

“Operation Check: Visuality of Success”

(For the original article go to

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Abstract

This article examines the nexus between images and war in the context of the Colombian armed conflict. Specifically this article focuses on the successful hostage rescue operation, Operation Check as in Checkmate. On July 2nd, 2008, the Colombian army released 15 hostages, including former Colombian presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, three American security contractors and 11 Colombian military and police. The FARC were tricked into believing that the hostages were being relocated through the aid of an international humanitarian mission. In reality, they were delivering the kidnap victims to disguised military officials. What I propose is an examination of Operation Check as a layered composition of different military strategies in which a global imagination simultaneously affected both the local and the global. I argue that the documentation of Operation Checkmate and its different media recreations (upcoming film, National Geographic series, and books) have created and multiplied a global “influential spectators’ gallery of the international community” (Kilcullen Location 1713). Colombia has tapped into this global imagination with sophisticated strategies of netwar and cyberwar as well as market strategies, whether by becoming an exporter of security and weapons, a haven for foreign investors, or a touristic destination pushed by a national branding campaign. Operation Check is a story. From its planning, its execution to its documentation, Operation check was conceived as a theatre piece with characters and a script. This fact not only helped in the developing the ruse but it also created a story of a nation in which anything could be overcome and this story took over the global stage.

2008 was a turning point in the global press’ coverage of the Colombian war conflict. International public opinion and perception was influenced by the success of the Colombian Armed Forces in combatting one of the country’s most widespread, visible and internationally known crimes: kidnapping (DeShazo, Forman, and McLean 37). In a 2011 RAND report entitled “From Insurgency to Stability: Volume II: Insights from Selected Case Studies,” Colombia is one of the countries studied and 2007 is highlighted as the beginning of the transition from counterinsurgency to securing stability (Rabasa et al). It marks 2008 as a year of major military

successes against the FARC and identifies, as the most significant development from a counterinsurgency perspective, “the collapsing of the FARC’s command and control structure ... manifested in *Operación Jaque* (Operation Check), the rescue of Ingrid Betancourt and fourteen other hostages in July 2008.” (57). Operation Check, as in checkmate, was a military operation that resulted in the freeing of 15 hostages, including former Colombian presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, three American Security Contractors, and eleven Colombian soldiers and policemen. Operation Check’s success was based in deception. The Colombian Armed Forces tricked the FARC-EP rebels into handing over the hostages, to a fictitious NGO set up by Army officials. Pulled off without firing a shot even when they had the opportunity to do so, Operation Check demonstrated the success of intelligence versus the use of violence in an aerial bombardment or a ground attack (Hirsh and Isikoff).⁽¹⁾ In the global landscape of the war against terrorism, and in twentieth century military history, Operation Check stands as one of the greatest military and Intel campaigns in the last 20 years. At the time, the U.S ambassador to Colombia William Brownfield deemed Operation Check the most perfect rescue operation in the history of military affairs (*Soldados sin coraza*). President Álvaro Uribe explained that “for Colombia, the success of Operation Check is proof that there is a strong desire to defeat kidnapping, and a strong government decision to free hostages without using violence and, most importantly, without yielding to the kidnappers’ demands, including surrendering Colombian territory to them” (García, my translation). Operation Check also influenced public understanding of the Colombian conflict. Many Colombians saw Operation Check as a true sign of victory after the ten-year application of the Democratic Security and Defense Policy (DSDP) and Plan Colombia (“Ending Colombia’s FARC Conflict: Dealing the Right Card”). On a wider scope, Operation Check communicated to the international community that Colombia’s long internal instability was over, and that the country had become a regional player in matters of security and an important rising partner for new global markets (DeShazo, Forman, and McLean 14). The international press reported on this turning point with headlines and statements like, “After Taint Of Drugs, Colombia Reinvents Itself;” “Colombia is without a doubt the latest Latin American economic miracle;” “Colombia: Latin America’s rising oil star;” and “Colombia Becomes Safer for Business as Rebels Renounce Kidnapping” (“After Taint of Drugs, Colombia Reinvents Itself”; Linares and Montejo-Torres; Blas; Kopp). Some of these articles recount a brief history of Colombia’s security problems and improvements but they always identify Operation Check among the strongest evidence of a new era.

Operation Check not only consolidated the success of Colombia’s military tactics in the global landscape of irregular wars but also highlighted the successful U.S. military intervention in the country, an intervention that was initially requested by President Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) and made official policy by President Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2010).⁽²⁾ Since 2000 the

¹ (1) “Vice Defense Minister Juan Carlos Pinzón told *Newsweek*, “But we made the decision not to attack,” because the government wanted to convey it had a new “strategic concept.” “We want to send a message to the FARC and to the world: not to exterminate the FARC but to welcome back anyone who wants to come into the system.” Last week, to drive that point home, the Colombian military equipped helicopters with loudspeakers that began booming Betancourt's recorded voice over the jungle, saying “Hey, guerrillas ... demobilize now ... You'll recover your family, your honor, your liberty.”” (Hirsh and Isikoff).

