using the same weapons. Ethnocentrism shapes these conflicts internally and harms local enemies through torture, killing, and enslavement. Ethnocentrism contributes to how young males are taught, socialized, and trained to become soldiers (Otterbein 2009, 39, 86, 102).

Suppose tactics and weapons, language, and the people in the culture are similar. In that case, it may be those common characteristics of the enemy against his enemy that create the need for more soldiers from within the culture. This idea is not the case when countries are in a war against another country. Resources for soldiers and weapons can come from outside actors worldwide who vie to help in their arguments and battles. But when resources from outside the conflict are unavailable, or the circumstances are people living on the land, and in villages where conflict occurs, fewer options are available for formally trained armies.

P.W. Singer's work in *Children at War* recounts the history of wars from ancient times and describes the decision of warring groups who eschewed the use of children as front-line combatants. But that general decision changed with the beginning of a 1991, ten-year civil war in Sierra Leone in West Africa. In this civil war, all parties in the conflict used children. At the onset of the war, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebel group used children; 80 percent of their fighters were seven to fourteen years of age, and the estimated number of children in the conflict was ten thousand. They constituted the majority of combatants during the civil war (Singer 2005, chap 2).

Nothing about this decision to use children in Sierra Leone was acceptable to the international community but it became the first in a long list of documented countries and conflicts that followed suit. As more countries and conflicts sought to use children in this

manner, advocates began to place this issue in front of international organizations and communities, calling for justice.

The International Voice of Humanity

War has rules of engagement, and the international community has expected standards of humane treatment of the opposing forces captured during war. Humane treatment of those we intend to kill, or capture is a paradox, yet people have sought rules of engagement to bring humanity to conflict. The following summation brings a framework for creating laws and behaviors toward children as combatants.

The Geneva Conventions (Conventions) created standards of expected behavior during a war and define certain behaviors as unacceptable. In 1864 the first Conventions convened when twelve nation's representatives traveled to Geneva, Switzerland, to create wartime humanitarian treatment of prisoner protocols. With each subsequent Convention of 1906, 1909, and 1929, updates outlining additional protocols for treating enemy forces during the war were added to the existing language. Up to this point, the Conventions only covered combatants and their expected humanitarian rights. The horrific treatment of civilians (including children) during World War II, fully revealed at the end of the war by Germany's system of concentration camps, demanded the need to protect non-combatants through the Conventions. Specifically, referring to the treatment of civilians during World War II, the 1949 Convention delineated provisions for humanitarian relief for populations in occupied territories while creating specific zones like hospitals, considered off limits as targets by an occupying power (Geneva Convention 1949). While the articles in the 1949 Conventions were specific for the protection of civilians, their

protection was boosted in additional language protocols added in the 1977 Convention to address the rights and protection of children in civil and state wars:

The Parties to the conflict shall take all feasible measures in order that children who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities and, in particular, they shall refrain from recruiting them into their armed forces. (United Nations Human Rights 1977, Article 77)

However, rules for behavior beyond the pale and beyond the realm of decency are challenging to enforce. The worldwide use of conscripted children as combatants is mind-boggling until it becomes clear that this new practice was not intermittent but embraced by many political parties. The Convention establishing human rights policies for protecting prisoners' rights in Geneva in 1864 never anticipated using children as war weapons as documented in the 20th century. When the persistent breach prohibiting children's use escalated, the value of the Convention's articles to protect children diminished. While the 1977 Conventions broadly addressed this issue, these declarations do not adequately address or bind belligerents or armed groups in countries that use children as combatants.

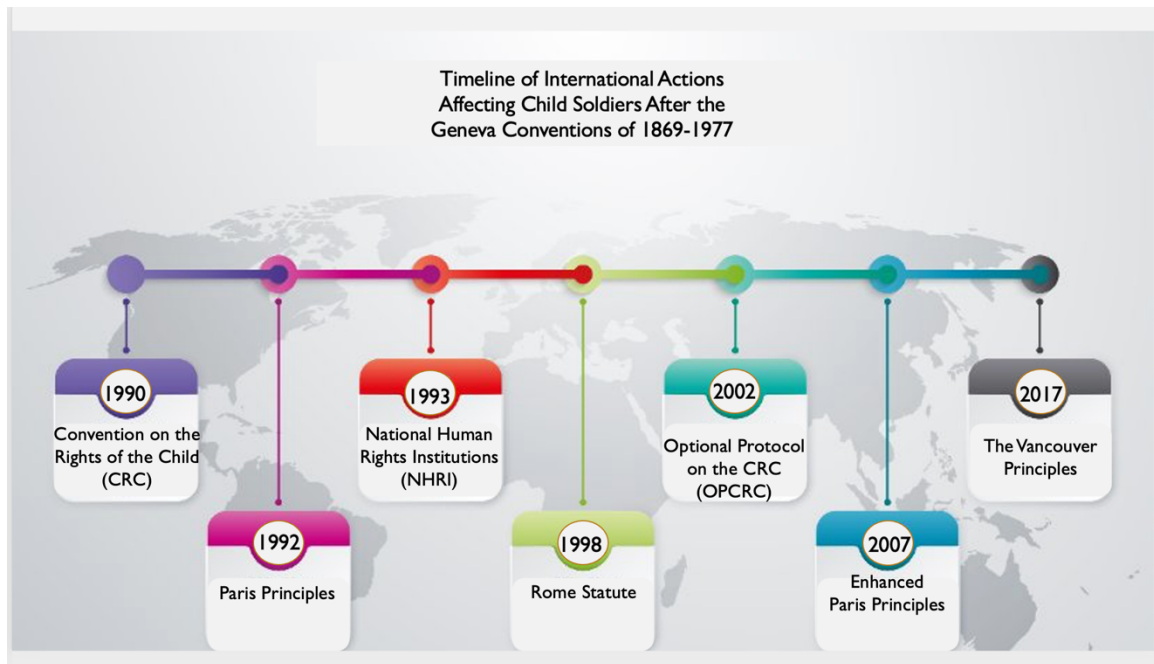


Figure 2. Timeline of international actions combating the use of child soldiers

Graphic created by: Victoria H. Trabosh

Often, in the passage of time and trouble, humanity seeks solutions post damage, which is the case of protecting children as soldiers. But as child soldiers in different parts of the world became commonplace, caring people needed to confront this new form of violence by creating several universal guidelines on the right of human dignity and protection of children in war and conflict. International organizations, intent on bringing citizens together worldwide, like the UN, step in and act as a collaborative space to create agreements. Figure 2 shows the timeline of international conversations and agreements outlining the UN's intent to be a voice in the protection of children. In 1989, international standards for the safety and protection of children, known as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), entered the international stage.

UNCRC develops protection and guidelines for basic human rights in all areas.

Everything from their right to education to protection from harm. A child, defined as less than eighteen years old unless the age of the majority in a nation was less, was the standard (UNGA 1990).

Child soldiers are not the only egregious acts during war. The UN also encouraged each country to set up their own National Human Rights Institution (NHRI) to monitor behavior in their nation and be a voice at the table for discussions, commitment, and agreement on standards for children and the human rights afforded to all citizens. NHRI representatives to the UN are accountable to the Paris Principles established in 1991 to address human rights standards (UNCHR 1992; UNGA 1993). At this point, the Paris Principles did not directly address the use of child soldiers. Specific statutes and the demanding journey of addressing the issue of children in combat continued through the adoption of the Rome Statute in 1998, creating the formation of the International Criminal Court (ICC) that same year. The ICC's most significant value to the international community is to take legal steps to prosecute those who ignore the laws and statutes regarding child soldiers. This international tribunal can generate legal recourse for perpetrators of crimes against these children without regard to the interest and consent of the nation where they operate (UNSC 1999; Meron 2000, 253; Rome 1998). Highlighting the issues affecting children during conflict (not just child soldiers), the UN established the “Six Grave Violations Against Children During Armed Conflict” in 1999. Supporting its value is the tenants of international humanitarian law, international jurisprudence, and international human rights laws (UNSC 1999). Rome

1998). These six grave violations act as a reporting mechanism and lens through which children's rights are framed, as shown in Figure 3.

Six Grave Violations Against Children During Armed Conflict	Key Legal Resources Underpinning Violations	
1. Recruitment and use of children 2. Killing or maiming of children 3. Sexual violence against children 4. Attacks against schools or hospitals 5. Abductions of children 6. Denial of humanitarian access	International humanitarian law ❖ The Four Geneva Conventions (1949) ❖ Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions (1977) ❖ Rome Statute of the ICC (1998) ❖ Customary international humanitarian law	International human rights law ❖ Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and its Optional Protocols (2000/2012) ❖ UN Declaration of Human Rights (1948) ❖ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) ❖ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) ❖ Regional human rights instruments ❖ ILO Conventions 29 (1930) and 18 (1999) ❖ Convention against Torture (1984) ❖ Customary international human rights law
	International jurisprudence ❖ Case law of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda and the Special Court for Sierra Leone ❖ The Rome Statute and case law of the ICC ❖ Case law of the International Court of Justice	
	Security Council Resolutions on children and armed conflict ❖ 1261 (1999), 1314 (2000), 1379 (2001), 1460 (2003), 1539 (2004), 1612 (2005), 1882 (2009), 1998 (2011) and 2068 (2012)	

Figure 3. CRC Defined Six Grave Violations Against Children and the International Legal Resources to Support these Violations

Graphic created by: Victoria H. Trabosh

The UN continued its advocacy and established the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPCRC) in 2002 (UNGA 2002). In 2007, UNICEF undertook the process of reevaluating the protections in place and, with several partners, created a new addendum to the Paris Principles, further delineating the responsibility to children in combat and outlining steps and behaviors needed to protect, rehabilitate, and monitor the children in

this situation (UNHCR 2007). As awareness and international advocacy grew, in 2017, additional guidelines called The Vancouver Principles with a mandate to prioritize and deepen the protection of child soldiers, monitor, and track their use in conflicts, and address early warning signs in all UN peacekeeping missions was written. The Vancouver Principles, in concert with the Canadian government and partnership with Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative, child protection advocates, UN representatives, and key member states, seeks to deepen and strengthen the specific needs of child soldiers (Canada 2017).

There is no doubt that the international community aims to eliminate the use of child soldiers by establishing rules of engagement writ large for countries during war and conflict. What began with the Conventions, and all of the subsequent and specific resolutions, institutions, legal framework, and advocacy from 1990 through 2017 to protect a child soldier framed by the “Six Grave Violations” (UNSC 1999, GCRCs 2021), attempt to cover all bases from a humanitarian and legal perspective. The width and depth of the guidelines would appear to create a comprehensive framework of protection for children. Yet, research in 2017 by the Peace Institute of Oslo (PRIO) commissioned by the organization Save the Children International, found an increase in the number of children affected by conflict. They estimated in their report that 420 million children were living in conflict zones (Graham et al. 2019, 16). While not all those children are exposed to the horrors of serving as combatants, increasing exposure to conflict can only lead to more abuse of children in combat.

International agencies, governmental groups, and NGOs are working to eradicate child soldiers as weapons of war. These organizations and others seek to help, rehabilitate, and retrain child soldiers and to sound the alarm about the number of children exploited while crying out to donors to support their cause. Mental Health and Human Rights Info website, a collector of resources, lists specific resources to assist children. This list includes but is not limited to:

Amnesty International, Children Born of War, Child watch International Research Network, Child soldiers, Child Soldier Relief, Child Soldiers International, Global Coalition for Reintegration of Child Soldiers, Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Save the Children, The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldier Initiative, The Children and Armed Conflict Unit, The Child Rights Information Network, The Children and War Foundation, The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, The Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, UN's web page concerning children and armed conflict, and War Child International Network. (MHHRI, n.d.)

While the ICC was established to seek out and indict those perpetrators, in total, only eight perpetrators have been indicted and four convicted by the ICC. Given the scope of the issue, why are indictments and convictions not more effective and prevalent? Table 1 shows the perpetrators and the state of their indictments.

Table 1. ICC Indictment & Convictions 2005-2021

Name	Country	Group	Indicted	Convicted	Prison	Current Status
Germain Katanga	DRC	FRPI	2007	2014	3 yrs. 8 mos.	Sentence completed 2016
Joseph Kony	Uganda	LRA	2005	no	no	At large, whereabouts unknown
Thomas Lubanga Kyilo	DRC	FPLC	2006	2012	14 years	Serving sentence in DRC
Mathieu Ngudjolo chui	DRC	FNI	2007	acquitted	no	Whereabouts unknown
Bosco Ntaganda	DRC	FPLC	2006	2019	30 years	Hague ICC Detention Center
Okot Odhiambo	Uganda	LRA	2005	no -died in ambush	n/a	Dead
Dominic Ongwen	Uganda	LRA	2005	2021	25 years	Hague ICC Detention Center
Vincent Otti	Uganda	LRA	2005	no - reportedly executed by orders from Joseph Kony who declared him dead	n/a	No independent proof of death and considered to be at large as a fugitive. Proceedings against him are ongoing

List of all Indictments of Perpetrators to date and the results of those indictments.

Source: (Klobucista 2022)

Indictments are perpetrators from the DRC and Uganda. Yet on the ICC website on the International Day of the Child Against the Use of Child Soldiers in 2021, the ICC Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda declared, "Children's voices and their stories of unspeakable abuses during war and conflict must not go unheard" (Office of the Prosecutor 2021). Respectfully, while we hear those declarations through media, the cries of the children are not answered often and soon enough. While the Office of the Prosecutor declares the intent to hear their voices, since 2003, the ICC has been conducting multiple investigations in Uganda and the DRC but also in:

Darfur, Sudan; the Central African Republic (two distinct situations); Kenya; Libya; Côte d'Ivoire; Mali; Georgia, Burundi; Bangladesh/Myanmar, and Afghanistan (subject to a pending article 18 deferral request). The Office is also currently conducting preliminary examinations relating to the situations in Bolivia; Colombia; Guinea; the Philippines; and Venezuela (I and II) and has completed three other preliminary examinations concerning the situations in Palestine, as well as Nigeria, and Ukraine (pending requests for authorization to proceed to investigation) (Office of the Prosecutor 2021).

Twenty-three countries are listed, and only two country's prosecutions in Africa demonstrate the ICC's ability to affect change. Eight perpetrators are grinding through the wheels of justice, some dead, presumed dead, and some on the run. While this work is complicated, this is an injustice to the children. Greater awareness must be available beyond the international, governmental, and NGO levels. Sustained interest and productive action may seem impossible as issues affecting children get eclipsed by media events that take center stage momentarily or they are forgotten when international or local national issues transfix citizens. Universal issues need universal and sustained attention, and in today's media landscape, it is one of the most vexing problems to get and hold a viewer's attention.

Conflict as Catalyst

Conflict forces the creation of solutions through treaties, sanctions, agreements, principles, and legal avenues, yet the problem persists. Knowing injustice to children is immoral to the majority of humans, in an introduction to *Child Soldiers*, Luis Moreno-Ocampo, Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court since its formation in 2002, stated,

Using children to fight adult wars is not a cultural practice. It is not a byproduct of war. It is not the sad but inescapable consequence of poverty. It is a terrible crime with clearly established codes. It involves terrorizing and abducting young children, putting them through brutal rites of initiation, and forcing them to kill community members, sometimes even family members, or be executed. (Kahn 2008, 13)

Mr. Moreno-Ocampo calls poverty a catalyst for child soldiers, but it is by far the only catalyst. Those who traffic children in armed conflict benefit from a breakdown in community and family support networks, extreme poverty, forced displacements, and a state of impunity originating from a breakdown of law (Lamahieu and Me 2016, 64). Caring people worldwide are disheartened and appalled at the sacrifice of children in war and conflict. The catalyst is the continuation of a conflict that does not get solved. People can live together with differing views if they choose peace above their differences. Child soldiers are a symptom of an inability or decision not to choose peace. This thesis will not solve the root problem of conflict. But child soldiers are deeply concerning, and we must find ways to eradicate their use.

Activism to assist children is not internationally coordinated. Nor are all forms of child servitude a collective issue. In Roméo Dallaire's book, *They Fight Like Soldiers, They Die Like Children*, he states, "Man has created the ultimate cheap, expendable, yet

sophisticated human weapon, at the expense of humanity's future: its children" (Dallaire and Humphreys 2010, 3). Children make effective soldiers because they lack the agency to make informed decisions. Young children are still growing and are weak lambs for killers who want to form an army and easy pickings in places with few other options for the child. When a child's family dies during an ongoing conflict, how can they protect themselves? A child caught in the middle of a battlefield with their family dying around them, choices are not the internal discussion but processing the shock of the death of a loved one and how to survive. Waiting for them in their grief and desperation are the killers. They have lightweight guns the child can carry. They use drugs, fear, and religious exploitation to form their minds. And the most shameful crime to civilization? They will quickly kill these children if they do not comply because the child will be so easily forgotten. Dallaire's work focuses on what actions to take in the aftermath of disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation, and reintegration of child soldiers. While he knows the importance of healing, he wants to find ways to prevent child recruitment in the first place. Dallaire knows as a soldier of the tactical defense needs to decommission and neutralize an enemy's weapon system. Yet he powerfully applies those words to the child soldier as a non-starter in combat (Dallaire and Humphreys 2010).

Dallaire was the senior officer of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda before and during the Genocide in 1994. He arrived in Rwanda in 1993 for a UN reconnaissance mission. He visited a rebel battalion headquarters fighting against the Rwandan government's troops to assist in the implementation of the peace agreement to end the long-standing Rwanda Civil War between the Tutsi and Hutu tribes. He describes the young boys he observed in the bush who were the soldiers in this camp and saw

firsthand the appeal that drew young Hutu boys to connect in these camps. The boys had come from refugee camps in Uganda and fought against the Rwandan government for the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) during the civil war before 1994. Fighters interested in these uneducated and poverty-stricken kids, willing to give them beer and drugs, provide a uniform, and arm them, allowed these children to identify with something other than their fear and reality. From initial indoctrination in those camps before the Genocide that Dallaire had seen in the bush, this trained youth wing called Interahamwe turned into the most brutal killers in the militia during the Genocide. Dallaire saw these children firsthand become killers (Dallaire and Humphreys 2010, 32-35). After the Genocide, Dallaire sought healing from the trauma he experienced. Those mental images of the young boys marked as Interahamwe and the trauma he knew they had experienced led him to create The Dallaire Institute (Institute). The Institute has developed a comprehensive strategic plan to end the use of child soldiers worldwide. In their third edition of *Child Soldiers: A Handbook for Security Sector Actors*, they state:

The Dallaire Initiative approach empowers military, police and prison personnel by re-conceptualizing children and armed conflict as a specific, and high-priority, concern. This in turn leads to doctrine, strategies, and tactics to both interrupt child soldier recruitment, and to improve security sector interactions with all children, and ultimately to avoid casualties on all sides. (Reeves et al. 2017)

Seen as a nuanced approach, rather than focusing on the aftermath of a child's situation, the Institute seeks to keep front and center the urgent focus on ending the use of children in combat. This organization has a seat at the table and was instrumental in creating The Vancouver Principles in 2017 (Canada 2017). Their commitment is to elevate children's rights to the highest priority on international peace and security agendas. What grounds their work is seeking collaboration of all parties interested in

solving this issue and holding states accountable for a breach of responsibility and commitment to put children first. It sets an intimidating and demanding path to eradicate the use of child soldiers, yet that is the path to solving any “wicked problem.” Because Dallaire has lived the experience of confronting children as soldiers, his resolve and that of the Institute to work for a child soldier's freedom remains unyielding regardless of difficulty or setback.

With all of the attention drawn to this issue through the work of excellent organizations such as Dallaire's, other organizations, and the UN and its member states who want change, when hypocrisy meets politics, the solutions continue to frustrate the advocates. For example, the US Child Soldiers Prevention Act (CSPA), established in 2008, requires the State Department to list all countries identified as using child soldiers or support militias. When the US lists a country within the guidelines of the CSPA, the country becomes ineligible for certain forms of US military aid. Many countries depend on that aid to secure the sovereignty and security of their nation. The CSPA includes a "national interest waiver provision," which allows the president to bypass the law if it believes it is in the US national interest to do so (CRS 2022, 1-2). While the list places on notice countries not complying with the CSPA and having consequences for their security, a waiver allowing them to continue to get support from the US without compliance is an inexcusable but sobering example of politics eclipsing humanity. One of the organizations acting as a watchdog is Human Rights Watch. President Obama's list of annual waivers led Human Rights Watch to declare that one of his negative lasting legacies will be the increase of waivers given to countries using child soldiers. During his presidency, the list grew from six to ten countries. Allowing any waivers in countries that

use child soldiers, because their governments may bring other strategic or political value to the US is a shameful display of hypocrisy (Amnesty International et al. 2016). It is confusing that the US stands for child soldiers unless they do not, for political purposes. Moreover, suppose the US, which has reasonable standing in the world as an advocate for others, can so easily lose its way. It does give credence to the difficulty of this “wicked problem” and its complexities.

Beyond this, the UN is accused of not providing full disclosure of all states and actors using child soldiers in a report from The Eminent Persons Group (EPG 2021). The Secretary-General's annual Children and Armed Conflict Report (CACR) has come under scrutiny and question from independent organizations that countries are omitted from the list without apparent justification. The Eminent Persons Group (EPG) is an independent organization that accesses the CACR's report to compare the UN's findings to public reports in eighteen different country situations. They concluded that the stipulations by which a country must be listed were not adhered to in several situations. The report stated:

The criteria that were set out in the Secretary-General's 2010 report and stipulated that a party would be delisted from the annexes based on its full implementation of a UN action plan to end those violations and UN-verified information that the party had ceased all violations for a period of at least one reporting cycle i.e., one year. (Dallaire et al. 2021,10)

When listed, inclusion has been a deterrent for countries listed. Becoming listed in the report has been effective in helping children in states where the actors were the leaders of the country and ANSAs who were persuaded to stop using children. However, the findings of the EPG revealed states or actors who were delisted without meeting the criteria set out above. The EPG's report was unintended to criticize the value of the

annual CACR report but to remind the UN of its power to be a global voice that could make a difference for children. The report states:

The Secretary-General's list provides an important step towards accountability for those who commit grave violations against children in armed conflict by clearly identifying the warring parties responsible. The mechanism also serves as a foundation for the UN to dialogue with warring parties, secure concrete commitments to end and prevent violations through time-bound action plans, and create tangible, positive changes for children affected by war. It has contributed to concrete, positive impacts on the lives of children, including the signing of at least thirty-three concrete action plans by warring parties to end violations against children and the release of more than 150,000 children from armed forces and armed groups over the past two decades. (Dallaire et al. 2021, 12)

After careful scrutiny, the report confirms that the United Nations is as vulnerable to its own politics as any other organization. Then-Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stated publicly that member states "had applied undue pressure to evade listing, including threats to withdraw UN funding" (Dallaire et al. 2021, 11). When the same standards do not treat all perpetrators of crimes against children with identical treatment, the credibility of the UN's Children and Armed Conflict agenda is problematic. We need watchdogs to watch the watchdogs whenever a "wicked problem" is on the table due to the complexity of the issue and how it affects other issues. In this context, politics, diplomacy, and changing players are some of the contexts that make this a "wicked problem."

Advocacy Does Not Cease, and Healing Is Constant

In her 34-page study of the issue of child soldiers, Professor Jacqueline McAllister concludes that international prosecution can deter the use of child soldiers.

Her conclusion states that deterrence is only effective when the backers of one of the protagonists have been liberal democracies, which they have been 50% of the time. Only half of the prosecutions can be more effective. Prosecuting perpetrators is less efficient when powerful authoritarian states support adversaries (Power 2020). Prosecution is not a deterrent if the crimes committed against children are in warring factions in a destabilized country. The most productive solutions bridge the gulf between security forces, NGOs, and humanitarian efforts. Each focus on a different part of the issue, yet all must combine to create sustainable operational solutions.

There is a contradictory position of McAllister's belief that there is a lack of enforceable deterrent of those who engage children but are not a part of the democracy, liberal or otherwise. Geneva Call is a humanitarian organization seeking to work with those outside of the UN's purview and diplomatic reach; those engaged in a conflict defined as Armed Groups and de facto Authorities (AGDA). Note, these are the same groups referred to as Armed non-State Actors (ANSA) in previous mentions. Geneva Call has added to the description in their wording. They know that while laws may deter some state actors, those fighting in a country outside of the recognized government's military need a different approach. Their mission statement declares in part:

In situations of armed conflict, Geneva Call, as a neutral, impartial and independent international humanitarian organization, endeavors to strengthen the respect of humanitarian norms and principles by armed groups and de facto authorities (AGDA), in order to improve the protection of civilians...Whilst other organizations also work to improve awareness of humanitarian norms, Geneva Call is the only organization in the world focused exclusively on creating lasting behavioral change among AGDAs to promote the protection of civilians. (Geneva Call, 2022)

Geneva Call's mandate focuses on protecting educational systems in areas where these AGDAs operate. One of their latest efforts was necessary when humanitarian

workers in North Kivu in the Congo became the target of abductions, hold-ups, thefts, and attacks. Geneva Call entered to create dialogue within the affected communities and AGDAs for more than a year to discuss the issue of humanitarian access (Capdevila 2019). They know that connecting with AGDAs allows them credibility with the groups to reach a consensus on the same ideas that underpinned the Geneva Conventions in their latter Conventions, the protection of the child. Their efforts allowed them to create a commitment from three local communities to facilitate access for NGOs and accompany them in their work. How does this fact relate to the use of child soldiers? While Geneva Call is not solely focused on child soldiers, they participate in discussions like the panel event webinar on May 6, 2021, titled "Ending the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers by 2025," discussed in Chapter 3. Solutions to end the use of child soldiers must include all actors supporting children, those who use child soldiers, including AGDAs, a.k.a. ANSAs, which lie outside of diplomat circles and international norms and expectations and bring all actors and strategies to the table to choose children over conflict.

Education, a fundamental right for children, is an impossible promise to consistently meet during conflict. Until universal prosecution exists, and child soldiers are no more, prioritizing children's need post conflict are vital. Rehabilitation and reintegration are important steps before, and once politics get settled and conflicts are subsiding or ending. Healing of the children will take years, and programs focused on this issue alone are paramount to the future of this generation of children. In 2021, the UN issued the Global Coalition for Reintegration of Child Soldiers (GCRCS) report stating it was time to reframe the issue of child soldier reintegration through the four pillars:

1. Planning how to adopt a new strategic plan for protecting children,
2. a nuanced and sensitive approach to linking programs with existing educational and other programs in place and during ongoing conflicts,
3. ensure and provide long-term financing of programs delivered with transparency, accountability, and oversight while consistently advocating for additional funds from international organizations and within state's government budgets,
4. coordinate activities of all international, private, public and state's strategies and all on their unique strengths and expertise to pool those resources and the wisdom of those creating solutions. (GCRCS 2021, 5-7)

The UN is often dependent on organizations to end the use of children in war, and this is an example of the combined efforts, organizations, and emphasis needed to create sustainable solutions taking the onus from a group or state of “me” to a combined effort of “we” the core of collective impact (Kania and Kramer 2011).

