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"Looking for Marshall McLuhan in Afghanistan", Rita Leistner, Chicago 2014 : [recenzja]

TransCanadiana 8, 319-321

2016

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**RITA LEISTNER. *LOOKING FOR MARSHALL
MCLUHAN IN AFGHANISTAN*. CHICAGO:
INTELLECT, 2014. 240 PAGES.
ISBN 979-1-78320-030-6**

Looking for Marshall McLuhan in Afghanistan is a result of the many remarkable talents of its author, surprising coincidences, and a certain business trip, which turned out to be quite unique. In January 2011, Rita Leistner—a photojournalist from Toronto, known primarily for her works focusing on armed conflicts—was invited to participate in an innovative project called Basetrack. It was an independent, civilian, international media experiment, the aim of which was to use social media (such as Facebook or Twitter) so as to facilitate unhampered contact between troops on a foreign mission and their families in the United States. A group of writers, designers, researchers, and photographers accompanied a battalion of U.S. Marines during its seven-month stay in Afghanistan. Leistner photographed the daily life of a military base situated in Helmand, a province near the border with Pakistan.

Participating in Basetrack, Leistner, for the first time in her career, took pictures with her smartphone (iPhone) using the Hipstamatic application. Thanks to this application, both the display of the phone and the pictures taken with it are of an analog character; users can take typically square photos and can choose from among several types of filters, lenses, films, and flashes. Pictures taken in this way have become the basis for Leistner's book that constitutes, in fact, a kind of portal between image and text.

After three weeks in Afghanistan, the author returned to Canada “with an iPhone full of photographs and a bad case of the blues” (18). Her bad mental state was primarily due to the extremely depressing depictions of humanity emerging from the observation of that war-torn country. Several months after returning home, Leistner, quite accidentally, attended Peter Nesselroth's

lecture at the University of Toronto devoted to the application of McLuhan's concepts to analysis of the Arab Spring events. This lecture inspired Leistner to use McLuhan's theory in her interpretation of the images she had taken within the framework of the Basetrack project.

Therefore, Leistner's work is a book of photographs that discusses the aspect of war and tries to answer the question of how to deal with the presence of violent conflict in human life. This could be an "ordinary" album full of pictures and, perhaps, comments by the author. Yet Leistner has applied certain elements of Marshall McLuhan's media theory which, in turn, allowed her to present interesting interpretations of those photographs included in the book: instead of showing the "human face of war" (on which her earlier publications had focused), the artist has now exposed its technological dimension by describing what McLuhan calls "the extensions of man."

The use of this theory has enabled Leistner not only to approach the subject in an original manner but also to portray it accordingly in her book, both in terms of its content and form. The author's reflections on the development of the methods of interpersonal communication, the nature of war, and the essence of humanity have been arranged in six chapters (preceded by a foreword written by Julian Stallabrass). The book refers to McLuhan's works not only as far as its content is concerned but also in the visual sphere—including the original layout of the text, the use of drawings (by Janson Logan), diagrams, and handwriting—and, above all, in the endless play on the codes, balancing between the so-called scientific and unscientific aspects of the presented content, so characteristic of McLuhan's theory.

Equally important in Leistner's book are three perspectives that the author adopts in her narrative. The first is the perspective of a literary expert and linguist (Rita Leistner received her MA in comparative literature in French and English from the University of Toronto): ". . . everything that has to do with Marshall McLuhan begins with language. . . . This book, too, is a gloss of things I read in McLuhan, things I'd read before I'd read McLuhan, and things I read because I'd read McLuhan" (34). Following in his footsteps, the author shows how language, writing, printing, and typography have shaped—and continue to shape—human history and culture. Besides speech and writing, there are also other, visual modes of communication in Leistner's book, ranging from the most literal ones as conveyed in the image of a donkey transporting a patient to a provisional hospital, to images showing unmanned drones that produce a characteristic buzz accompanying the inhabitants of Afghanistan day and night.

In addition to language, the leading role in Leistner's book is played by other agents in the transmittal of information: images and pictures as well as light and its absence. Here, another perspective comes to the foreground, namely a point of view offered by the photographer as an "automatic" agent

and as an artist. Before going to Afghanistan, Leistner never had an iPhone, and she had never photographed using a mobile phone. However, her participation in the Basetrack project required the use of a device which would take a picture quickly, allow for its immediate basic editing, and then upload it onto the Internet. The author was really surprised when she realized how easy it is to take high quality pictures with a smartphone: “Imagine if one day all the expensive equipment you’d mastered, all your training, all your experience and knowledge, everything you’d spent your life sweating to learn, became obsolete, and was replaced with a Green Lantern Power Ring that anyone could use. That’s what using the iPhone as camera feels like to me” (105). Leistner thus raises important questions about the artistic aspect of photography and the role digital photography can play in exposing the truth about reality.

The third perspective that Leistner emphasizes as crucial in and for her work is simply her point of view as a human being. The appalling living conditions of the local population in Afghanistan as well as the function of the military base she visited made her reflect on the moral responsibility of Westerners (especially Americans and Canadians) for the current situation in the Middle East. A significant part of her book (both textually and graphically) is devoted to the problem of dehumanization, inevitably associated with military operations. As Leistner remarks sarcastically, “The Americans dehumanized the Afghans and the technology dehumanized the Americans—it was infectious. That is the job of war: you have to dehumanize someone, after all, in order to kill or torture them with a clean conscience” (70).

The abovementioned aspects of Leistner’s ideas and work intertwine successfully, forming a unique mosaic in the form of her book *Looking for Marshall McLuhan in Afghanistan*. The book in question will constitute inspiring reading for all who want to learn more about mechanisms operating in times of war and peace, or those involved in the development of language and communication. Above all, however, it will surely be an invaluable source of inspiration and information for all those who perceive the timeliness of McLuhan’s thinking in the contemporary world, and will therefore be eager to follow Leistner’s observation that “[o]nce you start looking for Marshall McLuhan, it’s impossible not to see traces of him everywhere” (72).