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Kalina Kukielko-Rogozińska graduated in sociology from the University of Szczecin and completed PhD studies at the Graduate School for Social Research at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. Her research interests focus on relations between art and media, and the role of animals in human life. She is the author of *Między nauką a sztuką. Teoria i praktyka artystyczna w ujęciu Marshalla McLuhana* (Between science and art. Artistic theory and practice depicted by Marshall McLuhan), which won the 2015 Pierre Savard Award from the International Council for Canadian Studies (ICCS).  
e-mail: kalina\_kukielko@wp.pl

Krzysztof Tomanek graduated in sociology from the University of Szczecin and completed PhD studies at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow. His research interests focus on methodology of social sciences, data mining, text mining, issues of trust and loyalty, analysis of social networks and visual sociology. He is the author of academic and popular articles on practical applications of text analysis.  
e-mail: k\_tomanek@wp.pl

Kalina Kukielko-Rogozińska, Krzysztof Tomanek

## Faces of war in the context of Marshall McLuhan's media theory

### Introduction

In the history of media studies, it would be quite a feat to find another character who would be as colourful and controversial as Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980). The philosophy of this Canadian scholar has had an impact on the discourse on mutual relations between culture, society and the media for several decades. While his understanding of the concept of media was very broad, as it included all man-made objects, today it is most often applied in the context of the means of communication and various consequences of their proliferation (cf. McLuhan, 1994). Although it has been almost sixty years since the Toronto

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professor developed his framework, his media theory continues to be applied in the study of newly emerging media.<sup>1</sup>

This article aims to present a modern example of application of his theory, involving an analysis of photographs taken with an iPhone. The discussion considers the blog of the Canadian photojournalist Rita Leistner, which developed as a result of a media project conducted in cooperation with the American military contingent in Afghanistan. During her three-week stay in a US Marines base in the south of the country, Leistner, for the first time in her career, used a smartphone instead of professional photographic equipment. This mainly stemmed from communicative requirements of the project and the attendant need to use a device which would enable her to easily edit the photographs and quickly upload them onto the Internet. Her work resulted in a blog entitled *Looking for Marshall McLuhan in Afghanistan*, where she employs selected concepts developed by the Canadian thinker in the second half of the twentieth century, such as the probe, the extension of man and the figure/ground dichotomy. Consequently, the receivers of the materials she prepared can look at war from a different perspective, one involving focus on technology. The present text draws attention to the “comeback” of McLuhan’s concepts to the modern discourse on a broadly understood domain of the media.

## Old wars, new media

In early 2011, Rita Leistner, a photojournalist from Toronto, known mainly for her works devoted to armed conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Pakistan, was invited to take part in an innovative media project called Basetrack. It was a civilian international media experiment aiming to use social media (such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs) in order to facilitate contact between troops on a foreign mission and their families and friends in the United States. The project was initiated by Teru Kuwayama, an experienced documentary photographer covering the war in Afghanistan since 2001. With the support from the Knight Foundation, he assembled a group of writers, researchers and journalists who would be ready to join him during his next mission in the country. The team was supposed to accompany a battalion of US marines<sup>2</sup> during their seven-month stay in Afghanistan. Leistner’s role was to photograph the daily life of soldiers stationed in a military base located in the province of Helmand near the border with Pakistan.

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<sup>1</sup> This has been observed, for example, by Grzegorz Godlewski in his introduction to the Polish translation of McLuhan’s *Gutenberg Galaxy* (McLuhan, 2017, pp. 9–28).

<sup>2</sup> The United States Marine Corps, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 8<sup>th</sup> Marines (1/8).