While the government may not fully engage in the fate of ex-child soldiers through programs and funds, local citizens are taking up the cause. In Mosul, religion can be a weapon of peace and aid in reconciliation. Local faith leaders are preaching and teaching the peaceful tenants of the faith. The local leaders are respected and can aid in creating a new future, regardless of the past's sins (Thelwell 2019). If religions could teach their core message and use it for the good of their believers, who would then extend that peaceful message to others, religion could become a solution when the leaders of the faith partner in the fight to keep their children alive. A vigorous follow-up and monitoring program for any child soldier is mandatory once they return to civilian life. As Dallaire reminds us, the less successful the reintegration, the more likely the former child will be re-recruited, voluntarily rejoin an armed group, or drift into a life of crime.

This outcome is the fate of a child unprotected in the first place and what happens if we fail to right the wrong of what they experience in combat. Dallaire speaks about reintegration passionately as a complete response which begins at the moment conflict is created. He knows firsthand reintegration is the cost of not solving this issue, and successful reintegration is complex:

Successful reintegration plans must cover all the phases of the conflict, from the beginning of a crisis right through to the conclusion of a peace agreement and well beyond. And they must commit, with depth and sophistication, to the deliberate rehabilitation of conflict-affected children away from evil toward good, from abuse toward restraint, from survival toward living with hope that they can have a better future. (Dallaire and Humphreys 2010,165-6)

Beyond Rage to Healing and New Perspectives

Beyond the enraged citizen or tireless organizations seeking to end the use of children as soldiers, regardless of reintegration, what becomes the fate of a former child soldier, like any soldier, from a psychological standpoint who lives beyond the war they fought? The effects of depression and anxiety on former child soldiers are well known. In the research conducted by Pfeiffer and Elbert in Northern Uganda, they describe Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army's (LRA) abduction of children for military use. Their study revealed a high degree of PTSD in child soldier survivors. They concluded from their study of these children whose mean age of their abduction was fourteen and who were now ten years older at the time of the interview that they represent more than the children in Northern Uganda. In their research they concluded:

They are like other children, youth and adults living in war affected areas are highly affected by the mental health consequences resulting from their violent, cruel, and life-threatening traumatic experiences during the war. The psychological suffering of productive symptoms like acted-out flashbacks and active avoidance or “quiet” symptoms like intruding memories or feelings of loneliness thus leads to dysfunctional behaviour in daily routine tasks, social life, and work/ scholastic life (as dysfunctionality is one criterion to diagnose PTSD). Therefore, they are in need of mental health interventions to relieve them from their suffering and make them functional again for their personal daily life tasks as well as in the interest of a society trying to recover from years of insurgencies. (Pfeiffer and Elbert 2011, 6-7)

The reintegration of former child soldiers was higher if a former child soldier found employment, married, received an education, or experienced few mental health problems vis-à-vis the average population of their peers (Jordans et al. 2012, 25). Yet, how realistic is it for a child who has suffered through war to return to a relatively normal life compared to their peers? Employment, marriage, education, and few to no mental health problems are the goal in part or whole of all who seek a full life. The film *Children of War* shows children's heartbreaking journey in their search of healing. Yet healing is possible whether a child should or should not initially experience a traumatic event as illustrated in *Children of War*.

Summary

Undoubtedly, the international community seeks solutions. Children are resilient, and successful reintegration programs go a long way in caring for them in the aftermath of what children have experienced. As children are demobilized, unless a unified plan ends the use of child soldiers, this cycle of brokenness and repair of a child as a soldier in the first place will continue and too many scenes, shown in Figure 4, will continue. And while reintegration is the first step in a hopeful plan of healing, there is no guarantee that

the program will successfully heal the children. Static images of child soldiers or films depicting a child soldier's journey are essential to record and remember. But what better, consistent, and more effective ways to protect children in these situations can be sought? Children must be protected before there is a need to save them. Perpetrators must be caught, convicted, and sentenced. No organization or country should issue waivers of the rules for these children's treatment to meet its own priorities. These waivers, while they make sense for the country issuing them, may be issued without fear of impunity and only the media calls out the hypocrisy.

Just as media acts as a watchdog to call out bad actors, how can media, specifically film, serve in creating a solution for these children? When child soldiers become the focal point of storytelling, that focus must be well thought out and create more than pity and pain for the audience. Children cannot wait for the intrigues and politics of nations and organizations. Activists and well-intentioned leaders must jointly seek to solve the problem in concert with the legal tools and resources available, while being open to new ideas and perspectives.



Figure 4. Demobilization Ceremony in South Sudan

The children in Pibor, Jonglei State, surrendered their weapons and uniforms in a ceremony overseen by the South Sudan National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Commission, and the Cobra Faction and supported by UNICEF. Photo credit CHARLES LOMODONG/AFP via Getty Images used with permission.

Chapter III.

Media Anthropology and Its Role in Creating Change

After my first visit to Muhazi, I vowed to return and cook a meal for the boys. When I came back with Sara Neeley, an American scientist living in London who specialized in infectious diseases, we were intent on engaging some of the children to help us prepare the meal. The children ate rice and beans every day as their mainstay of nutrition. As a mother, I know the power of food to gather people and create a community. The same meal served every day is sustenance. A well-prepared, memorable meal nourishes the belly and soul. Six boys shyly volunteered to cook with us. They spoke no English; I spoke a little Kinyarwanda. Food would connect us as one. Without awareness, I would spend the day as an anthropologist, immersing myself in a world I did not know existed. It was their actions and reflections that would bring me awareness, knowing though I was only touching their lives for a brief moment, they would touch mine for a lifetime.

Anthropologists seek to understand groups and cultures and how to interact in ways meaningful to those observed, learn lessons, and gather insights to bring value to those outside of the group or culture. Anthropologists observe how those within groups create meaning that may be unique to them. The study of the use of child soldiers worldwide is a lens through which to view the creation of a child soldier and the intent and consequences of their creation. While found around the world, child soldiers bear

similarities of how they are used by the perpetrators and consequences to the child misused in this manner. Sharing that information by interested groups and advocates is vital, but the use of child soldiers in media also has become a commercial enterprise. Many issues, though horrifying, are generally not used as entertainment. They include animal sacrifice, child marriage, and prostitution. Yet the image of child soldiers serves as subjects in film roles other than documentaries. What do media messages of child soldier portrayals suggest to the viewer if they have little awareness of actual child soldiers? Visual images help people contextualize what a child soldier looks like compared to themselves. Small, defiantly looking at the camera, often in dirty, tattered military garb, appearing almost comical in their seriousness they have become child soldiers (see Figure 5). Yet, to the viewer, they conjure up a broken, abandoned, and lost childhood. It is not difficult to go through what Victor Frankl referred to as an existential crisis, not only in viewing their images but imagining what the child must themselves go through. *In Man's Search for Meaning* by Frankl, published after he survived the concentration camps of World War II Frankl reflected on those who survived, who found meaning in their lives, and how they chose life beyond the horror of their experience (Frankl 1962). However, Frankl intended through his book to create internal dialogue for anyone looking for meaning in their existence. When media creates an idea, we can pull back the curtain on an image we view by noticing our internal dialogue and whether the image or story generates inaction, action, or an existential moment. We can respond to right the wrong a message reveals, call out its inaccuracy, and replace the message with a more meaningful one.



Figure 5. 11-year-old Civil Defense Forces (CDF) Soldier, Kono State, Sierra Leone

Photograph by Guy Tillum used with permission.

Media Anthropology's Value to Solve a "Wicked Problem"

Media is the bridge of information from one to the many. Countless people will only know child soldiers exist through media representations such as images or stories told in films, stories, and newscasts. Many people who live in a country or part of the world without child soldiers gain their knowledge and opinions through those media representations.

Media anthropology's rise as a respected source for understanding message delivery and its ability to create a change for an issue began in 1969. Media anthropology, coined over 50 years ago at the American Anthropological Association (AAA) meeting in 1969, set about a new way of collaboration in media analysis. In 1970,

AAA held a Media Workshop bringing together a diverse group: anthropologists, historians, journalists, producers, science writers, and those engaged in communicating scientific information to the public. Thus began a conversation to discuss the power to influence an issue through media from diverse perspectives (Allen 1994, 3).

Media anthropology is a scientific discipline that connects mass media and cultural anthropology; the nexus of who we are translates to how others view us through media resources. This connection allows an anthropologist to view, shape, or affect a story or set of themed events bringing their science to the creative process. Media anthropologists seek to create awareness and understanding of another's culture or group through the chosen media, influencing the message's accuracy and can help create a more impactful message for change, if that is the goal. Achieving awareness and understanding through media tools creates a more informed general population. Evaluating the media's power and effect on the creation of the media is critical to problem-solving and can be especially helpful in parsing out the issues that create “wicked problems” (Rothenbuhler and Coman 2009; Othold 2015, 77).

A media anthropologist creates a message with intention and desire to effect awareness through depictions, images, and emotion. Successfully incorporating this science can create a stronger call to action for an audience rather than a "So what?" reaction. Shared understanding and a call to action benefit from a subtle and consistent message, helps humanity understand those who are the farthest and most foreign to them.

Margaret Mead (1901 – 1978) needed no designation as a media anthropologist. Mead's study of culture was not what made her so prominent in media. It was her ability to apply the practical to the necessary. In her articles “Visual Anthropology in a

Discipline of Words," she spoke about the power of film for fieldwork, and believed its value was underutilized. She expressed dismay that filming was not regularly used to capture more than the words in a culture and the anthropologist's observations.

I venture to say that more words have been used, spoken, and written disputing the value of, refusing funds for, and rejecting these projects than ever went into the efforts themselves. (Mead 2009, 4)

Mead seemed to indicate that film as a medium used masterfully to capture images that may disappear and tell a story through the subject's words, emotions, and physical response was of value. What more can film do with those images to create change, not just observation? Mead was masterful at communicating the practicality and usefulness of her research. She was artful in speaking to the general public about the specifics of her work. She held their interest and educated them at the same time.

In Martin D. Topper's paper *Anthropology and Mass Media: Or "Why Is There a Margaret Mead, Daddy?"* he states Mead's staying power and success were due to her ability to seek relevance in her research for those outside of academia, write jargon-free in publications to the general public, willing to work with media, and learn the subtleties of working in the public's eye. She was prepared to be misunderstood yet was an effective communicator (Topper 1976). These are the qualities all great communicators possess. She became the shoulders on which media anthropologists stand to create the change they wish to see.

Reflecting on the message of Ira R. Abrams, in his chapter "The Anthropologist as Television Producer," he realized that a vital message that what may be anthropologically accurate but did not attract an interested audience as defined by a producer would not make it to air. He learned through trial and error that regardless of the

topic, all good ideas in any genre told in story form start with the expected outline of a strong beginning, middle, and end. He learned that telling the story begins with clarity of the storyline, how to say to it in a way that will attract an audience to watch it, and if it is a social issue, create an action. Influencing a film requires a reflexive nature of the anthropologist to understand how their views interact with the subject or product they make (Allen 1994, 122). Again, according to Abrams, when a story has difficulty with editing, it is usually a problem with the story itself (Allen 1994). It seems he was not referring to the storyline. But what to keep in and eliminate to enhance the message. Can the editing of a child soldier story increase the probability of the audience to stay engaged? And if so, will the story remain accurate, thoughtful, and less interested in taking your breath away, but create a thoughtful sigh and introspection to ask, "Now what?"

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz said in his 1972 study of the Balinese cockfight, "The culture of people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong" (Geertz 2005, 86). That straining (reflexivity) determines the message sent to an audience. Geertz's work saw cockfighting for the Balinese as their art form, their way of expressing status, rage, kinship, fear, and all the emotions present when the cocks are fighting. It is not about the animal in the fight. It is about the men in that culture and a form of masculine expression in their community. As an art form, cockfighting structures an outlet for the men to communicate in a way that is understandable by others in the community (Geertz 2005). How true of the art of filmmaking. Filmmakers structure their understanding of their subjects set in a place of their choosing and edit to the scenes of

their creation. Their film's structure and outcomes allow the audience to view and grasp a message without the benefit of a constant community like the Balinese that understands the symbolism intended at all times. The art form of the film, as considered and experienced by an audience as a group or a whole, is a singular expression, different from the nature of each cock fight (which can have different outcomes from fight to fight, but always the same structure). No two films are alike, and their nature requires the creator to decide how they will tell a story and what emotions they seek to elicit from their audiences. As viewers aim to understand the film's message, they can experience myriad emotions in the story they are witnessing on a screen. And the audience will determine what they take from a film they view. While Geertz articulated his understanding of the symbolic meaning of cockfights for the Balinese, filmmakers are not anthropologists but artistic creators. In specific creative choices they create for misery child soldier media, there is value in explaining and ensuring their message is understood by their audience.

Anthropologists understand the power of a subject to speak for themselves and yet, if not captured, know a message without a messenger is dead. Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski first coined the term “ethnographer’s magic” referring to his field work in the culture of the Trobriand Islanders in Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea. That magic which he believed he as an ethnographer held was his experience living with the islanders and observing them from within their daily living conditions and in their language (Malinowski 1922, 6). Magic from his viewpoint indicates his belief to understand and communicate the most authentic view of another culture while maintaining the least impact from one’s own culture requires immersion into the culture. While Margaret Mead studied and embedded herself in various cultures from US Omaha

Native Americans to natives in New Guinea and American Samoa, her findings and staying power were in her ability to connect with the general public, and her work remains relevant for review and discussion long after she finished her field work. She herself was magic as messenger. But her magic, I coin as “Mead Magic,” was her ability to make connections with those outside of academia. She wrote a widely read column for Redbook Magazine from 1962 – 1978 with a readership that increased to five million by the 1970s (Shankman 2018). While an anthropologist first and foremost, she used the academic findings and theories to inform and educate the general public as no anthropologist previous to her had been able to accomplish.

While her focus was not films, anthropologist Susan Allen speaks passionately about the media anthropologist as an influencer and activist. In her 1994 work discussing media anthropologists' value to journalism, she reminds the reader that all journalism students learn the five Ws of any article: Who, What, When, Where, and Why. But Allen feels a sixth W is missing: Whole, as in the whole system and how one article written, or in the case of child soldiers, the story written or film created with the entire world issue of child soldiers connects the audience to the issue, beyond the storyline. Allen believed that in a written article, the hypertext or perspective of an article could become the tipping point in an article's effectiveness (Allen 1994, 155-156). In 2005, Allen reflected on the last twenty years since she had written her book. As all activists go through, she was discouraged and encouraged to realize the world remained polarized, maybe even more so than twenty years prior. How can media bridge the polarization in a significant way? Allen believed media anthropologists could work more to change the conflict between people and nations. She applied her fieldwork from the 1970s in the South

Pacific, observing imbalances of power, and on reflection, realized media anthropologists were part of a global movement of citizens to create global social justice, in her case, through the nonviolence movement (Allen 2005, 288). Her actions and ideas when translated to media products transform media anthropologists from observers and creators to key partners in creating change.

When undervalued and unleveraged, the media anthropologist's value is unseen. If “perspective is everything” becomes a trope without examination, perspective becomes the *raison d'être* for inaction. Activists choose their “wicked problem.” When poverty, lack of education, mineral rights, lightweight guns, ANSAs, corrupt states, or any other singular issue is an organization or activist's belief, they will seek to create the solution to satisfy their perspective of the reason the problem exists. Yet, if you asked a child soldier how to save them, their answer would differ significantly from an adult soldier who has faced that child through the barrel of a gun. Diplomats or activists sitting at a UN Security Council meeting viewing a film about child soldiers will experience the film's message through their personal bias with the potential of different and competing goals. By creating an amalgamation of the perspectives and people who all wish to make the change, a broader focus on the root cause receives a more thorough examination. The UN is running as fast as possible to invoke international law and sanctions to ratify nations who agree with the protocol they are signing. Yet, there is no universal decrease in children's use, and politics play a role in the lack of enforcement. Is it fair to blame the UN, which focuses on a global issue like child soldiers but cannot solve it through their concepts and tools? When a “wicked problem” is brought to light, people are desperate to end it. Yet, the situation's reality and complexity require clarity, including more

perspectives, with a constant awareness that no singular perspective solves a “wicked problem.”

A media anthropologist's training in observing and recognizing the nature of human beings and the culture in which they operate while integrating all perspectives to solve a “wicked problem” is imperative and appropriate to give them a seat at the table. When media anthropologists are at the table, they must lay down their arms and any belief that their work is not subject to the public's opinion and that the safety of academia is where those who seek their knowledge can find them. By proactively seeking organizations, filmmakers, producers, and state's actors in a conflict, a well-spoken media anthropologist can ask anyone, "Is it impossible to believe that I can make your project or goal more successful? Let me bring my awareness, insight, and understanding of combining cultural considerations, message making, and developing that message to create the sustained and lasting impact you seek." Activism is arduous work, and the science of media anthropology is not enough to create change. It will take media anthropologists who possess Mead Magic to allow media anthropology's perspective to apply to the broader public, get an invitation to, and remain at, the table.

How Times Have Changed

Whereas generations traditionally translated culture and cultural symbols from eldest to youngest, today's postmodern world depends on media in many instances to make the distant, close, and unexperienced events virtual. Living in a connected and global society, media shapes our thoughts and ideas. Media can produce an opinion, belief, and judgment about another's culture or situation, which Edward Sāid referred to as Orientalism. Orientalism as a theory discusses how the exaggeration of the difference

of another culture, the other, affects a viewer of that culture. Saïd's approach revealed the often-held presumption of the western world to view any culture different from theirs as inferior and then create stereotypes of specific aspects as the differences to strengthen their position (Saïd 1978). Stereotypes may be helpful to create groups when those predefined groups cause a summation of the issue affecting the group but not when the stereotype creates groupthink or, in some cases, inaccurate stereotypes. Without reflection and understanding, stereotypes are destructive and uninformed. Our subconscious or automatic interpretation of the other defines that group and creates judgments (often without internal examination). The awareness that Orientalism affects a person's view of different culture and possible dismissal of it and its people, helps to inform media anthropologists why an intended message or a call to action is ineffective. Suppose media is to have an influential role in creating a change for eliminating child soldiers. If so, the solution is not just about accurately telling a story. Still, the editing of the depictions the story creates with the awareness of the psychological process the recipient is going through in their decision-making process to act, react, reject, or respond to a media message is helpful.

Dangerous and disorderly, the hapless victim, and the hero, are the three categories Myriam Denov's article, "Child Soldiers and Iconography" defines as images of child soldier depictions. She does not try to separate them but says they are a mixture of all the categories. The definition of children in these categories supports to underscore the urgency of ending the use of child soldiers. When those categories become one, what chance does the image of a child soldier in media depictions have to create any impression other than a miserable and memorable image left in the viewer's mind? Denov

recognizes the acceptance of these images is dangerous and reckless behavior. Getting in front of the creation of the images is critical to creating a change. As Denov so accurately states and serves to remind us that images of child soldiers and the responsibility to reflect their accurate representation is the responsibility of both the creator and its audience, including the media anthropologist who brings the science of culture and perspective to the discussion. She is in the camp of advocacy for child soldiers that to create a change, the research published must step outside of academia and come to the public's attention. When these images come to the attention of all, she challenges the audience to do more than view the image, but speak up about what the image portrays, its accuracy, and if its creation can make a difference for the child soldier (Denov 2010). That is where the challenging work begins and must continue.

After a serious and balanced review, analyzing the audience's reaction to the media product can determine whether the depictions created the director's desired outcome. Equally as important are the unintended consequences of these portrayals.

Glamorizing or glorifying an archetype is effective in entertaining an audience. Superheroes are often an underdog before their superhuman traits allow them to become the victor. Batman, Spiderman, and Magneto are three of the better-known superheroes with tragic backstories: all became superheroes after suffering trauma as a child (Leslie, n.d.). Using archetypal characters and situations allows an audience to identify the characters and situations in their social and cultural context. Archetypes can impart realism to a fictional character and enable the viewer to identify with the role, but their thought process can also fall prey to Orientalism and stereotypes. The depiction of child soldier archetypes in film, books, cartoons, or any medium used by well-meaning NGOs

to raise money may cause the plight and horror of the experience of child soldiers to become secondary to commercial or well-intentioned efforts.

Images and stories told about child soldiers fall into the category of misery literature. Described as literature that often has a protagonist whose life in childhood is desperately painful or worse, yet in the storytelling the protagonist eventually triumphs over the difficulties. In his article, “Child Soldier Stories and their Fictions,” David Mastey specifically refers to child soldier stories in the genre of misery literature. He speaks of a primary aspect of this form of narrative, non-fiction with fictional elements, as one where the eventual triumph is possible for the protagonist (not dissimilar to the superhero's journey). Misery literature sells well and without judgment and must be taken seriously as a form of communication and entertainment (Mastey 2015, 7; O'Neill 2007). In misery child soldier media, the same arc occurs in all forms of media. However, real-life rarely ends in a happily ever after moment or eventual triumph and deserves this particular terminology. To support this position, a deeper dive into other forms of media is analyzed. They include: the ex-child soldier and storyteller, author of *A Long Way Gone*, Ishmael Beah; *Monos*, a fictional film about child soldiers set in Colombia, a 2012 docudrama that created urgency and excitement with a call to action; and the viral video *Kony 2012*. An example of anime's use of child soldiers as a protagonist with a passing comment about the fate of an actual child soldier is discussed. Also, an online panel webinar broadcast to talk about the issue of child soldiers, discusses the urgency of solving the issue. Throughout the use of these examples the question remains the same: how can a child soldier's story create a change for anyone other than the storyteller or participants? Can media products help create a collective movement to serve those

desperately in need? While there are multiple ways child soldiers are depicted in media, their descriptions and value to ending this “wicked problem” vary greatly from print, to film, to anime, to webinar.

Media: Its Use, Misuse, and Effectiveness

Ishmael Beah

Ishmael Beah's book, *A Long Way Gone*, recounts his experience as a former child soldier in 1991 during Sierra Leone's civil war. With over 1.5 million book sales, he topped the New York Times bestseller's list, and his book is one of the best-selling misery child soldier media books (Zipp 2014). When Beah was only 12, his village was under attack, and he ran from his home as his family and memories burned. In another village protected by government soldiers, there was food, soccer games, and a place to sleep; Beah thought he had found a safe spot. But soon, he and the other children found they were not safe and had a choice: stay and fight or be killed. The children became instant soldiers as they received arms and ammunition. Given the order to snort brown-brown, an insidious mixture of cocaine and gunpowder effective in lowering inhibitions, the boys killed others and saw no way out after that experience under the influence of drugs and duress. This was also Beah's personal experience.

Rescued by UNICEF workers, he found his way to the U.S. and is now an international ambassador and human rights activist seeking to end the use of child soldiers worldwide (Johnson, 2007). Since Beah's book release in 2007, he has continued his education, become a sought-after speaker, and serves as an ambassador for UNICEF. He travels back to Sierra Leone and other countries connecting with child soldiers and

meeting with these kids in rehabilitation camps. In the dozens of interviews and speeches on YouTube and websites where he continues to speak, the message is consistent: children deserve the opportunity to get out of this situation. He believes that within each child lies the ability to create their future. And whether with children, NGOs, organizations, interviews, or in his book, he is consistent in this messaging. Beah does not waiver in his belief or his passion for helping these children. Through these messages and speeches, he has a perpetual public smile and hopefulness about him. He has done the hard work to heal and yet describes flashbacks and PTSD moments that exist to this day. Beah, though professing to suffer the effects of the trauma still, is clear on his mission and purpose, and has found, in Frankl's words, his meaning (CBS News 2007, captaindarwin 2012, Seay 2013, Mothstories 2018, UNICEF, n.d.). One of his stated goals was a foundation to continue his work. It was established in 2007 but there is no sign it still exists. The IRS revoked the foundation's 501(c)3 status due to the lack of filing the required forms for three consecutive years (Guide Star, n.d.).

No aspersions are laid on Beah for the failure to run a foundation. But is a reminder to note no one woman or man has responsibility to explore every avenue to solve a “wicked problem.” The most meaningful use of his voice seems to be as a public speaker through his affiliation with UNICEF as a Goodwill Ambassador since 2007. An activist like Beah is not perfect, but he continues to call for change and advocate for child soldiers. His book was but a key to entering the international stage on which he continues to stand and serve children. As an Ambassador for UNICEF, he has the backing of this organization and its resources; he is an outstanding storyteller who can connect with audiences, allowing him to continue his work. His book was the match, his story of loss

and triumph. But Beah is the flame that keeps his subject of child soldiers relevant. He is the message as well as the messenger. But one person does not create a movement. A collective conversation among activists sparks a movement. Yet, media plays a significant role in Beah's ability to share his message and provide platforms to deliver messages with charismatic stories and a singular message, allowing him to be a voice for many voiceless child soldiers.

Monos

During the 2019 production of the film *Monos*, 800 children from across Colombia auditioned for the role of teenage commandos guarding prisoners of war. The movie won several awards lauding the storyline and message (Le Pacte 2019). When questioned about the Colombian conflict and use of child soldiers in the country, writer and director Alejandro Landes said:

In *Monos*, youth serve as a metaphor for Colombia as a nation; it's a young country, still searching for its identity, and the dream of peace is fragile, tentative, and recurring... It's a stage in life in which we are caught between wanting company and, just as desperately, wanting to be alone. *Monos* looks to evoke this angst and conflict from the inside rather than create reactions of pity or outrage in the audience by depicting what could be perceived as a foreign conflict. (Taylor and Taylor, n.d.)

Yet, if the audience misses the metaphor of a child soldier symbolizing a country in crisis, it falls on the backs of children portrayed simply as child soldiers and anxiety and conflict are about the child, not the metaphor Landes attempts to create. In *Monos*, the child soldier's leader, The Messenger, is a mysterious figure portrayed by Wilson Salazar, a real-life former commander of a Colombia guerrilla group. Salazar is a former child soldier conscripted in the Colombia civil war at eleven years old. Salazar led the military acting and instruction for the boys recruited for the film. In an interview in 2019 on

WLRN radio, Landes spoke of specifically choosing him for the role and hoping the use of children in this brutal film would jar the viewer (Padgett 2019). Who is the jarred viewer? How are these child actors affected by becoming heroes in the film?

