

PERCEPTION MANAGEMENT IN THE ART OF WAR

**A Review of Finnish War Propaganda and
Present-Day Information Warfare**

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1. PROPAGANDA AND INFORMATION WARFARE

Perception management has always been integral to the art of war, either intentionally or unconsciously. The concepts of "traditional propaganda" and "psychological warfare" have been replaced by those of "information warfare", "information operations" and "psychological operations". The idea behind this article is that perception influences military knowledge and policy-making. The methods used to control perception and the ideas that take shape regardless of this control reveal the different cultural backgrounds of the parties at war. At the same time, these means of control – images, words, and leaflets – expose the tactical thinking of those who use them.

Perception and images, and their psychological analysis, have always been at the root of successful operations. Nevertheless, the analysis of "invisible" weapons often remains at the level of analysing the number of weapons or the functioning of machinery, and this is why the images pertaining to perception management have been taken as given. Therefore, it is appropriate to ask whether perceptions are produced or whether they arise spontaneously.

Many of the wars of the last ten years have given the impression, however, that the exertion of psychological influence through information operations is the result of systematic planning. This systematic planning often results in short-term and sometimes even longer-lasting success at least at the level of images. This assumption was supported by the Operation Hail Mary carried out in the Gulf War and the images created of the Patriot missile. However, the systematic nature of psychological operations has not necessarily ensured an operational advantage for the troops, and their results have been questionable. It has been possible for a psychological operation to become counter-productive, as evidenced by the Soviet propaganda about Field Marshal Mannerheim in the Finnish wars of 1939–1945. Perception management through information operations is a challenging weapon to plan and use compared to

traditional battle. It is therefore safe to assume, for example, that not all of the successful propaganda operations of the Second World War that sought to win over "hearts and minds" were the result of systematic planning.

In 2nd chapter of this article we examine the theory of perception through the field theory of the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In 3rd chapter we examine perception management in practice using two examples. The first example introduces "White Death", a propaganda concept used in the Finnish Winter War. The second example deals with the United States' information operation in Afghanistan.

2. PERCEPTION MANAGEMENT

Maurice Merleau-Ponty has suggested that when you touch your right hand with your left hand, the object, your right hand, can also sense itself. Nevertheless, a hand can never feel that it is the one touching and the one being touched at the same time. Instead, there is a vague relationship between these two states, alternation, in which the one being touched senses that it is the one touching and the one touching senses that it is the one being touched. This interchangeability shows that there is no difference between the subject and the object; their distinction is purely theoretical. A human being is capable of sensing because he/she can also be sensed through his/her body. For example, a soldier whose leg has been amputated after stepping on a landmine can still feel pain and have a cold feeling in his "non-existent leg". Thus, sensation is not an object to consciousness. The corporality of a human being enables him/her to surpass the present time (Merleau-Ponty 1962).

Perception has meaning, but it is not rational to a human being. We are in the world even before we learn how to speak. Perception always contains more information than we can rationalise into definitions.

The starting-point of Merleau-Ponty's theory is a field, against which the phenomena of the world become meaningful. This meaning is not constituted by the consciousness, but by our constant relationship to the world, especially through the body. According to fixed-point theoretical thinking, there is



Figure 1. The subject's perception of the object.

always a causal relationship between two fixed points in space. (Merleau-Ponty 1962)

Fixed-point theory does not account for electrical phenomena, however. Electrical research has reached the conclusion that an individual phenomenon can only exist in relation to the whole. The early philosophers regarded air, fire, earth and water as fields against which individual phenomena and objects could be understood.

All metaphysical systems are field theoretical systems. They require a beginning from which everything starts to differentiate, which sustains the differentiation, and in relation to which the differentiated can exist. The forces in the field do not lie in a straight line, but form an arch as in induction. Thus, there is no empty space between objects. The space is a dynamic dimension. All objects are related to each other through this field, and there are no interruptions in time, but the changes are temporally dependent on the preceding moments. Einstein's theory of relativity can be seen as the epitome of field theory. In Einstein's theory all things except the velocity of light are relative phenomena, i.e. field phenomena.

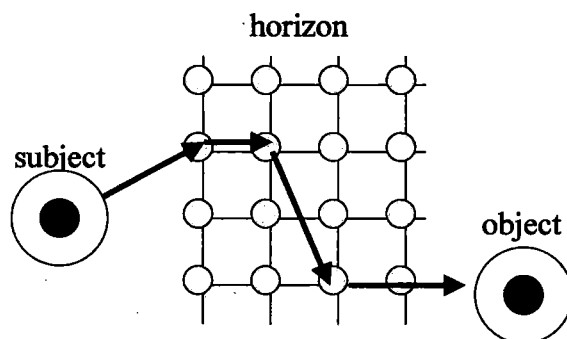


Figure 2. Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception and the field.

