

Article

Twelve Insights into the Afghanistan War through the Photographs from the Basetrack Project: Rita Leistner's iProbes and Marshall McLuhan's Theory of Media

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Abstract: This article presents the iProbe concept developed by the Canadian photographer Rita Leistner. This analytical tool is one of the ways to present the image of modern warfare that emerges from messages in social media and photographs taken using smartphones. Utilized to understand the approach are photographs Leistner took at the American military base in Musa Qala (Helmand province, Afghanistan) during the implementation of the “Basetrack” media project in 2011. The theoretical basis for this study is Marshall McLuhan’s media theory, which was used by the photographer to interpret her works from Afghanistan. Leistner is the first to apply the various concepts shaped by McLuhan in the second half of 20th century, such as “probe”, “extension of man”, and the “figure/ground” dichotomy, to analyze war photography. Her blog and book entitled *Looking for Marshall McLuhan in Afghanistan* shows the potential of using McLuhan’s concepts to interpret the image of modern warfare presented in the contemporary media. The application of McLuhan’s theory to this type of photographic analysis provides the opportunity to focus on the technological dimension of modern war and to look at warfare from a technical perspective such as what devices and communication solutions are used to solve armed conflicts as efficiently and bloodlessly as possible. Therefore, this article briefly presents twelve iProbes that Leistner created based on her experiences from working in Afghanistan concerning photography, military equipment, interpersonal relations, and various types of communication.

Keywords: iProbes; Rita Leistner; theory of media by Marshall McLuhan; Basetrack project; war coverage; war photography; smartphone; Hipstamatic app



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1. Introduction

For decades, journalists, whom Susan Sontag calls “professional, specialized tourists”, have been gathering for their audience images and sounds that report these foreign tragedies. According to her, it affords a sense of voyeurism and allows the audience to observe distant wars in the privacy of their homes without the need to act or even reflect on what has occurred (Sontag 2003, p. 17). German philosopher, Wolfgang Iser, points out that the type of medium used in disseminating such materials may also influence how we perceive them. Iser even talks about a process of “making unreal” what the audience is viewing. In his opinion, it is for this reason that images provided by various types of media no longer have a documentary guarantee of presenting reality. The relationship between reality and how it is presented is always mediated not only by the medium itself, but also by the knowledge, attitudes, or ideas of both those who create a given message and those who are its recipients. Therefore, each image released by the media is in fact covered with successive layers of meanings and contexts (Iser 2005, p. 124). Whether photographed or recorded while at war, broadcast and viewed on multiple platforms, the imagery becomes a continuation of politics in the network media because, after several thousand shares of such photos, the captured moment becomes a global event. The visual representation of war may be somewhat obscured by the interpretation of those received images (Der Derian 2018, pp. 328–329). Hence, the question is whether modern media

can be used to accurately present the contemporary war from a vantage point that makes it possible to view from a distance and allowing for the necessary space to reflect on it remains.

Such an attempt was made by the photographer Rita Leistner, based on photographs taken during the project referred to as Basetrack.¹ Leistner, a Toronto-born photographer, describes her work as socially and politically engaged art. Her photographs, texts, and activities on social media explore what it means to be human, how we should live with each other, and what influence—individually and collectively—we have on the world around us. Since she first encountered Cornell Capa's concept of a "concerned photographer" during her studies at the International Centre for Photography in New York in the late 1990s, her creativity has focused on the direct experience of reality, especially her work in documenting the lives of the members of various societies, groups, and subcultures who find themselves in new and extreme situations and must manage under circumstances they have never faced before. What happens to the photographs after they are taken is an equally important element of this entire process: how they are processed, where they will be published, who will be able to see them, and to what extent the creator can affect perception. Taking a photograph is not just about pressing the shutter button; a professional photographer must pay attention to various details while maintaining their artistic style and form of expression. The whole process begins with the chase of the subject (it can be a human, technological, the effect of light, a place, or just an unusual combination of ordinary things) and ends with the interpretive work of the viewer. Photography can force its viewers to form their own interpretations, as do other art forms, meaning that it can arouse substantial creative anxiety. Photographers often risk their lives to not only witness the moment but also capture it, giving future viewers a moving testimony of the unfolding events. This approach characterizes the work of Rita Leistner ([Word + Images 2016](#), online).

2. In Afghanistan

During her long career, Leistner has worked on the frontlines of all the conflict-ravaged countries she visited while searching for what she viewed to be the essence of humanity, the specks of what allows us to survive with dignity even in the darkest moments of our histories. The starting point, and primary motif of her visual and verbal narrations, were ordinary people in their daily lives during a time of war. She then noticeably changed this perspective in 2011, when she joined the experimental social media initiative Basetrack project at the invitation of American photojournalist Teru Kuwayama.

Basetrack is a non-profit US-based 501(c)3 public charity, operated by November Eleven, which focuses on an open-source approach to journalism. The primary goal is to use social media and smartphones to report on the war in order to engage public participation in the reporting process. Basetrack was comprised of technologists, analysts, artists, and journalists who accompanied soldiers of the 1st Battalion, 8th Marines (1/8), who were part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) located in Musa Qala in the Helmand province, southern Afghanistan, near the Pakistani border. The project team was embedded with the Marines and could use social media to share experiences and thoughts, thus encouraging both soldiers and their loved ones to actively participate in the reporting process ([Zamora 2011](#), online).²

Leistner's participation in the Basetrack project was primarily focused on following the battalion with her camera. However, it was not a conventional camera, but a smartphone ([Kurpel and Leistner 2014](#)). Accompanying the soldiers and reporting on their daily tasks

¹ The official website of the project—www.basetrack.org (2010–2011)—is no longer active.

² The main outline of the Basetrack project resulted from the personal experience of Kuwayama, who had worked as a freelance journalist in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Kashmir for nearly a decade and often had trouble establishing cooperation with the military stationed there. Even if he managed to work in the base or accompany the soldiers in their daily activities, it was always far too short to reliably tell their stories. So he invited artists with similar interests to participate in the Basetrack project, ready to work with the contingent soldiers throughout the seven-month shift (from August 2010 to March 2011). His team includes: David Gurman, Balazs Gardi, Tivadar Domaniczky, Joshua Levy, Sundev Lohr, Monica Campbell, Matt Farwell and Sadika Hameed ([Basetrack: Conversation with Teru Kuwayama 2014](#), online).

was nothing new to her, but the alternative method of taking, editing, and publishing the photographs with an iPhone was a novelty (Leistner 2012, online). Using smartphones was not obligatory for Basetrack, but Leistner wanted to explore the technology's options once she saw the photographs taken by her colleagues. Just before leaving Canada, she bought an iPhone and was surprised to find that there were no manuals for photography using it (Leistner 2018, online).

