

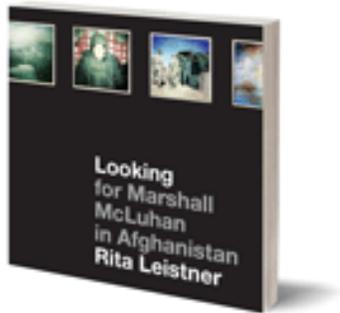


## Confessions of a digital naive

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Reviewed by Jill

Diverse events led Rita Leistner to participate in *Basetrack*, a social media experiment to embed journalists with US troops in Afghanistan. *Basetrack's* intent was to bring the Marines closer to their people back home. Leistner, a digital naive, captured images on an iPhone using the Hipstamatic app. One of her aims through publication was to interpret or explain her experiences in McLuhan's terms. She also interpreted Afghanistan via this new technology. These are the less obvious hints that the reader is in for a different sort of experience. The book [Looking for Marshall McLuhan in Afghanistan](#), is confronting in its format and appearance. At times it shouts.



[Looking for Marshall McLuhan in Afghanistan](#) began as a 12-part online series, and later became a material object on paper. 'Book' is not the appropriate term. The reader is confronted with what at first may seem mayhem – fonts of various sizes, images with rarely an explanation, diagrams, Leunig-like cartoons, and starbursts of ideas. There is a method to this. At times, the book reads like a monologue – Leistner outlining her choices, her experiences and her impressions. Her own words mostly appear in a font that a reader might expect to encounter. Quotations from McLuhan and others are usually larger, sometimes to the extent that a page holds just three words. Some of the points that Leistner wishes to emphasise are writ large.

The reader can tackle the book in several ways – read the shouty bits, read the photos, read the author's commentary, or try to read everything in one go. This latter does not work. Think of your own thoughts and impressions – would an hour's, a day's or three months' worth of thoughts and ideas be coherent to others? And what of a conversation?

Within Leistner's own discourse, there is an explanation of *Basetrack's* purpose and background, the issues the journalists faced, and how some of these were resolved. The theme of technology and its issues surfaces several times. The troops' permitted use of the Internet, specifically Facebook, had an impact that was not necessarily what was intended. 'Facebook was just one more technology that wasn't doing as it was told.' [59] Mobile networks have value for both good and for evil. Then there are extensions, sometimes McLuhan-evoked, sometimes Leistner's own musings: 'Mobile phones are voice devices that flipped into writing devices and are flipping back into voice devices with new voice recognition software.' [176]

The iPhone/Hipstamatic combination offered the ability to produce square images. Its filters could produce images similar to those taken with antique cameras. Leistner admitted being a social media naive to some extent – she had never owned an iPhone, never before taken a photo using a mobile phone, never used Twitter and rarely used Facebook. Initially she felt unsettled. The iPhone/Hipstamatic combination made

her feel remote from the process of photography and thus dissociated from the images she had taken. She realised that the images were devoid of humanity. This is an age-old tactic of war - destroy the enemy's artefacts and the structures which make his society a society. The method is a good choice for this project.

There are parallels to McLuhan's ideas and those of others who manage weaponry. Bombs and firearms, and the increasingly used drones permit action from a great distance, possibly relieving the initiator of responsibility [203]. Dissociation is a recurring theme. US Command noted the divide, and made some attempt to get troops to disembark from their vehicles, remove their sunglasses and mix with the locals. Indeed there seems to be a silence when you look at the images - people simply dissociated from the machine containing the Marines and the photographer.

The photos are powerful. They were taken as seen, not always as considered images. Leistner might be taking photos backwards over her shoulder through a dirty window, so what usable images she got were 'mostly luck'. The only way to 'edit' was to wait till her armoured vehicle was traversing locations where she hoped to be able to capture particular subjects. There is a seventies Polaroid or deteriorating slide look about the images - lens faults, mottling, washed out colours, rounded edges with borders. There are images of soldiers, keepsakes, the living conditions, the daily, the novel - just as in past wars, as long as war and cameras first co-existed.

References to particular images are rare and there is no list of images with their stories. There is detailed attention to one - a warning sign - and this is essential for the language theme of the surrounding pages. This may be a McLuhanesque device - leaving us to deduce message from the medium.

There is a *Clockwork Orange* feel to the language throughout the book - terminology such as 'semiological guerrilla warfare', synaesthesia and semiotics. It is a little like traversing rough ground and quicksand - needing to watch your step, take one back, pause. Leistner makes some observations on language and how certain ones are changing, particularly in connection with texting - how texting may make spoken communication less common. Biblical quotations on Babel [211] reinforce this line of thought. And are the (rare) spelling mistakes part of the confrontation or are they merely spelling mistakes? If something is handwritten is a mistake a typo? 'The written word, like unmanned aerial vehicles, is a way of conveying a message from a (safe) distance.' [180]. Non-literate cultures have an enforced closeness and unity due to their dependence on oral communication, and a resistance to written artefacts originating outside the tribe [180]. This may well help the Taliban.

Now for the shouty bits. Most of these are McLuhan's words, and for the McLuhan naive, it is an easy introduction. Virtually all the quotations are thought-provoking and would make for interesting discussion, even away from this context. Some are prescient. A recurring analogy is that man-made objects are an extension of the human - clothing and housing take over the body's temperature control. Bombs replace teeth and hands when killing is required. Body armour and the armoured vehicle are extensions of the skin. A photograph can be viewed as the transmission of information, not a material object [98].

Each 'chapter' seems to condense concept into a thought bite. The varying fonts fight to grab the reader's attention. These demanding quotations often serve to mark a place in the text and context. They are confrontational, making the reader look at them, like interruptions to the steady flow of harmonious font. This is reading on someone else's terms, and it is not necessarily bad. 'The great challenge of the future will be archive and data management and the lost art of slowing down' [96]. This last is especially true for this book. The reader is not permitted the luxury of time to reflect. That comes later.

Leistner reflects on books and how 'weight, as much as anything else, becomes the deciding factor how we will make and access information in the future' [95]. The Smart Phone now replaces a lot of communications tools. It puts their uses and functions into one object.

The images and cartoon-like drawings present information in different ways. The star bursts have an origin in one concept such as body armour, fuel dispensers, or IEDs. They are a little like brainstorm, but immaculately organised. They reflect how a person's thoughts might ripple in an association of ideas. Military rock writing and graffiti too serve to inform. The quaint images of early machines - typewriter, camera obscura - illustrate distance. These are now remote, just as an image renders the subject's form and not the feelings/humanity.

Julian Stallabrass's foreword can be a bit strident, but he introduces the book neatly.

Leistner, a teacher of the history of photojournalism and documentary photography, is meticulous in her documentation and annotation. These annotations, combined with the bibliography, lead the reader to diverse further sources.

This is a remarkable work – intertwining the author's own expertise, her in-depth knowledge of her subject, and the skills of an impressive personal and professional network.

It is also addictive.