² (2) See Tickner (“Intervención por invitación”). Tickner develops the concept of “intervention by invitation strategy,” through Colombia accepts the U.S. agenda in its country in exchange for aid from Washington,

United States has provided more than six billion dollars in aid through Plan Colombia, along with permanent training and supervision of military performance in the country. After heavy U.S. involvement in Colombia, aid has steadily declined since 2008, while the American government has pushed for a “Colombianized” version of Plan Colombia (Tickner, *Colombia, the United States, and Security Cooperation by Proxy*). Operation Check responds to such “Colombianization.”⁽³⁾ Many critics of the Colombian government have cast doubt on the authorship of Operation Check, claiming that the United States was behind its planning and execution. One U.S. counterinsurgency expert working in Colombia spoke about Operation Check only under the condition of anonymity, “The rescue ‘was the Colombians’ show--that’s the official tale. But our Special-Ops Command has been deeply involved with Colombia for some years. We gave strategic guidance on the concept [of the ruse]. We pushed the whole infiltration idea” (Hirsh and Isikoff). I am not interested in discovering the actual author of the operation; rather, I see the success and controversy around Operation Check as an opportunity to elucidate what is being transferred from the United States to Colombia. I would like to ask: what is being Colombianized? Is it the military strategy? If so, which strategy? How does “it” – whatever is being Colombianized– change as it is appropriated? As the word “Colombianization” points to a process of nationalization, how does this play out within a global state of war? With “American-style counterinsurgency [...] going global,” how could a national process still be a successful global military strategy? How do local military tactics play out within global security policy? (Hirsh and Isikoff). I would develop my argument around Operation Check as a media operation, in which forms of visuality cannot be separated from military strategy. By analyzing Operation Check as the height of Colombia’s success against the FARC-EP, I want to see how that success is represented in imagery and what place that imagery has within this global space of war. My intention is to reveal how, in this global space, images here are not evidence or proof of a military strategy, but rather they form part of the military strategy itself. Operation Check was a highly visual military operation; it has even been called a cinematic operation. Considering how images flow in the larger global field of media and entertainment, I want to analyze what is at stake here, how visuality serves to bridge a space that is fragmented and diverse while, at the same time, global.

WHAT WAS OPERATION CHECK

For Operation Check, the Colombian army officials deployed a sophisticated version of man-in-the-middle (MITM) attack. MITM is an attack in which communications between two parties are intercepted and manipulated. The parties believe they are speaking to each other when, actually, it is the attacker who controls the conversation, delivers new information to the parties, and deletes original messages. An MITM attack requires the ability by the interceptor to impersonate both sides to the satisfaction of the other; in other words it requires deep knowledge of the parties’ shared context (Otis Location 4751; Schneier). Context is the main form of authentication; therefore, only field officials with access to local knowledge and with informants

³ (3) This word came from different members of the U.S. Congress, who have, each year since 2004, called for a reduction of U.S. aid to Colombia and a “Colombianization” of the program “under which Colombian security forces would assume the operational capabilities to take over functions now provided by the United States.” (Veillette 13)

on the ground could perform such an operation (Villamarin Location 4324). The attack was directed at communications between FARC-EP military strategist Mono Jojoy and the commander of the FARC's first front, Gerardo Aguilar (aka César), who was responsible for custody of the hostages (Schneier). César was tricked into believing that Mono Jojoy had ordered him to hand over the hostages to a rebel-friendly third party that supposedly was going to transport the hostages to the encampment of Alfonso Cano, who was, at the time, the FARC's new leader (Rabasa et al. 57).

This third party was a fictitious international NGO, called the *International Humanitarian Mission*, designed to deceive the guerrillas. The members of this “humanitarian organization” were military intelligence officials in disguise. In order to fabricate this theater of operations, Operation Check mimicked previous hostage releases; specifically the unilateral release of Clara Rojas and former congresswoman Consuelo González negotiated by Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez and carried out by a humanitarian commission headed by the International Committee of the Red Cross on January 10, 2008 (Villamarin Location 4266). The Pan-Latin American television network Telesur always broadcast the hostage releases negotiated by Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez. The Colombian Intelligence Office analyzed the video documentation of this humanitarian mission, as it was the only reference that could provide clues about what the FARC-EP would expect from an international commission (Otis; Villamarin Location 3781). For Rojas’ and Gonzalez’s release, Hugo Chávez dispatched two Russian MI-17 helicopters painted white with an orange trim and covered in International Red Cross logos. Their crew included Red Cross delegates, the Cuban ambassador to Caracas Germán Sánchez, Venezuela’s Minister of the Interior Ramón Rodríguez and his secretary, Colombian congresswoman Piedad Cordoba, a medical team, and a cameraman and journalist from Telesur. Operation Check used the same type of helicopters, painted exactly the same way, and designed a crew that would match the political backdrop seen in the release organized by the leftist government of Chávez (Bruce, Hayes, and Botero Location 4046; Otis Location 4464; Villamarin Location 3342).