3. In Canada

Leistner joined Basetrack in February 2011, the penultimate month of the project. The idea for the project organizers was to involve a female photographer with military experience who would be interested in accompanying the Female Engagement Team (FET), which was to join the 1-8 battalion in Musa Qala for a few weeks. The primary goal of the FET's activities was to establish contact between coalition soldiers and Afghani women. Concerning cultural norms, male soldiers cannot talk to women or even look at them. Therefore, Battalion 1-8 needed a FET and the FET needed a female photographer (McCullough 2013, online). Leistner spent six weeks in Afghanistan (three of them in Kabul, uploading hundreds of photographs to the Basetrack platform).

After returning to Canada, the photographer discovered a theoretical concept she decided to implement to interpret the photographs taken during the Basetrack project. The approach dovetails on Marshall McLuhan's media theory (and his belief that the medium is the message), which the photographer learned of during a lecture at the photography festival CONTACT. The presentation on Arab Spring by a semiologist from the University of Toronto, Peter Nesselroth, marked a turning point in Leistner's way of thinking and working, inspiring her to use McLuhan's concepts to interpret the photographs from Afghanistan. Thanks to a partnership with the Literary Review of Canada, she launched a blog in 2012 entitled *Looking for Marshall McLuhan in Afghanistan*, where she created twelve posts related to photography, warfare, and the ideas of the eponymous researcher. A year later, she published a book with the same title (Leistner 2013).

4. Afghanistan and McLuhan

McLuhan once stated that new technology requires a new war (McLuhan and Fiore 1968). Leistner, like others, has observed that nearly all military conflicts are a scene of applying state-of-the-art technical solutions, also when it comes to reporting their events. However, she believes that the Arab Spring (2010–2012) completely changed the rules of this game which were in force for decades. The initiators and participants of protests (civilians, not professional journalists or photographers) became the most important kind of reporters, using their smartphones to report on the course of those events from the "inside" and to publish their messages directly on Facebook and Instagram. Therefore, the Internet supplanted and extended the traditional role of newspapers and television, both with regard to spreading the news and the way of using them. It is a change that threatens the traditional professional norms of working as a journalist but also creates extraordinary possibilities (Leistner 2018, online).

Nasselroth's lecture prompted Leistner to see the Basetrack project as a breakthrough moment in the history of photojournalism where the smartphone was used for professional reporting on war activities as the main medium (Leistner 2018, online). Her book, inspired by McLuhan's concepts, discusses this innovation in an unconventional way³. Applying McLuhan's theories changed her perspective and way of perceiving not only the very process of taking photographs, but also (perhaps even most importantly) the surrounding reality and manners of describing it. In addition to using existing theoretical foundations, the photographer also follows in McLuhan's footsteps through the visual layers of her content and typical composition of the monograph. According to McLuhan, the linearity, adhering to academic frameworks of building narration and the uniform font imposed on

³ The book can be viewed at: <http://www.lookingformarshallmcluhan.com> (21 April 2021).

the researchers stopped being the essential elements of publication standards, as their rules should be established by the writer every time (Benedetti and DeHart 1996, p. 33). Leistner manifests this concept in the original arrangement of the photographs, text, casual use of diagrams, handwriting, and drawings.

4.1. Probes/iProbes

Are the “beautified” and nostalgic (as the Basetrack critics, commenting on the project website and its Facebook account, call them) photographs taken with the assistance of the Hipstamatic app⁴ capable of being heard in the discussions on the sense and nonsense of war? Can they initiate difficult questions, increase awareness, and change our attitudes? Leistner believes that they can, especially if perceived in the context of McLuhan’s theories, which allow for a unique analytical perspective. *Probe* was the first term in McLuhan’s dictionary that she borrowed for her work. However, as in most categories he suggested, it is difficult to provide a uniform definition of this notion. He derived it from poetry (especially the assumptions of symbolism) and simply denotes it as an original method of perception. McLuhan said that the probe may suggest an unconstrained structure of a conversation in the sense that it is discontinuous, non-linear, and often involves looking at a problem from various perspectives at the same time. It is a thought process that is based on the rules of filling in the gaps. Against the impression that it lacks any formal order, McLuhan was convinced that the probe may successfully be applied as a fully fledged scientific method. He believed that it is a highly efficient manner of inquiring, asking questions, and ordering research. In this context, even more doubts may arise as McLuhan highlighted that, because the probe is to be used to discover the essence of things and to wake up perception, it is completely useless in presenting empirically verified facts (for him essential in traditional linear academic narration) (McLuhan and Kuhns 2003, pp. 403–19).

It is a specific manner of perceiving reality drawn from the world of art that McLuhan tried to introduce to the world of science. His description of a probe reveals linguistic connotations related not only to general assumptions of symbolism, but also concrete activities of poets following this trend (especially Stéphane Mallarmé). While attempting to create a precise definition of a probe as a research method, McLuhan stated that its nature lies in the puns that disturb the usual flow of the language and disclose what has been “hidden” or “muffled”. Thanks to the play on words, the language as an entirety may reveal hidden dimensions of reality in which it functions by disrupting the expected course of events. In this context, McLuhan’s belief that the very process of probing is a certain form of art, which critically approaches the discovery of events by suggesting possible interpretations to the recipients without imposing them authoritatively, no longer comes as a surprise. The person experiencing the probe will interpret it via the possessed knowledge, experience, or emotional state. A probe is, therefore, only an impulse that initiates a thought process in its recipients, being the expression of views or observations of its author only later (Neill 1993, p. 77).

A similar approach was assumed by Leistner, who used it as a basis for creating her iProbes (a blend of the words iPhone and probe). According to her, these tools make it possible to observe and replay reality by describing its artefacts, which can be divided and separated layer after layer. iProbing allowed her to gain insight into further layers of meaning in the photographs taken during her time in Afghanistan. Although the source from which this tool is created is different from McLuhan’s (his probes were based on words, not images), both forms perceive the artefacts metaphorically by showing that each object can be something completely different than what we see purely on the surface. Leistner searched for a method of interpreting the photographs that would allow her to access the depth of their message but to also derive their true meaning, inaccessible using regular, superficial observation (Leistner 2013, pp. 72–73).

