

Secreting History / Screening 'History': 21 takes

by Andrea Luka Zimmerman

Since the end of human action, as distinct end products of fabrication, can never be reliably predicted, the means used to achieve political goals are more often than not of greater relevance to the future world than the intended goals. – Hannah Arendt

Between the experience of living a normal life at this moment on the planet and the public narratives being offered to give a sense to that life, the empty space, the gap, is enormous. - John Berger



1

'Bo' Gritz turned 80 this year.

The great majority of those serving under him have not.

Lt. Col. James Gordon 'Bo' Gritz - "*the American Soldier*" for the Commander-in-Chief of the Vietnam War – is one of the most decorated combatants in US history. Gritz was at the heart of American military and foreign policy – both overt and covert - from the Bay of Pigs to Afghanistan.

He was financed by Clint Eastwood and William Shatner (via Paramount Pictures) in exchange for the rights to tell his story Their funding supported his 'deniable' missions searching for American POWs in Vietnam. He has exposed US government drug running, turning against the Washington elite as a result. He has stood for President, created a homeland community in the Idaho backlands and trained Americans in strategies of counter-insurgency against the incursions of their own government.

He claims to remember every single one of the 400 people he killed.

The media turned him into the inspiration behind *Rambo*, *The A-Team's* Colonel John 'Hannibal' Smith and Coppola's Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*.

What does it mean to make a life like this?

2

At the end of Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* (1899) there is a call to "*exterminate all the brutes*".

How does such a thought come into being?

Swedish writer Sven Lindqvist, in his book titled after that phrase, explores the origins of racist totalitarian thinking that led to the possibility of such an idea being enacted internationally.

He begins, "you already know enough. So do I. It is not knowledge we lack. What is missing is the courage to understand what we know and to draw conclusions."

An image of Gritz and his Cambodian mercenaries fighting the 'secret war' in Laos was published in General Westmoreland's memoirs *A Soldier Reports* (1976).

Francis Ford Coppola made *Apocalypse Now* in 1979. It was *Heart of Darkness* narratively transplanted to the Vietnam War.

Coppola asked for permission to use this image promotionally for *Apocalypse Now*, but with Marlon Brando's face pasted over Gritz's. This request was refused by the Department of the Army.

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"We thought the means would be justified by the end - but the end never justifies the means." – Bo Gritz

The majority of lives are lived *in* history. Few lives *make* history. If that history is dark, occupying the shadow-lands and margins of what is known or acceptable, the price of that making can very high indeed...

What are the implications on a personal and collective level of identities founded on a profound, even endemic violence? What are adequate means by which to examine the propagation of that violence through Hollywood and the mass media, the arms trade and ongoing governmental policy?

War has *become* a social structure, a way of being for individuals and countries, in what is becoming an era of 'permanent conflict'.

Moving beyond political reportage or investigation, necessary as they are, any sustained investigation must look into the nature of human conscience and the limits of deniability (whether to oneself or others). When redemption is no longer an option, the psyche needs to find other ways to live with itself.

Gritz's is a contested, contentious and very public life lived glaringly in the media age. It is a life made from fragments, from different positions, both politically and in terms of their mediation. His life is contradictory and assembled from all these shards.

In my essay film *Erase and Forget*, the exploration of a complex and constantly changing relationship between event and image is one of my key intentions. When contentious ideas and actions enter the socially mediated space, all too often crude binaries (of action and reaction, right and wrong, etc...) are created. These are, as is evident across the world today, extremely dangerous.

Fiction creates reality. Hollywood and political structures in the United States are tightly knit. On a material level, there are exchanges of personnel and funds. Hollywood regularly employs (often retired) covert operators and military staff as advisers, and the story rights of military operations often become the properties of major studios. Where the purchase of such rights is, by definition, often after the fact, on occasion funding precedes the event.

The flow of funds and support from Hollywood to the military is not uni-directional. The Pentagon contributes by providing army assistance (military advisers, helicopters, use of

bases, etc...) to productions that it deems supportive of US policy. Such films inform climates of public opinion within which policy operates. They open imaginative spaces and arenas of ethical consideration in which certain kinds of military operations are validated. Furthermore, Hollywood cinema serves as a curious, discursive space for policy makers (and thus for speechwriters as well as scriptwriters). Ronald Reagan, on numerous occasions, publicly drew on the Rambo series to articulate his foreign policy vision and figure his political aspirations.