In an article entitled *Lessons Learned from Operation Check [Mate]*, Captain (USAF) Dylan D. Dombret points out Operation Check’s contributions to the United States Armed Forces. This document underscores “the use of human intelligence (HUMINT) and small operational footprints at the tactical and strategic level,” the intrepid use of air force, and leadership, “the use of restrained force and seeking transformational effect-based objectives [that] could turn the tide against the insurgency aggression more than a full-scale land assault” and the highly effective strategy on public opinion. Majors (USAF) Steven J. Ayre and Jeremy F. Hough in their masters thesis entitled *Air Power In Irregular Warfare* for the Naval Postgraduate School under the supervision of Dr. John Arquilla—one of the most influential theorists on Revolution in Military Affairs in the United States—analyze Operation Check as one successful example of the unconventional use of air power in an irregular conflict (Ayre and Hough). These are just two examples of many in which international military literature incorporates Operation Check as part of a global understanding of war, in the analysis of its organizational, technological, doctrinal, and strategic dimensions, with Colombia understood as a successful case of U.S. intervention in the region.

OPERATION CHECK'S VIDEOS: COPIES OF COPIES

Operation Check was designed to be an exact copy of the humanitarian release negotiated by President Hugo Chávez on January 10, 2008. The video recorded and broadcasted by Telesur was the source that allowed the Colombian Armed Forces to plan the mimicry. For Operation Check to be an exact copy of the hostage release of January 10, 2008, this mimicry had to have its own cameraman and journalist producing a video documenting the military operation. The video of Operation Check released by the Colombian government starts with the helicopter landing at the rendezvous point, and ends with the helicopters landing in San José del Guaviare, where Army General Mario Montoya hugged his officers, celebrating the success of the operation.⁽⁴⁾

Seventeen members of the Colombian Armed Forces and the Intelligence Office comprised the rescue mission personnel for Operation Check; the crew copied the political backdrop exhibited in the release of January 10, 2008. The fake crew was a mission chief with an Italian accent, two international observers (an Arabic speaker and English speaker with an Australian accent), a cameraman and a journalist from the Venezuelan TV station TeleSur, a medical doctor and three nurses, two fake guerrilla delegates and an eight-person civilian flight crew for two helicopters. One of the fake rebels was actually a demobilized guerrilla who is now actively collaborating with the Colombian Armed Forces. Two helicopters were used in this mission but, twenty hours before their departure, it was decided that only one helicopter would land at the rendezvous point. César had sent a message asking to travel with six more guerrillas; therefore, the Colombian Intel team decided to use only one helicopter and to tell César that his request was not admissible due to cargo restrictions, since only one helicopter was authorized to land. The helicopters were painted white with an orange trim. On the bottom of the fuselage were the logos of the international NGO and inside and at the door, the symbol for no weapons allowed (Otis; Bruce, Hayes, and Botero).

The cameraman, the journalist and the mission chief disembarked first. The latter was wearing a bib with the logo of the International Red Cross. The Venezuelan news team was wearing red shirts, blue vests and bandanas around their necks, as is customary for members of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela. The news team's first task was to inspect the surroundings with the camera, distract the guerrillas and, by turning and pointing the camera back to the helicopter, indicate to the crew in the aircraft that it was safe to disembark. The operation was supposed to last eight minutes but it actually took twenty-two due to the hostages' reluctance to and aggression toward being handcuffed by humanitarian workers (Bruce, Hayes, and Botero Location 4110).

The video released by the Colombian government on the same day Operation Check took place begins with the disguised journalist addressing the camera and describing the importance

⁴ (4) The video I analyze in this section is the one showed by the Colombian government during the televised press conference on the day Operation Check took place. I found this video in a bootleg DVD sold in the streets of Bogotá entitled "Operation Check videos," which is a compilation of multiple edits of this footage, celebratory videos downloaded from YouTube, a Colombian TV show on Operation Check and the recorded press conference.

of this historical event as if reporting to a mass audience; behind him we see the rebel army impeccably dressed in the background. The journalist interviews the protagonists of this fake humanitarian mission and constantly gives indications to the cameraman on where to shoot from. We see the hostages as they are being introduced to the humanitarian mission; however, when they try to speak to the camera specifically about their difficult situation in captivity, protesting against the FARC-EP, the journalist stops them saying that their policy does not allow the prisoners to make statements to the camera. Nonetheless Keith, one of the American contractors, showed the camera his handcuffed hands and Army Lieutenant Raimundo Malagón --held hostage since 1998-- said “I have been chained for 10 years, I am Army Lieutenant Raimundo Malagon, from our glorious Colombian Army, kidnapped for multiple reasons...” The camera moves back, again the cameraman states that he cannot transmit any further, but Malagón moves closer and says “You should allow me to speak, I have something very important to say ...” Again the camera retreats and we only see Malagón’s mouth moving but we cannot hear what he says. The hostages look very angry, they move away from the camera; when the camera approaches them, they raised their handcuffed hands in protest.