⁴ See: <http://hipstamatic.com/camera/> (21 April 2021)

4.2. Extensions of Man

Another concept developed by McLuhan and used by the photographer in her analysis regards the extensions of man. McLuhan was inspired by the American anthropologist Edward T. Hall, who described the phenomenon of creating “prostheses” that replace or expand the reach of the activities for which we earlier “used” only our bodies. Hall stated that the evolution of weaponry starts with teeth and fists, and ends with nuclear weapons (although currently it would probably be replaced with Unmanned Aerial Vehicles). Natural mechanisms of regulating body temperature were “expanded” by making clothes, textiles, and building houses. We use furniture instead of sitting on the ground. We improve our eyesight with glasses or magnifying glasses, cutlery allows us to eat without getting our fingers dirty, we do not have to transport items on our backs as we can use a car, etc. (Hall 1959, p. 79). McLuhan refers to all those extensions by using one word: medium (Gordon 2003, p. xiv).

Further “extensions of the body” that humans invent are generally accepted as a result of human activity, the effect of the permanent drive to discover. The extensions are typical to civilizational changes. McLuhan’s critical analysis relates to the reactions of people to these new phenomena. When faced with changes, they often are not able to recognize and understand their new qualities. This causes tensions, shocks that are seen as threats to the contemporary arrangement. They are the source of opposition towards the adequate approach to those changes. In this regard, McLuhan assigned great significance to art. He believed that creative expression can forecast “the new”, pay attention to unknown symptoms, anticipate changes and the related threats to contemporary, recognized behaviors, and can counteract the consequences of changes we did not comprehend. Art can facilitate understanding, appreciation of their meaning, and proper adjustment to new conditions (Grosswiler 1998, p. 94).

4.3. Figure/Ground

Leistner was also inspired by McLuhan’s dichotomy of figure and ground, which carries much interpretative potential regarding the perception and observation of the reality surrounding what is contained in the photographs. McLuhan explains the concept as using a simple mechanism developed at the beginning of the last century by Danish psychologist/phenomenologist Edgar Rubin, who investigated visual perception and optical illusion. Rubin showed the relationship between figure and ground using a simple illustration that either presented the profiles of two persons looking at each other or a decorative vase, depending on the viewer’s perception at a given moment; he or she sees either the faces (not noticing the vase) or the vase (not noticing the faces). In either case, the viewer sees the figure and disregards the ground. This dichotomy is found in any image; the part on which we focus is the figure, while the rest remaining outside the scope of our conscious attention becomes the ground. It is not a permanent distinction as each change in the process of observation immediately alters the relations between those two elements, simultaneously modifying their meaning (Marchand 1998). McLuhan was convinced that all situations in life create a small area of attention (figure) and a decidedly larger area of inattention (ground), which constantly resonate, pulsate, and interact with one another as the shape of one area continually adapts to the shape of the other. They do not exist separately because they do not have a meaning in isolation (McLuhan and Powers 1989, p. 5).

These ideas may be successfully applied to photographs taken during the Basetrack project. When we look at them, figures emerge from the ground as well as the meanings each viewer assigns to specific objects in the picture. For McLuhan and Leistner, the ground is indefinite, acoustic, and emotional, while the figure is concrete, visual, and conceptual. The ground can be understood as the context of the situation, which provides conditions for experiencing the part from which the figure appears. When the gaze shifts and there is a change in the composition of those elements, the meaning of all parts of the image is altered as well. According to McLuhan, the ideal perception is hidden in the ability to

maintain attention not only on the figure (which is relatively easy) but also on the ground, all the while being in a dynamic, resonating relationship. Unfortunately, we have been taught for generations to see only the figure and to ignore all other elements of the picture at which we are looking. The ground usually stays invisible because we are so familiar with it that we stop paying conscious attention to it (Gordon 1997, pp. 307–9).

4.4. Global Village

In the *Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan assured that electronic interdependence recreates the world as a global village (McLuhan 2011, p. 36). He believed that electronic media, those enabling the harmonious interaction of all senses of its users, may shape a new a community that resembles pre-literate communities. McLuhan's theories assert that its members will display rich emotional responses, commitment to shared activities, intuition, and a strong sense of belonging. Consequently, the changes occur both in the individual and in the social spheres of their functioning. The new media create a global network of mutual dependencies, something similar to our central nervous system. It is not only a kind of electric grid but also a uniform field of experience that allows us to respond to the world similarly and see it as a whole (McLuhan 2003, p. 148). This “neuroelectric” net brings together all the people in the world for its global co-living and co-experiencing everything that happens. In McLuhan's terms, this is an extension of information processing that takes place in the human nervous system (McLuhan 2003, p. 5).

The visual techniques that preceded electronic media shaped a system of organizing the world, based on the pattern of a printed page: with structured, aligned content and neat margins. It led to a common mechanism of breaking down the whole into fragments or specializations. However, McLuhan believed that the situation is changing thanks to the ubiquitous and rapid ways of communication. New patterns of organizing reality are created, ones without margins and a precise center, unlike visual techniques. Those patterns point us towards the organic and integral, not mechanical and fragmentary. We are returning to a tribal community (McLuhan 1997, p. 87). The idea of a global village becomes an important context for Leistner's deliberations.

5. iProbes

iProbes are a tool through which Leistner undertakes the narrative about Afghanistan, based primarily—which results from the essence of the Basetrack project itself—on reporting various aspects of everyday life in the base at Musa Qala. Interestingly, it is difficult to talk about a single leading story because there is no chronology of successive events. On the other hand, while each iProbe has a different theme, Leistner's main focus remains the same: the relationship between humans and modern technology. In each iProbe, Leistner uses new images and texts, but the content published in them is similar in structure. They include: a theme referring to the discussed artefact-extension, visualizations in the form of photographs, quotations from the works of Marshall McLuhan and other media theorists, statements by soldiers, experts, journalists and, of course, the author's main text. Therefore, two central elements of her story are clearly visible here: the text (the main text, i.e., the reflection presented in a given iProbe, as well as quotes and references, often expressing the author's attitude to the topic in question) and the image (mainly Leistner's photographs, but also graphics, diagrams and a map of the region).