Although she spent only three weeks there, she returned to Canada with a sense of depression she had never experienced before (Leistner, 2014, p. 18). The principal reason was a grim picture of modern humanity which emerged from her observation of the war-ridden country. In an interview that we conducted with her, she stressed: “The profound emotional experience of being in or near a war changes everyone enormously, even if, as a journalist, you are in many ways apart from what is happening. (...) It is worth risking your life to be a part of the telling of the truth, the reporting of history” (Kukielko-Rogozińska & Tomanek, 2017, p. 23).<sup>3</sup>

A few months after her return home, Leistner, quite by chance, attended a lecture given by Peter Nesselroth of the University of Toronto devoted to the potential of McLuhan's theory in analysing the events of the Arab Spring (2010–2012). The lecture inspired her to use this method in her interpretation of the photographs she had taken within the framework of the Basetrack project. It enabled her not only to analyse the hundreds of images from Afghanistan, but also, perhaps more importantly, to change the focus of her approach: instead of the “human face of war” she now exposed its technological dimension. Interestingly, this change made the photographs more accessible to the viewers. Aesthetically beautiful, they do not shock them with the horror of war but give them an opportunity for quiet interpretation. Indeed, it cannot remain unnoticed that “traditional” war photographs, focused on the tragic fate of man, can literally petrify the viewers. Writing about this, Urszula Jarecka observes:

The horror of sudden death in war is too literal, too close to the corporeality of the viewer to make him or her able to deal with it without any emotional side effects. Pictures of decay which disturb the viewers are not in the service of beauty. Without any aestheticising techniques, photographs from the frontline either display a lack of taste (which is a personal matter), or (...) are simply uninteresting, since their formal imperfections make them unattractive or substandard in terms of informative value. (Jarecka, 2009, pp. 131–132)

## The media, iProbes and the extensions of man

A year after professor Nesselroth's lecture, Leistner (working in cooperation with *Literary Review of Canada*) started a blog called *Looking for Marshall McLuhan in Afghanistan*, where she posted her observations from her stay in an army base in the south of the country (cf. Tomanek & Kukielko-Rogozińska, 2016, pp. 173–187). Her point of departure was

<sup>3</sup> English quotation from the interview with Rita Leistner provided by the authors (translator's note).

McLuhan's concept of the extensions of man. The idea as such is not an original invention of the Canadian author. McLuhan describes the phenomenon in his second book (*Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*; McLuhan, 1962), where he quotes E. T. Hall's *Silent Language* (Hall, 1959) (cf. Molinaro, McLuhan, & Toye, 1987, p. 280). In this context, the most interesting fragment comes from E. T. Hall's chapter entitled "The vocabulary of culture":

Today man has developed extensions for practically everything he used to do with his body. The evolution of weapons begins with the teeth and the fist and ends with the atom bomb. Clothes and houses are extensions of man's biological temperature-control mechanisms. Furniture takes the place of squatting and sitting on the ground. Power tools, glasses, TV, telephones, and books which carry the voice across both time and space are examples of material extensions. (Hall, 1959, p. 79)

In this approach, all man-made material objects can be treated as extensions of man. Interestingly, as mentioned above, McLuhan refers to all of them as media.

Another McLuhan's idea used by Leistner is his concept of the "probe". As in most cases of his theoretical proposals, it is rather difficult to pinpoint its precise definition. The Canadian thinker derives it from the world of poetry, particularly from the tenets of symbolism, and most often describes it as an original means or method of perception. In his view, the probe resembles leisurely conversation: it is discontinuous, nonlinear and tackles things from many angles at the same time. In spite of its apparent lack of any formal structure, McLuhan is convinced that it can be recognised as a fully legitimate scientific method, since it is an effective means of enquiring, forming questions and establishing research order. Even more doubts arise when the author stresses that since probes are adapted to reveal the essence of things and awaken human perception, they are not useful in the study of irrefutable facts, which require linear prose (Neill, 1993, p. 77).

What can be seen here is a certain method of perception of reality derived from the world of art which McLuhan tries to apply in the world of science. His description of the probe includes linguistic considerations related not only to the general tenets of symbolism but also to particular poets of this movement. Attempting to clarify the definition of the probe as a method of study, McLuhan observes that it essentially rests on puns, as wordplay disturbs the regular patterns of language and uncovers what has been "repressed" or "numbed" in it. Thanks to puns, then, the language as such can disturb the expected course of events and uncover the hidden dimensions of reality in which it functions. In this context, it is hardly surprising to note McLuhan's conviction that the process of "probing"

is a form of art. It consists in critical approach to uncovering meanings which involves suggesting possible interpretations to the receivers rather than imposing them (Theall, 1971, pp. 25–28). In this way, it is the receivers who form their own interpretations according to their knowledge, experience or emotional state. The probe is only an impulse that triggers the receiver's thought process, while its role as the expression of the author's views or observations is of secondary importance.