The task of the fake news team was to distract the kidnappers, to drive attention toward the camera, since it was fabricating the image of the event for the world. The camera had a microphone that allowed the pilot to listen in on what was happening in the field. In turn, the central command of the Colombian Armed Forces was listening to the pilot and copilot’s conversation. With phrases like “breaks OK,” or “Anti-ice system OK,” the pilot and the copilot were communicating to central command how the operation was playing out. If the operation were in peril, the chief of the fake humanitarian mission would have pretended to have lost his wallet. The pilot, listening through a microphone installed in the camera, would have delivered a code. This phrase would have communicated to the other mission field players, as well as to the military leadership following the operation from afar, that they were being discovered (Otis; Bruce, Hayes, and Botero; García). Therefore the camera was a form of live transmission; therefore it had to stay on during the entire time of the operation.

The decisive moment in the documentation occurs back in the helicopter as they are flying away from the site, The Colombian intelligence officers subdue the kidnappers, César and his second-in-command, aka “Gafas”. And then, the mission chief, whose name was Russi, yells “We are the Colombian Army, and you are free.” The camera jerks and we know that something is happening; it is not clear what we are looking at. Ingrid Betancourt describes this moment with the following words, “Something happened, I’m not sure what, and then we saw the commander who for years was in charge of us and had been so cruel and despotic with us, on the floor, naked, and blindfolded.” Mark Gonsalves also points to the same chaos, saying “Suddenly, this big-ass fight breaks out, all these aid workers were just pounding on César” (Otis Location 5157).

The news team documented the operation by impersonating the work of a cameraman and a journalist. They broke with their roles when Russi revealed their identity to the hostages by announcing their freedom. However, their task of documenting continued. They kept recording; the cameraman continued to be a cameraman. Once Russi revealed their true identities to the

hostages, the camera moved to Ingrid Betancourt. We see her crying and somebody asks her “Who do you want to thank?” and she answers “our army.” Everything was part of the mimicry; there was a news team in disguise doing what they were supposed to be doing, recording and reporting. But their work went beyond the impersonation; they continued recording even after their identities were revealed. In this sense, this video served two purposes. The video recorded during the operation served to support the mimicry as well as to actually document the hostages’ rescue. As part of the mimicry, the camera added authenticity since it served to create a media event that made it real for the rebels. The presence of the camera and the news team was an indicator of realness that sparked posing and laughter among the rebels as well as serious commentary about the importance of the event. In the documentary “The Perfect Rescue” (Discovery Channel) about Operation Check, Army General Mario Montoya says that, out of all the team members, it was the cameraman and the journalist who were given the most special training. In the same documentary, the Intel officer who impersonated the journalist states that their intelligence revealed César as a very vain man; therefore, their job was to exploit this side of his personality by capturing his attention with the camera, and distracting him from the operation’s progress. In the video of Operation Check, the camera moves constantly, following different actors in the event. The journalist asks César to give an interview, a request that the commander of the fake humanitarian mission vehemently denies. César, caught between welcoming the head of the fake humanitarian mission and his desire for media attention, reluctantly agrees. His smile never wavers as he nervously states that he does not want to break any protocol. We see César trying to walk away from the camera, with his guerrillas in new uniforms and perfect formation in the background, but the camera seems to be everywhere, always moving, spinning around him. We also see his second-in-command, “Gafas.” He follows César everywhere; we see that he has a handycam. He records some moments and, in others, he puts the camera down.

The “nurse” from the fake humanitarian mission describes seeing the rebel army well-dressed and standing at ease with their rifles across their chest. She saw them documenting the mission with photo and video cameras. In fact, three months after the hostages’ rescue, the news channel Noticias Uno announced that the *real* video of Operation Check had been found (“Exclusivo: El video de las FARC sobre la Operación Jaque”). It was a video recorded by one of the FARC-EP rebels. The video that Noticias Uno claimed was the real one begins with intercuts between the two helicopters, one flying above the site, and the other landing. When the cameraman, the journalist and the head of the humanitarian mission leave the helicopter, the guerrilla cameraman asks somebody to check if the camera is working properly. A woman answers saying that indeed the red light is flashing, indicating that it is recording. The head of the humanitarian mission goes straight to this camera and says “Hello” in Spanish, and continues saying, “me Spanish, little, OK?” to which the guerrilla that had previously checked the camera answers, “good, OK”. The camera records him moving away, towards Cesar, and then records the encounter between César and the humanitarian mission. The next cut shows one of the U.S. hostages Mark Gonsalves looking up, following the helicopter that is flying above the site; we see him talking with the other two Americans in captivity. Then it shows members of the humanitarian mission addressing the hostages. The video cuts and the cameraman frames César, and the fake Telesur news team. The FARC-EP cameraman says out loud “An interview with

Comrade César.” Next, the camera records the hostages getting handcuffed and then everyone getting into the helicopter; one of the members of the fake humanitarian mission takes two cases of beer out of the copter and places them on the ground. Then the helicopter takes off with the doorway ladder still hanging down. And we hear the voice of the presumed cameraman, and he says “And Comrade César left; there he goes.” What follows is a discussion about the beer left by the humanitarian mission as a present to the guerrillas.