The report presented in iProbes, based primarily on the concept of “body extensions,” is an introduction into the world occupied by American soldiers. The basis of the text is the photographs contained therein, which most often literally illustrate what the author writes about. iProbes are mainly concerned with the technologies that surround the inhabitants of the base in order to create a sense of security in these extreme conditions, and then (remotely) share it with loved ones in America. The author describes various methods of communication, which on the one hand serve to ensure comfort and connectivity with the family home, but on the other hand, may expose their users to serious danger (e.g., due to the localization of mobile phones). In line with the idea of the Basetrack project,

the photographs she took show soldiers during their daily duties (both trivial, such as exercise or eating, and serious ones related to warfare, such as patrols), thanks to which their observer has the impression that it is a safe place that might as well be in an ordinary training ground rather than in a war-torn country. However, the means of communication are not the only extensions that interest the photographer. Equally important in her story is the lethal technology used to wage war effectively, secure soldiers, and ultimately gain an advantage over the enemy and victory. This technology helps ensure safety, in the literal, physical sense. However, it additionally dehumanizes everyone who is within its range (Leistner 2012, online).

Depictions of war by the media may be of interest to social researchers for several reasons. It is possible to distinguish at least four approaches that they may find particularly captivating. First, as reports of conflicts of an extreme nature, often directly related to matters of life and death, such messages tend to strongly bind the attention of the audience and have the potential to shape their opinions and attitudes. Second, as unique and sensitive coverage, they show more clearly than others the way professional norms, principles, and practices are implemented, especially in presenting content with a high emotional load. The concept of objectivity and credibility, the level of trust towards official sources, direct access to the location of events, cooperation with various actors involved in the conflict, the level of the photographic realism—these are only a few issues that may be analyzed based on war reports and photography. Third, these messages clearly reflect both cultural perspectives and traditions of cultural representations. In the case of showing armed conflicts, the concepts of ethnic identity and nationalist mythology, which highlight the historically important issues of national formation, cultural prejudice, and international and intercultural relations, are often invoked. Fourth, the nature of war reports and photographs reveals a lot about the impact of politics and power, including their social aspects, on media representations. This approach shows the curious aspects of the nature of the government–media relationship, the role of political consensus and opposition towards imposed media strategies, the selection and consolidation of images treated as historical evidence, as well as the social importance of photographs (as cultural icons, elements of social narration, and collective memory) (Griffin 2010, pp. 7–8).

Looking at Rita Leistner's iProbes from this perspective can be insightful, especially in the context of her time as an embedded observer with Battalion 1/8 and commitment to reporting on the daily life at the base (which may be categorized as participant observation). Leistner emphasizes that in her work, the contact with the photographed object and taking the photograph is important, but so is how the captured moment will interact with its recipients. We do not always see someone staring back at us from Basetrack project photographs; most of them present tangible objects (which the photographer looked at, and now so do the recipients), but the questions about man and humanity constantly pulse right below their surface. It is possible to ask the humbling question of whether the Basetrack photographs can be at all used to convey anything about extreme human activity—such as war—without including people in the pictures (both those responsible for armed actions and those who suffer as a result). However, it often transpires that such non-anthropocentric photographs become the most accurate depictions of wartime actions including forms of visual management related to security and surveillance policies. They can move the audience's attention from observing human protagonists to the very construction of the system, thus disclosing the principles of its functioning (which brings to mind McLuhan's concept of figure and ground). It can be observed that war photography is becoming increasingly dependent on the action of state power, corporate interests, and everyday life. The opportunities of creating images contrasting with the official photographs also become crucial for those who want to challenge the ways that state-imposed security and surveillance operate (Andersen and Moller 2013, p. 205).

Unlike in her earlier works and publications, Leistner presents images of “war without blood”. These report on how the bloodless portion of wartime daily activities looks through the eyes of the people at the base. According to the idea of the Basetrack project, the photographs she took depict soldiers carrying out their daily duties so that the observer may fall under the impression that it is a safe place, that it might as well be any polygon rather than a place in a war-ravaged country (Leistner 2012, online).

Employing the theories and methods outlined above, Leistner prepared twelve iProbes based on her experience of contemporary warfare in Afghanistan.

5.1. *First Insight: The Smartphone and the Hipstamatic App*

“The iPhone camera is an extension of the eye and of the finger. [. . .] The permanence of the printed image has been exchanged for a transit digital image that most users never intend to preserve on paper. They are meant to be traded and communicated to others, like phone calls: photograph as transmission of information, not as material object.” (Leistner 2013, p. 98). The difference between a smartphone and its traditional ancestors lies in changing the approach to the photographs taken with it. The tangibility of photographs developed in the darkroom is replaced with temporary digital images, which most users do not intend to keep in the form of traditional copies. A smartphone photograph becomes a message like a telephone conversation; a transmission of intangible data sent from the sender to the recipient. According to the photographer, the immediacy and the aforementioned temporality of a photograph taken with a smartphone makes us feel that we are looking at each other as we truly are (Leistner 2013, p. 102).

The small size of the iPhone compared with its technical capabilities frustrated Leistner at first. As a professional photographer, she was accustomed to using proven equipment, while the smartphone with the Hipstamatic app, despite its obvious advantages, seemed like something frivolous in the Afghani reality. She suspects that both Marines and Afghans viewed it to be some sort of a joke or a hoax and wondered when the photographers taking part in the project would start using “real” cameras (Leistner 2013, p. 104). Indeed, Basetrack relied heavily on images captured via a smartphone with all its technical and aesthetic consequences. Each of the photographers involved in the project used the Hipstamatic app, and Leistner noticed its two highly important effects, which only indirectly involved the very act of taking the photograph. First, as it imitates analogue photography using a set of algorithms, copying traditional photographic processes and exaggerating specific effects in the images, the app highlights the material properties of photographed objects. This focus on the material and the technological dimension of both the shooting process and the persons immortalized in the photographs is a breakthrough in Leistner’s approach to reporting on war. Debates on the use of the Hipstamatic app in professional war reporting open up a series of questions about the differences between photography and illustration, professional and amateur, and reporting and editing. Controversy is primarily caused by the use of automatic photograph settings, imposed (in a way) by the application, the related deprofessionalization of war photojournalism (it is technically much easier for non-professionals to create images) and the presentation of war in a nostalgic, retro style. The app has supporters who zealously defend Hipstamatic photography as innovative and in keeping with the rapidly changing nature of armed conflict, photography, and journalism itself. However, it also has equally staunch opponents who, in turn, emphasize the ethical dimension, stressing that this application, which is too illustrative in style, does not present events as they really are. Of course, how many and what manipulations are allowed in reportage photography has changed dramatically at different points in the history of photography (both analog and digital). Accusations of modifying war photographs are nothing new, and a photo reportage using Hipstamatic is just another such example (Alper 2014, pp. 1236–7). Second, Leistner took pictures for the first time with her iPhone, in fact—with any phone at all, during the Basetrack project. Of course, she had used digital SLRs in her work so far, but the camera in the phone turned out to be a completely different medium. The issue with using Hipstamatic was similar as it offered several combinations