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The imbrications of Hollywood mythmaking and national policy formation reach back to the first half of last century. It was not merely that Hollywood directors were seized by the hubristic urge to shape the extraordinary dreams and everyday opinions of the masses, but rather that figures within the administration actively sought to harness such hubris. J. Edgar Hoover's 'mission, in effect, was to commandeer the American film industry as a propaganda tool for the government' (Braun, 2002). During WWII, Hollywood had geared up a significant propaganda machine. Frank Capra's documentary series *Why We Fight* (1944) is perhaps its most famous product.

Crucially, here, I do not intend to 'set straight' the spectacular distortions of this propaganda machine, neither simply to tell a hidden history of covert operations and political violence, nor to expose the exploitation of such histories by Hollywood. There have been many attempts to point to the accuracy of detail (or otherwise) of a Hollywood account, or to oppose a sensationalised and spectacular violence to a stealthy and lethal reality. So here, my aim is, through this text and the film *Erase and Forget*, to identify and analyse the exchanges - imaginary and material - between the spectral and the spectacular.

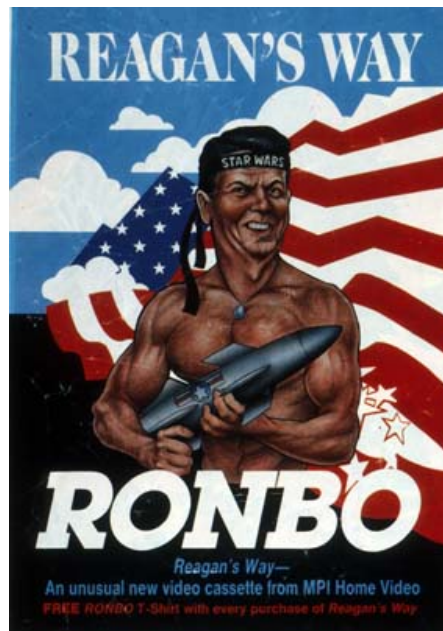
Gritz was part of a world where deniability lies at the forefront of action on the uncertain line between knowing and unknowing. The spectral nature of covert operations lies in their being, officially, 'neither confirmed, nor denied'. Thus the spectral is produced by official discourse, but admissible to it only as that which cannot be admitted. However, rather than a product of official denial, it is a product of 'deniability'. Deniability involves not the denial of a particular event but denying official authorisation of an event.

Dislocating action and intention, cause and effect, creates a shadow realm from which strategic operations march forward like zombies – an operation appears to have been carried out in the absence of an originating order. The action is spectral in as much as it seems to escape the laws of causality that govern the rest of the world – it is an effect without identifiable cause.

The spectral can be thought of as power's penumbra - precisely an effect of the potential to 'project power'. Indeed, the potential for covert operations is variously publicized: covert operations are an acknowledged instrument of policy. Thus, spectrality is more an effect of an administration's covert operations capability, than of any particular operation. Thus, the spectral issues from the encounter between highly publicized capability and the mechanics of deniability.

While any given mission may be invisible, the spectral threat of those missions is often broadcast in a spectacular fashion. The very visibility of Hollywood renditions of covert operations does nothing to diminish their spectrality. On the contrary, the spectral subsists in the spectacular: if it is the penumbra of power, it is also the shadow of the spectacle.

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The images, discourses and practices associated with the series of *Rambo* films allow one to explore material, re-presentational and discursive exchanges between the spectral and the spectacular. On one level, the themes and stories of the series were deliberately mapped by its producers onto popular concerns and topical policy issues (returning Vietnam vets; prisoner of war recovery missions; Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and US-sponsored resistance). At the same time, the series provided the media with a wealth

of imagery and a cast of characters to articulate their coverage of such concerns, while policy makers were offered a rhetorical vehicle with which to drive their strategic imperatives through the minefield of public opinion.