This assumption was Leistner's point of departure when she developed her iProbes (the term coined from "iPhone" and "probe") and posted them on her blog. The above mechanism enabled her to penetrate the subsequent layers of meaning of the photographs she had taken in Afghanistan. Although their source was different (as in McLuhan's approach probes involve words rather than images), all her iProbes also capture artefacts metaphorically and show that any object can be something else than we actually see when we look only at its surface: "It goes mining for meaning – something I was determined to find in my iPhone full of photographs as a way of making sense of and giving meaning to my experience".<sup>4</sup> In other words, the author tries to find a way to reach the depth of the message conveyed in a photo image, to get to know its true meaning that is inaccessible by means of ordinary observation.

Another idea of McLuhan's theory used by Leistner is the dichotomy of figure and ground, one of his favourite tools of analysis of reality. The two concepts are best explained invoking a well-known drawing used by psychotherapists, which – depending on our focus of attention – features either an old woman wearing a scarf on her head, or a young lady with a velvet ribbon around her neck. When we look at the former, we do not notice the latter and vice versa. As termed by McLuhan, what we can see is figure and the remaining part is ground. In fact, this dichotomy can be illustrated using any image: the part on which we focus our eyes in a particular moment is a figure, and the elements which remain outside the field of our attention are ground. Importantly, the roles of figure and ground are not fixed. Rather, what is involved here is the constant process of changing the object of observation, and hence changing the meaning of individual elements of the entire image. "McLuhan understands ground as the structure or style of awareness, 'the way of seeing' or the terms of perception of a figure. It is important to note, however, that studying ground 'on its own terms' is impossible, since when we focus on it, it comes to function as a figure" (Knosala, 2017, p. 136). According to McLuhan, all situations in human life are composed of a relatively

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<sup>4</sup> See Leistner (2011).

small area of attention (figure) and a far larger area of inattention (ground), which constantly swap their roles; the shape of one is determined by the other. Figures emerge from ground, which is the context of the situation and thus provides the receiver with the terms that define the part that is currently perceived as a figure. Full perception involves the skill of keeping both figure and ground, in their dynamically resonating relationship, in the field of attention. Unfortunately, however, this is a rare ability and ground most often remains unnoticed. One reason behind this might be the fact that ground has become so familiar that we no longer pay conscious attention to it (McLuhan & Powers, 1989, p. 5).

Leistner uses the dichotomy of figure and ground mainly in her discussion concerning the photographs she took from the inside of an armoured army vehicle:

Photographing through the window of an armoured vehicle dismembers the camera (which is already a self-amputation) from the photographer. The subject out the window is not looking back at a photographer (another human being) carrying a machine, but at the machine directly. The gaze is not therefore at us, but at an idea of us as embodied by machinery, in this case an armoured vehicle. The passers-by couldn't see I was taking their pictures, but because they know the military is there keeping watch on things, they knew they were being watched.<sup>5</sup>

This is a kind of metaphor, a poetic relationship between the inside and the outside. Each participant of this situation, both the photographer and the photographed person, may be perceived by the other either as figure or as ground. But in fact neither of them can really see the other, since they both rely on stereotypes of what there is to be seen: the Afghan sees soldiers squeezed inside the car, and the soldiers see the figure of an Afghan against the desert landscape.

Rita Leistner is not the first photographer who used a smartphone to take pictures of war. In fact, some fellow members of the project (Teru Kuwayama, the initiator of Basetrack, and the Hungarian photographer Balázs Gárdi) did the same. However Leistner's situation was exceptional, as she had never had an iPhone or used a smartphone to take pictures before. It was the principle of the Basetrack project that, as it were, made her use a device that enabled her not only to instantly take photographs, but also to edit them and quickly upload onto the Internet. Used to carrying around over fifteen kilograms of professional equipment, she was really surprised how easy it was to take high quality pictures with a smartphone:

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<sup>5</sup> See Leistner (2012b).