of “films” and “lenses” but did not inform the user about the effects that may be obtained while using them (Figure 1). The Hipstamatic app simulates an analog Polaroid camera as one has to wait a few seconds for the image to “develop” and appear on screen. A different, “unfiltered” version of the photograph is not saved in the phone. What is more, the photographs also show “pseudo-photographic” flaws, scratches and streaks added automatically as a result of an algorithm. Thanks to the latter, these images seem more real, rough, and have the charm of photographs taken several decades ago. The aesthetics of this kind of photography therefore go far beyond the traditional interaction between the photographer, the film and the lens. The images are the effect not only of the appropriate use and operation of the device, but also of the work of programmers who previously programmed the device. For this reason, it is alleged that it is not the photographer who transmits emotions (Alper 2014, p. 1237). The use of the app proved somewhat haphazard due to the absence of instructions for use, meaning that planning the look of a photograph took a degree of trial and error (Leistner 2013, p. 107).



Figure 1. The smartphone and the Hipstamatic app (version 2011). Source: created by Rita Leistner (used with photographer’s permission).

5.2. Second Insight: Text Messages

Text messaging, like most forms of written communication, is based on the phonetic alphabet which, according to McLuhan, was admittedly a ground-breaking invention that also triggered drastic changes in the social and individual life of humankind. Writing made it possible for humanity to transition from tribal organization to complex social structures. McLuhan suggested that the main consequence of this change is the imbalance of the senses typical to a pre-literate man and the simultaneous enhancement of vision that characterizes a civilized man. For him, this is a symbolic replacement of ears with eyes and feelings with the reason (McLuhan 2011, pp. xvi–xvii). Leistner reflects on the modifications that occur in the two basic systems of alphabetical writing—the Latin alphabet and the Abjad—because of the language of text messages. Though these alphabets historically derive from the same source, there is a fundamental difference between them. The Latin alphabet uses AEIOU vowels, while the Abjad is a system of writing in which characters

are used to denote consonants. However, the photographer notes that they reconnect in smartphone text messages (Leistner 2013, pp. 114–15). This stems from a simple mechanism of shortening the number of characters in a message, which involves deleting the essentially redundant vowels. Moreover, both the users of the Latin alphabet and the Abjad use numerals (shortening or even replacing whole words, such as in “4 you”) and deliberately linked punctuation marks (such as colon + dash + right parenthesis = smile). Another interalphabetical connection is found in all sorts of acronyms (such as BTW—*by the way*; AFAIK—*as far as I know*). When writing, the user resorts to a language stylistically similar to colloquial speech, full of agreed-upon slogans, abbreviations, and diminutives. The goal is to adapt the form of the language to a specific device and the speed of communication it requires (Menand 2008). According to Leistner, communicating via text messages sent and received using a smartphone relies on a new kind of language, which she calls silent spoken written language (Leistner 2013, p. 127). “The smartphone, like the epoch-making invention of the phonetic alphabet, is a huge game changer that is carrying mankind to a new plateau of mass written and visual literacy.” (Leistner 2013, p. 122).

5.3. *Third Insight: Body Armor*

“Body armour is an extension of the skin. A machine gun is an extension of the eye and of the teeth.” (Leistner 2013, p. 128). McLuhan recalled the observation of the American inventor and architect, R. Buckminster Fuller, who noticed that the creation of weaponry is the constant source of progress. Arms, uniforms, and all kinds of military equipment require progressively better performance parameters while consuming fewer resources (for example, materials and energy). The idea is to increase the strength of the army while at the same time limiting the size, weight, or number of things it needs to improve. Creating a new type of weapon almost immediately triggers the need to invent something that can protect against its lethal effects. Bulletproof vests resulted from attempts to find defense against bullets. According to Fuller, it should be both sturdy and as light as possible. Therefore, first of all, the idea is to reduce the total weight of the vests as much as possible while maintaining proper ballistic properties (McLuhan 2008, pp. 373–74).

The vest can save a life, but it also increases the number of casualties who survived an attack despite profoundly serious injuries, such as loss of limbs. Leistner believes that a lot has been said about the vests saving lives, but truly little about the condition of people who have survived thanks to wearing them. Those costs are shared by the wounded, their families, and the governments of the countries in which they live. Such ramifications are faced by soldiers when they return from their mission as the uniform already determines their social functioning at the time of military action. Leistner believes that the uniform is a simple way of drawing a line between “us” and “them”, separating the soldiers from the civilian population (Figure 2). “While no one would argue that body armour is not a necessity for military personnel in restive areas like Helmand province, an unavoidable effect is that the armour renders the wearer intimidating and alien to the civilian population. Sometimes that effect is desirable, but intimidation is less effective when the mission is to befriend and win-over the local population.” (Leistner 2013, p. 131). Civilians usually do not have bulletproof vests and many war photojournalists refuse to use them as a gesture of solidarity when they work among the people who cannot use such protection (Leistner 2012, online).



Figure 2. Body armour. Source: created by Rita Leistner (used with photographer's permission).

5.4. Fourth Insight: Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles

"An armoured vehicle is an extension of the skin and of the eyes; It's an extension of the military personnel inside." (Leistner 2013, p. 134). The Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicle (MRAP) is one of the most popular combat vehicles used by the American contingent. From October 2006 (when they started to be manufactured on a large scale) to Leistner's participation in the Basetrack project in 2011, over thirty thousand MRAPs were sent to missions in Iraq and Afghanistan (Figure 3). According to the United States Army Acquisition Support Centre, these vehicles serve as particularly durable multi-purpose platforms, capable of weakening the effects of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), rocket-propelled grenades, landmines, and small arms attacks. These threats cause the highest number of fatalities and heavy injuries in overseas mission areas (United States Army Acquisition Support Centre 2021, online).