The 'Rambo universe', however, is more curious than its official and mainstream appropriations suggest. For instance, in Sierra Leone Rambo was a canonical text for RUF rebels who borrowed *noms-de-guerre* directly from the universe of Hollywood action films; in Poland members of the Solidarity movement adopted Rambo as a figure of democratic resistance, having watched bootleg VHS copies at clandestine screenings. As an 80s phenomenon, the films pervaded the cultural sphere. A children's cartoon series (1985) saw Rambo engaged 'in global struggles against evil' and there were porn spin-offs, too, 'such as *Ramb-Ohh* (1986) and *Bimbo: Hot Blood Part II* (1985), and *Bimbo: The Homecoming!* (1986)' (Franklin, 1993)

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Writer David Morrell invented the Rambo character in 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War. Rambo is also an apple. It travelled across the waters with Swedish settlers and grew rosy in colonial orchards in Virginia. From a bite into a colonial apple, Rambo was born.

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First Blood (Kotcheff, 1982) was intended by both the inventor of the Rambo character, David Morrell, and by the movie's director, Ted Kotcheff, to have an anti-war stance. The film follows recent Vietnam Veteran John Rambo searching mid-country USA for survivors of his unit, many of whom, it transpires, have either died from exposure to chemicals used during the war or committed suicide. Rambo's adjustment to civilian life is troubled.

Rambo, although betrayed and deeply suspicious of his government, remains deeply patriotic, 'all I want is for my country to love me as I love it' (*Rambo: First Blood II*, 1985). Furthermore, and precisely because of this loyalty in the face of what he perceives as repeated betrayal, Rambo's 'compulsion to win' seems to have rendered a dysfunctional American war machine retroactively invincible. In this sense, the Rambo vehicle re-establishes the American soldier as masculine hero, while accusing the soldier's administrators: it was not flawed masculinity but flawed policy that led to defeat.

Ted Kotcheff made *First Blood* in 1982. In test screenings the audience rejected the ending, which depicts Rambo committing suicide. The public could not fathom this death. So the ending was changed. Rambo became a franchise.

First Blood (1982) Alternative Ending

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bn187skbynQ>

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Nearly three decades after McCarthy's House of Un-American Activities, Ronald Reagan's presidency saw a rejuvenated and popularised struggle against Communism, and the Prisoner of War issue was mobilised in the name of this struggle. Hollywood corrected, at the level of cultural fantasy, what the administration had not achieved in actuality: the reclamation of those it had allegedly abandoned in Indochina. Reagan raised the POW flag over the White House and wore a POW bracelet.

Rambo: First Blood II (Cameron, 1985) sees Rambo rescue POWs left behind in South East Asia after the withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam. Rambo is chosen for this mission because of his war record, in particular his ability to survive (and perform his given tasks) in conditions of extreme adversity. A CIA agent briefs Rambo for this mission. Rambo indeed finds POWs in a camp deep inside Laos. Upon confirmation of this discovery, the very same CIA agent who organised the mission subsequently sabotages it. Rambo then shifts into a mode of superhuman autonomy and rescues the prisoners all by himself.

Rambo's excessive violence is symptomatic of the traumatic legacy of the actual War, and the film was extreme even by the standards of Hollywood then. Unleashing Rambo's killer potential again in the sequel, *Rambo, First Blood II*, saw the movie top all previous films in number of deaths per minute (approximately a killing every 2.1 minutes and some 70 explosions). It has been argued that these were simply acts of self-defence. Rambo never attacks first. Rambo is 'basically self-defending' and it is only after he is betrayed by the military, then captured and tortured, that 'this animal wakes up, which is a defence'. The casting of offence as self-defence is perhaps consonant with figuring American superpower and individual Americans fighting in its service as benevolent in a decade when America was becoming the sole superpower.

"...Half of politics is "image-making", the other half is the art of making people believe the image." - Hannah Arendt

U.S. Marine Corps Commercial: A Nation's Call Extended Cut

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMqmP5C5WHI>

"[Events] do occur, to be sure, but in part according to the conventions dictating how we receive, imagine, and pass them on." (Gordon)

Covert operations are institutionally accepted as an essential instrument of government policy. Thus, without the need to invoke shadowy conspiracies, the very machinery of democratic governance produces a host of spectres – ‘spook’ is the widely employed term for a CIA agent. As one such spook, Rudy Enders, retired high-ranking CIA officer in charge of all ‘special operations’, claimed, “[t]he covert operations the world knows about are those that failed. Many more ... were entirely successful and will remain secret. That’s what keeps us going. And someone like me will never talk about them.” (Rudy Enders, 2004)