In Colombia, the use of child soldiers is widespread. According to a UN report focusing on Colombia issued on June 21, 2021, active recruitment of children by warring groups continues unabated. Child soldiers in Colombia have the same background and purpose as anywhere in the world. Conscripted into service, they seek to survive in an untenable situation. An estimated 14,000 children in Colombia have served in ongoing conflicts in the last sixty years (UNGA 2022, 8-9, Gozzo 2022, UN Colombia 2021).

Director Landes' use of child soldiers to tell his story is a questionable use of children existing in the fantasy of *Monos* and at the same time, the real-life setting of Colombia. Influencing audiences and affecting child actors by creating archetypes with which they are all too familiar can have unintended consequences. If the result is apathy rather than shocking the audience, the country's image and citizens remain stereotyped. Media then is relegated as a tool for profit and creates more harm than good. But the use of child soldiers is not limited to film; their use is also on full display in comics.

Anime

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is a series of superhuman films based on Marvel Comic Books. Shang-Chi is a superhero whose origin story is his indoctrination as a child soldier somewhere in the Islamic States (Bacon 2020). Anime is a popular form of Japanese animation. A blogger reports his top five children's anime soldiers in a specific anime series. Though the blog begins with "Child soldiers are real, and it's always been a tragic reality," he then enthusiastically tells the reader about his favorite

anime, child soldiers, who are often tragic victims of circumstance or talented for their age (Jiraiyan 2020). A sidenote dismissing the reality of the archetype but acknowledging its tragedy typifies a belief that this “wicked problem” is tragic yet unsolvable. Is it possible to use a child soldier archetype in comics without dismissing the importance of the problem of child soldiers? Allowing continued use of child soldiers with a short disclaimer does nothing to solve the issue and glorifies a child as a hero and savior. It is another example of how the fantasy world can have a real-life effect on the creation of future child soldiers as viewers come to believe they are a reality that will not change and therefore can be exploited and unchecked through created media.

While these works have nothing to do with creating change for child soldiers, images of child soldiers are often used to attract donors, like Beah’s for UNICEF, to give, and then give more. What has been the result of some of those efforts and how do donors view media messages?

Message Received. Or Is It?

What messages stay in a donor's mind? A 2020 study by Goyanes and Demeter focused on incidental news, the news that viewers passively see on social media. These media messages and stories generate from specific profiles (the media, interest groups, individual journalists, individual citizens, celebrities) who produced them or friends of the viewer who share those posts. Incidental news is auto-generated on media-based news platforms using artificial intelligence in search engines like Google. Algorithm-generated content continuously generates news dissemination and can become the echo chamber of users' opinions and views. While the authors' initial belief presumed that written content is the primary source of incidental news, they found the viewer's incidental news feed

increased with the addition of Instagram stories (Instastories). The differentiation of Instastories exists because the viewer must seek out the stories voluntarily. Their study concluded that incidental news stories had little value other than entertainment for the viewer. The most significant impact for a viewer receiving incidental news is when the viewer is aware of the topic before receiving the news. While they stated incidental news did not bring much value, they were silent on the harm it might create. Yet, if the news content creators do not cover a topic, incidental news could be the only source of information and generate a viewer's desire to research a topic further (Goyanes and Demeter 2020). Incidental news coupled with previously held beliefs grounded in the theory of Orientalism can create an impact worse than the issue it intended to expose, confirming the viewer's perspective: this story is about a “wicked problem” with no solution.

While incidental news may or may not affect viewers, another media phenomenon is a “disaster marathon.” Its definition is grounded in the idea that a media event is created spontaneously from a current event, unplanned and unexpected, on multiple media platforms over a more extended period. Breaking news is often how this category of events comes to the public's attention. A disaster marathon's impact often goes beyond the initial new story and creates massive reactions by the public (Rothenbuhler and Coman 2009). Unexpected disasters and news events affected viewers throughout history when media became the medium used to disseminate the disaster or event. Examples include the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, the Challenger Disaster of 1986, the unexpected death in 1997 of Diana Princess of Wales, the 7.0 magnitude earthquake in 2010 in Haiti, and the killing of nineteen school children by a teenage shooter at Robb

Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas in 2022, to name but a few. These events transfix viewers. Media used to inform the public during a shocking or horrifying incident changes the news cycle, the collective reaction, and the views of many who witness the news event through the media. Disaster marathons can affect a news cycle but may not create a lasting change or calls to action. Incidental news may not have a lasting effect on the viewer. But together, they can create chaos, undo good work, and create negative conclusions about the subject matter.

Kony 2012 More Harm than Good?

Both incidental and disaster media were on full display in *Kony 2012*, released on March 12, 2012. This 30-minute call to action video became an incidental news event after a post on Facebook for the organization, Invisible Children. Their stated goal was to raise awareness of and capture Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony in Uganda, notoriously known for his use of child soldiers. The video, narrated by Director Jason Russell, became the fastest viral video in 2012, with 116 million views in six days. Pew Research reported that 58% of young adults aged 18-29 (its intended audience) knew of the video (Fan 2021). In *Kony 2012*, Russell reminds the viewer the world is getting worse. He begins the story by talking to his five-year-old son Gavin about his experience in Uganda with a young boy named Jacob, whom the rebels had captured under Kony's command. The scenes that follow are horrific, flashing on the screen with loud music, and exemplify the use of dark images to incite the viewer to respond emotionally. Throughout the video, he leads the viewer on a journey through his words and ideas, imploring the audience to act. He describes a US youth movement that would engage young people to contact their government representatives and demand the capture of Kony. He states he will rely on

who he called culture makers like Oprah, Bono, and Mark Zuckerberg to use their platforms to share the video. Russell called on young people to contact their congressional and senate representatives, urging the US to send American advisers to Uganda to help capture Kony. In *Kony 2012* Russell said he wanted to make Kony famous, a household name. He said in the film's voiceover his intent was to make Kony world news and wanted to shine a light on the propaganda we are fed each day (Russell 2012). Ironically, in the way and manner he delivered his message, he became a propagandist. Russell spoke at several high schools showing videos of child soldiers, all attributed to Kony's actions. He printed thousands of posters, produced thousands of "Kony 2012" bracelets that could be geotagged, and all promotional materials were available to students donating a few dollars a month to his organization Invisible Children. The music, the message, the tone of the words, and the cinematography all displayed an urgency of action and need (Russell 2012).

The double-edged sword of the *Kony 2012* film is its designation as a concurrent disaster marathon in the form of a public mental health breakdown that affected Russell. Shortly after the film's release, Russell suffered a public breakdown, captured on a video of him naked stumbling through the streets of San Diego. The video downloaded to the internet went viral after reports on several news sources (TMZ 2012). After hospitalization, he received treatment in a mental health ward. This unanticipated news event of Russell became a disaster marathon, which had nothing to do with Kony or the film. The public's derision and interest in the humiliating events that followed Russell even captured the attention of Oprah when she sat down with Russell seven months after his breakdown to interview him. She wanted to discuss his breakdown, not Kony and

child soldiers. She was more interested in his personal story, even asking him if he thought he was gay rather than delve deeply into the issue of child soldiers. The perfect plot twist: from capturing a rebel to examining a director's sexuality. Disaster media is not a consistent productive form of media because the message makers shape it to satisfy their viewership rather than seek to use the media to solve an issue. In the case of *Kony 2012*, the result of it becoming an incidental and disaster news event? Research showed that many viewers of the video felt the portrayal of the child soldiers in the film manipulated the audience with images and words. Many questioned the purpose of the film. Additional criticism was the film's stance to politically rely on the US government to hunt down Kony. Another pejorative view was that the hidden agenda of the film was to garner donations for Invisible Children (Bal et al. 2013, Cauterucci 2016, Karlin and Matthew 2012, TMZ 2014, Winfrey 2012).

While Invisible Children raised over 30 million dollars after the film's release on Facebook in 2012, the organization was ill-prepared to manage its fame and fortune. The public criticized Invisible Children and its most visible creator Russell for the movie's production, the producers' motives, and the western view of the issue of Kony and child soldiers in Uganda. A lack of transparency of the funds raised by Invisible Children, and their use created a further distaste for the organization and its mission. Sadly, the unfortunate breakdown of the director led to a film and organization whose legacy is noted more for the sensationalism of the moment than the good it created.

An antithetical to *Kony 2012* and Russell's perspective that Kony was the devil to children and the Ugandan government was the hero, was the documentary released in 2018 by Ebony Butler, *A Brilliant Genocide*. This response to *Kony 2012* sought to

expose current Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni as the reason for Kony's existence and Museveni's ongoing twenty-year-long genocide of the Acholi people of Northern Uganda. Kony remains at large, and those interviewed in the documentary including victims, observers, government officials, and academics, state it serves Museveni well to leave Kony at large and the target of international disdain while Museveni speaks of peace. Yet, those in Northern Uganda argue bitterly that Museveni's crimes against them created Kony's platform and mission in the first place (and yes, Kony is also to blame). But Butler's root premise is the government of Uganda continues an ongoing genocide against the Acholi people of Northern Uganda, undeterred by international agencies or accountability. The number of views of *A Brilliant Genocide?* Less than 70,000 (Butler 2017, Mutex 2017). This documentary in a traditional form has not had the impact but also ironically did not create the harm that *Kony 2012* created. A message without a messenger is unheard, and there was no equally incidental message to respond to the incidental and disaster media messages created by *Kony 2012*. Was *Kony 2012* accurate, effective, damaging, or something else? What value or harm is a film like *Kony 2012* that garners over 100 million views on social media channels as an incidental media event and is not effective in helping to capture one man, and then it gets flipped into a disaster marathon of the creator's mental breakdown?

In this instance, Kony remains at large, which was the opposite result intended by the filmmakers. Oprah, one of the world's most influential culture makers, did not focus on child soldiers. Invisible Children as an organization lost credibility with a large audience due to the blowback of Russell's mental health breakdown. Oprah's video interview garnered over 176,000 views and did nothing to create a change for child

soldiers (Winfrey 2012). *Kony 2012* may have caused more harm than any good it can accomplish by strengthening stereotypes of child soldiers' misery and organizations whose motives appear self-serving and manipulative (regardless of the creator's statement). Lack of credibility with an audience may result in lack of long-term support to carry out a mission. Meanwhile, children enslaved by Kony's strategies remain the victim. It may be that effective messages to create a change must be neither incidental news nor a disaster marathon but a concentrated and consistent effort and message that reaches people intellectually and emotionally. A well-curated message requires expert editing addressing culture, accuracy, intent, balance, and storyline.

Media Appeals and Pitfalls

Irene Bruna Seu evaluated media appeals in humanitarian crises highlighting appeals that intend to create a response to a particular cause. However, the audience can deny or ignore the cause because of how the audience interprets the media. She describes psychological behavior that validates the viewer/donor's belief that they do not need to give. Donors cite many reasons for not giving. Compassion fatigue and too many needs by too many causes can cause a donor to not give to any cause. Neoliberal attitudes and beliefs allow donors to focus on their pejorative view that no one gets something for nothing. An open cynicism that creates a sequence of events may be interpreted as a story meant only to elicit pity and a request for donations by manipulating the viewer/donor, who then decides not to give at all (Seu 2010, 2016).

Media anthropologists, aware of the psychological process and pitfalls of activism and action, can help craft a message through a solid story with thoughtful editing. Editing that consistently asks how the culture, creation of the characters, the portrayal of a

character's behavior, and message delivered through words, music, scenes, and story are ground the audience should be nonnegotiable. Once an audience understands the problem, has an internal urgency to respond, and wants to participate in solving the problem, solutions are closer at hand. Yet when advocates convene and the message they intend is not received by the audience as intended, what does that result indicate to the advocates?

Advocates Convene

Beyond storytelling and those who speak through documentaries, films, autobiographies, and fantasy, the real-life work of advocacy seeks to bring together interested parties to create change. In 2021, in a published webinar open to the public, observing as an audience member in attendance, the panel engaged the webinar's participants in polls to understand this audience's understanding of the issue of child soldiers. After the prepared presentations they launched an online poll and the response showed the need for a better message, storytellers, and actionable items for the interested general population. The panel event and online discussion on May 6, 2021, titled "Ending the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers by 2025," was sponsored by three organizations: Alliance 8.7, War Child, and International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour, a UN initiative. Key messages, summarized in a paper made available to participants after the webinar ended are shown below. From all 139 participants, including seven expert speakers, in an online poll during the discussion, three-fifths (60%) of participants felt that ending the recruitment and use of child soldiers by 2025 is not achievable, with 40% saying it was achievable or "may be achievable" (Alliance 8.7

2021). Without a clear roadmap to ending the use of child soldiers, the panel produced the following action items:

Action 1: Raise awareness and mobilize action. Hold a conference in an area where child soldiers are used and build on the attention given 2021's UN theme of International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour.

Action 2: Increase funding amounts and duration of services offered to assist in the reintegration of child soldiers.

Action 3: Involve communities to make interventions sustainable and relevant. In areas where community-based armed groups (paramilitary, vigilantes, self-defense militias) are the prominent three recruiters and thus where the armed group is the community, this direct engagement is crucial in preventing recruitment.

Action 4: Tackle root causes, especially given the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19. Armed groups are often willing to discourage child recruitment, but poverty and insecurity drive children to (re)join. COVID-19 is exacerbating poverty and insecurity. (COVID-19 is a factor not addressed in this proposal but adds to the complexity of ending the use of children in war and even reaching them.)

Action 5: Improve monitoring which allows for better early warning systems and prevention measures to ensure the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict can be managed and eliminated.

Action 6: Prevent conflict goods from entering supply chains. Many products such as gold and precious stones are linked to child recruitment, as in some areas, for example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, mines are often controlled by armed groups. (Alliance 8.7 2021)

The panelists sought to provide action items with no answers on how to accomplish their goals (or even the next steps or tasks for the action items listed). It may be the audience present could not carry out the steps necessary for these six action items. However, the panel appeared visibly dismayed that 60% of an informed audience believed that child recruitment would not end by 2025 (Alliance 8.7 2021). It could be

the audience, concerned but not as deeply steeped in the issues as were the panelists, did not see a single next step they could individually take.

When a panel receives this kind of feedback, it might be easy to believe the public's involvement is unhelpful, therefore, unnecessary. Yet, the actions of a few will not solve a “wicked problem.” Solving a “wicked problem” demand deep analysis and exploration. Every tool employed, every audience engaged, and more significant effective action taken, including the effect of media on eliminating the recruitment and use of child soldiers. Webinars bring advocates and caring people together from around the globe. This platform is a vital tool to continue to hone a message that creates a sustainable action and practical impact.

While the panel’s stated aims were to educate the audience on the latest statistics and action taken and get them to understand a possible solution, what was missing in their delivery that did not cause the audience to change their stance? And as this issue is debated and discussed, imagine the child, as shown in Figure 5. They could not care less about this continued dialogue with no actionable items, and no army of supporters to help them personally.

Summary

The case studies shown from Ishmael Beah's firsthand account as a child soldier, to fictional films such as *Monos* based on real-life events in Colombia, to the stylized version of a child soldier in anime, to the film *Kony 2012* with over 100 million views, show no singular or collective action. Even in the panel discussion with eminent experts, members of the audience doubted whether they saw a possible route to end child

recruitment and use based on the information provided by the panel. The audience and their psychological reaction to media images and requests for donations and assistance as described by Denov and Mastey are complex, and the tenets of Orientalism silently wait to pre-inform that the problem of the other is not theirs. These findings are not a win-lose issue but reveal that new and different resources are needed to solve the issue. The media anthropologists who develop their brand of Mead Magic will create messages that engage global citizens in solutions.

Perhaps a media anthropologist's views can make a difference, and they can be an active part of a solution. Article 17 of the CRC, a clarion call hidden in plain view since 1989, calls the media anthropologist, "In all circumstances and under all conditions, the global community is directed to prioritize a child's needs within their laws and country's strategies, especially in conflict" (UNSC 1989). The media anthropologist could help to end child soldiers' use by crafting messages with Mead Magic. This work begins where Article 17 of the CRC ends:

Parties recognize the important function performed by the mass media and shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual, and moral well-being and physical and mental health. To this end, States Parties shall:

- (a) Encourage the mass media to disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child and in accordance with the spirit of article 29;
- (b) Encourage international cooperation in the production, exchange and dissemination of such information and material from a diversity of cultural, national, and international sources;
- (c) Encourage the production and dissemination of children's books;
- (d) Encourage the mass media to have particular regard to the linguistic needs of the child who belongs to a minority group or who is indigenous;

(e) Encourage the development of appropriate guidelines for the protection of the child from information and material injurious to his or her well-being, bearing in mind the provisions of articles 13 and 18. (UNSC 1989)

Media anthropologists and their reasons for engagement and calls to action have been in evidence since 1989. The need for this expertise begins in Article 17 from the viewpoint of responsibility to the child. Article 17 reinforces the value and input needed from this science and quickly expands the activist's position of crafting messages through media to support those children.

Anthropologists recognize narrative analysis places the storytelling of child soldiers at its core and offers the media anthropologist the most significant opportunity for impact. Examining the stories told by the creators of child soldier media can assist in understanding why messages that are so critical may not have a long-term effect.

The two films analyzed were *Children of War* and *Etana*. The directors of both films reflect their intent and themes in creating their films. A focus group watched *Etana*, and a careful examination revealed their reactions to the film. The analysis of their views and any call to action to assist child soldiers in their plight compared to the director's interviews underscore the opportunity of a film's power or how it may miss the mark of creating a call to action.

Chapter IV.

Research Methods

The six boys who volunteered to help us cook the meal for the entire camp had never been part of a meal preparation. We had twenty-two pounds of minced goat and beef, twenty-two pounds of spaghetti, and enough tomato sauce, tomato paste, vegetables, spices, oranges, candy, cheese, eggs, and bread to feed forty-two children plus the staff in the camp. Sara began by explaining the importance of cleanliness as they started the mise en place of preparing the ingredients. Properly preparing the elements was an essential step for the spaghetti and bolognese sauce to succeed as a meal. This process of teaching them the importance of meal preparation, how ingredients worked together, and the ultimate result would make their hours-long preparation and participation worthwhile as they stayed engaged throughout the process.

Theoretical Framework and Analysis

The qualitative analysis tool chosen was thematic analysis focusing on critical realism (CR). This research focuses on films about child soldiers, including two in-depth interviews with two directors on their film and intent, and finally, a focus group watching one of the films and commenting on their understanding and ultimate reaction and call to action they may have experienced.

A thematic analysis seeks to identify, report, and analyze data. Braun and Clarke acknowledge a researcher cannot simply give voice to their findings and must systematically frame their conclusions. They argue thematic analysis is a method in its own right, not just a process performed (Braun and Clarke 2006; reswell 2018). While thematic analysis suffices for this research, choosing CR for analysis further frames two specific films, their director's opinions, and an audience's perspective of one of the films.

CR analysis can address a social problem by explaining events that lead to those problems and then offering ideas and solutions. In their words, "The theories that help us get closer to reality, i.e., that help us identify causal mechanisms driving social events, activities, or phenomena, are selected and formed using rational judgment of these social events" (Fletcher 2016, 182). Fletcher describes three stratified yet equal levels in CR ontology. This stratification reveals one level is constantly affecting the other, and there is a fluidity through which they interact. Therefore, none is superior to the other, and all three add to the analysis. The "empirical" level explains how humans experience events and the circumstances leading to those events. The "actual" level frames what is happening, whether it is observed or not. These actual occurrences often differ from observations at the empirical level, e.g., the tree that falls in the woods (actual level) makes no sound unless heard (empirical level). The "real" level seeks to explain the interaction and structures of an experience and events, whether observed or not. These structures are critical to understanding child soldiers to change their reality. Fletcher further describes how all social frameworks possess causal powers and liabilities and reminds us that these potentialities can enable or constrain them from acting in specific ways. She suggests the process of abductive reasoning (the method of understanding

something from what is present, of its meaning for a greater whole) as an essential part of the analysis if choosing this methodology.

Engaging a small focus group, two directors, and two films, abductive reasoning through the lens of CR will enhance the value of the analysis. Furthermore, in “Critical Realism and Semiosis,” the authors argue that semiosis (anything that makes meaning) is critical in the use of CR to keep data not at arm's length but within grasp to interpret its significance to the audience (Fletcher 2016, Fairclough et al. 2002, 9). Dialogue, scene placement, film structure, and actors portrayed in the film, whether actual, or created, are essential to the viewer's reception and interpretation of the message. Semiotics frames the interaction between ideas, people, and causes. In life, purposeful semiotics creates understanding, awareness, and consensus. Its absence leads to misinterpretation, lack of action, and missed opportunities to develop solutions to “wicked problems.”

Giving equal attention in the coding process to the entire conversation, I began the coding process looking for ideas, regardless of their repetitive nature among respondents. To find themes, I started with more significant ideas as groupings and, by collating them and organizing them, pursued memorable and imaginative phrasing that gave me ideas to identify themes. Placing those initial coded ideas in the three themes relevant to each theme, I sought to create coherent, consistent, and distinct ideas. Looking for relevant extracts, I found them in the conversations with the directors, the focus group participants, and in both films to illustrate the points I found often repeated. Not rushing this process, I critically reviewed my assumptions to confirm the validity of the discoveries and ideas I had identified. I then reexamined the data through the lens of CR as a practical philosophical framework for social science, allowing a more profound

message and clarity of its effect on the directors and their audience. While the empirical level of CR needs no further clarification, the second and third levels require additional comments. My interpretation in this analysis is also through the lens of the viewer and creator. It includes everything that brought that person to this place in time and will affect how they view the actual event, such as an event portrayed on film. However, the viewer's perception is affected by wherever the director chooses to focus their lens. Finally, in this analysis, the real level consists of the child soldier that creates the need to solve the issues, war, and conflict. Media is the action that creates reactions.

This intensive analysis and coding are appropriate because while this is far from an exhaustive review of all films and filmmakers in this genre, the limited data and research can yield a plausible conclusion though not positively verified writ large. However, it will add to the toolkit of ideas, themes, considerations, and catalysts to support activists. Adding only to a toolkit does not make the claims or summary less valid but serves as a reminder that adding a practical application to the science of the anthropology of media is vital. The anthropology of media adds to the bigger story anthropologists seek to tell and that the public needs to understand.

Chapter V.

Film Analysis

Cooking twenty-two pounds of spaghetti took all of the wood in the camp to get a rolling boil of gallons of water. As the seasoned wood ran out, I used the green, wet wood, and black smoke poured out from the fire. The boy tending the pot refused to leave his post, stood in the smoke, and stirred for hours with no complaint. Cooking modifications occurred during the five-hour cooking process. When the meatballs they had so carefully rolled stuck to the bottom of the huge pot, they were broken down and voilà - spaghetti bolognese! After much work and effort, the meal was ready to serve.

Etana



Figure 6. Scenes from Etana

Release Date: October 8, 2020, Actors: Trinity Moriah Jones and Vivian Nweze.

Introduction

Cinema can draw the public's attention to injustice or social issues. *Etana* is a short film created in 2020 and directed by South African Marian De Pontes as her thesis project at Chapman University in Orange, California. It won the New Horizon Award for young filmmakers (Welk 2021). The overriding focus of this film is the fate of a child soldier. In a fictional account, Etana is a teenage female soldier confronting her struggle to follow the orders of her commander at the cost of her humanity. This film's subject matter and characters reveal how fear commands action but how love can countermand authority and uncover the freedom to choose how to live, even if it means dying. This film's courageous and profoundly emotional theme is evident in its elements. Most noticeably, the strength of the three main characters, the powerful story told from a fictional account, and the use of symbols and signs indicate the characters' internal struggles. Stripped away are details that could distract, leaving the viewer thinking deeply about the messages of this film and what this message through a story about child soldiers means to them long after the film ends.

Film Summary

The film begins with the viewer looking down the barrel of a gun as Etana points it at the face of a young girl and is being commanded by a voice off-screen to kill her. The title of the film explodes on to the screen to the sound of gunfire. The story then begins again in the camp and builds back to this critical moment. *Etana* tells the fictional account of a small camp located in an unknown desert with a ragtag group of children declared warriors by the camp commander, Nafisa. The three main characters are all female: the camp commander Nafisa, the protagonist Etana, and the little girl Yaya, under

the care and instruction of Etana, who will become a child soldier. The story follows Etana's journey as she complies with Nafisa's military orders, shooting a boy without hesitation in the arm who dangerously uses gunplay. As the film progresses, the audience meets Yaya. During shooting practice, Etana tells Yaya, "The first to blink is the first to die" (De Pontes 2020, 0:01:29 – 0:01:34) reminding Yaya that fear will kill her. Etana's relationship with Yaya is as a teacher and protector. There is no apparent conflict in Etana as to her circumstances in the camp and her role as the senior child soldier next in command to Nafisa. Later in the night, Etana tells Yaya a fable about a boy and the great creator Nhalik, revealing Etana's mindset. In the fable, death is the only freedom for the boy who attempts to swim through a vast body of water but fails. Etana speaks quietly, more to herself than to Yaya, who has fallen asleep. As Etana sleeps, she dreams of the moment as a small child, Nafisa pulls her crying and screaming from a burning home. Etana realizes it is Nafisa when she sees the red beret worn by Nafisa in the camp in the dream. At this moment, Etana wakes and realizes Nafisa is not only her commander, but the thief who stole her from her previous life.

The story takes a dangerous turn in a pivotal scene when Etana confronts Nafisa. Nafisa threatens her, leaves the tent, and Etana observes a large green beetle on her hand, causing no harm. Suddenly, Etana crushes the beetle in an unprovoked moment leading to a climactic confrontation between Nafisa and Etana. The scene returns back to the opening scene when Nafisa orders Etana to shoot Yaya as evidence of Etana's ultimate loyalty to her as the commander. When Etana refuses, Nafisa shoots Yaya. Etana begins to run toward the large body of water. Shot by Nafisa, Etana sinks in the water, like the

boy in the fable, and dies. The final scene shows Etana rising from the water, taking off her gun, and limping to an unknown land.

This film's message explores untenable choices given to children as soldiers. Ultimately, no option will create a positive resolution. *Etana* is a glimpse into the reality of a child soldier and an important story to tell for those who may be unaware of their existence.