Figure 3. Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicle. Source: created by Rita Leistner (used with photographer's permission).

Soldiers are aware of the dangers and consequences of MRAPs being ambushed but riding in them is still much safer than patrolling the areas outside the base on foot. Apart from safety issues, the use of armored vehicles is related to a socio-cultural problem, namely more difficult circumstances of establishing contact with the residents of surrounding villages. “Armoured vehicles save lives, as long as the military personnel remain inside. The problem with staying inside the MRAP is that you can’t meet the population and win over their hearts and minds.” (Leistner 2013, p. 136). Having a close relationship with civilians is an important point for military authorities. Yet, leaving the vehicle more often increases the risk of serious injury or even death (Petraeus 2010, online).

5.5. Fifth Insight: Figure and Ground Dichotomy

The photographs taken by Leistner from inside the MRAP are unique for at least two reasons. First, the MRAP protects from dying, but it also protects from being seen. The people that it passes by are aware that there are soldiers inside, and that they can be photographed by them. Second, dressed in her uniform and a bulletproof vest during the ride, the photographer sat strapped to a seat with her back against the windows of the vehicle. Therefore, she could not turn around to take a picture or see what she was photographing. She held her iPhone over her shoulder and pressed the “shutter button” when the column of military vehicles was passing through villages as these moments had the highest likelihood that she would capture their inhabitants. The whole series is, therefore, largely an accident. Moreover, the thick and dusty bulletproof glass of the vehicle acted as an additional filter, because of which everything outside the window seems somewhat blurred (Leistner 2012, online). These unique conditions made those photographs a perfect exemplification of the figure/ground dichotomy, which McLuhan perceived as a constant interplay between what we focus on and what, at a given point, remains outside our scope of attention (McLuhan and Powers 1989, p. 5). Leistner notes: “The first image I looked at on my iPhone elicited in me a feeling that, in McLuhan’s terms, would be attributed to the resonating intervals of meaning that are the result of recognizing an unfixed perspective of an artefact. This is the relationship of Figure to Ground”. (Leistner 2013, p. 139). The passers-by could not see her taking their pictures, but since they knew the military reality, it was obvious to them that they were being watched by someone who was inside. Such a situation is highly symbolic and shows that neither side actually sees the other and the perception of both is, therefore, based on stereotypes about what they might see if they really looked. They do not share a language that they might use to communicate—even if the Marines leave the vehicle and want to make direct contact, everything they say is translated and interpreted by a linguist, which in reality is a major barrier. Both sides want to communicate with each other, but there are so many obstacles that it becomes virtually impossible (Leistner 2013, p. 144).

5.6. Sixth Insight: Improvised Explosive Devices

“IEDs are extensions of the finger and of the forest—forests converted to wood converted to energy, detonated with a finger.” (Leistner 2013, p. 146). The historical irony is the fact that the Americans themselves taught the Afghani Mujahideen guerrilla in the late 1970s how to create improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to help them gain the upper hand during the Soviet intervention. Nowadays, IEDs are a hallmark of the Taliban and the leading cause of death or injury among contingent soldiers, the Afghani National Army, and civilians (Leistner 2012, online). The Taliban use these simple and relatively cheap weapons in a setting that they find convenient while avoiding respecting international laws on course and principles of armed conflict, which primarily impacts on the morale of contingent soldiers under attack. Many advantages determine the use of IEDs in such actions; first of all, low construction cost, simple design, ease of obtaining an explosive substance as well as the possibility of causing large losses without having to be near the site of the attack (Ciszewski and Mondel 2012, p. 77).

In Afghanistan, it is estimated that about a thousand new assault-ready mines may appear every month; they are mainly homemade devices made of common items: wire, plain manure, flat tiles, and several home-made batteries. The outer structure is mostly made of wood, so the IEDs look like a natural element of the landscape, covered with sand or stones to make sure they do not stand out. They may be detonated by pressing (when they are stepped on, or a vehicle rides over them) or remotely (for example, using a cell phone). IEDs are simple devices with immense lethal capabilities (Cywiński 2017, pp. 309–10).

In this context, Leistner points to another deceitful advantage using such devices. Due to their mostly wooden construction and only a small amount of metal or electronic parts, they become virtually invisible to modern mine detectors. Equipped with the world's most modern military equipment, the American army is troubled by the outdated technique developed by the U.S. military itself more than thirty years ago. It does not have a device or technology that would help in finding and safely detonating such explosive charges. However, there is a more traditional way: specially trained tracking dogs, so-called war dogs, which the U.S. army has been using since the beginning of the Iraq war (Figure 4) (Leistner 2013, p. 150).



Figure 4. War dog. Source: created by Rita Leistner (used with photographer's permission).

5.7. Seventh Insight: Fuel Dispensers

"Fuel dispensers are extensions of energy and measurements." (Leistner 2013, p. 152). These are either mechanical-electric (traditional) or digital (modern) devices used to measure and dispense the right amount of fuel, which is usually found in large containers hidden safely underground. Leistner notes that we rarely think about where the fuel we buy comes from or how it was delivered to the dispenser. Nevertheless, we are convinced that it will be there every time we go to a gas station. It comes out of nowhere and never ends (Leistner 2013, p. 156). McLuhan linked this attitude with the concept of figure and ground as well as perception training influenced by our extensions. According to the Canadian researcher, people generally do not look for the ground in any situation. They focus on one element of their surroundings and ignore the rest (Marchand 1998, p. 260).

However, the distribution and availability of fuel in Afghanistan is not a permanent presence (obvious in Western countries) but a permanent absence. Due to its geopolitical location, this country is a specific energy bridge (Leistner 2012). It does not have many energy-related deposits, but the northern areas—in the vicinity of the Caspian Sea, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan—have huge reserves of natural gas. Fuel is precious across

the country; especially in the south, where traders almost always have to work with the Taliban. Poor infrastructure additionally affects the operations of coalition forces as they must find a way to deliver the fuel to their bases (Freedberg 2010, p. 20).