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 a camera feels like to me.<sup>6</sup>

In terms of McLuhan's media theory, an iPhone, just as any other mobile phone, is an extension of the ears, the eyes, the fingers and the mouth of its user. What is more, like other smartphones, it is a new medium that, according to his theory, incorporates a number of others: a camera, a phone, a radio, a TV receiver, an Internet browser, a music player, a text editor and so on. In this way, old media are combined with the latest digital ones in a single device. This phenomenon is even more stressed by Leistner's use of the Hipstamatic app, which looks on the screen like "a virtual mechanical camera" and simulates analogue photography<sup>7</sup> (Tomanek & Kukiełko-Rogozińska, 2016, p. 181).

When it comes to military equipment, McLuhan makes some remarks on this issue in a number of his publications, e.g. in *Understanding Media*, where he writes that "the rifle is an extension of the eye and teeth" (McLuhan, 1994, p. 341). Indeed, it can be noticed that in the course of development of civilisation humans have invented arms and military equipment that enable them to keep maximum possible spatial distance from their target. On the one hand, this results from attempts to secure maximum safety for the soldier. On the other, however, it also makes it possible to objectify the enemy, i.e. to treat him as a mere physical object that is devoid of human features and needs to be liquidated.

According to Rita Leistner, the consequences of this process are twofold. Firstly, it is certainly easier for soldiers to deal with the psychological burden of direct involvement in war. Secondly, it results in the dehumanisation of the enemy. Apart from this, she also notes the consequences of using protective military equipment that do not often feature in public debate. Body armour and military vehicles, which in terms of McLuhan's perspective can be treated as extensions of the soldier's skin, make it possible for those seriously injured to survive. This, however, entails a number of psychological, social and economic consequences. While in public discourse a lot of attention is paid to the fact that modern body armour saves lives even in extremely dangerous situations (such as a mine blast), there is not much interest in the fate of the survivors themselves. The list of medical conditions is long: spine injuries, loss of sight or hearing, amputations, psychological disorders requiring long-term

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<sup>6</sup> See Leistner (2012a).

<sup>7</sup> See <http://hipstamatic.com/classic/> (accessed 18 July 2015).

hospital treatment and so on. It is not only the veteran, his or her family and friends but also society that bear the consequences. Body armour and uniform also play a significant informative function, as they are a clear mark of distinction between the soldiers and civilian population, pinpointing and emphasising the division between "us" and "them", the sphere of order (cosmos) of the base and the sphere of chaos outside.

While in Afghanistan, Leistner also observed an ironic twist of fate. The technology of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) was transferred to the mujahedeen by Americans in 1979 in order to improve their chances against the Soviet intervention. Today, these devices have become a typical weapon of the Taliban and are responsible for most casualties both among the US forces in the country and the local civilian population. IEDs come in different shapes, forms and sizes, and can be detonated in different ways: on contact (stepping on or driving over) or by remote signals, including mobile phones.<sup>8</sup>

McLuhan was convinced that societies engaged in war use their latest technology: "a new weapon or technology looms as a threat to all who lack it" (McLuhan, 1994, p. 344). In this context, it is rather surprising that Americans, who have the best military equipment in the world, find it difficult to deal with an obsolete technology they developed themselves thirty years ago. While there is no technology that would be able to detect and safely neutralise such devices, there is a tried and tested traditional method: specially trained sniffer dogs, the so-called war dogs, used in the US Army since the 1940s.<sup>9</sup> This case demonstrates superiority of nature over technology, as the best available tool to trace IEDs is a living creature.

The demands of modern war are also reflected in the use of armoured vehicles, which can be approached as another example of extensions of man aiming to protect the soldiers. The most popular of them is the Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicle (MRAP), a relatively small construction that makes it possible for those inside to survive the explosion of an improvised device. With V-shaped hulls, blast-resistant underbodies and layers of thick, armoured glass, MRAPs enable the Marines to safely operate outside their bases.<sup>10</sup> Since October 2008, when the vehicle was introduced on the market, the number of MRAPs fielded in Afghanistan and Iraq has reached an astonishing number of almost thirty thousand. Leistner observes two important consequences of this fact. Firstly, as in the case of body armour, although soldiers can survive even a serious blast, their physical

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<sup>8</sup> See: North Atlantic Treaty Organization (2015).