In 1982 Gritz set out on his most extensive mission to recover American POWs and MIAs he believed left behind from US covert missions in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. The official status of these missions remains contested, as does the very meaning of the terms used for ‘missing’ combatants. Many of those Gritz believed to be missing in action were operating in areas, much like himself during the US-Vietnam War, in which there was no official US presence at the time. Another reason for the uncertainty and vexation is the possibility that many of those classed as MIA in Vietnam were in fact killed in (covert) action in Laos; they are not only missing, but also displaced. Perversely, they are missing from where they were not. Many of these soldiers, mostly from Special Forces, were sent on secret missions, without ID on their bodies, which means the government would not acknowledge their death by Laotian forces, and instead labelled them POW-MIA in Vietnam.

Popular fascination with the issue had intensified after the war. Each ‘homecoming’ event staged to effect public closure – such as Operation Homecoming (1973) – only served as a platform for those who insisted the issue was still open. American public discourse

continued to conjure these dead (or otherwise) soldiers, who did not officially exist, yet were invented when they did not (in Vietnam) and who were denied when they did (in Laos, Cambodia and, indeed, North Vietnam).

In 1979 Gritz had given up his formal military career to prepare for his first, soon aborted POW recovery mission, Operation Liberator. However, he used the assets still in place and immediately started preparations to launch Operation Lazarus (1982-83). Lazarus was short of money, and this shortfall was collected from various sources. Litton Industries provided specialist equipment worth \$50,000 through chairman Fred O'Green. William Shatner, famous as Star Trek's Captain Kirk, helped bridge the gap further by providing \$10,000, in exchange for the rights 'to tell his life story'.

Clint Eastwood provided the outstanding \$30,000 needed to get Operation Lazarus off the ground, in return for an unofficial option on the mission's story rights: "Clint Eastwood called me up one day [...] I've been told that you need \$30,000 to complete an operation. You don't have enough money. I said that's the truth. And he said all right, I just want you to know, he said, someday I'd like to maybe do a film about this but you don't owe me anything" (Gritz).

Thus, a future history was at once made possible and purchased. The story of prisoners returned through the initiative of one man operating beyond the law and without official sanction was just the kind of patriotic tale of heroism and redemption that Hollywood was hungry for. However, a restaging of the mission (Hollywood film) depended very much on an initial staging congruent with the conventions and dictates of its Hollywood paymaster.

Operation Lazarus brought with it sensationalised news coverage on all three major US networks, as well as a campaign to discredit Gritz. He claimed he was prepared for the smears and suggested that his mission, at the highest levels, had a different ultimate objective: not to recover prisoners of war but to confirm their non-existence. Effectively, what the administration wanted was a spectacular illustration of absence, and the high visibility of 'nothingness' was intended to banish the spectres of those supposedly still missing. So, having initially conjured the spectres as a means of prolonging the war and then as a means of negotiating the peace, the administration now wanted to banish those spectres through the spectacle of the covert operation.

Of course, the very notion of a spectacular covert operation is paradoxical. As is the fact that Gritz was chosen to lead the secret mission precisely because of his visibility. In the end, Gritz never returned with any prisoners, but each return was haunted by the spectre of prisoners that his very missions were involved in producing.

Eastwood admitted later, via his biographer, "I did a lot of stuff for them, a lot of legwork" (Schnickel, 1996). Gritz's suggestion of a Hollywood production staged as a

cover for a covert operation that would itself later be made into another Hollywood production is, indeed, the stuff of Hollywood productions and postmodern allegory.

If Eastwood invested in a covert operation to rescue missing prisoners of war in reality, then later, again on screen, Reagan, after the release of American hostages in Beirut, proclaimed: 'Having watched *Rambo* last night, next time this happens I know what to do' (June 1985).

On January 31st 1983, CBS News called Gritz's current foray into Laos 'the stuff from which movies are made...a case of life imitating art'. The inadvertently implied elision of difference between 'life' and 'art' in this strictly nonsensical newspeak is telling - read, "this mission is a model for movies that this mission is modelled on."

In 1985 David Morrell, inventor of the Rambo character, received a phone call from *People* magazine asking him whether Rambo was based on or inspired by the exploits of an actual person, James "Bo" Gritz. This was the first time he had heard of Gritz.