The importance of oil in the Afghani war is very rarely addressed both by the coalition and the public opinion (Figure 5). The fact that one of the main reasons for the American intervention in the region was an attempt to control the Caspian Sea deposits remains an open secret. Since the 1980s, there is a plan supported by both the USA and Canada to build the TAPI gas pipeline (Turkmenistan—Afghanistan—Pakistan—India), connecting the rich Central Asian deposits with South Asia to satisfy its immense energy demands. This pipeline is of grand economic and strategic importance as, in theory, it will benefit Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India as well as weaken the position of the two leading energy market players: Russia and Iraq. The weakest link in this international investment is Afghanistan with its unstable political situation, the American invasion, and the constant threat from the Taliban. The section of the pipeline that would run through the country is to be 816 km long, cutting through five provinces in the west, southwest, and south, also their parts completely under Taliban control. There are many caveats related to the pipeline in terms of not only details of the investment but also whether the residents will be able to work on the construction sites, whether those tasks will be carried out by foreign contractors, as was the case in Iraq, and also the lack of safety which strongly destabilizes this state still rebuilding itself after decades of conflict. The Taliban attacks are not the only potential threat as there are also the drug lords who hold actual power in the areas along the route of the pipeline. The Afghani authorities plan to send several thousand soldiers to secure the pipeline, but the American withdrawal from the area is likely to trigger another wave of internal violence. Protecting the structure becomes one of the most important elements of the project (Wojcieszak 2015, pp. 221–44).

Leistner states that Afghanistan as an “energy bridge” is, in the context of McLuhan’s theories, a medium of fuel transport that primarily exists to supply the neighboring countries with little profit to itself. Thus, it becomes a metaphorical extension of the dispenser. We use it, but we do not really pay much attention to it (Leistner 2013, p. 161).



Figure 5. Fuel dispenser. Source: created by Rita Leistner (used with photographer’s permission).

5.8. Eighth Insight: Megaphones and Sermons from the Mosque

“Loudspeakers are an extension of the mouth. They are artefacts of the persistence of oral culture.” (Leistner 2013, p. 162). There are more than fifty thousand mosques in Afghanistan, including many small and private ones like those Leistner photographed

in Shir Ghazay (Figure 6). Each one is equipped with megaphones used both for prayer calls and transmitting religious and political contents. In small communities where most residents do not possess a TV or even radio, these mosque megaphones become the main source of information. Moreover, nearly seventy-five per cent of the country's population is illiterate, which means that most Afghans cannot write and read and, what is most important, that they must rely on interpretations of the Quran that are read to them by someone else. Furthermore, many self-proclaimed imams can recite Arabic scripture from the holy book of Islam but do not understand its significance, so they also rely on the intentions and interpretations that have been delivered to them by another person. Therefore, it is all based on words alluding to the Quran or merely linked with it, passed from one person to another, from generation to generation. Interpretations of interpretations. Unfortunately, despite their questionable origins, they become the motivation for mobilization and (often ruthless and bloody) fight in the name of the incorrectly understood Islam (Dupree 1980, pp. 104–9). "From the papyrus scrolls of the first Biblical texts to Gutenberg's historic Bible set in moveable type, to the *Book of Mormon* being published by a newspaper press; to TV and radio evangelists, to imams preaching through the loudspeakers atop mosques ... technology has played a role in religion." (Leistner 2013, p. 171).

The oral culture and associated role of imams in shaping the general opinion is a major concern for Western military strategists planning actions in Afghanistan. The representatives of Western culture rely on literacy and the technologies that arise from it, no longer able to understand the power of the spoken word (Murray 2000, online). One of the attempts to solve this problem was founded on the radio. Coalition forces have begun to use radio devices—in a shape similar to mosque megaphones—to wage an information war against Taliban propaganda. The U.S. military and ISAF manage radio stations all over the country and a radio tower is the most distinctive element of any base (Leistner 2013, p. 171).

It seems like a well-thought-out and effective direction, especially since radio is a medium that can affect most people very strongly (Lewis and Booth 1989). However, in Leistner's view, since the megaphones used in mosques remain a medium that cannot be penetrated or overtaken, the next channel of counterpropaganda and counterintelligence in Afghanistan should be a mobile phone, not the radio (Leistner 2012, online).



Figure 6. The Mosque. Source: created by Rita Leistner (used with photographer's permission).

5.9. Ninth Insight: Mobile Phones

“Mobile Telephony is an extension of the ear and of the mouth and of the finger.” (Leistner 2013, p. 172). Mobile networks shape one of the largest business areas in Afghanistan, second only to the drug market. Large telecom companies have to pay for “protection” in every Afghani province; otherwise, their towers are destroyed. What is more, the Taliban want to avoid tracking their activity using phone localization and demand that the entire system is shut down at night (Leistner 2012, online). Most companies agree to this to avoid costly repairs of the towers, and yet the Taliban often destroy them anyway. Telecommunication services are usually switched off from 5 p.m. to 6:30 a.m. the following day. It is a problem that affects many Afghans who cannot access the only form of long-distance contact for more than thirteen hours a day. While it significantly impacts the daily lives of the country’s citizens, Afghani phone companies stick to their decision to shut down the system because it reduces the risk of Taliban attacks (Sundby 2010, online).

Many Afghani phone users prefer to write text messages than talk. It is faster, cheaper and, above all, quiet. Most of them cannot read and write, but creating messages is possible thanks to speech-to-text and text-to-speech converters. According to Leistner, this is an extremely interesting phenomenon not only because sending, receiving, and “reading” such a text message may be a question of life or death; it also changes the functioning of the phone itself. It was initially a device used to pass verbal messages to become a text messenger over time, and then (thanks to the abovementioned conversion software) it surprisingly returned to its original manner of exchanging spoken information (Leistner 2013, pp. 176–77).

5.10. Tenth Insight: The Written Word

“Writing is an extension of the hand and of the eye; writing is a visual artefact that stands in for man; the written word replaces the ear with the eye.” (Leistner 2013, p. 178). The Taliban exploit the illiteracy of Afghans because it lowers the risk of individuals obtaining information and, consequently, gaining independence from verbally conveyed wisdom and knowledge. The spoken word still holds great power in Afghanistan. For this reason, the primary targets of Taliban wrath and attacks are translators and interpreters working for coalition forces (Thorne 2018, online). “Interpreters are prime targets for the Taliban, who see them as enemy collaborations, and so for their own safety it’s not uncommon to go on routine patrols without them. Photojournalists protect the identities of interpreters for the same reason, blacking out their faces if they should appear in any photographs that might be published.” (Leistner 2013, p. 181). Their cooperation with the enemy and revealing secrets that are hidden in Dari or Pashto is seen as treason. It is sometimes safer not to take an interpreter on patrol, but then it is much more difficult to establish the already quite limited contact between the contingent soldiers and the inhabitants. Furthermore, it is really difficult to find an Afghani with sufficient language skills who would be ready to take the risk of working with foreign military forces. Only the best-educated residents can speak both languages. Both Dari and Pashto are official languages in Afghanistan, but they are dissimilar and the differences between them resemble those between English and German. Without the help of an interpreter, any attempt to talk and penetrate the circle of Afghans holds no chance of success (Dupree 1980, p. 70).

