



## Alumni Interviews – Rita Leistner

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### Marshall McLuhan, Green Lantern and the War in Afghanistan

In January, Arts & Science caught up with war photographer Rita Leistner (BA 1987, Woodsworth; MA 1990, Comparative Literature) in Toronto just before she headed off to France to take up an artist-in-residence. We spoke about her new book, [Looking for Marshall McLuhan in Afghanistan](#), in which she applies the pioneering Canadian—and U of T—media theorist’s ideas on language and technology to contemporary warfare and smartphones. An [exhibit](#) based on the work has been mounted in La Rochelle, France.

**A&S: Tell us about the genesis of your new book.**

RL: In January 2011, I was invited to take part in [Basetrack](#), a journalism experiment that integrated new technologies and platforms, like social media and smartphones, into a military embed with US Marines in Afghanistan. It was designed to connect over a thousand Marines and corpsmen with their families, and to connect the broader public with the war. It involved tweeting and uploading photos on a daily basis and had its own Facebook page. I spent three weeks in Helmand province, and another three in Kabul. It was the catalyst for *Looking for Marshall McLuhan in Afghanistan*, which places social media, smartphones and military technology into a much broader, semiological context.

**A&S: Why McLuhan? How did that connection come about?**

RL: Simple coincidence. 2011 happened to be the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of McLuhan’s birth, and there were a lot of events in Toronto about McLuhan. One afternoon after I’d arrived back home from Afghanistan, a friend persuaded me to go to a talk on McLuhan at U of T. It was then that I had my “McLuhan epiphany,” during a lecture by my former semiotics professor, Peter Nesselroth. Sitting in Carr Hall at St. Mike’s College—across the street from the McLuhan Coach House, where he held his now famous seminars—a title for an essay popped into my head: “Looking for Marshall McLuhan in Afghanistan.”

For the first time in months, I had a starting point from which to make sense of my experience in Afghanistan. The iPhone photographs I took using the Hipstamatic app became a portal between image and text in a series of iProbes—a portmanteau of iPhone and probe, which is McLuhan’s term—that focus on our artefacts and technologies.

I say in the book that “looking and finding are in resonating relationships to each other.” There is also a notion of process as being therapeutic in a way. McLuhan thought so. Looking for McLuhan, about whom I knew almost nothing, began as a kind of prophylactic therapy to keep me from sliding into full-blown depression. It ended in an amazing journey of process and discovery: both self-help book and guidebook to this moment in history when smartphones and war first collide.

It was also a kind of virtual appeal to find something positive in the chaotic collision between technology, Afghanistan and our humanity in general. McLuhan had a faith in technology I don’t necessarily share. It’s been tied by others to his Catholicism, which just is not where I’m coming from.

And did you know that, in 1993, *Wired* magazine (and you don't get much hipper than that) named McLuhan its "patron saint"? I'll admit a big reason I chose McLuhan was the peculiar hipness associated with his work, which I thought would help bring a wider audience to the semiotic investigations I was embarking on. Borrowing a phrase from Umberto Eco, who was a much earlier influence for me, I call the book "an act of semiological guerrilla warfare." I'm really just trying to recruit an army.

**A&S: What was it like shooting on an iPhone?**

RL: I own a lot of cameras and lighting equipment, and I'd never imagined I'd ever have a need or desire to use a phonecam. But I wanted to fully embrace the concept of the Basetrack project, and I ended up getting quite excited about using this technology in a place that modernity seems on so many levels to have passed by. Putting aside traditional photography for the sake of the project required a leap of faith.

One day, the Battalion's Master Gunnery Sergeant asked me what it was like to use an iPhone as a camera. I replied, "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."

But there's no denying the smartphone is a real game changer. For the first time in history, images and text are seamlessly merged on the same device. This co-dependence of image and text seemed like a moment I'd been waiting to talk about my whole life.

**A&S: The book was conceptualized digitally—as an [original online contribution](#) for the *Literary Review of Canada*. But then you turned it into a material object—a gorgeous and provocative one. Why?**

RL: I grew up in a pre-digital world and I'm something of a bibliophile. Books, photographic prints, these forms of human experience with an element of permanence, have long been the foremost way I've wanted to leave my mark in the world. I felt a sense of urgency—that somehow we are at a turning point in history where the world of books was being replaced by the digital world, and I had to not just produce a book at exactly this time, but a book that was about the very disappearance of the book.

I spent nearly two years working closely with a fantastic graphic designer, Jenny Armour, to create a symbiotic relationship between image and text in book form—and readers familiar with McLuhan's collaborations with renowned graphic designer Quentin Fiore will see that my book is an homage to the spirit of that collaboration.

Eventually, *Looking for Marshall McLuhan in Afghanistan* will come out as an e-book, and it will be ironic, again, when readers come across the parts of the book that draw attention to itself as a material object, as in "this book made of paper you can hold in your hands."

**A&S: What inspired you to become a photojournalist who covers war?**

RL: I wanted to be a photojournalist from the age of 12, when I read about Idi Amin's secret torture chambers in Uganda in *Life* magazine, and then again when I saw Roland Joffé's film *The Killing Fields*, about the Cambodian genocide, and the complete news and media blackout that descended on the country for nearly four years of Khmer Rouge rule. I had a perhaps naïve idea that journalism and photographs could help curtail these kinds of atrocities. Twenty years later, I ended up living in Cambodia learning photojournalism on the ground from veteran war correspondents who were in Phnom Penh when the city fell to the Khmer Rouge in April 1975.