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In the same period, William Casey [CIA Director during the Reagan years] brought in some of the country's top public relations firms to advise him on how to sell his two pet projects, supporting the Contras in Nicaragua and the Afghan Mujahedeen, to a dubious American public. He called this "perception management" (Cockburn, Clair, 1998).

Ronald Reagan, at the 1988 annual Republican Congress fundraising dinner said, "by the way, in a few weeks, a new film opens, *Rambo III*. You remember in the first movie Rambo took over a town, in the second, he single-handedly defeated several communist armies, and now in the third Rambo film, they say he really gets tough. Almost makes me wish I could serve a third term."

Rambo III (Cosmatos, 1986) is set in Afghanistan. After the Soviets capture Rambo's beloved colonel and father figure Trautman, Rambo reluctantly joins Afghan freedom fighters in order to defend Afghanistan's right to freedom from Soviet rule. Rambo defeats the Soviet Army almost single-handedly. The film was released in 1988. It ends with a dedication printed over its final scene: 'This film is dedicated to the Gallant People of Afghanistan'. At the time of its release, the Reagan administration's covert funding for Afghanistan was at its highest. The film premiered as President Gorbachev announced the Soviet forces' withdrawal from Afghanistan, a policy decision that was welcomed by none more than the marketing team working on *Rambo III*. The film rode the wave of euphoria for US political and military 'success'. This was, then a historical context which enabled the film's hero to be figured – both by the film's marketing team and, indeed, by audiences,

who read the film in the social and discursive context of the times – as individually responsible for the defeat of the Soviets in Afghanistan.ⁱ

There is another, less widely distributed film that stands as testimony to the Reagan government's dedication to the 'Gallant People of Afghanistan'. Untitled and shot on Super 8 sound film in the autumn of 1986, it is the record of a 'secret' training programme for Afghan Mujahedeen on US soil. Gritz claims that the training program was initiated by the National Security Council (NSC) under the direction of State Department official, William Bode, and that the funding was channelled through Stanford technology, a CIA front-company.ⁱⁱ

Most of the training was carried out in a disused mine in Sandy Valley, not far from the small desert town in which Gritz was and remains resident. The Soviets need only have waited two years, however, in fact just a few months before their Union's collapse, to view this footage. In 1989 Gritz included the record of these sessions in the first film he himself would produce and direct, *A Nation Betrayed* (1989).

At one stage, the footage shows Gritz winding up a detonator cable leading to a huge plastic container-bomb that explodes in spectacular fashion. It leaves behind an enormous crater in the desert earth and is cause for enthusiastic cheering from an off-screen crowd. A little further into the reel, Gritz, presiding over a bucket of ball bearings, instructs his traditionally clad Afghan trainees in the making of homemade claymore mines. Explaining what will happen once the many ball bearings penetrate their targets, he makes a cryptic allusion "just think of it as Hollywood". These bomblets are baked in apple pie tins and then detonated in close proximity to human-shaped paper targets. After the explosion, Gritz inspects the targets and shouts triumphantly, "all the Commissars are damaged!"

Gritz has repeatedly asserted that *Rambo III* is based on his experiences: "by the time the third one came out I got suspicious" (Gritz, 2003). Gritz as the source of Rambo is a rumour whose origin is not easily traced but which has been reified by its reiteration in the media. In a Las Vegas news feature tracing the US role in training Mujahedeen (near Las Vegas) – an issue rendered explosively topical by the September 11th attacks – two news presenters announce: "Afghanistan's Northern Alliance is considered one of America's strongest allies in fighting against the Taliban." The male anchor continues: "Turns out that some of those Afghan leaders were trained right here in Southern Nevada, and the man who conducted the training is someone who knows plenty about guerrilla tactics" (Broadcast June 9th, 2002).

It is now a creative act – and one mimicked by my own montage in *Erase and Forget* – when Channel 8's editors cut their news item to footage of Rambo. The voice over explains the unorthodox editing: "You've heard of the Hollywood Rambo, who plowed the cinematic jungle of South East Asia looking for American POWs." On screen, we see

Rambo in a shooting frenzy, firing a 50mm cannon. Rambo shoots the gun from his hip, which is followed by a match-cut to Gritz shooting an even bigger gun, also from the hip. The television voice over continues over Gritz shooting: "we'll meet the real deal, Bo Gritz" (Broadcast June 9th, 2002).