Analysis

As a short film, *Etana* shocks the audience in its subject matter and resolution. The opening scene of Etana pointing a gun at Yaya was a powerful story structure technique defined as *medias res*, Latin for 'in the midst of things.' The story opens with a scene that will be resolved later in the story. This structure can set an ominous and shocking tone for any film (Jenkins 2021). While using one storytelling technique of *medias res* could be sufficient to tell the story of a child soldier, the second structure of storytelling, the hero's journey, described by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* is evident. The hero's journey or monomyth occurs when the key protagonist in a story's arc starts in the present. As the story continues, their journey to change their circumstances or overcome a difficulty finishes with the eventual resolution of those circumstances. These stories grip the reader and viewers as they figurately relate to the challenges and victories along the journey. The steps in the hero's journey are the call to adventure, arriving at the threshold of transformation, addressing the challenges and temptations during the journey, experiencing a revelation causing death and rebirth of possibility, the changes in the character's mindset and behavior, atonement, and then return to self (Campbell 2008). In *Etana*, the director used this structure powerfully in

this short film. When the story opens after the evocative scene with the gun, Etana is on the precipice of her journey as she changes and goes through all of the steps of Campbell's hero's journey. The use of medias res and the hero's journey create a powerful story from the beginning scene and allow this short film to develop completely and comprehensively.

De Pontes' masterful use of color, dialogue, characters, and sound allows the viewer to participate in the story and create an emotional connection from the beginning to the end of the film. The colors chosen were nearly all in the orange and brown range, evidenced by the fatigues worn by the children, the dusty landscape, the violent scenes in the fable and flashback, and the lack of vivid color in most scenes. The three colors most used throughout were red, green, and blue. Red was a signifier of violence throughout the film, in the rag tied around the guns, the beret of the commander, and the red rags tied around the children's arms. The color red's absence evidenced tranquility as occurred in its sudden absence when Etana rose from the water on the distant shore, removed her gun which had a red rag tied to it, and dropped it into the water. The red vanished from the scene, and the blues and the greens in the shot were heightened. The vibrant green on the beetle represents beauty and innocence. The bug's innocence ends with Etana crushing it off-screen and it is shown as dead immediately afterward. This moment indicates a revelation and rebirth occurring within her, transforming her mindset and actions. Blue was less vibrant but became the color of the water and shoreline's landscape after Etana died and came up from the deep water. Again, there was peace in the scene through the use of color, and Etana's return to freedom completes her hero's journey. Without mentioning a specific country or conflict, the colors De Pontes chose to signify the

depravity, violence, and hopelessness effectively created the mood as the setting where a child soldier exists, allowing the audience to view the culture of a camp without ever experiencing it. In media and in the hands of a masterful storyteller, color create emotions within the viewer that few other mediums can duplicate. Scenes described in books require the reader to develop their unique interpretation of the events. Film, acting as the messenger for the child soldier, allows the viewer to enhance their understanding of the no-win situation in this setting through the images and colors chosen by the director.

The brief amount of dialogue enhanced the scenes. The tone and tenor of conflict and violence eclipsed any need for the identity of a specific country or conflict, but Africa as the continent is mentioned. Early in the film, a voiceover of radio propagandists makes a declaration:

Brothers, soldiers, our government alongside the UN forces has compromised our base. It's time we stand together—no time for fear. We'll fight to the end. They could never take Africa from our feet!" (De Pontes 2020, 0:00:53 - 0:01:19)

Nafisa ignores the children's humanity, as evidenced in her exchanges with the children, often followed by violence. When an older boy randomly shoots his rifle in the air in gunplay, Nafisa nodded her head at Etana. Before Etana takes the shot, Nafisa said, "They think that you are just kids with guns. Hm! But we know who we are. Don't we?" (De Pontes 2020, 0:02:04 - 0:02:14). The lack of humanity continues as Nafisa shoots Yaya. Before Yaya dies, she pleads with Etana to remember the fable. Nafisa barks, "Fairy tales are for children. And there is no room for children in this camp" (De Pontes 2020, 0:10:56 -, 0:11:09) as Nafisa gazes fiercely at the small children in the camp wearing military fatigues. Nafisa's behavior demonstrated her constant indoctrination of the children that they were soldiers, not children. Freedom was in Etana's monologue as

she told the fable to Yaya and spoke of freedom in herself. Even so, freedom was metaphorical. For the boy in the fable and Etana, freedom only came through death.

Etana quietly whispered at the end of the fable as if talking to herself,

If you listen to the whisper closer, you'll hear it...that to save him from sudden death, Nhalik turned the boy into a winged animal. Free to roam the earth as it pleases. 'Cause, that's why Nhalik created us. To be free."
(De Pontes 2020, 0:04:21 - 0:04:54)

This declaration, five minutes into the 15-minute film, begins a series of events that gives Etana her freedom through death. Images and words weave seamlessly, creating the overall storyline and mood for the film.

Sound plays an essential role in the film. Gunshots and gunfire were evidence of the violence in the camp, and against one another. Ominous music was darkly tonal in quality. Music adds anticipation of dread, including a drum increasing in tempo and volume before violent scenes: the confrontation between Nafisa and Yaya, the crushing of the beetle, when Etana is ordered to shoot Yaya, and as Etana runs to the water. The sound of gunfire signifies both Yaya's and Etana's death, but neither is seen on screen. Gunfire, throughout the film in critical moments, startles the viewer. When Yaya was watching Etana fire at targets in the desert, the gunfire punctuated Etana's sentence. A single gunshot in the middle of Etana's declaration, "The first to blink (gunshot) is the first to die" (De Pontes 2020, 0:01:29 - 0:01:34) underscores Etana's warning to Yaya. As the film closes, a beautiful song is playing with words sung in a foreign, African language that sounds like hope and pain, together, as a final reminder to the viewer of Etana's ultimate moment of final freedom.

The filming of this story is abundant with powerful colors, words, and sounds, adding to the richness of the storyline. De Pontes blends a system of signs representing a real-world situation with abstract ideas about freedom and violence. The hero's journey became evident through these three highlighted areas, even though there was no happy ending.

Evaluation

De Pontes' vision of the world where child soldiers live and survive is brutal in its reality and conclusion. Analyzing this film leads to understanding this film's effect on the viewer and how the story's construction and structure can lead the viewer to a perspective or opinion. The setting of a child soldier camp weaves through the plot defining scenarios and the actors' behaviors toward one another, creating a culture to observe. The conclusion reached is that freedom is only available through death which speaks to the somberness of the issue and the victimization of the children.

To view this film only once and without the context of the problem of child soldiers and solutions available through reconciliation and recovery could leave a viewer with the perspective that a child in this setting is hopeless and lost, and only death will free them. That said, this film is beautifully developed and tells a harsh reality that cannot be ignored.

Children of War



Figure 7. Scenes from *Children of War*

Release Date: October 12, 2010, Ex-child soldier and child soldier art.

Introduction

Children of War, released in 2010, was filmed and directed by Bryan Single.

When viewing a film in documentary form, the story told of real people captured in their environment adds considerable ethos to a film's credibility with an audience. It is not only the perspective of the filmmaker's lens that catches the eye of the viewer but the perspective of the person in the camera's focus. Single chose to illuminate the heartbreaking aftermath of child soldiers returning from a combat situation and beginning their journey of healing and rehabilitation. The film focuses on three children. Single's account highlights the children's path to recovery through dialogue as they speak to

counselors at the Rachele Rehabilitation Centre (Centre) in Northern Uganda (Centre, n.d.). Freedom from captivity is only the beginning of their journey. While they cannot undo the past and erase their experiences, in the thoughtful arms of counselors unyielding in their faith and belief that they can help these children, Single captures the loss and transformation of each child. *Children of War* had its premiere at the UN, the first film ever to receive such an honor. The UN's intent in showing the film was to underscore the issues outlined in the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict for the assembled delegates, emphasizing the UN's campaign to end the use of children under eighteen in conflict (UNGA 2002). *Children of War*, honored worldwide in over 45 separate screenings, allows viewers to witness the pain and suffering children face long after they leave a conflict. It also offers a powerful message of hope in healing these children. The film was nominated for the Cinema for Peace Award for Justice 2010 (IMDb 2010).

Film Summary

The documentary focuses on the Centre, where child soldiers go after rescue or release from a combative situation. The film opens with rushing water, the great expanse of land and sky, and animals known to the continent of Africa. An elder holy man speaks of the need for peace, and men are praying in an open stretch of land and walking with bibles as they read and pray. Scenes of children dancing in church, and as a boy casually passes the camera, his shirt reads, "We are all equal players." The occasional narration of Jane Ekayu (Jane), one of the children's counselors, frames the camp's background and the children's lives before their placement in the Centre. Archival news footage reveals

the history of the LRA and its leaders, the perpetrators of the crimes against these children.

The most potent storytellers are the children as they choose to reveal the horrific specific details of their experiences that have caused their trauma. Through Jane's narration, the viewers learn that all the Centre's children suffer distinct levels of trauma. The two boys featured, Polycap, who looks less than ten years old, and Nyero, an older teenage boy, both tell their experiences of killing others, their wounds from gunshots, torture, and their ongoing belief that they are to blame. A young girl, Akulu, an adolescent who represented very young girls abused and traumatized serving as wives for the fighters, spoke of her fear of another abduction. She talks about and eventually confronts the perpetrator of her rapes and abuse, Abonga Papa (Abonga), the religious leader of the LRA who comes to the Centre. Beyond the emotional pain she experiences, the gunshot wound in her leg continues to cause her physical pain.

The film weaves the stories of the physical and emotional pain of the children with the unwavering compassion and intent of the staff at the Centre to help them heal through art, role play, counseling, and faith. Not all of the children appear to move past their pain. Instead, the message implies the possibility of healing and the counselor's desire to give these children hope for a better future, which they believe no one has the right to destroy. The film ends with Nyero reuniting with his mother and family, one of the outcomes the Centre seeks for every child. The smile on Nyero's face leaves the viewer understanding that suffering can heal to small and large degrees, as experienced through Nyero's universal expression of joy and happiness. As the holy man comes back

to speak at the end of the film, he cries out to God that he desires that God will wipe the tears from the children and that only compassion remains on earth.

Analysis

Children of War is an observational mode documentary that attempts to discover the truth of the children's experiences and possibilities going forward for the children by observing their interaction with the Centre in close up and poignant footage created by the director. By capturing the raw unguarded moments of the children, the viewer can understand the film from a personal view in the powerful emotional reactions created by the dialogue and cinematography (Master Class 2021). Single filmed these powerful, intimate moments of the children with their counselors, and the lens was often at face level with the child creating a setting for the viewer that felt sacred and intimate. The limited narration by Jane throughout the film was of an omniscient quality, giving the viewer moments of clarity and context of the children's experience to internally surmise how the one child represented the many. The limited narration allowed the viewer to become one with the children, establish pathos, and feel their pain. Jane referred to Akulu kindly as her daughter, thereby taking a little girl and making her someone she could protect as the mother figure, relatable for any parent. A similar dynamic occurs for Nero and Polycap when their male counselor refers to himself as the father. Viewers could establish common ground with the children as they felt parents' universal need to protect children.

Characters and subjects have a balanced perspective. Single chose to tell the story of the perpetrators of violence from the LRA with humanity and not just as evil characters. Abonga's visit to the Centre begging for forgiveness of his sins juxtaposed the

violence he created as an LRA member, including using Akulu as a child wife.

Examining the religious ideology used as a weapon against the children by the LRA was evident in the scenes from the archival footage and the children's words. The Centre also used religion as a positive belief system to help heal the children in. Using role play of war games in the Centre supported the children's process and identified their feelings and guilt against the real-life atrocities they committed as child soldiers.

Children of War is a monochromatic film, and that choice removes mood and possibly some levels of Orientalism by the western viewer. The only color in the entire film was the art images shown created by children in the camp, recognized as art therapy and a healing therapy model. As this art comes into view, the images represent not only drawings the children made of death and violence but scenes of home, family, hope, and healing. The soundtrack consists of nature, the singing of the religious men and the children, archival footage of screaming and crying, and an exorcism of Polycap to help remove the evil spirits within him. In the counseling sessions the soft and lost voices of the children juxtaposed against the consistently kind voices of their counselors create intimate scenes of discovery for the children and counselors. The scenes of the children speaking to their counselor reveal the respectful witness of the child's memories, and the powerful words of wisdom the counselors seek to plant as seeds in the children's minds. The children speak in intense and anguished tones in the group session of their peers. Some talk of forgiveness, others of their inability to forgive. Allowing them to tell their story without judgment symbolized the Centre's willingness to let the children decide how they would process their trauma. The children's conversations in the peer setting spoke to the awareness the children gain at the Centre. They were beginning their healing

journey, including the ability to blame the perpetrators rather than themselves. The most powerful scenes were those when the children interacted with their counselors, as shown below:

In one scene, the young girl Akulu, is questioned by Jane:

JANE: During your time with the rebels, did you see children being killed?

AKULA: I saw.

JANE: Mmm. Why were they killed?

AKULA: Those who tried to escape for home were caught and killed.

JANE: Mmm.

AKULA: And if you believe in evil spirits they kill you.

JANE: Mmm.

AKULA: Uh. Those who couldn't walk were also killed.

JANE: What?

AKULA: If you develop swollen feet and cannot walk anymore, you are killed.

JANE: Mmm. OK. Did they ever use children to kill other children?

AKULA: The adult rebels don't kill. Children are the ones to kill.

JANE: Mmm

AKULA: Uh. (Single 2010, 0:14:20 – 0:14:52)

In this brief bit of dialogue and examples that follow, the children reveal the cruelty to which they are subjected. While almost unimaginable, the veracity of these recollections is beyond reproach when viewers receive a consistent message at various points throughout the film. Immediately following this scene, Nyero is relaying his experience to the counselor of his abduction:

COUNSELOR: Nyero...can you tell me how the Lord's Resistance Army abducted you?

NYERO: When we learned the rebels were approaching our home—

COUNSELOR: Which year was this?

NYERO: 2002.

COUNSELOR: Mmm.

NYERO: We ran and hid in the grass.

COUNSELOR: Mmm.

NYERO: They came directly to us, and we were captured.

COUNSELOR: Mmm.

NYERO: After being abducted we were smeared with oil.

COUNSELOR: Uh-uh.
 NYERO: Our foreheads were smeared with a cross.
 COUNSELOR: Mmm.
 NYERO: Then our chest and palms of our hands.
 COUNSELOR: Mmm.
 NYERO: Then we were told that this charm that has been applied to us the moment that we try to escape no matter where we go we'll be found and executed at once.
 COUNSELOR: Mm-hm.
 NYERO: That was the first rule.
 COUNSELOR: Mm-hm.
 NYERO: Then your shirt is removed, and you're paraded.
 COUNSELOR: Mm-hm.
 NYERO: You're made to lie down and are flogged seventy strokes or more.
 COUNSELOR: Mm-hm.
 NYERO: And then you're declared a soldier. (Single 2010, 0:14:54 – 0:15:51)

Counselors know that therapy begins when children verbally disclose their personal traumatic experiences to them. When children come to the Centre with mental images, experiences, and memories full of fear, counselors do not seek to resolve their pain but find ways to bring new meaning to their experiences. Jane asks Akulu how she felt about Abonga's referring to her as his wife when he saw her at the Centre. Akulu does not reply but softly weeps and turns away from Jane. Jane said:

Turn to me. Rest on my lap. We do appreciate what lies within you. We share in your pain and are very sad. For us the most vital thing is your return. Once you're here the future looks bright. Don't imagine Abonga will still hunt you. He has no more power over you. Should he ever return and wish to speak with you, tell him that he has no right over you. "You exercised power over me, took me to the rebels where no laws existed, and the law was in your hands. You could do whatever you wanted. But not now. Not where we are. The law tracks everything." We have the right. You have your rights. Your mother and all the others have their rights. Your dignity as a human being has not been tampered with. Your self-esteem is untainted. It's as perfect as it was prior to your abduction. You see, we love you. You're precious to us. (Single 2010, 0:56:58 – 0:58:18)

Children of War allows the viewer to become deeply engaged in the lives of the children while creating a perspective for the viewer to decide what they want to do with the knowledge and lessons they have acquired from the film. How a viewer can use this message and turn their feelings into action remains the most significant challenge beyond getting these children healed in the first place.

Evaluation

Powerfully told through the children's words and reflections, *Children of War* takes the viewer through a freed child soldier's healing journey. Religion frames the story from the opening scene to the final one. Throughout the film, extreme religious indoctrination is symbolic of evil and good. The LRA told the children evil spirits would inhabit them if they tried to escape to a peaceful setting. At the Centre, religious indoctrination was once again a tool to assure the children that God was there to protect and help them. Singing, praying, and reciting Bible verses was an attempt to bring a new meaning of faith as an almighty weapon to help them in their times of need long after they left the Centre. The children began to learn to process a new paradigm: a peaceful environment and its expectations. While the film asserted that hope and healing are possible, Nyero was the only child shown who had healed enough to reunite with his family. From the film, it is unknown if Nyero was successful in his reintegration with his family and how the next step in healing works outside the Centre. Would more instances of the success of the healing and rehabilitation strategies used at the Centre, told through more children's stories, affect the audience, and their desire to create a different future for children like Akulu, Polycap, and Nyero? Or will more personal stories from more kids

overwhelm the audience? A story told as beautifully as this one should be enough to create awareness, outrage, and action. But is it?

Summary of *Etana* and *Children of War*

Etana and *Children of War* display great care and concern for their subjects. Both burst with emotion and create powerful storylines, one as fiction and the other as a documentary. Each character seeks hope for freedom and healing in some form, imagined or real. When considering the issues confronting child soldiers, no one film can present all options and scenarios.

No expectation should be made of any film director to become an activist. It is not up to the creator of a film to cause action in another. However, can a filmmaker go beyond observing culture and create a film as another catalyst for changing those in dire circumstances?

When viewing a film such as *Etana* or *Children of War*, personal responsibility of the viewer is paramount to act, learn more, and seek solutions regardless of the grim reality in which children find themselves as soldiers. And as a caveat, both of these incredible film are only available at film festivals, in academic settings, authorized meetings, library archives or from a private video link. While the viewing of both films is limited, audiences who are fortunate enough to experience these stories and their storyteller's framing remember them long after the film ends.

As discussed in Chapter 5, *Children of War*'s impact came as the first film ever screened at the UN to help combat the use of children in their "Zero under 18" campaign (United Nations 2002) and *Etana* received worldwide attention and acclaim for its young director when she received the New Horizon Award, for her work as a nonbinary or

female film maker (Welk 2021). These films serve a purpose beyond their art form; both advocate for child soldiers in very different and powerful ways.

The power of storytelling in both films brings value in three ways. Awareness if the subject was unknown to the audience before the viewing. When watching these films, the spirit quickens in those who know about child soldiers and seek change. What remains long after viewing either or both films is an awareness that though most do not see child soldiers, they exist, suffer, and need protection.

Telling a fair and balanced story that can shine a light on a horrific situation, and then culturally and carefully curated for an intended audience is an important milestone for any film.

For organizations such as the Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative, can film help enhance their multi-pronged approach and solution to help child soldiers? The Initiative focuses heavily on research, policy guidance, advocacy, capacity-building programming, and engaging the children and communities in reintegration and rehabilitation (Dallaire Institute 2022, 10). How could compelling storytelling through film augment their work and goals? Stories told through images, and carefully edited content will deepen the visual message and bring it to advocates long after committee meetings have stopped. It is not that media cannot affect child soldiers and their condition, but there does not appear to be enough quality content to assist in the goal. Sensitively designed media like these films can benefit organizations such as Dallaire's, those in the UN, other bodies engaged in solutions, and activists in service to child soldiers.

Chapter VI.

Analysis: One Subject, Two Directors, Three Themes

Impressing children who have seen it all in war is not easy. Yet, the curiosity of those children waiting for food elevated as their fellow ex-combatants served them a meal they had never known. Spaghetti bolognese served with grated cheese, a baguette, Fanta to drink, oranges, and candy for dessert. Some used utensils as they sat on the benches, but many began digging in with their hands. When I asked, "Why don't they have forks?" The Muhazi director, Ally, told when they first arrived at Muhazi, they were given a tin plate, a fork, and a spoon. Many had never seen utensils and threw them away immediately. They would receive no additional utensils. They came back for seconds which was encouraging to know they enjoyed it. The children ate their meal, mostly in silence, unless whispering with each other and furtively keeping their eye on Sara and me.

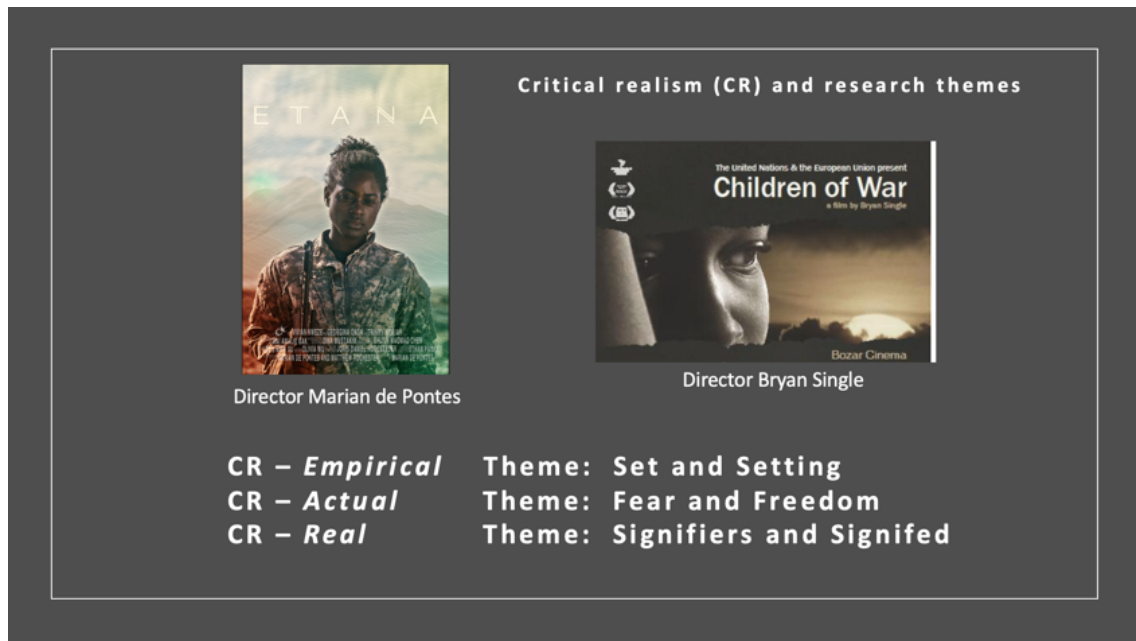


Figure 8. *Etana* and *Children of War* Analysis

Framework of Themes and Subthemes from Director Interviews, Film Posters: Etana and Children of War.

Directors: Bryan Single and Marian De Pontes

Initial research about films in the child soldier-related genre led to two directors, Bryan Single and Marian De Pontes. Their award-winning films, *Children of War* and *Etana*, are impactful in their own right, yet neither film is available to the general public for viewing. I contacted each director through LinkedIn, requesting a short conversation about their film. Both graciously agreed and sent their private links to their videos. De Pontes also agreed to allow her film for viewing with the focus group. Single's film, *Children of War*, is available on Kanopy and through academic institutional libraries. De Pontes' film *Etana* debuted in 2020, continues to make the film festival rounds, and is not publicly available.

Individual director interviews were semi-structured. Each director completed a consent form through DocuSign for the interviews. The document included background information, the purpose of the discussion, the purpose of the research, and a request for their electronic signature. Each director received the same questions before the interview. Meetings were recorded digitally via Zoom (with verbal permission), each lasting ninety minutes, and then transcribed.

Fundamental questions and the overall question structure that make up the interview on teachingwithmovies.org are incorporated into the discussions (RedClay and Frieden, n.d.). Questions adapted or directly used were general opening questions to establish the history and experience of the director as a filmmaker, the personal challenges they faced in making their films, and their motivation. As an example, in the opening section of questions, I asked them what the most challenging concept for them was to portray in telling their story. The next set of empathy based questions sought to elicit the message they intended behind their film, how the film affected them personally and what problem they wanted to illuminate about child soldiers. I asked them if there was a crucial moment in the story, a scene that they thought brought illumination or an "ah-ha" moment. The final section allowed them to reflect on how their film mirrors the human condition, the broader notion of humanity, and if they intended to create a call to action through their film's story. The questions revealed how the directors interpreted the issue of child soldiers from a global perspective.

This strategy of using these types of questions compares the results of a director's intent to the audience's experience identifying clearly if a message sent is a message received (RedClay and Frieden, n.d.). This strategy incorporates the director's voice to tell their story with separate film analysis, superior to film analysis alone.

The specific background of both directors of why they chose to create their films is discussed. Although the other's film and name were unknown by either director, both felt a calling and passion for sharing an important story that not all want to hear, but whose time is now. The three key themes that unify these directors and films are prominent in the research. Each director spoke only about their film, their reasons for creating it, and their expectations of its value to support ending the use of child soldiers. Personal background and descriptions are provided from the interviews for each director separately, and themes for both the two director's thoughts and reflections are combined.

There are no assumptions that the data encompasses all aspects of filmmaking or how to create a change through media for child soldiers. Even so, both filmmakers displayed extraordinary wisdom. As discussed in Chapter 4, while thematic analysis is flexible, it served the data well to dive deeper with a focus on CR to parse the ideas and notions of the director's intent. Each theme, set and setting, fear and freedom, signifier and signified, has prominent sub-themes to understand the film's meaning to its creator. The identified sub-themes are both esoteric and concrete; esoteric in that reflection on death, violence, and hope; often more subjective than scientific, and shown in their quotes. They both spoke of concrete ideas of what it means to have children engaged in conflict. Themes and subthemes are shown in Table 2.

Bryan Single, Director, *Children of War* Interview

Filmmaker Bryan Single began work in the industry in 1997. His awareness of the impact of the media's portrayal of war came from the events surrounding 9/11 in the US on September 11, 2001. In this awareness and media climate, Single stumbled across a little-known story in Uganda. However, he saw his stumble as more of the muse that finds you when you are tuned in to a particular subject. As an artist, he does not approach projects rationally but from a deep place within himself. Single was introduced to Els De Temmerman, former Belgian journalist, and founder of the Rachele Rehabilitation Centre (Centre). His initial intent was to visit the Centre and bear witness without preconceptions of an end goal. While his personal approach might be how a media anthropologist or activist would approach it, he was neither. Single felt resonance between his circumstances, what he noticed in the media, and how he could contribute a more significant message.

Alone in Uganda with only his camera, it was weeks before he focused his lens on the Centre's children. He returned often over three years. For him, the issue in Uganda was about children directly swept up by war and abducted and becoming child soldiers and victims of extreme violence. As an antithesis, the story he told was the process of rehabilitation and recovery of ex-combatants in the wake of war.