In other words, action and perception cannot be dissociated. Perception always carries a perspective, because the perceiver has a certain relationship to the object through the field. A direct causal relationship between the subject and the object is not possible in field theory. The horizon is a field against which our knowledge and experiences always receive their meaning. Perception is only possible against a background. A grey spot is dark when viewed against a light-coloured background, but against a black background it may seem very pale indeed. The spot has no qualities of its own: it receives them against a certain background.

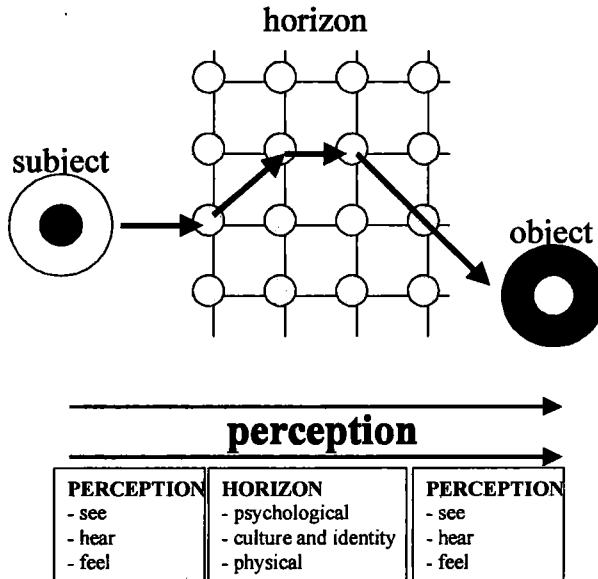


Figure 3. Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception and the subject's perception of the object through a field.

Our consciousness can extract an object from the field, but its meaning is always formed against the field. For example, when our sense of sight picks out a butterfly from the landscape, our other senses and consciousness are always also involved, providing their own meanings: we can feel the summer breeze and the touch of grass against our bare legs, we can hear the birds sing, and our childhood and friends spring to mind. Thus, the field of perception is more than the sum of individual senses, it is rather a dynamic melting pot of senses. This even solves the old chicken and egg conundrum: both came first. Neither can exist without the other. Similarly, man does not single-handedly clear out the way for himself, but the world yields the way to man.

A patient who has lost the conscious control of his/her limbs due to brain damage can still scratch an itch spontaneously. The body's intentionality prevails over association. Many of us are not aware of what is happening inside of us but we can function regardless of this. Also, an equilateral triangle would be an incomprehensible concept in a culture where there are no straight walls. All formal thinking is preceded by something that is not formal. Our perception does not tell us anything directly, but receives its meaning only when perceived to be something and perceived against something else. For example, everyone recognises the feeling one gets when words and letters on paper suddenly turn meaningless when one is reading them. Hearing starts to dominate. Musicians read music but listeners can concentrate on listening.

3. THE INVISIBLE ENEMY AND PROPAGANDA

3.1. "White Death" in the Winter War

From the end of November 1939 until March 1940, Finland waged war on the Soviet Union. This war, known as the Winter War, saw the rise of "White Death", one of the leading themes of Finnish propaganda. It was based on a rumour spread among the Red Army troops that White Death was lurking in the Karelian forests. However, White Death is by no means a simple phenomenon or image.

Snow has been considered an essential feature of White Death. It was an element that surrounded both the Finns and the Russians.

Frost has also been associated with White Death. The following is an extract from the thoughts of a Finnish soldier fleeing the enemy and then taken prisoner:

"There was total disorder. The soldiers used it to escape to the forest. One of the soldiers noticed it too late. There was no retreat. The enemy was everywhere. I had to find some cover, and fast. Some logging had been done in the area in the autumn, and there was a top of a pine nearby. I dashed under it. I intended to leave once it was dark. The situation got worse. The enemy positioned several sentries, one right next to the treetop. It was impossible to leave unnoticed. I spent the next 24 hours under the top of a pine – without budging, as well as the next night and day. It snowed on the treetop at night, and I got better cover. The sentries stayed persistently in position. I stuffed a handkerchief in my mouth. I muffled the chatter of my teeth. Tonight I'll have to leave, otherwise I'll be facing White Death." (reported on the Finnish television channel TV1, 2001)

Snowsuit was also associated with White Death. The Finnish soldiers wore white camouflage suits in the Winter War, and Finnish newspapers spread propaganda about the invisible Finnish soldier.

The battles of the TF 4th Light Infantry Detachment illustrate the role of White Death in the Winter War. The success of the task force was based on its swiftness, which was attained by using skis to move in the snowy terrain. Many rumours ensued, one of them being that they took no prisoners. The task force became famous for its snowsuits and "invisible" movements.