**A&S: You took a bit of a detour first.**

RL: After high school, I had no idea how to go about becoming a photojournalist. I ended up at Woodsworth College, studying French and English literature and American history. I was particularly interested in the Vietnam War. I was born in 1964—too early to remember much of the war from the news, but late enough that it was already being taught as history by the time I reached university. In fact, I'm writing a book review right now of Michael Maclear's memoir of covering Vietnam and how he had to convince the CBC that the war was important to a whole generation, not just Americans. I'm definitely part of that generation that was deeply affected by the war in Vietnam.

But I was only 18 years old. I wasn't ready to pack my bags and move to a war zone. So I set aside my dream of being a war correspondent, and just read about war. In the meantime, I fell in love with literature. I'm an obsessed Francophile, and I love alphabets and linguistics and read grammar books for fun and relaxation.

But I've never been a "typical academic." In my first year at grad school, I asked for an extension on a paper about Umberto Eco so that I could go tree-planting, which was my summer job for 10 years. I'll never forget Professor Lubomír Doložal's response: "Not enough philosophers know how to drive a nail." (I got the extension). The next year, I wrote an essay on logging literature as a way to bring together my academic work with the world being introduced to me through tree-planting. I read Howard White's 1983 collection of poems about his years in the logging industry in British Columbia. In the introduction to *The Men There Were Then*, White wrote: "If the truth be known, I'm not much better at bulldozer driving than I am at being a poet, but I've always been able to turn a lot of heads with the combination." I identified immediately and thought, hmmm, I could be like that: I could turn heads by having a weird combination of skills and interests. Since I was already in the MA program in Comparative Literature, which is as genre-crossing as you get in literature programs, I was already well on my way.

**A&S: A focus of your work is portraiture—[The Edward Curtis Project](#), [Portraitscapes of War \(Lebanon\)](#), [the Women of al Rashad](#) (inside Baghdad's largest psychiatric hospital), [American Women Wrestlers](#), [Crazy Horse in Iraq \(American Cavalry Soldiers\)](#)... Even your first short documentary film, *Miklat: The Bomb Shelter Project*, which premiered at the New Orleans International Film Festival last October. Yet your book is a departure from portraits. Why?**

RL: I decided to try something different and look at humanity through our technologies, what McLuhan calls "the extensions of man." But even though portraits are not heavily present in the book, they are present through their absence, through my discussions about language, man-made artefacts and the image captures of smartphones. There are some places where I really riff on the idea of capturing portraits inside cell phones.

**A&S: What have your experiences in war zones taught you?**

RL: It's normal to come across things in life we think we want, even if we don't really know what they would mean to us if we had them. Getting to a certain place in a certain way is as much about the doors that have been shut on us, as it is about the opportunities we become open to once those doors have been shut.

Take for instance the way I went to Iraq. I couldn't get an embed because I wasn't American and because I wasn't affiliated with a big media outlet. Ironically, I eventually did do one of the longest embeds of the war, spending three months with the American Cavalry, which ended up being a cover story in *The Walrus*. I could have so easily said, "It's too difficult." Instead, I made my way to eastern Turkey and from there walked to Iraq in the company of Kurdish smugglers. It was a grueling, highly illegal, three-day journey through rugged mountainous terrain carrying heavy gear. We travelled mostly at night to elude Turkish border guards, who had shoot-to-kill orders. Halfway through, I nearly

fell to my death, badly injuring my knee. But in the end, it was a very different story than most journalists had, and it meant that my introduction to Iraq came through the people who helped me along the way, not as someone at the top of an American tank whose first encounters with Iraqis were as an enemy to be killed. And so what had at first been a bitter disappointment and seemed like a huge disadvantage actually ended up being a great advantage. I wouldn't have told you that when we were in the middle of the Taurus mountains with what seemed like no way out. I would have turned back time to be at home in a second if I could have.

**A&S: You said earlier that you've never been a "typical academic." Maybe in part thanks to your rather 'unorthodox' journey, and your rare melding of theory and praxis, you've been invited to teach photojournalism courses at U of T's Victoria University and Sheridan College. You've also been invited to talk to Comp Lit students as an alumna who went on to a non-traditional career, most recently last fall. Why do you mentor?**

RL: It's funny you should ask, because I actually say in the acknowledgements to my book that I hope the book helps answer the question, "What do you do with your degree in Comparative Literature?" That was the theme of the most recent Comp Lit event, so when I was asked to attend, I knew I could speak to it.

Anyone who teaches or mentors will tell you it's a two-way relationship. There is a lot to be said for the discipline of having to describe how and why you do what you do. One of my most hated phrases is, "Those who can do, those who can't teach." Teaching is phenomenally challenging as well as rewarding. It's surprised me how much my teaching has contributed to my practice as well.

Being engaged in the University and being around the energy of the students was really instrumental in my inspiration for writing *Looking for Marshall McLuhan in Afghanistan*. Those who don't see the personal value in giving back are missing out. Throughout my life and career, many people have been very generous to me. The acknowledgements to my book, for instance, are 1,500 words long.

**A&S: So apart from your camera, what's the one thing you couldn't do without on your travels?**

RL: That's easy: something to read, usually related to the place I'm in or the project I'm working on. Oh, and a flak jacket of course.