5.11. Eleventh Insight: Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (Drones)

“Unmanned Aerial Vehicles are an extension of the eye, of the finger, of the body.” (Leistner 2013, p. 192). Drones fly too high to be seen, but low enough for people to hear them. They pass overhead 24 h a day, 7 days a week. They are everywhere. Drones hover over villages and towns, observe, kill, and then observe again. Like Big Brother. The psychological impact of their continued presence combined with the number of civilian deaths they cause is a so-called negative strategic cost that needs to be taken into account when assessing their use (Owen 2013, online). (Figure 7).

Some opponents of unmanned aerial vehicles see their application as a form of inglorious cowardice: if you are not prepared to die for a cause, then it is not important to you. Furthermore, little is known about post-traumatic stress disorder and other illnesses affecting drone pilots eliminating their targets from thousands of kilometers away. It is difficult to find an answer to the question of what happens to a soldier who is essentially cut off from the physical, sensual, and physical realities of war. Yet, such soldiers kill (Leistner 2013, p. 206). “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?” (Leistner 2014, p. 204). For days, drone operators stare in silence at the same piece of land. They witness the carnage. Pilots of manned aircraft do it differently: they leave the scene of the attack as soon as possible (Dao 2013, online).



Figure 7. The Drone. Source: created by Rita Leistner (used with photographer’s permission).

5.12. *Twelfth Insight: Sandbags and HESCO*

“Harnessing the power of earth and sand; Walls are extensions of the people on the other side.” (Leistner 2013, p. 206). Fortifications of coalition troops have become a permanent element of the Iraqi and Afghani landscapes. They have been in use as temporary protection structures since the first Gulf War in the early 1990s. HESCO is a special gabion container built from folded metal mesh and a bag made of exceptionally durable material. Leistner describes HESCO and sandbags as non-durable bricks that can be used wherever there is something that can fill them in (Figure 8). Like traditional Afghani settlements, they are an extension of the soil and sand of the region. Many ancient structures in Afghanistan were built from sun-dried bricks (adobe) (Leistner 2012, online). This oldest and most common building material in the world is made of sand and water, mixed with grass, straw, or fertilizer for durability. The muddy concoction is poured into longitudinal forms and dried in the sun. For this reason, adobe is a cheap building material, the production of which (as opposed to fired bricks) does not require fuel, furnaces, or specialized skills. The production process is simple and time efficient. “Like the ancient adobe villages in Afghanistan, sandbags and HESCO bastion barriers are extensions of the earth and sand.” (Leistner 2013, p. 207). The fortifications of the base were made of the same soil on which they stood, astonishingly matching the landscape, and not fitting in at the same time. They were in the middle of a community, yet separated from it. The entrance was guarded (literally) by armed tanks instead of doors. Additionally, the bases are covered with Concertina wires, made of the so-called razor wires, which are used to aggressively defend a protected site. They cause serious injury to the person trying to get through. Leistner concludes that Marines, with their villages built from modules, sandbags,

and barbed wire, are pretty much a nomadic tribe and have no intention of staying at a given place forever. Sooner or later, they will leave the Afghans who will have to handle further conflict with the Taliban on their own (Leistner 2013, p. 207).



Figure 8. HESCO base. Source: created by Rita Leistner (used with photographer's permission).

6. At the End

Depictions of war by the media may be of interest to social researchers for several reasons. It is possible to distinguish at least four approaches that they may find particularly captivating. First, as reports of conflicts of an extreme nature, often directly related to matters of life and death, such messages tend to strongly bind the attention of the audience and have the potential to shape their opinions and attitudes. Second, as unique and sensitive coverage, they show more clearly than others the way professional norms, principles, and practices are implemented, especially in presenting content with a high emotional load. The concept of objectivity and credibility, the level of trust towards official sources, direct access to the location of events, cooperation with various actors involved in the conflict, the level of the photographic realism—these are only a few issues that may be analyzed based on war reports and photography. Third, these messages clearly reflect both cultural perspectives and traditions of cultural representations. In the case of showing armed conflicts, the concepts of ethnic identity and nationalist mythology, which highlight the historically important issues of national formation, cultural prejudice, and international and intercultural relations, are often invoked. Fourth, the nature of war reports and photographs reveals a lot about the impact of politics and power, also in their social aspects, on media representations. This approach shows the curious aspects of the nature of the government–media relationship, the role of political consensus and opposition towards imposed media strategies, the selection and consolidation of images treated as historical evidence, as well as the social importance of photographs (as cultural icons, elements of social narration, and collective memory) (Griffin 2010, pp. 7–8).

Looking at Rita Leistner's iProbes from this perspective can be interesting, especially in the context of her time as an embedded observer with Battalion 1/8 and commitment to reporting on the daily life at the base. The narrative presented by Leistner in iProbes—balancing on the verge of being a record of participant observation and artistic creation—can be interpreted in the context of sociology and visual anthropology. The artist's photographs may be seen as visual descriptions of the life of a particular, albeit temporary, community. The questions of the "historical truth" or the "realness" of the people, situations, and contexts presented in photographs as well as the possibilities of

interpreting them remain open. Collecting visual data, which is often the basis of ethnographic research, is undoubtedly a certain interference with social reality as it was before. Fieldwork is always a unique chain of recoding, translating, and displacing. The photographs from the Basetrack project that Leistner discussed when creating her iProbes more than anything educate and inform the public about certain aspects of the war. The use of this interpretative tool allows one (instead of focusing on the human aspect) to focus on the technological dimension of the struggle, and thus to look at the war from a distance, perceive the non-obvious beauty of the photographs depicting it, and at the same time understand its cruelty and senselessness.

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