"It seemed that the only thing waiting in the forest was White Death, a Finnish soldier in a snowsuit, who would attack and then disap-

pear without a trace... In the dark, the men in snow camouflage merged into the background. The Finnish wilderness protected its soldiers better than any defences or fortifications. Here in the wilderness, surrounded by snow, the enemy was helpless, and that is why it had concentrated all its troops to break through and to be able to proceed on the road... the patrols made sure that there was movement in the enemy troops day in day out, they did not have one peaceful moment the entire time... there was a moon over the Finnish forest. The snowdrift shimmered eerily in the moonlight and the shadows of the forest stayed still. The sentries in snow camouflage were almost invisible as they merged into the scenery. They could well have been trees or stumps covered with snow." (Sarjanen 1998, 51, 107–108)

Sharpshooter is another element closely related to White Death. It has been said about the Finnish sharpshooter Simo Häyhä, the most renowned sharpshooter in the world, that he operated under the supervision of his superiors in a disciplined manner and acted against armed force. He did not shoot people walking in the streets; he operated on the battlefield, fighting the hostile force that had invaded the country. The author Petri Sarjanen interviewed Häyhä in the summer of 1998 to find out what the most important psychological qualities of a sharpshooter are according to Häyhä. On the top of his list, alongside discipline, Häyhä placed a surprising quality: humaneness. Like in the defence of Socrates, black is turning white. A fighter that hates the enemy more than anything, quickly burns out and ends up destroying himself and exposing the people around him to danger. (Sarjanen 1998, 184–187)

The important qualities of sharpshooters include the ability to camouflage their position, their equipment and themselves. Simo Häyhä's reputation of being invisible assumed rather large proportions: towards the end of the Winter War the newspapers reported that he had been killed when, in fact, he had not. The story has it that Simo Häyhä's brother Aarre met a neighbour, who said to him: "I heard you lost Simo." Aarre replied to him: "Nonsense! I just got a letter from Simo yesterday. He's in Kinkomaa sanatorium near Jyväskylä, lying between white sheets, getting fat." The neighbour shook his head in disbelief; he had read in the paper that Simo Häyhä was dead. Häyhä's brother remarked: "Simo read it too. That's why he wrote me that letter. He told me to put a stop to the funeral because there is no corpse." (Sarjanen 1998, 156–157, 205)

The image of White Death arose spontaneously: at least at the beginning of the war little propaganda was carried on to intentionally foster the image. However, as the war continued, the media naturally began to emphasise many

of the elements associated with White Death. The newspapers frequently featured the invisible Finnish soldier, thus creating a heroic myth. For example, the newspaper *Ilkka* wrote on 13 December 1939 that the Finnish units in white suits were impossible to see.

The enemy naturally did not admit the Finns' better soldierly skills. For example, Moscow Radio that was used for anti-Finnish propaganda kept silence about the famous encirclement on the road to Raate, and blamed the weather for a minor Finnish achievement (14 000 dead) in one battle. The weather was considered to be an asset for the Finns. On 13 January 1940, the radio station gave the following report about the military operations during the preceding three-week period:

"During this period there has not been any significant changes in the Finnish military operations... The sudden cold period has improved the position of the Finnish units considerably. However, they have not known how to take advantage of the conditions thus generated... the actual number of casualties was 900 men, which was mainly due to the frost and not the military operations of the Finnish Army." (Jahvetti 1942, 56–57)

The Finns' ability to destroy the enemy's soldiers was thought to be based on the fact that Finnish sharpshooters were perched on trees. Simo Häyhä does not admit to this claim, which was put forward, for example, in the newspaper *Ilkka* on 13 December 1939. However, the conditions were regarded excellent for the Finns on both sides: the temperature was below zero, there was snow, and the skiing conditions were good. The Finns were used to these conditions, whereas the enemy's soldiers, who were brought to the front from all over the Soviet Union, were not.

As a conclusion, it can be held that the notion of White Death conceptualised the uniformity of circumstances and perception. It incorporated the genuine danger of war: death. Other fields that the parties at war shared, and which nobody could escape, were the circumstances such as the frost and the snow. The Finns strengthened these ready-made perceptions with leaflets seeking to confirm the existing connection.