Children of War is a profound statement for Single on several levels as an allegory for war and loss. Single does not apologize for not approaching an issue rationally but believes a more spiritual level is valid and necessary for him to create a balanced message. This perspective defines his approach to filmmaking. He did not describe any thoughts of activism for the film. In his continued description of what drew

him to this subject in this particular place, he said that art re-envisions who we are. Single remarked, "It is self-expression and about reconnecting to the imagination and envisioning who we can become" (Single 2022). It was the universality of this story that he felt transcended the locality. It was not the victimhood of these Ugandan kids; it was the fact that they were undergoing a process of rehabilitation, transformation, and healing that he felt all could benefit from witnessing.

Single stated violence, while necessary to portray a story's reality, is not the only part of a storyline where the emphasis should focus or dominate. He looks for a balanced approach to offset the violence with peace to tell a more authentic story, which for him creates a unique and responsible place of storytelling. He lives the philosophy that cinema can be a compelling language because it deals with images and symbols, and the director's responsibility is to treat the images and symbols with care and sensitivity. Single does not agree that cinema needs to be relational dialectics, a communication theory placing people and their communication at odds with one another. It is a fluid and constantly changing dynamic that creates a portrayal of the person or characters in a film (Baxter and Sharpe 2015). For him, film should create an experiential medium that begins with him. He must live the experience, letting it come through him. While recognizing there is no such thing as objectivity, the minute the camera turns on an image, the filmmaker makes a subjective decision. Single demands of himself to be tuned in, through the heart and soul, for any story he chooses to tell. Realizing how manipulative a filmmaker can portray a story, Single is conscious that he does not want to create more trauma or retraumatize an audience.

Aware that audiences can turn away from real-life horror, Single sought to create an experience for the viewer and focused his lens on what he viewed as the healing quality the children experienced at the Centre. He said,

I felt like there was this sort of shamanic transformational quality to what these kids were personally experiencing that could possibly be transmitted through cinema to audiences in a way that can be helpful for all of us as witnesses how an innocent child who had been taken to a hell worse than most of us will ever experience and somehow are transformed through creativity and art. And the power of that shows the power of human imagination and potential. That theme can be applied in several ways in people's lives. People turn away from this subject because they don't want to see another genocide or a film that takes them down a dark path. (Single 2022)

This message underscores what children in crisis have to teach us about what is possible.

When a viewer establishes logos with the other, they seek to end their suffering as they would want someone to end theirs. He went on to state,

Look, you know, we all suffer loss, emotional loss, and suffering on different scales, of course, and depths, but we still all share that. In common, we all suffer from something. And so, how do we transform the sort of trauma or negativity, that sort of disruptive side of those experiences into something that can help us grow, transform, and expand? And how do we find renewal? So that was the overall theme exhibited in these kids that I witnessed in some of their stories. That was what attracted me to this. (Single 2022)

Single believes this story of human loss and potential is applicable in several ways in people's lives. In his metaphorical way of stating, "we are all children of war," he describes that we all suffer from emotional loss on different levels. Regardless of the loss, he believes we also share the ability to heal and find renewal. *Children of War* materialized from deeply beliefs held by Single before he ever entered Uganda. His observations of the world led him to create this film. There is a profound need for more films like *Children of War* that seek to explore, not exploit, a child soldier's reality.

Storytellers who choose to focus their lens on suffering not to create drama but to remind humanity of possibilities despite humanity's attempt to quash the spirit, symbolize the power of telling a child soldier's story with care and tenderness to create healing, not despair.

Marian De Pontes, Director, *Etana Interview*

Marion De Pontes earned her MFA in 2020 in film production from Chapman University, City of Orange, California, and her BA with Honors in Film Production from the University of The Witwatersrand in South Africa. This short film was her master's project at Chapman. De Pontes was aware of child soldiers for two reasons. As a South African, she described herself as always being very aware of the use of child soldiers, especially in Africa. The awareness came from her culture, ideology, and news cycles. De Pontes' mother worked in the government and openly discussed the issue within their family. It was in February 2018 when she read a New York Times article about 300 child soldiers, of which eighty-seven of the child soldiers were girls, creating a lasting impression she could not shake (New York Times AP 2018). She decided to choose this topic for her film thesis at Chapman. She met Captain Dean Gillespie through her mother, who enhanced her knowledge and research. Gillespie worked with the Child Protection Unit with the UN in South Sudan, focusing on the release of child soldiers in Sudan. She spoke with him about the UN programs for child soldiers and how the programs operate for about three months. She said, "And once the money runs out, the child soldiers return to being child soldiers because there's not much else they can do" (De Pontes 2022). As mentioned above, her mother, who worked in the defense forces, openly talked about the African Union, and often said to De Pontes, "We must bequeath our children the Africa

we want" (De Pontes 2022). The theme of motherhood also runs through De Pontes' film *Etana*. De Pontes readily identified this choice as a tribute to her mother.

Filmed in eight days at the Salton Sea in California, the scene setting is a child soldier's camp: hot, dry, and isolated. The three main female characters were the essential aspect of De Pontes' storytelling. For De Pontes, the cast had to have a direct connection and bond with Africa; all three main characters have Nigerian ancestry. De Pontes describes the importance of casting as her primary concern once she wrote the script. She said, "If the casting is wrong, you feel it through the whole film"(De Pontes 2022).

Etana is a short film focusing on female child soldiers, specifically the lead character (played by Vivian Nweze), as she seeks freedom from a child soldier camp. In an interview after receiving the Horizon Award, De Pontes explained, "I aim to tell female and African stories that impact how people think about our approach to each other and our world and that support my ambition to create films with diverse and inclusive voices" (Welk 2021). Cultural appropriation was of great concern to De Pontes as a white South African. She called on friends in South Africa who were black to ask their opinion if she had the agency to tell this story. "Their consistent advice was that I must be truthful to the story; come from a place of the character's perspective, not from my own as a director" (De Pontes 2022).

Faultless casting was imperative for truth-telling, and all three main characters elicited emotion and character development that made this film a standout. The film won the Horizon Award for Emerging Female Directors in 2021. This award was never De Pontes' goal but gave credence to her casting, directing, and script decisions. No one found the recognition and its significance to the power of her film more profound than

De Pontes. As an aside, while funding is not a significant discussion in this thesis, part of the funding came from a personal accident De Pontes experienced while at Chapman. She chose to invest her insurance award into the production rather than save it for the future, thereby symbolically turning her pain into a greater good. As with Single, De Pontes' commitment to this project was far beyond the ego or financial gain, but a calling deep within her to make a difference for child soldiers. De Pontes' film comes from the viewpoint of the child soldier in the liminal moment of choosing freedom over obedience, knowing the decision would kill Etana on a human level. However, in De Pontes' depiction the spirit yearns to be free and when we sacrifice our life, we can gain freedom in those moments.

Etana's significance in the child soldier genre lies in its ability to tell a fictional account of children in war and show the lack of options they experience. A story told so powerfully revealing the dismal and appalling choices a child far from home and family must make is essential to view. How can those who advocate for child soldiers begin to leverage this medium to create awareness and change?

A Common Message from Both Directors

Single and De Pontes talked about an internal call to make their film the only option and path for each of them. One was a documentary over three years filmed by Single with one camera, and the other was a student project that all told her would be difficult to accomplish. The path of both films and both filmmakers meet at the crossroads of meaning and fulfillment of purpose. Both had a high intention to portray an honest and balanced story of a child soldier's journey while having the mettle to bring their inner calling and yearning to film.

How can these types of films have an impact in a way that changes the trajectory of child soldiers? Both directors are open to creating greater awareness about the fate of child soldiers, yet with no intentional call to action. Many people become activists or involved in world issues because they want to make a difference for others. Though not all have the bandwidth, ability, or resources, those who do need tools. Those tools help them find their way to way to life's meaning as described in Victor Frankl's work. Self-actualization and advocacy can peacefully co-exist when art meets science, and both come from a place of desire to create a better world. The following analysis will seek to understand from a thematic lens what is evident in both films that unifies their impact and can create a better world through cinema.

Table 2. Director Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme	Subtheme	Subtheme
Set and Setting	Mind	Spirit	Archetypes
	Ideology	War	Mother
Fear and Freedom	Mind	Body	Spirit
Signifiers and Signified	Clouds	Colors	Dreams

Summary of Themes and Subthemes from Director's interviews.

Theme 1: Set and Setting

"Turn on, tune in, drop out." (Timothy Leary 1920 – 1996)

Timothy Leary, PhD, is universally associated with this phrase, and his dissident philosophies were a factor in his removal from Harvard's psychology department in 1963 (Harvard, n.d.). In his book, *The Psychedelic Experience A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Leary 2007), Leary begins his defense and argument for the use of psychedelic drugs by explaining their ability to create a transcendent experience for the user. The appropriate set and setting were the two requirements he outlined as necessary to have a transcendent experience with psychedelics. He defined set and setting this way:

The nature of the experience depends almost entirely on set and setting. Set denotes the preparation of the individual, including his personality structure and mood at the time. Setting is physical – the weather, the room's atmosphere, the social feelings of persons present towards one another, and cultural-prevailing views of what is real. (Leary 2007, 3)

Summarizing Leary's view for this analysis the set is what the person brings to the experience as a unique individual. The setting is the situation in which they are placed and how they react to events within that setting.

How does the first level of CR, the empirical level defined as the realm of events as we see them, play into the set and setting of these two films through their message and structure? In creating these films, set and setting were critical to interpret the emotions and reflections of the characters and interpret for the viewer their emotions and how the film affected them personally.

Subthemes Set: Mind, Spirit, Archetypes

Single specifically used the term "set and setting" in the interview (Single 2022). In our discussion, he said he tried to be present and "got lucky" to be in the right place at the right time. When I pressed him to explain what he meant by "luck," he intuitively recognized that his luck was not luck at all. His mindset was to create a quiet presence of one man and his camera so that he would not overwhelm the children he was filming as they spoke to the counselor about their loss and confusion on how to live free now that their bodies were no longer in bondage. Without hesitation, he knew those moments before him, which he beautifully captured on film from an internal alignment of his mind, body, and spirit. In the same way, as his mindset was open, the three children he primarily follows through the film allowed their thoughts to consider the possibility of healing while continuing to feel the loss through what they experienced. In one scene, the LRA's chief priest, Abonga came to the camp. He was seeking forgiveness from the children for his mistreatment of them. He calls out with apparent affection and lack of awareness of the effect on Akulu, the young girl featured in the film as the child he forced to become his wife and endure extreme sexual trauma. Single filmed Akulu as Abonga spoke to her in front of the other children. Abonga boldly calls Akulu his wife; her eyes show no emotion, leaving the audience to suffer for her. Abonga talked to the children about being broken and asked for forgiveness from them (which the children would not give). After the event, the counselor Jane asked Akulu how she felt after listening to Abonga: "My heart is weak on the subject." As Akulu quietly wept, Jane said, "We do appreciate what lies within you. We share in your pain and are very sad. For us, the most vital thing is that you return" (Single 2010 0:56:46 - 0:57:27). Single's film

demonstrates capturing on film, with few words, the mindset of victims like Akulu. The truth of experience is fundamental in telling a message without judgment but as a witness to what they experience. All children have a perspective that changes through their life circumstances. Kidnapping children, forcing them to watch, and behave violently, breaks their spirit. Their way back to healing, to return, as Jane put it so kindly to Akulu, can depend on resources offered to children after the crimes committed against them.

Likewise, in De Pontes' film, she sought to characterize the mindset of the three main characters. Etana, the main character in the film as a teenage female soldier; Yaya, a much younger female child soldier emotionally attached to Etana, and the camp commander, Nafisa, who brutally runs the camp of children situated in a desert. Nafisa eventually loses control of Etana as Etana realizes Nafisa stole her as a young girl. In this example, as the characters play against one another in the story, as Etana becomes more deeply aware of the truth of her reality, she chooses to make deadly decisions against Nafisa's orders. The story begins to change after Etana's flashback of being abducted.

In Nafisa's tent, this conversation is led by Nafisa:

Look, when I found you out there all these years ago, I gave you purpose. I gave you life. If you trained her (Yaya) well enough, she'll be fine. This group will be fine. I can feel it. This time will be different. Our ancestors are on our side.

After a pause Etana quietly says, "Stole." "Eh?" replies Nafisa. "When you stole me," replies Etana. (De Pontes 2020 0:06:54 – 0:07:32)

Again, the set of the mind changes the story's arc, and the consequences are deadly for both Etana and Yaya. However, freedom is portrayed through their death when the characters break through their mental fear and bodily imprisonment. In *Children of War* and *Etana*, this change in belief from the fear they experienced to a form of freedom and healing is the message in both movies. De Pontes eloquently said her overarching theme

was to demonstrate, "Fear holds you captive, and courage sets you free" (De Pontes 2022). Both filmmakers capture the spirit of the children in their most courageous and liminal moments of freedom.

The final observation on set is a discussion of archetypes in storytelling. Good versus bad, right versus wrong, strong versus weak, holy versus evil, perpetrator versus victim. Each director avoided these relational dialectics by creating humanity in each character. In *Children of War*, Single could have made the children the ultimate innocent victims without responsibility for their actions whose lives would be restored through rehabilitation. Instead, he chose to film them talking to their counselors, who only spoke of hope, forgiveness, and healing. In other scenes, the children met to witness each other's similar but unique stories. While many children said that forgiveness of those who hurt them was the only way, some children were unfavorable to forgiveness for all. In those moments, the children spoke of their loss of an alternative life of opportunity. As stated by Nyero when the children were gathered discussing forgiveness:

You were all abducted very young. You couldn't even write. You're innocent and should be forgiven. But let me tell you, I don't speak in favor of the rebel leaders because I too, was abducted when I was very young. My own brother was also abducted and didn't survive. How can I forgive someone who has ruined my whole life? I could've gone far in school. Instead, I returned with a bullet in my leg. I will never forgive somebody who wronged me so much. (Single 2010 00:46:44 – 00:47:20)

In *Etana*, De Pontes reported from several screenings of the film Etana's violent killing of a large beetle in a scene shocked the audiences compared to the kind nature she possessed evident in her treatment of Yaya (De Pontes 2022). This image signified the change in Etana's mindset and fallibility without ever saying so. Not only do these decisions to use multiple archetypes in movies about child soldiers matter, but because these are children, the tendency is they must only be pure and innocent, or if they become

soldiers, they are victims or evil perpetrators. The children's imperfect nature is evident, and they become more relatable as human beings. This balanced view of what it means to be fallible allows the audience to care deeper about their human condition, not just their role in the story told through the lens. Balanced views and introspection can lead viewers to a vital self-discovery, further deepening their awareness and possible ability to act.

Subthemes Setting: Ideology, War, Mother

Setting, the physical and social environment is paramount to an experience.

Children of War was in the setting of a peaceful camp in comparison to the violence, war, and theft of the innocence of children who are now seeking safety and peace. In 1988, an anti-government movement was formed to combat a genocide of the Acholi tribe in Northern Uganda. Uganda's President Yoweri's power was unchecked according to those in the north, and Alice Lakwena began a religious movement of prayer called the Holy Spirit Movement. With the exile of Lakwena, Joseph Kony's mark on the organization and branding of the movement was to rename it the LRA. In the beginning, those in Northern Uganda gave Kony their support. When Kony lost power and standing among the Acholi, he began to intensify the violence and abduct the local children as soldiers without fear of impunity (Dougan 2016). Abonga was the chief priest at the beginning when Lakwena formed the group in the peace movement and soon joined Kony as a perpetrator of crimes against children.

Single chose this setting to explain how these atrocities against children can exist. A strict ideology alone, like religion, can subvert the moral framework. Kony used the "Lord" in LRA to create the set of a spiritual battle. That justification for him became more significant than the human condition; this battle could be won with the backing and

protection of the Lord. Though untrue, his use of faith for his declaration of the ultimate good also was a weapon in his hands against the children to hold them captive. Single spoke about the setting of war,

And that to me, is one of the central problems of this story ultimately, the roots of war in general. It seems like some sort of ideology fuels most wars. And how that can constrict our imaginations and set us down a path. It comes down to belief, you know, when you believe in something, you have no space for you're not curious anymore about the mystery of life, about the unknown. And that can be dangerous. (Single 2022)

Single sought to make a timeless film, and the physical setting transcended geography, though the setting is in Uganda. Single's goal was to overcome the pigeonholing of an African country, the otherness described by Săid, as much as possible, as described in the following two themes. Likewise, the rebel group in *Etana* is a fictional group called the IAF. The scene was a desert where a small band of child rebel fighters led by the female commander Nafisa was preparing to battle with the unnamed enemy. There is no mention of a specific country or location. Both directors sought not to constrict the viewer's imagination by using the country's setting and reputation as a theme.

Creating scenes by balancing images was equally important to both directors. In *Etana*, the mother figure was present in both Nafisa to Etana, and Etana to Yaya. There was no blood relation between the characters and this matriarchal metaphor as setting brought an expected connection of the characters to the expectations of the audience. In the quote above, when Nafisa tells Etana she found her and gave her purpose and meaning, her voice is tender, as a mothers would be. She places herself in the role of a protector of Etana. Etana demonstrates the role of a mother when she gently tells Yaya a fable to put her to sleep. In *Children of War*, the setting of the mother also informed the deeply personal discussions held between the counselors and the children. These

children's stories came to light through their interactions with the counselors, who tenderly encouraged the children, acknowledged their pain, and told them hope and healing were possible. Jane, to create a relationship with the girl Akulu at her first intake meeting, stated as she looked at Akulu:

I was told a young girl has arrived, and that she looks like my daughter. So, I hope we can be open with each other. You can see some names on the wall there. ("I can see, states Akulu) ...Do you see my name, Jane? That means you're my daughter, okay? Relax and don't worry. (Single 2010 00:13:20 – 00:13:48)

As Akulu is rescued, she must begin the most challenging healing process in the caring and compassionate hands of Jane, who seeks to be a refuge from the pain Akulu has experienced. This example clearly shows the setting of the mother/daughter relationship, which will be vital in their journey together. Importantly, this dialogue was not created for the film; it is the experience and desire of the counselor Jane to reach beyond the role that she plays for Akulu as a mother figure who believes in her, giving Akulu the courage to heal herself.

Summary of Set and Setting

Character development for a fictional film and the director's decision in a documentary to tell a fair and revealing story creates events as experienced and interpreted by the creator and the audience. The movement captured or created, the timeless and universal imagery, and the balanced depiction of the subject, all serve as a springboard for discussing the next steps when a “wicked problem” needs attention. This is the essence of the empirical dimension of CR, creating a message about a complex issue as challenging to observe as child soldiers. It requires skilled, thoughtful creators whose first choice is not to harm real or imagined characters to satisfy the audience's

gratuitous pleasure or the director's wishes. Single knew this from his experience before filming *Children of War*. As a young white South African, DePontes sought clarification and permission from people she trusted who asked her to tell a true story through *Etana*, not one only meant to entertain the audience.

Theme 2: Fear and Freedom

"I can say my spirit is free but living free takes a lot of practice." (Single 2010, 0:49:00 – 0:50:00)

Both films seek to create a balanced profile of characters, real and created, whether or not they change throughout the story. While CR refers to the level of reality that occurs whether or not it is observed, in film the image created becomes the real thing, whether it is observed or not. Fear and freedom, the actual manifestations of CR, are not filtered by human experience but express a different meaning than experience and are defined and illustrated through these two films. Both filmmakers intend to tell personal stories that balance these two emotions, showing both fear and freedom for children through their portrayals of static and dynamic character development.

Static and Dynamic Characters

In storytelling, a static character's value is to remain constant and unchanging throughout the story. Static characters act as a solid surface onto which other characters are more clearly seen, as in a sculpture in relief against its solid surface. The solid surface from which the art 'rises' creates a more robust image of what it reflects. In storytelling, static characters are that solid surface that can help advance the plot, though the attention is not directly on them. They are in the background and serve a purpose while serving (or

not) as a stereotype. In contrast, they may reflect the change in the main character, provide comic relief to a scene, or serve the main characters as they evolve in a story. Static is unmoving; that is their role to remain unmoved by circumstances but add to the storyline in a way the audience would expect them to act. A dynamic character is one whose character changes through the story's plot and conflicts. Characters can change in many ways. They might evolve in their outlook on life, develop new beliefs or come to terms with something difficult, and can be on their own hero's journey. Dynamic characters keep the audience's attention as they change throughout the story. (Glatch 2021). Whether a dynamic character changes for better or worse, their changes come from the story's plot, and the audience can conclude what caused those changes.

Both static and dynamic characters are depicted in *Etana* and *Children of War*. Using these character types deepens the audience's understanding of both films. In *Etana*, the characters of Etana, Yaya, and Nafisa change through the plot. Their behavior and reactions caused significant changes, reflected in the deaths of Etana and Yaya. Nafisa, who is dynamic throughout the film, remains brutal. Her change occurred at the end when she shot Etana, the girl she appeared to care for the most deeply and to whom Nafisa had earlier spoken to as the one she saved and gave life and purpose. The static characters were literally in the background and were the band of child soldiers who watched all of the events unfolding and did nothing to stop Nafisa from killing Yaya or Etana. Their presence was striking in that they never interfered with Nafisa's violence. In *Children of War*, Single chose the dynamic character development primarily through the three children, Polycap, Nyero, and Akulu. The viewer witnessed their journey at the camp in a linear narrative, thereby allowing the viewer to see their change. In Nyero's case, near the

film's end, he is reuniting with his family, who had long thought him dead. Single sought to portray the LRA, Kony, and Abonga as dynamic by showing old footage of their earliest beginnings of what appeared to be religious good in both their cause and their person. As they descended into evil through the killing and abduction of children, the stark change created balance for even the worst actors in this real-life conflict.

Counselors are portrayed as static figures. These counselors do not change throughout the story, exhibiting what Glatch describes as static character traits. Their kindness, patience, insight, compassion, and warmth were consistent. This background of characters in the film created an underpinning of hope and faith that healing was possible in what could be seen as an impossible situation.

The importance of telling these misery child soldier media stories with dynamic and static characters gives the viewer hope to believe solutions are possible and to be able to understand the film's journey through the characters. Furthermore, if a viewer can witness those experiences through the film's framework their belief that change can occur becomes possible.

Subthemes Fear: Mind, Body, Spirit

Jane to Akulu, "Do you still fear being abducted?" Akulu replies, "If they find me, they'll abduct me." Jane replies, "You still have fear?" Akulu quietly responds, "Yes." (Single 2010 0:38:12 – 0:38:24)

In both films, fear was evident through a variety of methods. Most scenes of the three children featured in *Children of War* took place at the Centre, and conversations reflect the fear of their memories and what could happen to them in the future. Single used archival news footage to present the history of the LRA, Kony, and Abonga. In the beginning, Kony stood up to the Ugandan president seeking to restore honor and end the

atrocities committed against his ethnic tribe, the Acholi people (Craine, n.d.). Interviews with early followers of Kony in the film said Kony had healed them physically through spiritual means. Northern Ugandans at first viewed Kony as peaceful, deeply religious, and courageous. But as Kony descended into an abductor of children to serve in the LRA, his violence affected the three primary children in the film, Nyero, Akulu, and Polycap. They at first hesitated to talk to a counselor. They revealed their fear in discussing their backgrounds, but as the counselors gained their trust, they began to tell their stories. In heart-wrenching scenes with their counselors, the children described what had happened to them before being at the Centre and the fear that came through the filming of their faces and their words, believing they would be killed if weak, or evil spirits would kill them if they tried to escape. It is not difficult to imagine this scenario, which was not only reflected as evil through the religious ideology of evil spirits but also described how the rebels commanded children to kill other children.

Controlling a person's body through mental fear is understood through psychosocial work discussing the brain's scientific neural routes. *In Healing Invisible Wounds*, Richard Mollica describes two pathways of how the brain processes traumatic events. One pathway of the brain structure, the cortex, stores our awareness of events as they are happening. The cortical pathway is where the brain retains facts and events as they are happening and critically assesses their meaning. It is also where memories and learning are stored. But when an event evokes fear and trauma, the brain will bypass the cortex and those memories become retained in the amygdala, the neural portion of the brain that processes fear and its associated memories, which continue to replay over and over in a person's lifetime. The amygdala is where reliving a traumatic event, described

as PTSD, occurs. In Mollica's work, he prescribes a clinical approach to avoid the amygdala and allow the patient to experience the event after it occurs, but this time through the cortex, assigning new meaning to the events. Mollica believes self-healing is possible if the mind can construct new meaning for a violent event (Mollica 2009). This self-healing happens when counselors like the ones shown in *Children of War* work with the children. If their work is successful and the children can be courageous in working through their fear and memories, they will gain the ability to process their trauma and life events with a new understanding of their power to create change within themselves.

While *Etana* is fictional, the fears of the children and Nafisa are also evident. The children in the camp, and the commander Nafisa, were from the opposite ends of the same power structure. Both were afraid for different reasons and at different moments. There appeared to be no chance for the cortex to evaluate the events as they were happening. The movie opens with a scene of Etana looking down at the barrel of a gun at Yaya. As the scene develops, Nafisa orders Etana to shoot Yaya. This scene and action of Nafisa comes after Etana announces that she knows she has been stolen. In that pivotal scene, after Etana's declaration, Nafisa changed in demeanor, and fear could be described on her face that the one she held most dear in the camp, Etana, no longer looked at her the same way.

The fear that created trauma for the *Children of War* is the same that Nafisa as the commander, used in *Etana* throughout the film. It is evident that courage could only find its way through death by choice of Etana. The pervasiveness of fear at high and constant levels creates a no-win situation for a child soldier.

Subthemes Freedom: Mind, Body, Spirit

Many who suffer trauma do not recover. M'bwirandumva (translated as Speak, I'm Listening) in Kigali, Rwanda, has served as a center for women traumatized by the Rwandan Genocide Against Tutsi in 1994. These women suffered some of the most horrific atrocities perpetrated on women during the war. Raped and beaten multiple times, witnessing horrific violence and death of their children and loved ones, physically mutilated, and permanently scarred, these women survive but live with the greatest of trauma. M'bwirandumva (Karamaga, n.d.) serves as a haven and strives to help the women turn their fear into freedom of spirit and mind by witnessing their stories and rehabilitation, not dissimilar to the Centre in *Children of War*. These moments of turning fear into freedom were evident in both films through their characters and plots. Why is it so important to talk about freedom in this subtheme? The ability to change one's circumstances is not guaranteed or sought by all. Again, Mollica reminds the reader that there is no formula for predicting who will be able to act courageously to recover from violence and find freedom within (Mollica 2009). While some can tap into their courage, others need a counselor's support. Children who cannot break free from the combatant situation cannot be judged because their decision is not understandable from a rational point of view. The indoctrination that goes into creating these child soldiers is physical punishment and abuse, use of drugs, fear of spiritual punishment if they disobey, and a lack of choices and where to go if they seek freedom. In *Etana*, the static characters of the children in the camp beyond Etana and Yaya serve as victims and bear witness yet remain compliant to Nafisa's commands. No judgment is made on these children for their

lack of action to stop the situation from unfolding. No explanation was necessary for the fear Nafisa continually used as she retaliated violently against all who challenged her.