In the FARC-EP video, the voice that speaks over the image places emphasis on certain moments. These moments mark what the Colombian news channel calls *real* about this video. The voice gives presence to those who were deceived. They give name to their deception: “An interview with Comrade César,” “And Comrade César left,” “that guy told me the beer was for us.” What is real about this video is that the relationship between the words and the image appears to be established, allowing us to be certain that they were deceived. We know what the image is about; they do not know they are being deceived, and still they name what they see with what we expected from them, with what the deception had produced. In other words, when we see Cesar being chased by the cameraman and the journalist, the rebels say to their camera “An interview with Comrade César,” we know that that is not true but we want them to call it that; we want them to be deceived and our proof that they in fact were deceived is their words. The realness of this video authenticates the documentation made by the Colombian Armed Forces. The first video recorded by the fake cameraman and journalist constituted a mark of veracity for those guerrillas on the ground; their poses, formation and new uniforms speak of an image fabricated for the camera. The “fake” camera sustained the simulation. The second video made by the FARC-EP guerrilla recorded those creating the first one. This is a hand held camera; it bumps, jerks and shakes but still it underscores important moments during the hostage rescue with a voice over that anchors the image. The video by the FARC-EP ends as the cases of beer are left on the ground and we see the helicopter flying away, whereas the documentation by the Colombian government continues. It records inside the helicopter when the deception comes to an end by subduing the guerrillas, César and his second-in-command “Gafas.”

These two videos —two different points of view— are intertwined. Both sides try to derive legitimate media presence from their documentation. However, each side uses a different strategy. In the first video, the one recorded by the Colombian Armed Forces, the news team appears as an outsider accompanying the parties involved; they are there only to narrate and document what they see. They describe and locate the event in a broader historical context, as journalist do. On the other hand, in the video recorded by the FARC-EP we see an image that is closer to the events. Here the cameraman acts as our translator of what we see and places his statements in a dialogue with those around him. The dialogue brings the image closer. The FARC cameraman does not move around like the fake news team, which follows people as they try to be where the news is. For the Telesur camera, the FARC-EP poses as a real army, with uniforms, appearing disciplined and organized, in opposition to the depiction the Colombian government has given of the rebels. For the camera of this apparently friendly TV network Telesur, the FARC-EP attempts to fabricate an image that they want to circulate and distribute, but what the illegal group did not know was that their image was already inscribed in a mimicry.

How to understand this strategy? For that I would turn now to The Colombian government's netwar strategies.

Netwar's fields of action "may involve public diplomacy measures, propaganda and psychological campaigns, political and cultural subversion, deception of or interference with local media, infiltration of computer networks and databases, and efforts to promote a dissident or opposition movements across computer networks. Thus designing a strategy for netwar may mean grouping together from a new perspective a number of measures that have been used before but were viewed separately" (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 28)

Netwar is about generating content and distributing it simultaneously along different channels in an attempt "to disrupt, damage, or modify what a target population "knows" or thinks it knows about itself and the world around it". Operation Check mimicked not only individual and group identities, but also protocols of war and humanitarian action. In this sense it subverts the images of those who in war appear neutral. With this mimicry Operation Check disrupts identities such as neutral parties, friend countries, and NGOs, integrating them within war as part of the enemy front.

Operation Check is a copy of a previous humanitarian release and it also exhibits a chain of different references. When the Colombian Armed Forces speak of how Operation Check was planned, they speak of the film *Ocean's Eleven*, Operation Entebbe (OE), Operation Bodyguard during WWII and even the Trojan horse in Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, Book II. Operation Entebbe is a reference in the history of military operations, specifically in resolving hostage crisis. Operation Entebbe was a hostage rescue mission executed by commandos of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) at Entebbe Airport in Uganda on July 4, 1976. On June 27, 1976, members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the German Revolutionary Cells hijacked Air France Flight 139. The plane was detoured and flown to Entebbe, Uganda. There, with the support of Uganda's dictator Idi Amin, the hijackers held Israeli and Jewish passengers along with French pilot Captain Bacos, who refused to leave the Jewish passengers behind when the hijackers were releasing all the one hundred and forty eight non-Jewish passengers. OE used five Hercules planes carrying one hundred Israeli commandos that landed on Entebbe airport. They carried a black Mercedes that looked like Idi Amin's official vehicle and Land Rovers that looked like his security caravan. The planes landed with their doors open and in complete darkness. Then the fake presidential guard came out and drove towards the terminal where the hostages were being held. However, as they approached the terminal, Ugandan guards requested they stop since Amin's new car was a white Mercedes. With their disguise in danger, they killed the guards with silenced guns and continued to the terminal. With OE, disguising, infiltrating and penetrating enemy territory, like a Trojan horse, became a military paradigm for deception. The IDF rescued 102 hostages and three died under crossfire. Five Israeli commandoes were wounded, and the unit commander, Lt. Col. Yonatan Netanyahu, brother of Benjamin Netanyahu, was killed along with 45 Ugandan soldiers and all the hijackers. Operation Entebbe did not have a cameraman or a journalist among the crew; nevertheless, there