Television conflates Gritz with the fictional character, Rambo, in order to make sensational news, featuring Gritz as Rambo. By conflating them, and thus sensationalising the covert, what Channel 8 does is to occlude the conditions by which Gritz's Afghan training was made. Everything singular about this film is erased, including the terrible events from which it emerged. By producing Gritz as 'the real deal', television produces the irrecoverable historical real (i.e. the past) as merely a parasitic supplement of fiction.

Spectacular realist fiction, then, precedes the events upon which it is ostensibly based. And this is something of an inevitability in a mass media environment which rehearses as well as scripts the conditions of sociability, namely those common fictions through which the world can be apprehended, those conventions that allow for a popular imagination to distance itself from the violence that underpins it.

The violence of Channel 8's treatment of Gritz's Afghan training film, then, is to erase its detailed relationships with the past – that is to say the discursive conditions by which it can be received as evidence of something other than the spectacular performance of a fictionalised character. James 'Bo' Gritz becomes the real Rambo, for the media (and to himself) because it serves the media precisely to be able to talk about real life; and it serves Gritz to reinvent himself as the 'real deal' in order to suture himself into a mise-en-scene in which his own carefully collected documentation can be apprehended as evidence, and he celebrated as a hero. As Gritz says, 'Why should I act like Hollywood when it is Hollywood's job to act like me?'

In summary, then, we can see how Reagan plots out his foreign policy imperatives along the trajectory of the Rambo franchise, which reciprocates by riding and intensifying the wave of euphoria generated by the apparent success of that foreign policy. There are interesting parallels between these public policy statements, these spectacular renditions of that policy's effects, and Gritz film record of one of the covert operations that were the policy's strategic implementation. This record becomes an element in the public construction of Gritz's character, used as it is in *A Nation Betrayed*, and the local Channel 8 news report. This construction erases – precisely through violent spectacle – the actual violence of which Gritz was an agent. Gritz participates in this violence through the directorial relationship he forges between himself and Rambo as fictional character, which finally entails reducing his utterances to fictional clichés.



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U.S. Marine Corps Commercial: A Nation's Call: 30
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4o95R71Bib8>

18

In 2004 journalist Ron Suskind wrote, “the aide said that guys like me were ‘in what we call the reality-based community’, which he defined as people ‘who believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality’. I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. ‘That’s not the way the world really works anymore,’ he continued. ‘We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.’”

19

On May 5th, 1986, Gritz set off for Burma on a final POW recovery mission, one that he maintains was initiated by the White House. It was there that he met Khun Sa, a warlord reigning over Burma’s Golden Triangle, and notorious for financing his militia with opium revenues. According to US government intelligence, Khun Sa held, or knew the whereabouts of, at least one American POW.

But on his arrival in the Golden Triangle, Gritz found no evidence of POWs. Gritz later came to believe that because earlier missions failed to confirm that there were no POWs left in Southeast Asia, he was sent to Burma to be killed by Khun Sa’s army. However, he was not killed. Instead, Khun Sa asked Gritz to act as an envoy to the White House, bringing a proposal in which Khun Sa promised to stop producing opium in exchange for an aid programme which would constitute a de facto recognition of the sovereignty of the Shan region. As a sign of his sincerity, Khun Sa promised to ally himself with the US government’s much-publicised ‘War on Drugs’ (whose public face was Nancy Reagan’s ‘Just Say No’ campaign). Khun Sa’s sincerity was further evidenced by his disclosure to Gritz of the names of the CIA clients that had allegedly bought his opium.ⁱⁱⁱ

At Khun Sa’s headquarters, Gritz set up his video camera and recorded himself listening to the warlord as he named his former customers, including Theodore Shackley (who went on to become the CIA’s head of covert operations, and was slated to become head of the agency) and Richard Armitage (who went on to become President Bush’s Deputy Secretary of State, 2001-2005). Gritz believes that the CIA used profits from selling-on Khun Sa’s opium to finance covert operations that fell outside of the legal authorisation and funding of Congress.

When Gritz returned to the United States and tried to inform his boss, Tom Harvey, about the illicit activities of very senior officials in the intelligence establishment, he was told ‘to

erase and forget' what he had seen. Gritz refused to do so, and became in some respects a whistleblower, which he claims ended his career as a US covert operator.