Changing a situation from fear to freedom can occur physically or emotionally. In *Etana*, physical freedom was impossible because escape was not signaled as possible. The ongoing fear established by Commander Nafisa allowed one solution only for Etana to find freedom: death. Transformation of fear to freedom was demonstrated in *Etana* in the mystical sense at the end of the movie. Early in the film, the protective relationship Etana exhibited toward Yaya was signified through a fable Etana told Yaya. As the fable progressed, the only freedom available to the boy in the story was death. And in the end, that became the fate and freedom of Etana as well. The parallel between the fable and Etana's death only becomes evident when Etana dies. De Pontes described freedom through death when a person finds themselves in a wasteland with no way out except physical death to free their spirit.

Another form of freedom came through this film, though not in its fictional form but through the actress Vivian Nweze, who played Etana. While De Pontes knew she was of African descent, midway through filming, Nweze told De Pontes her father had been a child soldier in the Nigerian-Biafran War, which waged from 1967 – 1970, from the ages of 12-15. Nweze was very open about the generational trauma she had experienced and going through therapy with her father. She described understanding her father's perspective more clearly after filming *Etana*. A film can create a kind of freedom for those like Nweze, who chose to put herself in service to the greater good of the film. Her father was able to see the film before he passed. Nweze said not only did she channel what she had heard from her father into the character, but De Pontes was aware the

filming took its toll on Nweze, yet Nweze wanted it no other way. De Pontes saw this as the universe coming together to tell an authentic story (story told with permission from Vivian Nweze) (De Pontes 2022). Just as the actress experienced internal freedom, freedom can also be through an intentional healing setting, as was symbolized in *Children of War*. What a profound example of the unintended positive consequence of De Pontes' desire to tell a fictional story and change the life of an actor for the better. A film created can have many unintended positive consequences such as the actress Vivian Nweze experienced.

The freedom the children seek in *Children of War* was physically created when they came to the Centre. The freedom of their minds to go on depended heavily on their ability to become free from their fears, trauma, and memories through rehabilitation at the Centre. Single sought to show the action of the children to seek freedom through healing in their interactions with the counselors and the stories they told. Just as the children's minds were filled with images and memories of horror, the counselor's words sought to bring new meaning to their experiences to create different neural pathways, as described in Mollica's work. The goal of forming new declarative memory pathways to elicit rational thoughts about the traumatic situation was the effort of the counselors and therapists. The counselor, Jane, works with compassion to help Akulu through her trauma, telling Akulu she wants her to return, metaphorically speaking of the return to who she was before her capture and loss of innocence. The return of Akulu is the mental return to freedom, the return experienced in Akulu that gives her awareness to know she is free from the past and does not need to return to it in the future.

This road to healing is fragile and precarious. The courage of these counselors to meet these children where they are, give them hope, and help them find freedom within speaks to the best in humanity. Single choosing to tell this part of Akulu's journey presents his belief that healing is possible. Nyero speaks up to Abonga at the Centre, and freedom grows in him as he speaks the truth to this criminal and takes agency over his life. At the film's end, Nyero reunites with his family in the middle of a field. Single demonstrates through an emotional scene that healing and reconciliation are possible, and Nyero's journey will continue.

Summary of Fear and Freedom

While fear and freedom do not necessarily exist on a continuum, their relation to each other incorporates mind, body, and spirit subthemes. Fear occurs when a child's abduction begins, and that fear ignites trauma. Fear registers through physical capture, mind control, physical harm, and permanent injuries. Fear is losing hope of what could be if circumstances had been different. Fear is created when children have to kill, witness, and cause violence and harm to another. Freedom is physical and mental, and one does not ensure the other. Both directors desired to communicate freedom: physical, spiritual, and mental.

We can seek to change our thoughts about what is possible. In our awareness, we can change the story of a child who does not need to lose their freedom and know they can overcome unimaginable fears. This message is essential for humanity and vital to consider when addressing the issue of child soldiers and how we tell their stories. The balance between these ideas is critical; one matters more when compared to the other. Fear that a child should never face this circumstance gives us a call to action; the freedom

to decide to help them recover as they help themselves and keep future generations from experiencing the same fate gives us meaning. Marian De Pontes summarized it this way, "Fear holds you captive, but courage sets you free"(De Pontes 2022). It is valid for those traumatized by war and true for activists seeking to end their suffering.

Theme 3: Signifiers and Signified

Finally, the real level of CR seeks to explain signifiers and signified in both films and what they can represent for the viewer and the director's intent and purpose of their use. Abductive reasoning is a way to interpret the signifiers and signified in these films that deepen the film's structure and meaning subtly and directly to the audience. A signifier represents the semiotics of a film. Semiotics comes from the Greek word 'semeion,' which means sign. In filmmaking, there is a fusion of physical reality and the imaginary. The physical can be represented with emotion or imagery. Signifiers become the basis for a visual narrative in a film. No two voices are the same. How a director places images on the screen, what they signify as vital to the story, and how the film creates their signifiers are unique to the filmmaker. Filmmakers seek to place physical signifiers that eventually transform on screen into what the director is trying to illuminate. Three types of signs are used. First, icons resemble what they are meant to signify, like a photo or statue that the viewer can see. Second, index signifiers that have a causal connection, like smoke to fire, which viewers must define for themselves. Finally symbol signifiers may have a conventional meaning, such as a flag, that the viewer must learn about to understand clearly (McManus, n.d.). These signs become easier to understand after viewing an entire film to make the filmmaker's message implicit. The

signified is the meaning intended and received from the filmmaker's use of their signifiers. In this section, signifiers and signified are illustrated from the perspective of both directors.

Subthemes Signifiers: Clouds, Colors, Dreams

Both films incorporated signifiers in beautiful and subtle ways. Single explained that the filming of the movement of clouds, the rushing waters, the sunrises and sunsets, and the animals on the land and in the water, all represented human emotions that constantly change and move; they are symbolic of life itself. Clouds and colors as subthemes represented signs that were both icons and symbols. The impermanence of nature and its inability to stay in one place was part of Single's reason for using these signs as symbols. Single's perspective draws from Buddhist teachings and the Law of Impermanence. According to the teachings of the Buddha, the law of impermanence states that all is impermanent. To find peace in life is to understand this principle.

Everything is subject to change and alteration in the world. There is nothing that is fixed and permanent. Existence is afflux, and a continuous becoming. Life is like a river. It is a progressive moment, a successive series of different moments, joining together to give the impression of one continuous flow. It moves from cause to cause, effect to effect, one point to another, one state of existence to another, giving an outward impression that it is one continuous and unified movement, whereas in reality it is not. (Singh 2012, 67)

While Single showed the suffering of the children as they retold their stories to their counselors, his belief and focus on their healing was an equally important aspect of their journey. He does not believe their pain will stay the same. He believes healing is possible explained by the principle of impermanence as a part of his philosophy of life,

which directly influenced his perspective on the storytelling of the children's journey (Single 2022).

De Pontes' backdrop of the endless sky, mountains, and desert setting as index signifiers, symbolizes any camp outpost with no escape possible. There was no indication of a specific country, though all the actors were dark-skinned, leading some to see this set on the African continent. Not located near anything but a flat body of water with no movement, and on the far side mountains that could not be reached, these scenes were one for the audience's interpretation that held no joy or beauty, just a backdrop to create no positive emotion. Another effective signifier in *Etana* of water was human sweat as a symbol of fear. In the opening scene, the audience looks directly into the gun barrel with sweat dripping. As the scenes pan up to the face of Etana, sweat does not represent the heat but a terrifying moment of fear that would come back later in the film and find a resolution. The opening scene set the tone of pain and fear, which would be realized further into the film.

Both directors made primary use of color in their films. While the world is not black and white, the colors seen or absent are critical to the film's cinematography and affect the viewer. The effect may be emotional if a color evokes a personal emotion, is used to denote a repeated theme, or reminds us of a scene similar in color, all without our awareness. Color builds harmony or tension in a scene or the entire mood of a film. Colors can draw focus to important details, show changes or arcs in a story, and elicit psychological reactions (Risk 2021).

The lighting of the scenes also plays into the color chosen and adds to the story. Both films were low-key lit, representing a more subdued light. High-key lighting is often used to create a cheerful scene. Low-key lighting can effectively add to a film's drama and emotional moments (Sikov 2020). Both filmmakers' choice of color and lighting spoke to the intent of emotion they wanted to elicit from the viewer. Color and lighting were intentional choices. They used color and monochrome (shades of gray in *Children of War*, and shades of orange in *Etana*) in different ways to create their scenes, which could eliminate or illuminate ideas for their audience. Single intentionally filmed *Children of War* in monochrome to eliminate index and symbol signifiers of Africa. As he reflected,

We all seem to know the images of Africa: the orange dirt, savanna, sunset. Africa has a particular light and color that's unique to that geography. And so that immediately places us in a foreign land. That is why we may have prejudices about or preconceptions about what it is. And so, I wanted to try to escape that. One way was by stripping out the colors. The clothes of many African cultures are very colorful and vibrant. I wanted to get away from those images. I want to strip that all down, just make it raw human faces, black and white, and gray. And so those don't become a cultural patterning that blocks us from having a more direct experience with what's happening with these humans, other fellow humans. (Single 2022)

In *Etana*, De Pontes chose to use color and light as index and symbol directly through her decision and use of both in the film. While most scenes were dry and dusty, there were exceptions, and De Pontes used color in the following way:

There was this green versus red side of things: We have the green and the lush and the hope of the beetle. And then we had the red, which they have on their guns because the guns are the things that are holding them captive, like they can't escape who they are because they're with their guns. But also like, overall, the tonal arc of it, it goes from an orange film. And as we descend into red, we're descending into fear more and more with every scene. So, it ends up being a very red film, at that end scene where Nafisa shoots Etana in the lake. And then we kind of come into a

place of coolness, where she's finally in a place of tranquility. (De Pontes 2022)

Using color and associated lighting as signifiers for each filmmaker was effective because it was intentional. The directors wanted to create signifiers that connected with their audiences beyond the stories they were telling through how the audience saw their characters and understood the emotions created through colors and lighting. Color and lighting can be a way to tell a story from the anthropologist's view to draw attention to certain conditions, cultural aspects, and ideas they want to highlight. While no anthropologist influenced either film, both directors succeeded in creating a balanced story to tell by using color (or lack of) and the lighting of the scenes, consciously knowing their effect on the viewer. It is techniques like the use of color which will create a lasting memory in the viewer and create unforgettable images.

Another effective use of the signifier is in *Etana*, which has an extended sequence when Etana tells Yaya a fable in the middle of the night. The fables she tells use the signifiers of icons, indexes, and symbols. The fable is in animation and represents the great creator Nhalik and a boy child who attempted to swim in the water to escape the life he could no longer bear. As the boy tries to swim to the other shore, he fails and sinks. Just as the boy fails, at the end of the film Etana sinks into the water similarly. The symbols in this fable were potent after they were considered in totality to the film's message and Etana's final swim to escape the camp. At times, signifiers are not evident in their moment, but they bring profound awareness to a universal concept in reflection. In this instance, it is the struggle of the boy in the fable and Etana to free themselves from an unbearable life.

Dreams are another powerful signifier and product of trauma that adults and children go through after a violent event (Mollica 2009). In *Children of War*, the subtheme of dreams was told through the children recounting their dreams to the counselors and reliving the horror of what they had seen and done. One of the ways the counselors tried to affect the traumatic dreams of the children was through religious exorcism. Whether it was healing or not, it was an attempt to find ways for the children to deal with reoccurring images and nightmares which would not fade. In *Etana* it was after Etana woke from a dream that she realized Nafisa had stolen her as a child. This trauma, relived in dream form changed the arc of the story and the decisions Etana would make from that moment forward.

Summary of Signifiers and Signified

Films rich in signs in the form of icons, indexes, and symbols create a layered and complex message. Within those layers and complexity, meaning is made for the viewer and reveals the filmmaker's perspective. Both filmmakers exhibited such care and concern for their film and its subjects, which they described in profound and personal ways in the opening section of this chapter. This level of responsibility to create messages that exhibit hope, heartache, love, loss, truth, and respect, demonstrated many times and in multiple ways films to support child soldiers, can create another tool to educate others unaware of this issue.

Summary of Interviews

Both directors sought to tell a story, not just of terror and loss, but of hope and healing. A significant result of comparing these two interviews and the subthemes is the clear awareness that the forces within each individual and their mental framework create the strongest imprisonment or freedom of the soul. Hope is possible to break through internal struggles and the battle to defeat inner demons, as illustrated in both *Children of War* and *Etana*.

Films hold our gaze, our attention and reach into our hearts. In their different ways, these two films did all three. What they share in their stories has as much to do with the director's intent and artistry as the films' themes. The analysis of the director's interviews gives essential insight into what is possible by creators who choose to create films that both directors described as coming through them, not from them. While there is no silver bullet (ironically), we lose hope only when we choose to look away. Media anthropologists who look closely at films like *Children of War* and *Etana* will immediately identify why they are so powerful.

Each of these films tells a story about a culture or event through characters, settings, and the characters' interactions, without judgment and only as witnesses. Both directors crafted sound and carefully edited films which exhibited a view of the culture from different perspectives and wanted to bring the issue to the public's awareness. From the science of this perspective, that might be enough. But if choosing to be an activist, filmmakers might create a significant impact beyond sanctions, laws, discussions, and

prosecutions. The power of film is that the value will not be limited to behind closed-door conversations by experts and advocates only. Shining a light on this “wicked problem” through well-developed films with excellent storytelling could create more significant action and a demand for solutions. Creators are among us to make these films a reality.

Chapter VII.

Analysis: One Focus Group, One Film, Three Themes

When we had completed cooking, I asked each boy what they had learned. They reflected on understanding food sanitation, what a different experience it had been to cook, how proud they were, what a wonderful day they had experienced, and their appreciation for Sara and me; in all, they were happy. The quietest of the boys shyly looked at me and said he wanted to become a cook from his experience. But did he or was that momentary inspiration? Was there a long-term change in the boys or just a moment to be remembered?



Figure 9. Focus Group and Film

Framework of Themes and Subthemes from Focus Group viewing Etana. Graphic created by Victoria H. Trabosh.

Participants

Study participants were required to be at least 21 years of age and to hold an undergraduate degree. This study participants live in the US, one in the European Union, and one in Asia. All reported a high level of comfort communicating in English. All stated they were willing to participate in a synchronous focus group at a reasonable hour in their location. Directly asked in the preliminary questionnaire, all participants indicated there were no cultural or social norms of concern and knew of the issue of child soldiers (See Appendix 1). Participants were recruited with permission from the International Institute of Coaching (IOC) group, of which I am also a member and fellow. The IOC is a Harvard Medical School Affiliate. The IOC is a not-for-profit organization seeking to bring science to coaching. As a member of this organization, I have found the conversations and scientific framework for coaching invaluable to my work.

The rationale for choosing this group came not only from the mission of the IOC, which intends to catalyze its members to make positive changes in themselves and others. It was through facilitated groups in which I have participated virtually for the last twenty-four months during the COVID lockdown with members of this community from around the world. I found participants to be thoughtful, respectful in facilitated conversations, and able to discuss with depth and clarity complex and sensitive topics and bring fresh perspectives and distinctive points of view.

Materials

Materials consisted of an initial Survey Monkey to reveal interest, background, and comfort level watching a film about child soldiers. More than six participants qualified, yet time zones for some participants were more than twelve hours apart,

precluding a reasonable time to include all those who wanted to participate. Demographic information is available in Appendix 2. The consent form discussed the research, background information about the film, possible scenes that might cause discomfort, and a request for their electronic signature to be a participant in the focus group. All participants signed the consent form via DocuSign.

While the focus group was aware of the film's title, none had access to the film and did not receive the list of questions before our meeting. The questions for the focus group were semi-structured. Fundamental questions and the overall question structure make up the interview on teachwithmovies.org and are incorporated into the discussion (RedClay and Frieden, n.d.). Questions adapted were general opening questions such as what they were thinking about as they watched the film and if there was anything they did not understand. Next, empathetic questions elicited comments on their interpretation of the film, e.g., did they believe there was a central problem in the story that transcended the characters? Was there an "ah-ha" moment, a scene that changed the outcome for the characters? The third section captured their reflections on themes, messages, and ideas they realized from watching the film, including if they felt a call to action to help end the use of child soldiers. Their reflections were thoughtful and varied.

Procedure

The focus group's oral consent began the digital recording on Zoom. The session started with a reminder that they could end their participation at any time and ask any additional questions. Each person referred to themselves and others by their renamed pseudonym to introduce themselves to the group (i.e., where they were calling in from, what they knew of child soldiers, and why they wanted to participate). Though some

participants knew each other through the IOC, their shared purpose and meaning were to observe, listen and contribute.

No assumptions were made that six focus group members speak for everyone who sees this film. Previous experiences matter, and none have ever been a child soldier or spoke of knowing any personally, but some did have greater knowledge of the subject by the countries from which they live or were born. Additionally, the reflections and perspectives of child soldier advocates and adult ex-combatants might have a different view of the film. While experts may be more knowledgeable than the general audience, the broad audience can create an impact and have valuable insight to share where they have not done so before.

Each theme, set and setting, fear and freedom, and signifiers and signified possess subthemes to understand the entire message of how the focus group processed *Etana* in the misery child soldier film genre. The themes described by them were mystical and concrete. Mystical in that reflections on death, violence, and hope are often more subjective than scientific were clearly shown and stated. Concrete ideas of what it means to have children in war were also spoken of clearly and succinctly (See Table 3). This strategy incorporates the focus group's perspective to tell their story, separate from the film analysis, and identifies if the message intended by the director is the message received by the focus group.

Table 3. Focus Group Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme	Subtheme	Subtheme
Set and Setting	Mind	Spirit	Archetypes
	Culture	Authority	Circumstances
Fear and Freedom	Mind	Body	Spirit
Signifiers and Signified	Guns	Water	Beetle

Summary of Themes and Subthemes from Focus Group

Theme 1: Set and Setting

Everyone carries a piece of the puzzle. Nobody comes into your life by mere coincidence. Trust your instincts. Do the unexpected. Find the others. (Anon. though often attributed to Timothy Leary)

Timothy Leary was interested in the interaction of the mind when influenced by psychedelics. He recognized that the personal alchemy created was unique in each user in their experience based on their personality and life experiences and the physical environment in which they placed themselves for the experience, i.e., set and setting. The set, for review, is the mental state a person brings to an experience, such as thought, mood, and expectation. The setting is the physical and social environment (Leary 2007). Set and setting were evident in the comments from the focus group (sans psychedelics) and mirrored their reflections based on experiences, personality, and previous awareness of child soldiers. How does the empirical level of CR, defined as the realm of events as we share them, play into the set and setting of the focus group through the structure of the

session and their interpretations of Etana? Again, in Leary's words:

The important thing to remember in organizing a group session is to have knowledge of and trust in the fellow voyagers. Trust in oneself and in one's companions is essential. If preparing for an experience with strangers, it is very important to share as much time and spaces as possible with them prior to the session. The participants should set collaborative goals and explore mutually their expectations and feelings and past experiences. (Leary 2007, 92)

While there was no specific prior time together for these particular voyagers, all were members of the IOC. All educated beyond high school self-identified as aware and interested in the subject of child soldiers and were known slightly or well by the others within the group through their IOC affiliation. They introduced themselves and described their interest and experience with child soldiers to one another, creating an initial awareness of the other's perspectives.

Subthemes Set: Mind, Spirit, Archetypes

Names are powerful things. They act as an identity marker and a kind of map, locating you in time and geography. More than that, they can be a compass. (Yoon 2016, 24)

It began with a pseudonym the focus members chose. Participants were requested to select the name they were to be called in the group and the thesis and not choose their first name or surname. Without prompting, and almost simultaneously in a clear expression of intention and unanimity, they renamed themselves without reference to gender: Angel, Grace, Hope, Joy, Love, and Shalu (a name of a beloved child). Both set of mind and spirit was evident in these choices. Though they were aware they would be watching a short film about child soldiers, there was a tone and spirit set between them without words or comments on the choices of the other's names. They showed care and respect for their fellow focus group members. They desired to find solutions to end the

use of child soldiers. While each member was positive yet somber before the viewing, the film changed their emotions and mindset, evidenced by their reflections. The three characters to whom the focus group referred by name:

Nafisa – female commander of the camp

Etana – teenage child soldier and most closely associated with Nafisa

Yaya – a young girl whom Etana is teaching the ways of being a soldier in the camp

Angel, self-described as "super empathetic," initially reflected after the film:

I started worrying about how I could handle it as a sensitive person. I was thinking about my own emotions and was really disgusted with what was happening. Even nauseated. But staying present, I was there in the moment and feeling it.

Though no others described themselves as did Angel, all reflected a deep empathetic reaction after viewing the film. Joy in their initial thoughts after considering the entire movie reflected,

I felt many different emotions. I tried to rationalize what the children could have been feeling and thinking on a daily basis, watching the film, it almost makes me really sad to know that there's fear I felt.

Grace looked for humanity in Nafisa when she delayed shooting Etana:

I think each character, especially Etana and Nafisa, is really sort of dealing with hope, hope trying to burst forward, hope trying to come forward.

Grace later described their perspective of a place known to be unworldly and magical in the 1939 film the *Wizard of Oz*:

The aha moment for me was when Nafisa killed Yaya. That signaled to me that this is a cycle, and there is no hope; there is no humanity...it was when the commander shot Yaya that I was like, Ah, okay, yeah, we haven't actually left the Land of Oz yet we're still in a situation where ideas, whispers of hope, are snuffed out.

Shalu described a sense of the inhumanity of what children are living through that was emotional to express as a parent themselves:

When Nafisa shot Yaya. I kind of knew there was a dark play. There's no light. So, I knew something from Nafisa's action; something's going to be very inhumane. For me, the aha moment was when I thought Etana had escaped. But then when something clicked, I said, No, she's gone. I think there's no way to window dress this; that's what I say. It's just a blanket no for a child to be in this situation.

Grace commented on the matriarchal structure that existed in the camp and the perspective they had of the three main characters, "Yaya as a young child, Etana as a teenager, and Nafisa as a mother." Grace was reminded by watching these characters unfold that "a kid does what a kid does." A child's behavior is universal, within set, an archetype we expect and can count on regardless of time in history, culture, or situation. This perspective gave light to Grace's belief of why Nafisa had to kill Yaya and then Etana:

They all sort of represent the same character at different points of their lives. They've all been the child, the teenager, the mother figure, the matriarch. Grace also reflected during the discussion. There's no point where the children potentially can stop being attached to each other; there's still that possibility potentially of an attachment so that Nafisa will continually have to kill. Nafisa has to continue to kill the spirit so that the kids stay in line and that they stay, on purpose. And that was sort of sobering to realize.

Shalu also reflected on this as they framed their understanding of the story as it unfolded:

Yaya brings in the culture of child. If you are a family, she brings the culture of childishness. Whereas Etana brings in the culture of rebellious teenager because she's going through all this. Questioning what to do, standing up to Nafisa, and then putting her gun down in a refusal to kill Yaya at Nafisa's command. I thought she was ready to take a bullet for Yaya at one point because she was expecting Nafisa to kill her instead. So, when Etana refused to kill Yaya, when she put the gun down, I noticed Etana's body language was straight and rigid as she stood up to Nafisa. So, for me, that culture was rebellious teenage culture.

The film has three scenes of a beautiful green, vibrant beetle: the first struggling on its back, the second climbing on Etana's finger as she observes it and then crushes it unexpectedly, and in the scene near the end when Etana rises from the water, the viewer can briefly glimpse it near her shoulder on her fatigues. The beetle's death scene deeply affected all member's mindsets. This deep and empathetic response and shock to the fate of the beetle is reflected in this series of themes and will be explored further in the following themes: Fear and Freedom, Signifiers and Signified. Shalu, reflecting on the beetle, described the mentality he developed from the scene: "When Etana crushed the beetle, I kind of said, well, that's where hope is destroyed."

Angel sought to find humanity in the characters as they find humanity within themselves:

You know, I was looking for humanity, yearning for it. Honestly, when Etana held the beetle in her hand, of course, the tension of both the fingers and the life that was in between her fingers, I was looking for humanity. I was looking for a reason to believe that life was still an option. And so that's sort of where my mind is now. I was yearning for it. I was trying to find humanity in it.... and so, I kept looking for it.

The set subtheme of spirit, how they were internally affected, is reflected in what the focus group participants thought this film meant in terms of a personal call to action.

At the end of the focus group, each was asked what call to action they felt regarding child soldiers after watching this film. A quote from each (in order of speaking):

GRACE. The one thing I would say is to care. I don't have that operationalized. Care that this is happening right now in the world. And that there are walls and ways of shielding this away from our vision. And that in some way, to Love's point again, you know, if we don't care if we blind ourselves, if we shut ourselves off from these atrocities, then we are in many ways, in some ways, complicit. That's where I'm at now.

HOPE. To look for it, to not be shielded. And to do that for others as well. As a first step.

SHALU. It's not much of a personal call for action other than support where possible, speak up. Where possible. This is romanticized. And not just in border-based wars, but there are wars being waged in minds in terms of faith. We ought to be careful where in a social context or something that's spoken, where children can be put into danger, we speak against that. That's one thing I always get.

JOY. When I spoke about awareness, for me, it is exploring opportunities where these situations are occurring. And yes, like I've heard so many others say, speak up, speak out, take action. So, for those in prison, it felt like the message for me was that death was the only freedom in this circumstance. While that isn't the intended message, the call to action will be speaking up, speaking out.

ANGEL. Is there any way to stop it and keep children from this reality? And what is the solution?

LOVE. How essential it is to be aware and intentional in how we speak for and live up to the values we believe to be true in building our society. How we interact with others daily and how those interactions add value to those we interact with in any way. And also, how we raise our children because they are also the future. And we are the future present; that means it's also important not only to watch out for our children but also how we build and rebuild and transform ourselves in ways that we can be an active change in society.