were a series of movies and documentaries made about it, which in turn became visual references for the Colombian Armed Forces during the planning of Operation Check.^(5⁵)

But one of the most astonishing references is from the FARC-EP itself (Otis Location 4772). At 10:30 A.M. on April 11th, 2002, a guerrilla unit disguised as members of the Third counter-guerrilla battalion walked into the Assembly building in Cali, while blocking the surrounding streets, and warned those inside of an alleged bomb threat. They evacuated the assemblymen from the state legislature building and provided them with special transportation arrangements to take them, supposedly, to a military base. Once inside the vehicles, the assemblymen learned that their protectors were the guerrillas of the FARC-EP posing as Army forces in order to kidnap them. I argued that the FARC-EP aimed at two different operations with this mimicry. On the one hand, by mimicking the armed forces of the state, they were showing that they could pass as such, precisely because they were, in fact, an army. On the other hand, they were defaming the Colombian Armed forces by mimicking them and thus revealing them to be impostors. In other words, they mocked the Colombian Armed Forces as they imitated them, showing that it is easy to imitate something that is already fake. Operation Check organized its mimicry within an expanded context. The mimicry exhibited by the FARC-EP during the kidnapping of the 12 assemblymen played with the idea of legitimacy and was addressed directly to, and in dialogue with, the Colombian Armed Forces, whereas Operation Check not only copied humanitarian protocols but --by copying a hostage release organized by President Chávez-- it cast a curtain of fog around the nexus between the left-wing governments of Latin America and the FARC-EP (Villamarin Location 235).

Operation Check projected power beyond the release of the 15 hostages by speaking to a global arrangement of enemy and friends in the region, which serves a U.S. RMA strategy. Again, Operation Check was the result of a RMA strategies as well as GCOIN tactics and it sealed the configuration of allies in the region by exhibiting dominance via restraining the use of force. The operation directly addressed Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's concerns when he stated that Colombia was becoming the Israel of Latin America by invading its neighbors, to which he would respond with war ("Amenaza Chávez con guerra si Uribe viola territorio venezolano"). However, the reference that Chávez invokes goes beyond the comparison. It is, in fact, a global arrangement in which military operations are part of a global imagination next to the entertainment industry with images like documentaries, TV series or films like Operation Entebbe.

ENACTMENTS OF OPERATION CHECK

⁵ (5) Films recreating Entebbe: *Victory at Entebbe* (1976), director: Marvin J. Chomsky; *Raid on Entebbe* (1977), director: Irvin Kershner; *Mivtsa Yonatan* (English title: *Operation Thunderbolt*) (1977), director: Menahem Golan; *The Last King of Scotland* (2006, Operation Entebbe is one episode in the story of Idi Amin). Documentaries: Operation Thunderbolt: *Entebbe* (1976); *Cohen on the Bridge* (2010); *Live or Die in Entebbe* (2012); "Assault on Entebbe", an episode of the National Geographic Channel documentary *Situation Critical* (2008); *Rise and Fall of Idi Amin* (1980); and *Operation Thunderbolt*, an episode in the 2012 season of the Military Channel documentary series *Black Ops*.

Operation Check has been an object of multiple iterations. Books, documentaries, TV miniseries, and special news reports have taken it as their subject matter. Hostages' memoirs like Ingrid Betancourt's bestseller *Even Silence Has an End*, and the three American contractors' *Out of Captivity*, feature Operation Check as the climactic moment of their narrative (Betancourt; Gonsalves et al.). Robert C. Doyle, in his study of POW memoirs, has identified six event-scenarios that the hostages' narrative follows. This genre begins with the pre-capture autobiography followed by the capture, the march into the unknown, a description of the prison landscape, the prison experience, and finally the rescue, escape or release. In the prologue of *Hostage Nation: Colombia's Guerrilla Army and the Failed War on Drugs*, the writers present the difficulties of writing a POW story,

[A]s our subjects remain in the jungle, the book, which we have worked on for six months, did not seem to have either a market or an ending in sight. We shelved the proposal. Over the next few years, we would occasionally pull it out and dust it off—changing titles, reorganizing, and rewriting—only to discover that we still didn't have a book. [...] The three of us worked together across continents for the next two years, until summer 2008, when Ingrid and the Americans were rescued by the Colombian military. To us, this seemed like a logical place to end a story we'd been covering for six and a half years (Bruce, Hayes, and Botero).