Then, as a whistleblower, Bo returned to Burma to gather more evidence with his video camera in 1987. On this mission into Shan territory, Bo Gritz again takes a camera for strictly documentary purposes. Here, the film record of the mission is to serve as an evidentiary element in a campaign in which Gritz, like Rambo, is cast as a lone crusader set against a corrupt bureaucracy. Appropriately, as in *Rambo II*, this campaign's point of departure is allegedly a covert operation officially initiated in bad faith (i.e. his first trip into Burma under the auspices of the National Security Council).

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The word 'secrete' has two senses that appear to be in peculiar tension with one another: to exude, and to make secret.^{iv} It is this peculiar tension that informs the relationship between spectacular representations of covert military operations in cinema and the spectral violence of the actual 'theatres of operation'. On the one hand, we have seen that Hollywood is willing to create the conditions of possibility for covert operations so that it might then recover them in spectacular fashion. Shatner and Eastwood both funded covert missions with an eye to their future Hollywood renditions. In this sense, Hollywood has the capacity to secrete a spectral violence. But this secretion, in order that it might be successfully recovered as spectacle, must be secreted as secret. The covert operation must be 'secret' in order to be authentic. Here, then, the covert operation is pretext for, and projection of, its own spectacular re-enactment.

This process of secretion, however, is chiasmatic. The covert operation may, in some instances, secrete its own Hollywood creation (for example, Gritz's proposal to Eastwood that a faux action movie production be staged on the Thai-Laos border to serve as cover for Gritz's mission). Here the spectral secretes the spectacular in order to make itself secret.

It is this process of mutual secretion, of projection and reflection, that my film aimed analytically to perform. The insertion into a fictional scenario of a historical actor whose biography is purportedly the basis of that scenario's script is a strategy that has yielded rich results. This *mise-en-abyme* strains the coherence of both the biographical and the fictional scripts, and in so doing reveals the generic imperatives that guarantee these discourses' very coherence.

21



Re-enactment and the real

I of course never had the opportunity to accompany the Gritz on a real mission. However, I never sought consolation in a re-enactment of such a mission. All the re-enactments I stage with Gritz are re-enactments of fiction. For my concern was never with the commando's survival techniques nor the mechanics of his killing methods, rather with how he, and we, imagine the role these techniques play in 'history' and, furthermore, the way history is told through the spectacular rehearsal of such techniques in cinema. The techniques of re-enactment that I have developed are intended to elicit and mark a slippage of registers between biographical narrative, fiction, and historical discourse.

For instance, in one re-enactment I ask him to play a character who serves to condense the political corruption that Rambo struggles against and prevails over. Gritz's self-stylized

public persona is also structured around a dramatised struggle against such corruption (the corruption whose narrative place holder he now occupies). Towards the end of this re-enactment I ask him how he feels, to which he responds, "if I let myself I am crossing that damn Mekong river... I'm back there, doing those things. And I see those [corrupt] people [that sabotaged my mission]... if it's noble, it must be done right, without compromise, if it's ignoble, then who cares because I'm not going to be doing it anyway. Like, sitting in a hanger with some people taking a picture as if I am working for the CIA."

Here Gritz is claiming that he would never do precisely what he is doing (play-acting), and worse still, acting as a corrupt CIA agent. He seems to have caught himself off-guard for he has caught himself reading his script in the wrong scenario and is startled by the inappropriateness of his own performance. And in response, for a moment, he takes refuge in the fiction and becomes the character of his historical adversary. "Once CIA, always CIA", he says, winking and wiping the sweat from his brow. Suddenly Gritz, 'the real deal', is an actor in search of a script and, as he gropes for the reassuring facility of cliché and strains to sense the appropriate generic conventions, he is disarmingly vulnerable. My initial frustration with our early interview encounters in which Gritz insisted on both directing and performing here gave way to the sense of excitement that the fiction director feels when opening a space that the actor spontaneously spans with a vital connection.

Re-enactment is an essentially theatrical process concerned with the deliberate (re)staging and performance of a prior script (whether that script be derived from historical record or dramatic account). And as the above scene makes manifest, the theatricality of re-enactment makes it an ideal form for framing the drama of identity as it is acted-out in social space and for investigating the role of memory and history in shaping these identities and spaces. Re-enactment reveals fiction, too, as a social space that we *all* inhabit.