<sup>9</sup> See "The quiet Americans" (2000).

<sup>10</sup> See: "What we do" (n.d.).



and psychological condition might be very serious. Secondly, they are safe as long as they remain inside the vehicle, which means that they cannot come in direct contact with civilian population, earn their trust and try to improve their mutual relations (Tomanek & Kukielko-Rogozińska, 2016, pp. 184–185).

## Conclusion

Rita Leistner's posts on her blog provide an example of how elements of McLuhan's media theory developed in the past can be applied in the discourse on media today. Although the Canadian thinker formulated his ideas over half a century ago, they are still surprisingly relevant. Indeed, Leistner's analysis of her photographs, which makes use of such concepts as the extensions of man, probes or figure and ground, proves that they can be effectively applied to interpret the impact of the latest technological achievements on individual and social experience. Her images of the war in Afghanistan provided her with inspiration to consider human nature and a complex situation of anyone who is in any way involved in an armed conflict. It is a grim picture. Although the photographs do not feature explicit scenes of death, bloodshed and suffering, we can notice technology that not only isolates people from one another, but also, most importantly, deprives them of human feelings. What we can see is emptiness and solitude brought about by war.

This article provides only a brief introduction to Rita Leistner's work. Her images from Afghanistan and their subsequent analysis seem to be material of extraordinary interpretative potential. This is why we have tried to present it in different contexts, focusing on connections with McLuhan's media theory.

*Translated by Piotr Styk*

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## **Faces of war in the context of Marshall McLuhan's media theory**

The article presents how Marshall McLuhan's media theory can be applied to analyse photographs taken with an iPhone. The reflections were inspired by the blog of the Canadian photographer Rita Leistner, who participated in a media project aiming to familiarise the families and friends of American soldiers with everyday life of the US military contin-

gent in Afghanistan. Leistner, for the first time in her career, used a smartphone instead of professional photographic equipment. Her decision was motivated by the need to easily edit photographs and quickly upload them onto the Internet. Her work resulted in a blog entitled *Looking for Marshall McLuhan in Afghanistan*. In order to describe her photographs Leistner uses some concepts defined by McLuhan in the second half of the twentieth century, such as the probe, the extension of man or the figure/ground dichotomy. Consequently, the receivers of the materials she prepared can better grasp the technological face of war.

**Keywords:**

Probes/iProbes, extensions of man, figure/ground, Marshall McLuhan, Rita Leistner

## **Oblicza wojny w kontekście teorii mediów Marshalla McLuhana**

W artykule przedstawiono sposób wykorzystania teorii mediów Marshalla McLuhana do analizy zdjęć wykonanych iPhone'em. Inspiracją do tych rozważań jest blog kanadyjskiej fotografi Rity Leistner, uczestniczki projektu medialnego, którego celem było zapoznanie rodzin i przyjaciół amerykańskich żołnierzy z codziennym życiem wojskowego kontyngentu w Afganistanie. Leistner, po raz pierwszy w karierze, używała smartfonu zamiast profesjonalnego sprzętu fotograficznego. Wynikało to z konieczności łatwego edytowania zdjęć i ich szybkiego umieszczania w internecie. Efektem tej pracy jest blog zatytułowany *Looking for Marshall McLuhan in Afghanistan*. Aby opisać swoje fotografie, Leistner użyła bowiem wybranych koncepcji sformułowanych przez kanadyjskiego myśliciela w drugiej połowie XX wieku: sondy, przedłużenia człowieka czy dychotomii figura/tło. Dzięki temu zabiegowi odbiorcy jej fotografii mogą lepiej zrozumieć technologiczny i medialny wymiar wojny.

**Słowa kluczowe:**

Sondy/iSondy, przedłużenia człowieka, figura/tło, Marshall McLuhan, Rita Leistner

**Note:**

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