The writers of *Hostage Nation* felt that with their subjects in the jungle, they could not finish the book. They speak of the hostages' release as the logical place to end the story; the release of Betancourt and the three American contractors was conceived as the *natural* end for their book. In order to turn a dramatic situation into a narrative they needed an end. In the case of the book *Hostage Nation* the narrative closure that the writers were asking for was a political event. Operation Check, was indeed a prefigured narrative for the country, for the success of the Colombian Armed Forces, for the nation as well as for many POW memoirs. The political event and its narration are intertwined. From the six event-scenarios described by Doyle, it is the rescue, escape or release that allows for the construction of the whole captivity narrative, and in the Colombian case a political narrative. It is the attained freedom that allows for the ex-hostage's reflection on his or her time in captivity as well as for a narrative of the a new nation, a new stage of the Colombian state, and a new global player in matters of security. In the case of Betancourt and the three Americans, Operation Check not only delivered the freedom needed for them to close this dramatic event in their lives, but also a spectacular ending, which in turn is a spectacle of war.

Nicholas Mirzoeff distinguishes two different forms of visibility: war as cinema and digital war. Mirzoeff identifies war as cinema when the flow of its images is highly controlled and specialized (290). In order to understand these war images --for example those broadcast during the Gulf War--, an explanation is always needed and it comes from a specialized percept capable of deciphering the integration between the machine and the human eye. Therefore, in this context, information dominance emerges from the capacity to interpret the highly technological image, a capacity held only by few who had the specialized knowledge to make

sense of the image, but not *any* sense. In this form of visuality, dominance rises from superiority; this superiority is based on technology, language and the position of the observer: a technology the enemy does not have, a language that the enemy does not understand and a gaze that it is not mutual. Operation Check was a media operation planned by the state and delivered to us by the camera that was internal to the military operation. The documentation of Operation Check without an explanation passes as a real hostage location transfer. In order to avoid that, during the press release the government explained every step, every image that we saw, making emphasis on the deception and mimicry. When the climactic moment of the video came, as spectators being informed during the press release, we already knew that such moment existed due to the language previously used and the privileged position in which such explanation put us. But unidirectional form of sense making did not stop the multiple iterations, versions that sprung from the initial video, creating noise around Operation Check. This form of noise belongs to what Mirzoeff calls digital/networked forms of visuality in which processes of sense making cannot be contained under the authority of one subject creating it. War images have become impossible to contain given the unending processes of copy and paste, blogging and re blogging, always available, creating unending accumulation. Mirzoeff explains that this process does not mean more information; it is, rather, the production of chaos.

Several authors have noted that captivity narratives usually interpret the ordeal as having a moral purpose, meaning that these narratives serve specific ideological constructs. Some captivity narratives recast the experience as that of overcoming a personal trial. Whether the narrative takes the shape of a religious trial and/or an examination of one's patriotic values, they become the pillars from which the will to survive emerges. However, while these values are tested during captivity, they are, at the same time, being constructed. Operation Check presents specific ideas of nation, and patriotic values that come to define the country's very nature through the interpellation it makes to the politician (Ingrid Betancourt), the American military contractors (to the world and specifically to a world waging war against terrorism) and to the Colombian Army (the 11 army and police men in captivity). Each iteration, whether a book or a TV miniseries, develops an aspect of these interpellations. Each iteration promises to deliver the same story in a way that it has never been done before, from the perspective of a different subject. Each is delivered as one node of this vast network of sense, creating several instances of neovisuality. For example, the ad for the documentary *Colombia Hostage Rescue* produced by National Geographic says:

The story of the kidnapping and subsequent holding of Colombian polemic political figure Ingrid Betancourt (along with other notable Colombians) in the country's deep jungles by the FARC (The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), has been recounted countless times since her rescue this year, but typically from a certain perspective—that of the official government. This daring documentary delves into the controversial and top-secret Operación Jaque, the code name for the plan to free 15 hostages from their FARC captors, an endeavor which was unprecedented for Colombia. Through interviews with intelligence agents who drafted the plan, rescuers, FARC captors and the hostages themselves,

the true story of the experience by the people who lived it unfolds on the screen (“Colombia Hostage Rescue.”).

The article called “NatGeo lands first with Betancourt rescue doc” presents a list of projects around Operation Check, each delivering and promising new insight and a different point of view to the story.

Separately, Paraiso Pictures is prepping a two-part miniseries on the event for Spain's TVE. [...] “This is a dramatization of the events that took place before and around the day the hostages were rescued by the Colombian military,” Paraiso Pictures’ Alex Pereira says. According to Paraiso partner Santiago Diaz, the mini will narrate and present four points of view on the matter: the kidnap victims and their drama, the kidnapers and their world, the military operation and all the stages of its planning, as well as the perspective of the minister of defense (De La Fuente).