The participants were emotionally moved and thoughtful after watching this film.

As parents, they relate to these fictional characters as children and teenagers as they might have been in their youth, and the humanity they express as parents. The culture of how a family would behave was a lens that led to their despair that scenes like the ones in *Etana* should not be happening. They processed *Etana* visually, through the sound and kinesthetically in the emotional responses.

While they expressed wanting to do more to get children out of this situation, they could not articulate what that might be. Educated and empathetic viewers, this film did not act as leverage for their internal calling to end humanity's most basic example of its inhumanity, crimes against children. Their deeply felt views did not translate to action,

collectively or individually. They could not describe a concrete, measurable action they were personally willing to take as a next step.

Subthemes Setting: Culture, Authority, Circumstances

Anthropologists are faced with understanding how issues that affect humans, such as conflict, are understood within a context or culture. And as understanding becomes more pervasive, the value of that understanding significantly increases, not as a structure but as awareness. Then individual human behavior can then be influenced through a specific lenses of a film, resulting in a greater sense of what is possible, and what is actually occurring in other parts of the world. Child soldiers exist worldwide, and this sub-thematic setting of culture, authority, and circumstance helps accurately reflect a global issue within the film's framework. Grace reflects on the reality of these children in their environment through culture, finding that culture can quickly overshadow authority and circumstance:

Being of Nigerian descent, I was curious as to like, where are these people from? And I was trying to find the culture, maybe they're Nigerian, and maybe they're not. And as the movie progressed, I said, oh, it actually doesn't matter. You take the situation, and you put us in a situation. We are each of these characters. Because if you know anything about behavior, know situations this big and this strong, if there's a culture of anything, it's a culture of trauma and abuse. That's the culture. And so as far as what this says about humanity, it's like, yeah, we're not that different.

Shalu reflected on culture and authority from a business perspective:

I had different streams of thought regarding the movie. I think as Nafisa the commander was talking about the betrayal aspect of Yaya's behavior, it came to me that is what almost any institution or organization does to instill discipline. You bring in the other as a target, and when someone falls into the other as a target, they then become the victim. They are the test of faith or respect as used by another. An example Nafisa used to groom the children to what discipline will require.

The subthemes within setting of circumstances were reflected in Joy's remark, which began with them describing their own beliefs:

You know, I want good, hopefully, for everyone. I want to support where I can; I want to give, and so I would like to hope that most people feel that way. To see the movie, I guess is why I was so shaken at first. I was just like, wow, that is a reality, a horror, that I can't imagine living through or being a part of, and the only way out is death.

Angel saw this setting as a cycle of behavior toward children through the culture, authority in the camp, and circumstances for a child in this situation with no solution given:

I'm just thinking about the message that the director wanted to relay and the message that I received on the reality part of this story. No solutions were given if the purpose was stopping the use of a child soldier or the war on bringing children into it. So, it was disappointing knowing the killing continues, and this negative cycle continues.

Observing the culture and setting created in this film did not receive much analysis of how that culture and its authority figure and circumstances exist in the first place. When we allow circumstances as a fixed explanation of how the world works, the fallback belief is that no change is possible. As Grace mentioned above, the focus group members agreed if they could not help to create a solution to this problem, they were complicit.

Summary of Set and Setting

Set of mind and set of spirit are critical when looking at the issue of child soldiers. As the focus group reflected on their mindset, they also wondered about the mindset of the characters beyond the dialogue. They noticed the archetypes of child, teenager, mother, and matriarch. Those amplified archetypes created intense emotion in the conversation of the focus group to the fact that this film was about child soldiers. Forcing

children to become child soldiers was untenable to them, as evidenced in their reflections. Within that framework, many focus group members spoke of their emotional pain and loss of hope for the children. However, others reflected an undying belief that good will prevail. The child soldiers in this film were set in a desert with dark-skinned children. This focus group rose above any stereotype that blames a people's culture. They sought the possibility of humanity regardless of the circumstances. This fictional story left some feeling more despair though they knew these characters did not represent real people but archetypes who needed rescuing. *Etana* tells a complex story of moments and choices that exist around the globe daily. While no one solution is possible, a well-meaning and highly intentioned group of people can add to the conversation in ways that may have been untapped. Moreover, though no action steps were suggested, e.g., joining an organization fighting the use of child soldiers, giving money when possible to support those working on the issue or become involved personally, the focus group's set of mind and spirit was deeply moved. They were thankful to become more aware of a problem that might be beyond their daily news cycle.

Theme 2: Fear and Freedom

"Life finds a way." Dr. Ian Malcom played by Jeff Goldblum (Spielberg 1993).

Beginning with this quote from Jurassic Park is fitting as Grace used it as a reflection in the focus group. Finding meaning and ways to express the sentiments of the focus group through metaphor became the strongest through this theme and the final theme of signifiers and signified. Films can evoke emotion, memories, and ideas not expressed directly in a film. Fear and freedom are two universal emotions, both

personally experienced, which can amplify in a group setting like a focus group or a child soldier's camp.

While CR refers to the level of “real” as one that occurs whether observed or not, in film, the image created becomes what is real, whether observed or not. Fear and freedom, the actual representation of CR, is filtered by human experience but speak to a different level of meaning than empirical and are defined and deeply reflected in the focus group. *Etana* made these two emotions evident through the character development, with the focus group often seeing them both in one character. In *Etana*, the characters of Etana, Yaya, and Nafisa change through the plot causing the deaths of Yaya and Etana. Nafisa's brutality evolves throughout the film. Her change occurred at the end when she shoots Etana, the girl she appeared to care for the most deeply and to whom she had earlier spoken to as the one she saved and gave life and purpose. The band of children in the film's background did nothing as Nafisa was killing Yaya or Etana. Their stark inaction gave Shalu pause, and they wondered why the band of child soldiers did not stop Nafisa. Those children also signified the inaction many take in the face of injustice in other instances, which became a call to action in set and setting for the focus group participants.

Subthemes Fear: Mind, Body, Spirit

Etana was described as the protagonist in the story, and the question was posed to the group of their opinion of who or what was the antagonist Etana struggled against. Joy saw the struggle and fear between Etana and Nafisa:

When Nafisa said to Etana, "I gave you life and purpose," I felt Nafisa expected some loyalty from Etana. But when Nafisa ordered Etana to kill Yaya, in the end Etana couldn't kill Yaya. She couldn't do it. Etana wanted to nurture Yaya, to be there for her. I just felt that Etana's huge struggle was caused by her fear of Nafisa and her internal conflict.

All generally saw Commander Nafisa as the one who represented fear. Hope described Etana's inability to turn against Nafisa through the fear Etana displayed, "Well, there was no defiance, there did not appear to be an option of turning on Nafisa."

Grace put it another way. They used the simile of another developed evil film character from the *Star Wars* franchise to describe the fear that Etana could not overcome to kill Nafisa. They compared it similarly to the relationship between Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader (Katz 2022). While Grace stated hope was the protagonist as well, they also reflected on the relationship between Etana and Nafisa and the conflict and fear Etana felt in mind and spirit.

Nafisa kills Etana last. Right? She could have killed Etana first when Etana didn't kill Yaya. Etana could have pointed her gun at Nafisa but sort of put her gun down as if to give up because of course, like my peers described, you know, turning against Nafisa Darth Vader style was not even an option. Etana was powerless to kill Nafisa.

Angel's comments were regarding how stories can create fear in another and how Nafisa used stories about what the children were fighting for and how she created fear in all of them as she brutally killed Yaya and then Etana:

The killing part, that fear part. I go to the movies and it's like, I'm there. I was really feeling what's going on in the scene. And what I was observing is just the power of storytelling. So, when Etana was telling Yaya about the fable when they were sleeping at night, and how effective and influential the story was. And on Nafisa's part her stories on the message that she was relying on was creating fears, to control the children through fear and the fear she was trying to create. And Nafisa was so detached from her emotions up to the very end when she when she killed Etana. And I felt a little pause in her, right before she killed Etana, just starting to doubt herself, you know, but the damage was done of course.

The focus group also defined fear through their own experience watching the film and the fear they as a viewer felt as they watched the film unfold. Their fear is even projected onto the fate of the large green beetle. They reflected this scene as a deeper loss of faith and hope for the characters (including the beetle). Angel described a bug phobia but also said:

I mean, surprisingly, it was the moments with the bug. Maybe because I have a bug phobia and I saw that bug in the beginning of the movie. It was upside down; it was on its back and struggling. And then in the middle of the movie, it was crawling on top of Etana's hand and Etana was observing it, and I was kind of happy that the bug survived. But then she crushed it in her hand. That was the most disgusting, you know, the moment of the movie for me that just the feeling was not just for the bug. It was just for the whole thing, the whole scenario of this kind of killing scenario. It created the same kind of nausea for me of all killing.

The children's fate deeply saddened the focus group's mind and spirit. Shalu said and emphasized many times, "there is no way out:"

And I really thought there's no way out. That once a kid is in this, there's no way out. That is a message I get from the film, and it's not a judgment message. Upon reflection, I think as long as a kid is in this rigid system there is no way out.

Grace's statement about killing the spirit was reflected in the Jeff Goldblum quote from *Jurassic Park* in considering gang violence and its effect on children:

This parallel from a different genre, but in the *Jurassic Park* movie, Jeff Goldblum makes a comment about how "life always finds a way" (Spielberg 1993). I had this feeling like love and attachment with humans always finds a way. Like even in despair, even in gangs, even in violence, even in horrible situations. We naturally want to attach, and I felt like the incident where Nafisa had to kill Yaya. This is something that's happened before. And in reality, this probably happens a lot. That being so, you'd have to continually suppress, you have to keep killing, to keep people in line. And so that was sort of going through my head, not just through the movie, but through this discussion. Where I'm like, yeah, there's no point. There's no point where the children potentially can stop being attached to each other that there's still that possibility potentially, of an attachment, then the commander will have to continually kill. They have to continue to

kill the spirit so that the kids stay in line; and that they stay, quote unquote on purpose. And that was sort of sobering to realize.

The images and storyline were harrowing for the focus group to view and discuss, but they found the freedom for the character, in their analysis, even if it cost them their lives. Their observations could reflect an acceptance of a world where killing is unabated. Or a philosophy that freedom of any kind can eclipse any loss. The view may also be from the belief that some situations create no way out; therefore, no solution is possible.

Subthemes Freedom: Mind, Body, Spirit

"Fear holds you captive, but courage sets you free." (De Pontes 2022).

As the conversation turned to hope, freedom was described abundantly through metaphor and example. Love reflected on metaphorical freedom, which costs life in the body but sets you free in mind and spirit:

The one moment that stood out was when Etana died. I was thinking about the whole story of the movie. That it's about hope; it's about freedom; identity. It's about the power and that there are different types of freedom. There is the way of freedom: the one that you can escape from that insanity, from oppression, from hate, which is what Etana experienced through her death. There are different ways to have that freedom. And I believe that Etana had that moment of freedom, and her soul was free. It is not what we wish for someone, but I believe that that's when her spirit found freedom.

Angel found a message in the fable Etana told Yaya in the night as Yaya was going to sleep:

Etana's struggle was with her conscience, so the antagonist was Etana's fear. When she was telling Yaya the story she said listen to the whisper - the whisper of her inner voice, her higher self, or her soul voice. I think that was the whisper of her inner voice and her higher self or her soul voice in the story also showed in some place that one person is coming out from the other person, those two shadows that got separated and then rejoined again.

Shalu was as hopeful of freedom as he had been discouraged by the situation the children found themselves in at the camp:

Like Grace said life should always find its way and it will knock on someone's conscience and that someone will take some step and that will reverberate. It may take years, but it will reverberate. So, I think this to be human, to borrow Angel's words, to listen to the murmurings which are usually coming from the inner voice, which is aligned with the truth of the world. Beyond race, beyond meaning, anything, I think there's always hope. As I said, if the movie had continued, I'm pretty sure something will change in a positive way. Maybe they will pass away, but there will always be people coming up, coming up coming up.

Grace reflected upon freedom as not possible in the scenario of children in a camp:

Freedom is not an option for any of them. They're all similarly imprisoned by the umbrella of war and fear and hate and murder and death, and a larger geopolitical concern.

In the beetle scene, Hope also kept looking for humanity:

The point I thought of as an awakening as well, was Etana's remembrance of being stolen. And also, the bug scene. The bug scene as Grace said, was also important in looking for the humanity, and that life is precious.

Summary of Fear and Freedom

The group reflected on internal and external types of fears and what freedom means to a person. A dance of fear and freedom is constantly played in an individual's physical, mental, and spiritual states. But if freedom can only come from death, how can we make the audience see the loss and be called to rectify the problem? If, as Ms. de Pontes said, fear holds us captive, what can courage create for child soldier advocates?

Theme 3: Signifiers and Signified

"The first to blink is the first to die," said Etana (played by Vivian Nweze). (De Pontes 2020)

Signifiers become a crucial factor in focus groups, the attention they give to signifiers when they see and interpret them. The signifiers in the film were signs used as icons, index, and symbol. They referenced and analyzed those icons, indices, and symbols that caught their attention. Many of their comments reflect the multiple uses of a signifier as more than one sign. The significance of their interpretation helps understand a film's effect on the audience and the power of signifiers to deepen a film's story or message.

Subthemes Signifiers: Guns, Water, Beetle

In *Etana*, guns are an important symbol of this focus group. Guns are icons that not only represent violence, but safety, identity, protection, and oppression. In the scenes shown with guns, the use of guns fired was as powerful as those moments when the gun was not. In those scenes of hesitation to shoot, the focus group discussed the meaning of those moments. The gun Etana holds, which forms the opening scene in the film, points to Yaya. It was the use of *medias res* as a symbol of things to be resolved later in the film. When the film came back to that scene, the focus group learned why Etana had been ordered to shoot Yaya by Nafisa. At first, Etana refused to lift the gun. When Nafisa quietly raised her pistol and pointed it at Etana, Etana took the stance to kill Yaya. However, after a few moments of dialogue with Yaya, she put her gun down, stood straight, and looked at Nafisa with defiance. Nafisa looked surprised, hesitated, and then suddenly killed Yaya (off-screen with the sound of the gunfire as the index of sound to

the action of the gun and death of Yaya as Etana looked on horrified). This scene was more than the violence created, and Angel commented:

I paid attention was the human bonding so no matter what's going on; what order has been given, the bonding between Etana and Yaya was so strong that Etana couldn't shoot Yaya when she had the order from Nafisa.

Grace found Nafisa's delay in shooting Etana an important metaphor:

...but it felt like if anything, was trying to be reasserted, recertified, suppressed, it was hope: the chance for freedom; hope for the chance for life. Hope for the chance of affection; hope for the chance of connection. That's why they have to keep killing. That's what they were fighting against. With Nafisa, she is fighting hope as well. Nafisa could have killed Etana first when she disobeyed her direct order, but she waited until Etana ran off toward the water and then shot at her.

For Shalu, the gun as icon and its use or not was through his belief that if guns and violence become personal, then we care. He went on to explain his view through a short story:

The story of this North Korean girl who came to London. She said in North Korea they would have executions in middle of the street. And she didn't question it because it was if they were watching Hollywood movie. Until her friend's mother got shot. And because they would make the children pick up the shell cases to impart the lesson of fear, the horrible lesson. But that finally clicked for the girl when it became personal to her.

As a symbol to the focus group, water represented escape, capture, death, and freedom in various scenes. Water was the sweat dripping off the end of the gun in the opening scene, which was an index to Etana's face, and the sweat was pouring off her as she pointed the weapon at Yaya. The body of water near the camp was vast and different from the landscape and would soon become an integral part of Etana's escape. The fable Etana told of the young boy trying to escape the life he could no longer tolerate would require him to swim through a large body of water, used to index freedom, a great distance, to be free. Though he would not be able to make the swim, the great creator,

Nhalik, would turn him into a winged animal, and he could roam the earth freely. After defying Nafisa's order, Etana ran outside the tent, collapsed, then got up and began to run to the water. Nafisa shouted to Etana to stop, but Etana threw off her gun and began swimming. Bullets rained overhead, and Etana sank into the water. Then, she opened her eyes, rose from the water, and was at the distant shore. The movie closes. For many, this final scene symbolized freedom for Etana, but there was confusion about the film's end. From Angel's perspective and her reading of the signifiers in the final scene, she believed Etana had lived and only revised that belief after listening to the other's perspectives:

I thought that she has been really came out of the water and only her foot had been shot. She was limping, and her eyes were opened in the last scene under water. So, I didn't think that she was dead. Until I heard Shalu say after Etana died, and she finally went to, to where she wanted to go. I thought that she had been shot. And then she finally rose above the water and escaped. That was my interpretation.

In Hope's words, what she saw was the lack of water on Etana as she rose from the lake was an important symbol:

I thought possibly of what Angel said, but she was not wet. She was limping. But she wasn't wet. So, the possibility of maybe her getting out of the water and surviving was there. But the fact that she seemed dry, I thought that she died.

Water continued to be a theme as a symbol. The crude water bottle belt Yaya made as a gift for Etana meant to symbolize her love and hope for escape for Etana. Yaya had heard in the fable told that the young boy could not make the swim and sank deep into the water. This belt became an icon as it signified a tool to stay afloat, an index to the evidence it would become for Nafisa's justification that Etana must kill Yaya because she had become a traitor and created the water bottle belt as a symbol of freedom.

Hope felt she pieced together the water bottles as a symbol, index, and icon:

I interpreted that part as perhaps the group depended on the commander for food and water. And that those containers that may be for water could also be used for escape...So I was really making a lot of assumptions. But I was kind of telling myself a narrative around what that might be because Yaya said it was a gift for Etana.

Another symbol Joy found important was what violence does not create. Ultimate loyalty:

There was a struggle between Etana and the commander. So, the conversation around, I gave you life and purpose and all of that, I felt Etana did feel some loyalty to Nafisa in that belief. However, Etana also struggled with nurturing and caring for Yaya or, sharing the journey and what she knew of it with Yaya. The real struggle was between the two: Etana and Nafisa because Etana knew she had responsibility, what was expected of her from a cultural standpoint within the camp. Etana had a responsibility to say yes to a command: if the young child Yaya didn't complete the tasks, she would be killed. However, Etana couldn't do it. She wanted to nurture Yaya, be there for her. Like a mother to Yaya and at the same time, didn't necessarily agree with what Nafisa was saying. Though knew she had a responsibility to kill Yaya, she couldn't follow through on it.

Hope questioned what they were protecting, and who was protecting them.

Protection was a metaphor as a symbol of what was not working in the camp and left them with questions:

...As they're all in the situation together. And I kept looking for the introduction of the commander having some sense of protection or defending or bringing these children together. Some sense that it was for their protection, or they were all defending against something. And that never happened. They were all victims. They're all imprisoned. But never introducing against what? So, it wasn't for protection or defense.

A large green beetle appears in three scenes. At the film's beginning, struggling in the sand on its back, unable to right itself. On Etana's hand, after she knew she had been stolen by Nafisa, in the next scene it appeared first alive and then crushed by Etana between her fingers and shown as dead. Finally, briefly glimpsed in the closing scene (four seconds on screen) on Etana's fatigues as she rose from the water on the far shore

and looked toward the blue hills. No one in the focus group noticed it on Etana's uniform at the end when she rose out of the water. This focus group saw the beetle as a powerful symbol and indicator.

Grace reflected index and symbol of the beetle's death as a senseless killing:

I'll just add that the killing is senseless. The messages explaining it are senseless; just like the beetle killing. Etana didn't have to do it, but she did anyway. So, some sort of comment on the meaning of life. And to Love's point self-incrimination; this is happening now. And as horrible as these things are these three characters are all victims.

At the beginning of the discussion, not everyone understood that Etana had died at the end as evidenced by Angel's remarks above. Not all signifiers a filmmaker chooses are interpreted as intended and may even cause confusion. The dream Etana had when she realized Nafisa had stolen her was interpreted differently by Shalu:

This dialogue about Etana, I did not get it. But I realized when Angel said she had been stolen. Stolen? (head nods on screen) Okay... I had a different interpretation of the dream. I thought she's dreaming this little friend of hers Yaya is being taken away because I couldn't figure out the gender. And the kid was being pulled out. Which I thought she's being taken out from her life just like that. Probably for punishment or something?

Summary of Signifiers and Signified

The intended use of signifiers may be lost on the audience, as indicated in some of the participant's reflections. And which signifiers the audience finds essential may surprise or confuse a creator. Films are not critically reviewed for signifiers per se, but a conversation around this theme helps understand a message's subtle yet intended impact by its director. Killing a person, or even a bug, is a shocking realization to the viewer's mind. Images are internalized by the viewer, whether imagined or real, but may overwhelm rather than provoke action.

Child soldiers are created for one reason: to fight, resolve, or continue the conflict. Using children as soldiers and causing the death of any child created despair in the focus group. Again, Grace framed it this way, "Freedom is not an option for any of them. They're all similarly imprisoned by the umbrella of war and fear and hate and murder and death, and a larger geopolitical concern." Confirmation bias is evident in Grace's reflection as they seek to process what they believe and feel, causing internal conflict, even when watching a film (Casad 2019). If we do not seek perspective outside of our own beliefs, we can be imprisoned with inaction of pity, mourning, guilt, and rage. Perspective on the issue of conflict and child soldiers is also affected by someone's role or experiences with counselors, government agents, ex-combatants, or child ex-combatants, all who come with their own form of confirmation bias.

This focus group demonstrated they understood the power of a message through a fictional film that gave them pause. They considered the state of the world and their own lives and meaning through the themes of set and setting, fear and freedom, signifiers and signified, even though they often spoke without awareness of confirmation bias. Working through the film brought deeper meaning, insight, and understanding that may have been missed if viewing this film alone or without discussion. Their collective spirit and attitude of respect for one another and the subject matter brought value to each of them, though not to the subject of ending the use of children as soldiers. Confirmation bias speaks first and loudest. But the soul whispers and is persistent. The soul's whisper requires the creator, viewer, and the anthropologist to choose how they will be flexible yet persistent in seeking to be a part of the solution.

Summary

The depth, breadth, and clarity this group had to understand the film from a psychological framework and an emotional response they could articulate created a value for a filmmaker to know their thoughts and understand if the impact they intended was realized. Focus and perspective can differ depending on the audience and their personal experiences, knowledge of children in war, and views of war. The group's compassion and humanity were on full and unconscious display. So many humans possess the same qualities, and the ability to reach them with a powerful message through the media of film is astounding if you contemplate what art can do to further our understanding of life and humanity.

As mentioned in the first chapter, Frida Kahlo used her art mediums to express her view on life through images she often created that were self-portraits but nuanced deeply by her pain, suffering, and beliefs. She was as intentional and determined as the filmmaker of *Etana*, and each one's legacy lies partly in their art and soul's desire to express their deepest beliefs. Those beliefs of De Pontes that she illustrated through *Etana*, deeply moved the focus group.

Near the end of their time together, Love spontaneously made the following closing statement leaving the focus group to decide how they would consider what, if any, part they could play in ending the use of child soldiers:

I see that in two ways. One way is how strong we are, as human beings how powerful we are, and this is to be seen through that inner struggle when Etana is asked to shoot, and she doesn't. But she stays there for a while in that inner struggle. And that's the beauty of being human when we come from the place of love. And the other part is how vulnerable we are when we are in those situations. And we are asked to look through the shadows, to the shadows. I believe this is related to those moments that they are forced to go against everything they believe to be true.

Chapter VIII.

Analysis: *Etana's* Audience and Director Meet

I met with some women in the Parliament in the capital, Kigali. They had also visited the boys at Muhazi. I told them about our day-long experience, cooking for and with the boys. They were astonished, and one of the women looked at me and said quietly with regret, "In all my visits, as a mother, it never occurred to me to cook for them. We only gave them biscuits [cookies] we purchased in Kigali. We should have cooked a meal for them." If solutions are less than a biscuit, or even a meal, it will not be enough to affect the issue of child soldiers.

Introduction

Adults are responsible for closely observing, protecting, and supporting children from dangerous situations and people. De Pontes recounted watching the child actors closely while filming *Etana*, most keenly during the scenes of violence to ensure no harm came to them physically or emotionally. When a movie's story is about the critical issue of child soldiers and the lack of protection afforded to them, it is vital to carefully view a film to look beyond its entertainment value to the director's intent and the audience's awareness and reaction to that intent.

Asking a focus group to watch a movie is not unique. The process is used regularly by directors to gauge how effective the plot line, characters, and genre works for an audience. Sometimes, the audience was unaware they were being watched for gasps, laughs, and reactions when a director or actor quietly slips into a theater. Some in

the film industry believe it dumbs down their work, which insults their creativity and puts their integrity at risk in creating a commercially successful product that is not true to their vision. Others believe that, with thoughtful engagement, focus groups can provide creators with insight on questions or responses they may not anticipate and put their message at risk (Willens 2000). Providing insight through film focus groups was evidenced in Margot Weiss's research and article "Mainstreaming Kink, The Politics of BDSM Representation in US Popular Media" and had a focus group watch mainstream film and comedy *Secretary* (Shainberg 2002). Through the film's plot of a boss and his secretary, the viewer watched the comedic interplay of sexual themes and relationships. Her findings noted the focus group accepted the sexual practices of bondage, discipline, dominance, and submission (BDSM) in this film because the actors were comedic and likable, and sex was the vehicle to tell a love story. She postulates that audiences can watch this film with distanced consumption. She describes it as "...offers a tantalizing glimpse of something other (sexy, exotic, kinky) that is safely viewed and evaluated from a detached, privileged, and normative position" (Weiss 2006,105). Whether the topic is sex or child soldiers, that distanced consumption is a lens through which an audience views something other, like a child soldier. Weiss found,

These interviewees are pointing to a basic disappointment: Nothing truly shocking and out-there can appear in the in-here consumer culture. Once mainstreamed, these images of BDSM are a little too safe, a little too nice, and a little too easy to swallow. (Weiss 2006, 125)

When misery child soldier media is mainstreamed, does that create stories the audience watch in a fantasy story form not addressing the facts, or will viewers reject the images and consequently, the issue?

When comparing the De Pontes' distinct ideas and intentions, as outlined in Chapter 6, the focus group also had particular ideas of what the film met to them revealed through their comments in Chapter 7. This analysis will compare where the focus group realized the director's intention and the conclusion to be reached of what was not understood or seen by the focus group. Table 4 indicates where creation met reception and where perception diverged.

