Hipstamatic Blues

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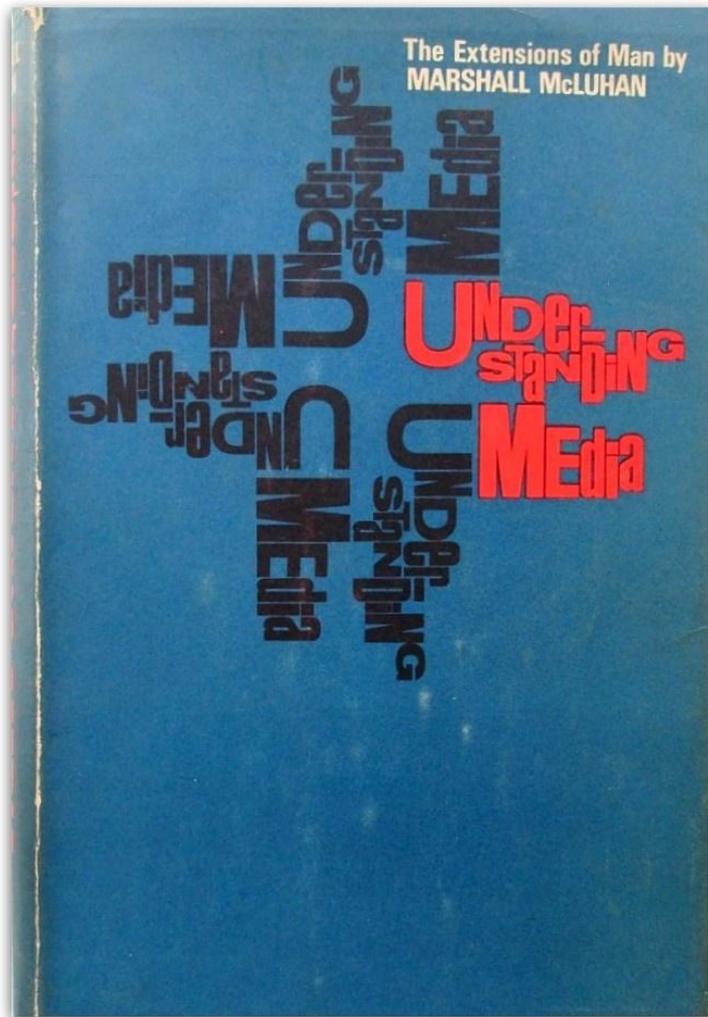
Book cover of Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1964.

McLuhanite books are usually hard to read—and this one is no exception. Rather than let regimented ranks of type parade down the page, every attempt is made to seize readers, stop their conventional thought in its tracks, and insist: attend to the medium! Look at the font, the paper, the gaps between the words! Then, hopefully, the book will engage more than just sight and its dreary consort, linear thought, and open readers to a richer, synaesthetic experience, and

to the organic, integral mental processes of the pre-literate. Or, given that this remains a book, at least a little. Perhaps, like monks reading illuminated manuscripts (in McLuhan's imagination), as you turn the pages, you should mutter the words.

Rita Leistner / Basetrack.org

Should McLuhanite photographs also be hard to read? You would think so. The same bias against the supremacy of vision should also bite here, and McLuhan does claim that photographs turn people into things.[1] Yet, on the face of it, Rita Leistner's photographs are highly recognisable, displaying a series of eerie familiarities. Taken on the iPhone using the Hipstamatic app, they seem at once old and new. The app provides a caricatured simulation of the (retrospectively) charming faults of analogue photography, particularly of the way film and prints age. It, too, says: attend to the medium, though it adds: here is the post-medium universal simulator, pretending to be an antique and particular analogue medium. Now that every option is available to you, express yourself by choosing your limitation from a menu.