These iterations promise to deliver the story of Operation Check from a different angle. The personal angle is developed through the ordeal of the hostages or by recounting the lives, fears and sacrifice of the military personnel involved in the mission. Other iterations have promised to unveil the real level of involvement of the United States in the Operation, while others have claimed that the bloodless mission was in fact a total lie. This multiplicity is what allows for the construction of a layered story with multiple storytellers and not the product of a single speaker, all of which develops a very complex networked visuality. In fact, we do not have the government telling us what to believe, as in the cinematic model, and correcting each new version that appears to deliver the truth. The government released a video of 8 minutes and 46 seconds from which multiple spin-offs have developed; what we have is a field of speculation with certain points of closure creating a hybrid between cinematic visuality –which is the initial video of the operation– and a networked visuality in all the multiple iterations derived from it. The iterations of Operation Check that announced they would reveal the level of U.S. involvement bring a new global order to the table, in which copying Chávez, or humanitarian protocols or accepting technology and intelligence services from the U.S. is a new and acceptable transnational configuration. Hollywood is also planning a movie about Operation Check,

EXCLUSIVE: In the wake of Osama Bin Laden’s killing by a Navy SEAL team, Hollywood is suddenly obsessed with politically-charged fact-based mission movies. Momentum is building on one of those at Warner Bros, *The Mission*. David O Russell is circling the picture and the studio is courting Brad Pitt to star. [...] The picture is basically the methodical six-year mission planned by American and Colombian covert operatives to free 15 hostages from the Colombian jungle. The hostages included three Americans and Ingrid Betancourt, once a candidate for President of Colombia. [...] The hostages were held by the Colombian guerilla group FARC from between six and 15 years. It was a nightmarish existence as the hostages were moved around the jungles, often

cruelly chained to trees at night by their necks. The central focus of the film isn't the ordeal of those hostages but rather on Operación Jaque, a covert effort involving numerous governments, diplomats and intelligence services and a vast network of spies, military advisers and soldiers plus high-tech surveillance measures. Nobody would confirm that Pitt was at all involved, and I'm not sure he'll be set, but I am convinced they are talking (Fleming Jr.).

The TV miniseries and the Hollywood movies in the making underscore the spectacular character of the real, which stands ready to be exploited on the cinematic screen, adding a new level to the multiplicity of one narrative in which the noise of all these iterations only affirm that there is something worth talking about. The Hollywood movie plans convey that the military operations in Colombia have reached the global screen of war as spectacle inscribing them in a genealogy that links military action and spectacle: Operation Check and Operation Neptune Spear. When Colombia appeared on the Hollywood screen in the 1990s and 2000s, it was through depictions of Colombian bloodthirsty mobsters, kidnappers, drug lords, arms traffickers and guerrillas (Mann; Cohen; Llosa; Hackford; Norris; Davis; Noyce; Niccol; Day; Lester). Today, Colombia's portrait on the silver screen has shifted. Colombian characters are not only the antagonists but are depicted as heroes alongside the Americans. Operation Check on the Hollywood screen signaled Colombia's entrance into a global market of narratives, achieved by turning war into spectacle. The multiplicity that these iterations present is a sense-making process that is not unidirectional but, on the contrary, transversal and repetitive, always allowing for another version of the facts. This is precisely a netwar strategy. Info niche-attacks are presented here as they develop different levels of the story for different audiences. The media iterations of Operation Check constantly dispute how this operation was planned and executed. They focus on different narrative angles and exploit the details that they claim are unknown. What they do not dispute is the success of the hostage rescue. In fact, new iterations are planned as we speak. They continue. The successful hostage rescue is the spectacular ending that gets recast in every movie, TV series, special news report or book. The argument that supports the production of a new spin-off of Operation Check is that new details will be revealed, but what allows it to exist, be funded and produced is the already known spectacular ending that gets recast over and over again, as well as celebrated. This form of content production replicates a structure of means and ends. What we continue to see is the spectacular ending with new details that bring to the forth the intricacies of the means used; however, these details only satisfy a curiosity based on rumor and gossip. None of the new details that appears in these iterations alter the legitimacy that the Colombian Armed Forces and government achieved with the rescue. On the contrary, what is created in this unending chain of enactments is the legitimacy of the ends despite the means used.

Operation Entebbe appears as a referent for the management of a hostage crisis. However, Entebbe is more a referent in terms of the multiple enactments it has produced of itself. Even today, 35 years after Entebbe, the story is recounted in the 2012 documentary *Follow Me: The Yoni Netanyahu Story*. This documentary tells the story of the raid's senior commando and brother of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (Gruber and Pinchot).

Operation Check and its different media recreations (upcoming film, National Geographic series, and books) have created and multiplied a global “influential spectator’s gallery of the international community.” This is not simply a refashioning of the old propaganda machine of the state. The war on terror has brought an epistemological change between words and images, representation and explanation that has set up new differentiations between enemies and friends, and means and ends.

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