Looking for Marshall McLuhan in Afghanistan

LRC
LITERARY REVIEW OF CANADA

A 12-part LRC series, featuring text and iPhone Hipstamatic photography by Rita Leistner

Editor's note: this series ran from February 02 to March 13, 2012. It is best appreciated when followed from the first post. An archive of all the posts can be viewed here.

MAR 13

IPROBE 11_SANDBAGS AND HESCO CONCERTINA BARRIERS

Harnessing the power of earth

Walls are extensions of the people on the other side; A sandbag is an extension of the earth

(photo: Rita Leistner/basetrack.org)

You can't go to Iraq or Afghanistan without seeing HESCO bastion barriers and sandbags everywhere. They are used to create temporary walls and fortifications against blasts or small arms. Originally designed as flood barriers, HESCOs are named after the British company that developed them in the 1980s. They are made of collapsible wire-mesh encasings and heavy-duty fabric liners. Like sandbags, they are filled with sand, dirt or gravel, so they can be used anywhere on earth where there is earth. HESCO barriers are technically trademarked by HESCO as "Concertainers." Like the coiled concertina razor wire also used widely for barricades in war zones, they are so called for their similarity to the musical instrument, which has the ability to expand and contract like an accordion.

(photo: Rita Leistner/basetrack.org)

Acknowledgment

The photographs in this series were produced as a part of the Basetrack Project. Basetrack is supported by a 2010 Newschallenge grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

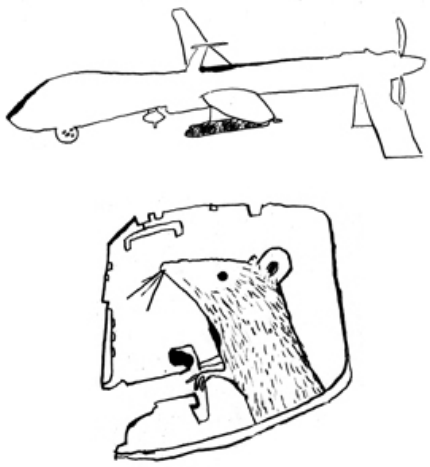
MAR 08

IPROBE 10_REAPER AND PREDATOR DRONES

Reaper and Predator Drones are an extension of the eye, of the finger, of the body

"You do definitely get the sense that you are sort of a guardian angel. You're like an eye-in-the-sky."
- U.S. Air Force Captain Catherine Platt, Predator Drone Sensor Operator, Creech Air Force Base, Nevada, U.S.A.

So-called Predator and Reaper drones were first developed by Israel for surveillance purposes. Today they are the most talked-about weapon in use by the U.S. military. Pilots, operating on what look like videogame monitors at ground control stations in the Mojave desert, fly the drones by remote to and from takeoff and landing sites thousands of miles away. This summer, a CIA-operated drone killed al Qaeda's second-in-command. Flying at heights of over two hundred feet, they are invisible to the naked eye. Sometimes you can hear them buzzing overhead 24-7. Sometimes they are doing surveillance. Sometimes they just drop propaganda flyers. They can hit a motorcycle right next to a busy café, while startled onlookers are unscathed. But you never see them. This is why I asked my friend, the amazing artist Jason Logan, to draw me a picture of one for this article.



(photo Rita Leistner/basetrack.org; illustration by Jason Logan)

Some of the Marines I met loved to tell the story of how Afghan farmers thought the ultra-automated, unmanned attack and surveillance drones were flown by specially-trained mice. I imagine it had become a sort of urban myth, told and retold, its original, apocryphal source irrelevant. The story fed their psyches by perpetuating the idea that the technological gap between their

enemies and them was unbridgeable to the point of absurdity. But the correlative to their misplaced faith in super-technologies is an opposite and equally significant loss of understanding of, and appreciation for, the more "primitive," primary technologies and tools of communication, like simple handwritten signs, loudspeakers atop mosques or improvised explosive devices (IEDs) made of wood.

It was important for the Marines to believe they would win at war because of their superior technologies, and drones, with their remote-controlled, super-accurate targeting and high-resolution cameras, are a perfect symbol of everything that can make humans capable of fighting a war without actually putting their physical selves at risk.

"The biggest noticeable difference is your lack of sensory output."
- U.S. Air Force Major James Ackerman, Predator Pilot—on piloting drones vs. other aircraft

What happens when soldiers are totally detached from the bodily, sensory, physical actualities of war? Some enemies consider the use of unmanned weaponry as cowardice—if you're not willing to die for the cause, how important is it to you? Moreover, little is yet known about how post-traumatic stress disorder will affect people who kill at such great distances. The received belief is that it's easier to kill someone you can't see. In *Laws of Media*, McLuhan noted this with regard to World War Two fighter pilots, citing psychiatrist Anthony Storr in his study, *Human Aggression*:

"The distance between [a bomber pilot a few hundred feet above a village] and the people he is bombing makes them into an impersonal target, no longer human beings like himself with whom he can identify" (p. 96).

But the reverse is also true, and the pilots seem inhuman to the people being bombed on the ground. In the case of drones, the attacker really is not human. In his excellent book on robotics and warfare, *Wired for War*, P.W. Singer interviews John Pike of GlobalSecurity.org about the roboticization of war. Pike compares it to the *Terminator* movies:

"This [the robotics revolution] opens up great vistas, some quite pleasant, others quite nightmarish. On the one hand, this could make our flesh-and-blood soldiers so hard to get to that traditional war—a match of relatively evenly matched peers—could become a thing of the past. But this might also rob us of our humanity. We could be the ones that wind up looking like Terminators in the world's eyes" (pp. 309-310).

Moreover, if we follow McLuhan's logic that our technologies alter our identities, that every new technology brings with it an identity crisis and provokes a psychic change, then the effect of remote control weapons on the user should be significant. McLuhan wrote that "radical changes of identity, happening suddenly and in very brief intervals of time, have proved more deadly and destructive of human values than wars fought with hardware weapons" (*Laws of Media*, p. 97).

And if, as McLuhan would insist, the drones are extensions of the pilots, prosthetics of a sort, then would not the act of killing, even from thousands of miles away, effect in them phantom traces of what their hands had done?

Another result of having fewer military personnel on the ground is that military intelligence becomes increasingly dependent on unknown elements. With fewer military personnel on the ground to intercede, informants become less reliable. Local disputes and rivalries can easily lead to misinformation motivated by revenge (something I witnessed in Iraq when embedded with the 3/7 Cavalry, 3rd ID). So while the drones seem to offer superpower eyes, the information coming to the ears is diminished in power.

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Works Cited

- Marshall McLuhan, with Quentin Fiore. *Laws of Media: The New Science*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988.
- Anthony Storr. *Human Aggression*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968.
- P.W. Singer. *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century*. New York: Penguin Books, 2009.

Acknowledgments

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