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[1] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1964, p. 189.
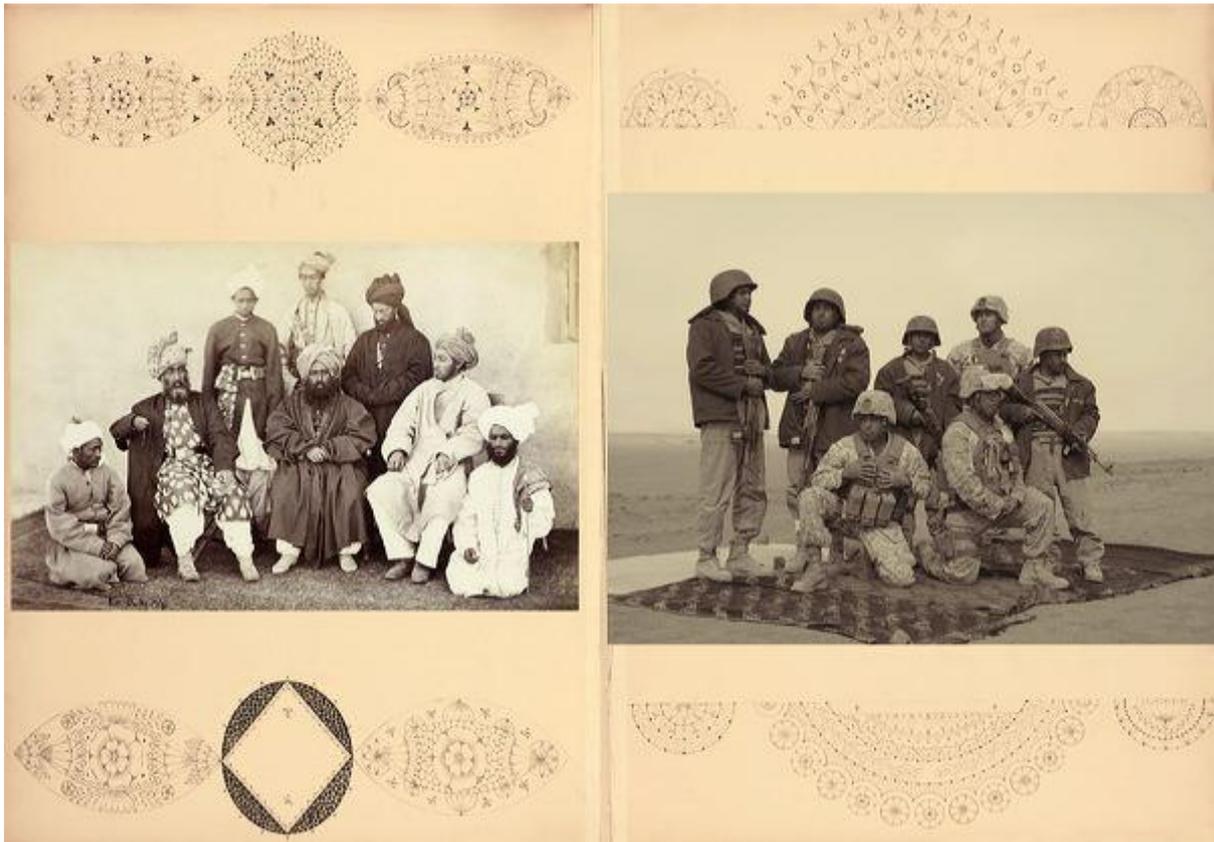
Simon Norfolk, image from the series *Burke + Norfolk*, 2010

In 2010, Simon Norfolk took a view camera to Afghanistan and worked in the footsteps of photographer John Burke making current versions of his imperial topography and anthropological portraits. This temporal span, of the new as old, encompassed a history in which the British Army, once again in Afghanistan, 130 years on, still attempt to impose order on its (largely pre-literate) people, to enduring geo-political purpose. Norfolk's old and new media pointed to the long constancy of imperial domination.