Table 4. Comparison of Director and Focus Group Themes and Subthemes

Legend: R indicates agreement x indicates a difference

Theme	Subtheme	Subtheme	Subtheme
Set and Setting	Mind R	Spirit R	Archetypes R
	Ideology x	War x	Mother x
Fear and Freedom	Mind R	Body R	Spirit R
Signifiers and Signified	Clouds x	Colors x	Dreams x

Summary of Themes and Subthemes from Director's interviews

Theme	Subtheme	Subtheme	Subtheme
Set and Setting	Mind R	Spirit R	Archetypes R
	Culture x	Authority x	Circumstances x
Fear and Freedom	Mind R	Body R	Spirit R
Signifiers and Signified	Guns x	Water x	Beetle x

Summary of Themes and Subthemes from Focus Group

A precise alignment between De Pontes' theme of fear and freedom and the focus group's understanding is shown. De Pontes' quote in the interview, "Fear holds you captive, but courage sets you free" (De Pontes 2022), was acknowledged by the focus

group in their belief that Etana did attain freedom even though it cost her everything, including life. There can be fear in each of us if we feel helpless or hopeless to be able to change a child soldier's condition. This event became a rallying cry for the focus group that it is unacceptable to do nothing if they are caring human beings. At one point, Grace said they would be complicit in violence toward child soldiers through inaction. As the conversation about the fear and freedom theme continued, spontaneously, Love spoke a line from the Imagine Dragons song lyrics, "Wrecked," "These days I'm becoming everything I hate" (Imagine Dragons 2021). Setting, as is used in this analysis, is defined as physical: the weather, the room's atmosphere, the social feelings of persons present toward one another, and cultural-prevailing views of what is real (Leary 2007, 3). The definition expanded to include ideology, war, motherhood, culture, authority, the environment as atmosphere, the social emotions of existence, and the prevailing views of culture. De Pontes removed any sign of a country to a specific country and culture to make the story more universal than any one country, especially in Africa. This lack of locality led the focus group to spend time speculating where this scene was taking place but eventually concluded, in Grace's words,

I was curious as to where these people are from. And I was trying to find the culture, maybe they're Nigerian, and maybe they're not. And right into the movies like, oh, it actually doesn't matter.

Setting also was defined as authority for the focus group and led to despair for the children. The focus group wondered if anything could be done for the children if they were placed in this situation as soldiers. In Hope's words,

I kept looking for the introduction of the commander [Nafisa] having some sense of protection or defending or bringing these children together. Some sense that it was for protection, or they were all defending against something. And that never happened. They were all victims. They're all imprisoned.

All focus group members responded to this message. At the same time, De Pontes wanted to present the truth about the child soldiers from her perspective without an intended call to action. In reflections like Hope's shown above and in more detail in Chapter 7, the film did not articulate any call to action from any focus group member watching the film. The signifiers were a meaningful part of the discussion for the focus group. The guns, the water, and the beetle as signifiers consistently impacted the focus group. The tipping points of no hope for the focus group was the killing of the beetle, the death of Yaya, and then Etana's futile swim. De Pontes used scenery and colors to explore her themes, Etana's dream sequence, and the fable in dreamlike form. The purpose of a dream sequence in a script is to create subjectivity. Subjectivity is the experience of your memories and emotions of thinking or feeling influencing how you view another event. It is a mental representation of an event rather than a physical one. When too much chaos is created too quickly in a dream sequence, the audience can become confused, as felt by the group's multiple understandings of what the dream sequences meant of the fable and Etana's dream intended. Use of dreams in scripts is meant to enhance the characters' journey, but that enhancement should be clear to the audience (Harper 2021). Both scenes confused some of the focus group members. They did not link the boy's freedom after sinking to Etana's sinking in the water and rising again. None of them were sure that Etana was dead. They were not confident in the dream sequence that Etana was dreaming of herself, or a young Yaya being stolen. Through the group's dialogue and another's perspective, they collectively agreed it was Etana who was stolen, and Etana did die and not make it to the far shore. While signifiers

were well used and intended by De Pontes, they did not always have the impact she intended.

Summary

The film *Etana* focuses on three women in a camp with no chance of escape. The storytelling was powerful from the focus group's viewpoint. But just as Weiss's focus group revealed, must creating a film offering a controversial topic be safe, pleasant, and easy to follow? If so, does it place the viewer in a position of distant consumption, a provocative peep at viewing and evaluating something safely from a detached, privileged, and normative position? De Pontes purposely did not show Yaya being shot but by the sound of a gun and Etana's reaction. Etana sinking into the water after Nafisa killed her was portrayed in a dreamlike sequence. Did those techniques artfully used create a space to keep the film's truths more detached from the audience?

For the focus group, the perspective of humanity in its moments of loss and freedom was evident. Yet, the focus group participants could not articulate what they could do next to change the fate of children in this situation. One film watched once can entertain and create awareness but may not be able to do anything other than making a great memory. Not unlike one great meal served to the children in Camp Muhazi, Rwanda, that fed and satisfied them, but only for the moment. How could a film's impact increase as a more significant part of a solution?

Chapter IX.

Collective Impact: We Fight So They Don't

Sixteen years after my first visit to Muhazi, I still wonder what has happened to those boys. Did they successfully find their way home? Was reintegration possible? Are enough resources available to them for their ongoing healing? Have they now married, had children, and found meaning in life? When thinking about those children, I am always left with more questions than answers. The power of the story I have told at the beginning of each chapter is not about the conflict and frustration the children face. It is a story of children confronting a new situation, and one that lacks violence or expectations. As all stories are told of child soldiers, there will be disagreements and frustration among global citizens, state actors, local and international organizations, and activists. Yet all must seek to right wrongs and be a resource for discussion and solutions.

The “wicked problem” of child soldiers is a social issue that requires attention in the media to create awareness of the problem and show what can be done to eradicate their use. Accurate and well-designed media coverage can heighten the importance of an issue to attract public concern, intensify the interest in the topic, and hype or announce it. In Ik Joe Chung's chapter in *Media Hype to Twitter Storm*, he defines media hype as the role of media in communicating and transmitting information about a critical event to the public, which can define and construct social problems. The effects of media as information providers and agenda setters are minimal when people have direct experience

of that specific social issue (Chung 2018). Stated more directly, those who work with child soldiers and the associated complexities are minimally affected by media hype. Yet, the public can be significantly impacted by their need for information and orientation to the issue. When media attention causes action, this is what Finlay and Faulkner in their article, “Physical Activity Promotion through The Media: Inception, Production, Transmission, and Consumption,” refer to as mass media as a 'meaning-making institution' (Finlay and Faulkner 2005).

As more media attention is created for a particular issue, public attention is drawn to the problem and magnifies societal engagement in the issues that drive necessary change (Chung 2018). This concern can escalate without a second thought or be well considered and orchestrated. Combining intent and action in a film tells a cautionary tale. This response was evident in the video *Kony 2012*, discussed in Chapter 3. This short video received over 100 million views on Facebook and became an incidental media event. However, the director's subsequent public breakdown drew more attention due to it becoming a disaster media event. The director had a call to action to capture Kony, raise awareness of child soldiers, and fundraise to help those children. Fundraising was successful, yet the organization's integrity, which produced *Kony 2012*, was widely criticized. The organization played little part in helping to solve the underlying issue of child soldiers. The story of *Kony 2012* and its impact is no more than a biscuit served at Muhazi, delicious to some but not memorable in creating the action intended.

Moving and accurate media portrayals told with heart and artistry such as *Children of War* and *Etana* were created by their directors with no intentional call to action for their audiences, as discussed in the interviews. The focus group felt no

extended call to action beyond the film's initial impact on them and the need to care about child soldiers. The result was a moving experience, but *Etana* failed to generate permanent transformation or collective action from this focus group. In the *Stanford Social Innovation Review 2011* management consultants John Kania and Mark Kramer describe collective impact as a disciplined effort that brings together dozens or even hundreds of organizations of all types to build a shared vision, agenda, and take evidence-based action forward (Kania and Kramer 2011). The soundness of collective impact makes sense. When many from different disciplines and skillsets come together the sum of the parts is greater than the whole. And when collective impact is used to solve a “wicked problem,” one that is global, different disciplines, cultures, agendas, power structures and with their own endgame, the challenge is massive. To bring this process, those engaged in the “wicked problem” must believe in the power of bringing many together and use effective communication at all levels to create change. The authors mention five ways to create collective impact:

1. Mutually reinforcing ways include a common agenda or shared vision of the problem and the actions required to change or mitigate the situation.
2. Shared measurement systems that consistently collect data and measure the results through a short list of indicators that can hold all parties accountable to the same measures.
3. Mutually enforcing activities does not require diverse stakeholders to do the same thing, but to undertake a specific set of activities in which it excels in a way that supports and is coordinated with the actions of others.

4. Continuous communication is the next area which requires massive trust between all parties including governments, nonprofits, international organizations, stakeholders within the countries, and media, to share a consistent message.
5. Create a separate backbone support organization with its own staff overseeing the entire initiative. (Kania and Kramer 2011, 39-40)

As a “wicked problem,” acknowledging the complexity of actors who affect the issue of child soldiers makes some of these ideas appear to be unattainable for now. To support this position, Item 1, referring to a common agenda, is not happening except for the cry to end the use of child soldiers, which is nothing but a battle cry without a plan. Item 2 of a shared measurement system is challenging to attain because it is unclear how the number of child soldiers is measured. Prosecution by states and the ICC is uneven and limited. Measurement of rehabilitation and reintegration is not universally acknowledged and imposed. Governments and ANSAs are not universally willing to enforce what laws exist about the use of children in war (Klobucista 2022). Item 4 refers to continuous communication based on mutual trust. Again, the complexity of the actors, the lack of consistent laws and enforcement, and those actors outside of the rule of law (ANSAs) create a situation in which the basis of the idea (mutual respect) is challenging to achieve. Item 5 of a separate backbone support organization has yet to be created.

Even so, organizations internationally recognized like the UN have a strong focus on the issue of eradicating the use of child soldiers. But the UN Charter lacks enforceability due to its own stated four primary purposes:

To maintain international peace and security; developing friendly relations between nations; cooperate in solving global problems and promote respect for human rights and be a center for harmonizing the actions of nations. (UN Charter 2021)

And indeed, the UN deserves scrutiny in carrying out the sanctions they create. As a reminder, the group EPG was convened by Watchlist to review the annual Secretary-General's report on the enforcement of sanctions imposed on countries using child soldiers and found politics can eclipse agreements (Dallaire et al. 2021,12; EPG 2021).

As each action item of collective impact is eliminated, what is left of this framework to create solutions for worldwide issues such as child soldiers? Suppose media portrayals are considered in a strategy to affect these children, and some negative images can be corrected and coordinated with those working on issues surrounding child soldiers. In that case, there can be a greater collective impact. In this regard, Item 3, mutually executing activities, may be the place to start parsing from this framework. Misery media and misery child soldier media can be separated if messages inform and not shock an audience, show violence only in the context of a point in an overall message, and collect audience feedback about their understanding of the message. When an audience articulates the messages they receive from the media, as the focus group amply showed, creating the ongoing action from media products is informed by the audience, not just the creator.

This entry point is where the media anthropologist's value can be amplified and considered. Creating an effective action with a focus on Item 3 could lead to the use and implementation of the other four items of the framework as organizations, governments, and interested groups coalesce around the root problem of ending the use of children as weapons. Seeing success will be proof of concept and create interest and collaboration to

continue solving the issue. It will take a generous spirit to share resources, best practices, time, talent, and funds rather than hoarding experience and wisdom. A pilot project of using information and mutual enforcement can be concentrated in one country, such as the DRC. This country is consistently named and shamed as a perpetrator for using child soldiers (Guterres 2017, 2018, 2022). The solution for DRC will be unique to the culture, actors, and issues, with many lessons applied to other countries in conflict that use child soldiers. Personalized solutions for a country and its actors are required. But momentum can be created to tackle this problem differently than it has been previously approached.

The focus must be razor sharp and multi-pronged: of the prosecution of perpetrators, the rehabilitation of children, enforced sanctions not lifted for political purposes, and solutions that are implemented and sustainable. And from the perspective of this paper, media tools informed by anthropologists, conversations, activists, content creators, and communicators, all focused on the same country simultaneously can add to the work already being done in the world for children caught in conflict.

This could be the powerful value of media and put an incidental and disaster media event like *Kony 2012* to shame to teach all who are obsessed with the issue that “wicked problems” can be solved. It will take filmmakers like Bryan Single and Marian De Pontes intent on using their creativity and genius to touch hearts, minds and reach out to every child soldier worldwide and gently say, “No more.”

This thesis highlights how media reflects a “wicked problem” like child soldiers. The history and escalating use of children as weapons of war was highlighted. Organizations and individuals focused on releasing children from this future were highlighted. Remembering Margaret Mead and the magic she created through media is

worth recalling and building upon. Media anthropology is suggested as an additional weapon for peace that may have been overlooked for too long. Anthropologists as activists is not new, but the value of applying the theme to child soldiers is an idea whose time has come.

The power of film to create lasting impact was highlighted through three films, *Kony 2012*, *Children of War*, and *Etana*. All three created impact in their unique way. The analysis of each film revealed its creator's intent, influence, and what value the film brought or did not bring to ending the use of child soldiers. In the director interviews with Bryan Single and Marian De Pontes, their views and intent deepened the understanding of their drive to create their films and hoped for impact. The focus group carefully watched De Pontes' film and were deeply moved yet described being somewhat discouraged in their newfound awareness.

The focus group's response was not dissimilar to the attendees of the webinar held by Alliance 8.7. This impressive panel was intent on informing the public on the issue and the work being done with a call to action and belief by those in attendance that this issue could be solved. The response by citizens in a live poll was not expected to be so discouraging. It illustrated that it was time to take the lackluster faith that a solution was possible and head back to the drawing board to reframe and consider how to discuss this "wicked problem" and possible action items (Alliance 8.7 2021).

With great respect, this ongoing response is presented not as a criticism but as a call to action for involvement of more scholars like anthropologists to continue to craft a message and solutions that draw people to action, not discourage them (or the advocates) with the scope and complexity of the issue.

The Anthropologist Activist Seeks to Learn How They Can Be of Service

In Hansen and Rossen's article "Activist Anthropology with the Haudenosaunee," they reflect on their work with the Haudenosaunee tribe and the Two Row Wampum Renewal Campaign of 2013. This culminating event of a yearlong project involved indigenous people from the Haudenosaunee tribe as well as non-indigenous people coming together to symbolically reclaim a 400-year-old treaty espousing mutual respect and balance between Europeans and the Haudenosaunee (Hansen and Rossen 2017). As activists, Hansen and Rossen began working with the Haudenosaunee tribe in the mid-1990s as consultants, educators, event organizers and proponents of the work the Haudenosaunee tribe wished to accomplish. Their advocacy was to create space specifically for the Haudenosaunee voice to be heard and recognized. Both anthropologists earned a seat at the table by becoming a welcome and returning guest to the Haudenosaunee tribe members, creating mutual respect, and with their desire to contribute to another's goals. In this journey, the anthropologists served to participate and clarify from their perspective what was possible for this culminating event in 2013. As the idea grew, thousands of people became engaged, a website was established, and media was used to share the message and event surrounding this historic moment. In their words, "What began as a modest plan to educate about mutual cultural respect and to highlight the role of treaties through the vehicle of the Two Row Wampum grew into a large-scale project connecting thousands of people" (Hansen and Rossen 2017, 36).

While their advocacy was personally motivated to facilitate decolonization, their dedication created consistent and long-term engagement with the Haudenosaunee and advocacy and demonstrated sensitivity to the issues was the tipping point for their value to the community.

The anthropologist as activist is not a one and done event. To be heard in any community, they must become part of it and sustain their interest and action, whether by staying for an extended period or returning to those they have met before. I learned this personally when I went to Rwanda for the second time in 2006, and in my subsequent ten visits to Rwanda. I visited with some of the women in a microfinance program our foundation *Itafari* was supporting. As I greeted a woman in Kinyarwanda in 2006 I had met six months earlier, she looked at me in wonder and said, “You came back!” That moment between us marked the moment that my ethos would only be established if I narrowed my interest to Rwanda and the programs we were building. Once is not enough for people with whom you want to engage. Respect from another comes when there is a mutual understanding of intent and is only established when the interests of both parties is sustained.

While recognizing the challenges of anthropologist as activist, Hansen and Rossen acknowledge many universal lessons for any anthropologist who choose activism as part of their role:

1. Theory to action requires a greater level of effort than theory alone.
2. It is easy to get lost in detail and lose the big picture of the advocacy goal that was the original driver.
3. Theories translated into real-life situations with people who are directly affected by those actions require time and effort to make the theories relevant and meaningful to those the activist wishes to serve.

4. Connections between disparate and diverse groups happens when common ground is created, and it is understood by all that existing walls must be broken down that divide the groups and mutual respect maintained and treated with care.

5. Relationships between groups will be contradictory and stressful; communication becomes a collaborative effort requiring all to find common understanding and handle conflict (Hansen and Rossen 2017).

As the anthropologist seeks to serve as activist, they understand interactions and people, how messages are sent and received, and if that is what a culture, a people, or a film intended. They will understand all or some of the lessons learned from Hansen and Rossen's experience. Many of the lessons learned apply to any collective impact action and is a reminder of what is possible when the anthropologist extends their hand to reach for another's whose is also extended.

Conclusion: Back to the Beginning at Lake Muhazi

Returning to the original research question, beyond the world's governmental and humanitarian organizations' response to child soldiers in conflicts, what conclusions can be drawn about media portrayals of child soldiers to assist in ending their use in conflict?

Media and film do tell the story of child soldiers with various results and intention of their creators. Background and research presented include the incidences of child soldier use globally, the often uninformed or biased public who believe this problem is tragic but accept it, and the power of images in films like *Children of War* and *Etana*. The director interviews and focus group evidenced that media can be essential in informing audiences about the issue. Using media products to ask for support can have

the opposite psychological effect, evidenced by Seu's research (Seu 2010, 2016). Still, media is not the only solution to this “wicked problem.” Yet, considering that “wicked problems” never have one answer, I suggest that through well-developed films influenced by media anthropologists, a story can be told that captivates its audience while activating a response from that audience. The study concludes that while a film about child soldiers can have a powerful, immediate impact, it may not create action. Yet awareness that this media can be a weapon of peace to help end the use of conflict that uses children, films can play a part in serving to end the use of child soldiers.

The resources needed are wide-ranging and comprehensive but succinctly framed through the work of Dr. Paul Farmer (1959-2022). Harvard Professor and Anthropologist Dr. Farmer worked tirelessly to end “wicked problems”; his passion and problem was world health equity. He believed that any solution requires staff, stuff, space, and systems (Earl 2017). Solutions are possible when all resources work in concert. The sum of the parts will create a greater whole for those in need.

From a resource standpoint, the “staff” in the case of child soldiers is the organizations and leaders worldwide who focus on this issue and meet with the children. Activists can turn their talent for effective communication into messages that create more than incidental media but influential media. Activists like Ishmael Beah can bring solutions from their perspective by engaging the children themselves as they grow into adulthood. The “stuff” is the rehabilitation programs, thoughtful and well-developed media messages, including films, financial resources to support and sustain programs to heal children, and effective and transparent legal prosecutions of perpetrators against children. The “space” is time to gather to create lasting solutions. “Wicked problems” are

never solved quickly, and this issue must be an obsession for activists that engage their senses, talents, expertise, and time. A calm urgency needs to drive those who work in this field with the awareness that children are dying every day on the battlefield. And they must engage others in this quest to understand that this issue can be solved.

Conversations and more conversations are goals of influential leaders who will become champions for children over personal needs or power and are willing to be held accountable to their stated agreements. The “systems” include providing children with the resources they need to not fall back into this lifestyle and offer it until the last child is healed. Those resources are imperative to help them recover from the recovery from the trauma we allowed them to go through. Strategies to implement well-developed plans like the Dallaire Institute's multi-pronged approach for engaging all actors can be enhanced with other disciplines and technologies. As ego steps aside and we lay down our arms of ownership and arrogance, money will come, but intellect must be engaged as we seek to enroll the brightest minds of all industries in our quest to help a child.

Dr. Farmer’s memorable way of calling for all resources through staff, stuff, space, and systems will all be needed to successfully create collective impact through mutually enforcing ideas inspired by the work of Kania and Kramer. Indeed, it is the approach for child soldiers. While one alone can do nothing: one film, one speaker, one call to action, one organization, one government, or one media anthropologist, all must work more closely together rather than keep their resources separate. The complexity of solving the issues is geometric in size, yet there will be no stopping those seeking relief and protection for children through all means possible. Saving a child soldier has profound consequences for that child, future generations, and the country where they live.

Ending the use of child soldiers, helping those who have been to hell and back heal, effectively prosecuting the perpetrators, striving to share the message with the uninformed, and providing a clear message for the innocently ignorant is a life's cause for many. Creating clearer messages will change the lives of countless others.

I will be developing the website ChildSoldiersNoMore.com to share resources, research, and films about child soldiers. It is amazing how much has been done to support and protect children worldwide, and each of us can add to that work. But the work does not stop until no child soldier exists, for that is the nature of a “wicked problem.” We will continually be solving it with new tools, innovation, and tenacity.

Media anthropologists with Mead Magic, working with creators, producers, and other disciplines in the arts, organizations, and states, can become partners in ending child soldiers as a “wicked problem” through their insights and sensitivity to cultural depictions that might be unknown to those focused on their end goal to create art with the central characters of child soldiers. It will take more than a little Mead Magic to offer insights to those who are so deeply engaged and may be weary of the fight. But just as no one would abandon a child on the side of the road to die, child soldiers cannot be left to fight their battle alone, and film can create another medium to communicate about this important issue.

Film writ large is not the solution, but a piece of the message to be added to the whole. The message of a film that media anthropologists influence that incorporates Mead Magic can change people, laws, and actions. Media anthropologists must pay more vigorous attention to becoming a forethought, not an afterthought, in any film which

seeks to lionize a child soldier as the hero or victim, for education or profit, as an activist, or in support of activism.

This research adds to the anthropology of media in identifying how a “wicked problem” can be addressed through a film. The power of media creates for a message is vital in the awareness, execution, and ultimate solution. Media cannot be used to raise money for an organization callously and without caution of poor media products, which can create unintended consequences like disaster media. Pictures of helpless children must evoke more than horror, shame, and donations. And more than callousness, disgust, and guilt are possible. It is more than the message the two films *Children of War* and *Etana* demonstrated beautifully. If messages and images created by these two films were enhanced through a media anthropologist’s lens, what more could these two films do to help a child?

The original thesis question seeks to understand what conclusions can be drawn about media portrayals of child soldiers in ending their use in conflict. While the answer is not that it consistently can make a difference, it is a definite possibility that film can bring more value to the issue, its audience, and advocates intent on effectively communicating their message. A film can be seen by many in multiple settings and analysis of all parts of a film structure and when the story arc is enhanced through an anthropological lens, and this will add value to solving this “wicked problem.” This analysis must take place before a film is finished allowing the media anthropologist to bring a nuanced awareness of the message and how to improve it to create a change. Because walking away from a powerful artistic resource such as film is an unintended missed opportunity. There are not enough well-developed films that entertain, impact,

and create a change. But that is the past. More can be done through films informed by facts, creating images to honor, not horrify, and tap into an audience's intelligence and willingness to stay involved for a long time.

This research and findings did not discourage me as one who cares. I see the faces of the boys I met at Muhazi, the pictures I have of them standing proudly with the meal they prepared for their fellow ex-combatants. I think about the pain and fear Akulu, Polycap, and Nyero, described as they exposed their souls in *Children of War*. Yet they are better for being in the Centre, their healing is in process, and everything is impermanent, even pain. I contemplate the narrative created for the children in *Etana* whose circumstance of freedom could only come through death. We know as global citizens we must offer children options. Through it all I remain clear-eyed in my stance and resolve, encouraged to know the role as a media anthropologist and activist I can bring to this “wicked problem.”

This thesis reminds me of the need to continue to seek solutions, become intelligent and compassionate in conversations that remove judgment and discouragement, and replace those emotions with determination to support the creators of content and activists seeking to end the use of child soldiers. When I began my work in Rwanda in 2005 I sought to be a partner with those I served. I was an activist. This work and research provided context to the value of the science a media anthropologist brings to the table. And now I return once more to becoming an activist, with an eye on messaging and how this work can inform my future projects. It will not be easy. But what is easy does not last, and what lasts is not easy. May we work together to create lasting solutions that keep a child from death and suffering as a child soldier.

Appendix 1.

Focus Group Demographic

1. Are you a member of the Institute of Coaching? (choose one)
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

2. What is the highest level of education you have completed? (choose one)
 - a. Graduated from high school
 - b. 1 year of college
 - c. 2 years of college
 - d. 3 years of college
 - e. Graduated from college
 - f. Some graduate school
 - g. Completed graduate school
 - h. Other (please specify)

3. What is your age? (choose one)
 - a. 21 years or over
 - b. Under 21 years

4. Do you have access to the internet and a zoom account to conference in for the focus group discussion? (choose one)

- a. Yes
- b. No

5. Please list languages you are comfortable communicating in and believe you have a high level of comprehension for a discussion. (open-ended response)

6. In which region of the world do you live? (choose one)

- a. Africa
- b. Asia
- c. Central America
- d. Eastern Europe
- e. European Union
- f. Middle East
- g. North America
- h. Oceania
- i. South America
- j. The Caribbean

7. What level of awareness child soldiers do you currently hold? (choose one)

- a. None
- b. I am aware of the issue

- c. My level of awareness is higher than just basic knowledge
- d. I am keenly aware of the issue
- e. I have done in-depth study or research about child soldiers

8. Do you have concerns about watching a short fiction film (15 min) about child soldiers that is not extremely violent? (choose one)

- a. Yes
- b. No

9. If you answered yes, to the previous question, but are still interested in participating, please list your concerns here. IF NO CONCERNS PLEASE WRITE "NONE" (if you prefer not to say why you have concerns, there is no problem, and you may close the survey without continuing). Many thanks for your initial interest! Vicky (open-ended response)

10. If you find the entire subject of child soldiers too personally upsetting to participate in a facilitated focus group, please know I understand. The questions in the focus group are not psychological in nature, but more reflective of how you perceived the movie and its value to explain child soldiers from a media standpoint. If you are still interested, please continue by responding yes. Again, if the issue is not one which you want to discuss, I understand and send my deepest respects to you. You may close the survey without continuing further. (no response requested)

11. Contact information (all must be provided)

- a. Name
- b. Email
- c. Phone Number
- d. Time Zone

12. Any additional comments or questions for me? (open-ended response)

13. Are there any cultural or social norms in the facilitated discussion of which you would like me to be aware? If none, please state "none" (open-ended response)

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