"The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil." - Hannah Arendt

JUNE, 1942



Salute to Daddy

End Note:

In 2001 I co-founded the filmmaking collective Vision Machine Film Project alongside Christine Cynn, Joshua Oppenheimer and Michael Uwemedimo. We explored a methodological approach that can be termed 'performance-as-research'. Building on a (Jean) Rouchian legacy of 'ethno-fictions', we strived to open a cinematic space in which role-play determined the plotting out of a historical *mise-en-scene* and the spatialisation of a historical imaginary. We aimed to make 'historical actors' of our subjects, and through fiction sought a way to document and analyse the historical scripts that have conditioned their historical performances.

In *Erase and Forget* my interest has not been merely in what 'really happened', but in the historical drama of these actors' self-fashioning. And so my experiments with role-play, re-narration, re-enactment and the montage of 'document' and 'fiction' have been part of a methodological quest to find a form of 'adequate mediation' – that is to say, a method that promises no immediate or direct access to historical truth, but whose processes articulate and analytically perform the dramatic, narrative and generic conditions of the production of historical truth, the production of historical actors.

These methods offer new ways of exploring relationships between image, memory and historical representation in a context – covert operations - where such explorations are fraught. Here, fiction cinema offers a route of access that allows both the recovery of logistical detail and the plotting out of a historical *mise-en-scene* that such details are elements of.

My thoughts above emerge from our collective efforts and conversations, and in particular with Michael Uwemedimo, whom I thank for his invaluable contribution over many years to my thinking these things through. With gratitude also to Gareth Evans for his astute editing.

Erase and Forget trailer

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tlh1i-2WZb8>

www.eraseandforget.com

Andrea Luka Zimmerman is an artist filmmaker, writer and cultural activist. Andrea's work is concerned with marginalisation, social justice and structural violence and has been nominated for the Grierson and Jarman awards. Films include *Erase and Forget* (2017), which had its World Premiere at the Berlin Film Festival (nominated for the Original Documentary Award), *Estate, a Reverie* (2015) and *Taskafa, Stories of the Street* (2013), written and voiced by the late John Berger. Selected exhibitions include *Civil Rites*, the London Open, Whitechapel Gallery and *Common Ground*, Spike Island, Bristol. She co-

founded the cultural collectives Fugitive Images and Vision Machine (collaborators on Academy Award® nominated feature documentary *The Look of Silence*).

ⁱ The BBC series *The Power of Nightmares* (2004) showed how both, the US as well as radical Islamic factions claimed that they were instrumental in Soviet withdrawal. Radical Islamic fractions were sponsored by the US who provided arms and training to the guerrillas. Afghanistan has been widely seen as the USSR's Vietnam. Michael Hobsbawm examines how the withdrawal of the Soviet Union stemmed from a combination of economic and political factors; the invasion simply became unsustainable (1995).

ⁱⁱ Nic Schou notes that 'according to the final report on the Iran-contra scandal by Special Prosecutor Lawrence Walsh, Stanford Technology was a private company set up by ... retired Air Force Major General Richard Secord and Iranian businessman Albert Hakim' (Schou, 1996:16). CIA operative Milton Bearden in a April 25th, 2001, interview for the French television show *90 Minutes* claimed that 'the CIA could have been involved in that Bo Gritz thing'. Schou asserts that Bearden 'was apparently unaware that he was acknowledging agency involvement in an illegal covert operation. "If we did some romantic training in the Nevada desert with a few Afghans ... I'm aware of that. I know about that. There's something like that. But it doesn't matter"' (Schou, 2005).

ⁱⁱⁱ The 'offer' was not made the first, or last, time; see Adrian Cowells PBS *Frontline* series *Opium Kings* (1997, three 50 minute programmes). CIA profiteering from the opium trade continued and in 1992, when Shan leader U Saw Lu attempted to shift away from opium production, he was cut short (and tortured) by CIA sponsored cronies. Read further Cockburn and St. Clair, *Whiteout, The CIA, Drugs and the Press*, (1998:215-232).

^{iv} This notion of 'historical secretion' grew out of a conversation between Michael Uwemedimo, Josephine Mcdonagh and myself.

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