Leistner's pictures do not appear to be quite that old, despite the distance she often takes from her subjects, which suggest the formality and shallow depth-of-field of the view camera. With their square format, simulated lens faults, mottling and rounded edges with borders, they evoke 1960s and 1970s Polaroid; snapshots made perhaps by US soldiers in Vietnam. In a McLuhanite fantasy realised, Hipstamatic effects can be applied arbitrarily to any subject matter. Refugees in the shanty towns of Kabul taken with a rosy 'Susie' lens and 'Dylan' film (described as being 'left out in the sun too long')? Nothing to stop you… But this is not what Leistner does. Instead, here are the Marines again, in their fortified bases, posing with guns, exercising, training, resting. As in Vietnam, they are the 'front line' in a war without fronts; the fragile, fleshy skin of a massive, networked, remote-controlled war machine; disposable men acting as a lure designed to draw the enemy into the sights of the gunships and the bombers. The photographs that they take, these occupying forces amid a largely hostile population—of themselves, of the camps, of tourist sites, of corpses, of torture and mutilation (very useful, Polaroid, for keeping such things from outsiders), have not changed much.

Leistner departs from these genres by dwelling on apparently mundane aspects of the military environment, and the surroundings that it affects, which point to the structural roots of the conflict. The use of sandbags, large and small, as temporary fortifications; the way in which fuel is stored and distributed; the home-made IED; the view from behind the bulletproof screen; and the landscape itself, as if created with resistance in mind. Her text also points to the many factors of the conflict that she cannot photograph: the opposition, the role of drug trafficking and drone warfare.

Why, in these circumstances, revive that closet God-botherer, McLuhan, with his belief that new media would deliver humanity to a realm of village-like, synaesthetic, universal bliss?[2] The very presence of the Marines in Afghanistan, an extreme and violent culture clash, would seem to refute him. It is often said of McLuhan that he anticipated global networked culture, and it is

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[2] On McLuhan's Catholicism and the way it guided his thinking, see Jonathan Miller, *McLuhan*, Fontana Press, London 1971.

partly on those grounds that his work has attracted renewed attention.[3] There is something deeply comforting in the idea that networked culture will produce, in and of itself, a universal humanism. You might even point to the many recent revolts against authority, particularly against dictatorial powers, and the way activists have communicated and shared tactics, as a symptom of evolving global humanism.

Rita Leistner / Basetrack.org

Yet Leistner's book also points to the obstacles, both trivial and grave, to the realisation of such a vision: the project for which she worked, meant to connect troops to their families through social media, ran into the micro-management mentality of the military bureaucracy, and was eventually cancelled. Drones—invisible from the ground, and avoiding the usual circuits through which the news media operate—launch missiles to blow up people who have no access to social media. It is hard to imagine the US government exploding a bomb in a mall in Bristol or Vancouver because they suspected that terrorists were shopping there. But if the communities

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[3] See, for example, Paul Levinson, *Digital McLuhan: A Guide to the Information Millennium*, Routledge, London 1999.

are exclusively of poor, brown-skinned people without access to cameras or phones, then slaughtering anyone in the vicinity of the suspects is just fine. The victims of remote warfare may not be the products of networked society, but the operators surely are. Raised from birth within the networked environment, they guide the drones and launch the Hellfire missiles; and of those, and the vast number of computer-literate armed forces operatives and private contractors who can see the murderous extent of the 'war on terror', very few have acted on conscience.

Since knowledge is power and wealth, the ideal of the global, digital, universally available library has been replaced with the reality of a massively spied-upon and data-mined individually tailored commercial environment, in which secrets and proprietary information abound. Certainly, one should pay attention to its materiality, its combination of media and its sensory and psychological effects; yet action, purpose and subject matter cannot be downplayed as mere side-effects of media. It matters whether social media are used to fake enthusiasm for a brand (with the use of click farms) or to foment rebellion against arbitrary and violent power.

Stallabrass, Rita Leistner, p. 6