3.2. The Visible and the Invisible at War against Terrorism

The words of Thomas Jefferson about England being hostile to the United States and hostile to freedom seem distant today. A more recent memory that springs to mind is the United States supporting Iraq in the war against Iran in the 1980's. Vilho Harle has written: "Friends and Enemies come and go at short notice and even change their faces within rather short periods. Today's

Friend can become tomorrow's Enemy, and vice versa." In the war against terrorism, the perception of the enemy started to revolve around the persona of a former friend, Osama bin Laden. Therefore, the idea of the enemy as "a social construction of *us*" seems plausible. (Harle 200)

On 12 September 2001 the President of the United States defined the objective of the war against terrorism in the following terms:

"This enemy hides in shadows, and has no regard for human life. This is an enemy who preys on innocent and unsuspecting people, then runs for cover. But it won't be able to run for cover forever. This is an enemy that tries to hide. But it won't be able to hide forever. This is an enemy that thinks its harbors are safe. But they won't be safe forever." (Bush 2001)

Furthermore, on 15 September the President stated: "This is a conflict without battlefields or beachheads, a conflict with opponents who believe they are invisible." Even though the President maintains that this is a false interpretation, his statement nonetheless reinforces the perception. Besides, on 26 September the President addressed the question of invisibility again: "You see, the enemy is sometimes hard to find; they like to hide. They think they can hide — but we know better." (Bush 2001)

The definitions of the Secretary of Defense supported those of the President:

"One has to know that a terrorist can attack at any time and any place using any technique."

"They do not have high-value targets that the typical weapons of war can go in and attack."

"They're in apartments, and they're using laptops, and they're using cell phones and they are functioning in the shadows, not out in front." (Rumsfeld 2001)

Contrary to the case of White Death, the definition of the objective of the battle delimited people's perceptions in this instance. Paradoxically, it followed that the enemy became invisible, and not us or our own troops. During the first six months after the terrorist attack there were almost daily speculations about the whereabouts of bin Laden. At times, bin Laden was in Sudan, then in Pakistan or somewhere in Afghanistan, in the Tora Bora mountains, for example. When the invisibility and the lack of information about bin Laden's whereabouts were combined, the inevitable conclusion was that bin Laden was, in fact, invisible.

On 14 September BBC News reported on the enemy using the expression "America's invisible enemy". On 29 September The Australian printed the following headline: "Hunt for the invisible man." On 13 September it was reported on Salon.com that "in Osama bin Laden, the U.S. is confronting one of the most stealthy and formidable foes in its history". Peter Bergen has written the following about bin Laden in his book *Holy War, Inc.*: "You can't find him, he will find you." Bergen suggests that when bin Laden is in the media, he is everywhere. (Bergen 2001) Our conclusion is that bin Laden is mostly a virtual enemy on computer and television screens.

Following the attack on 11 September 2001 the media became a central battlefield. Tony Blair and George W. Bush were afraid of losing the propaganda war, and attempted to limit the media coverage of bin Laden. Even though the U.S. military achievements in Afghanistan have been incontestable, the Western leaders' anxieties about the media war have not been unfounded. Bin Laden, as well as Arafat more recently, has become a psychological weapon that has agitated minds in the Arab world. The security measures of the Salt Lake City Olympics were a manifestation of the fact that the propaganda war had turned against the aggressor. In fact, the fear of bin Laden's impact on a wider scale as presented in the Western media has influenced the Western people the most; they are convinced that the world has become more evil than ever before.

On the other hand, the fact that the enemy was portrayed as a strong network resulted in an extensive military operation in a short period of time. In the long term, it will generate an atmosphere of constant fear of the existence of a global invisible enemy in the information age. Contrary to *White Death*, the use of bin Laden in the making of Western propaganda has turned against the Western countries themselves. In reality, Al Qaeda was not as strong as we were given to understand.

What has been typical of the invisible enemy has been binding it to forms of terrorism or guerilla action. The military forces face a problem trying to defeat this kind of an enemy because the enemy is inside the defender's own society and troops.

Finally, we can ask why the perception of the enemy was directed exclusively towards bin Laden, and consequently towards Afghanistan. Why not towards Saudi Arabia, for example, when fifteen of the terrorists involved in the attack of 11 September were from Saudi Arabia? Political and strategic reasons can be given to answer this question, but as regards propaganda, the decision to attack Afghanistan has caused unintentional fears in the Western population: fear of flying, changes in consumer habits, etc. This in turn has taken its toll on the economy and had a negative impact on the United States'

own economic well-being. Controlling the visible and the invisible is problematic and by no means unambiguous.

4. SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The following conclusions can be drawn, based on the applicability of Merleau-Ponty's field theory to the presented examples, White Death and Osama bin Laden:

- Perception management can never be certain. Controlling the visible and the invisible is problematic and by no means clear and lucid.
- The attempt to control sensitive perception can become counter-productive.
- It is challenging to plan operations in the field of perceptions.
- It is difficult to evaluate the impact of information operations and psychological warfare, and eventually, it is scientifically impossible. We cannot repeat a unique situation, and therefore it is impossible to achieve absolute certainty about the results of exerting influence on perception.
- To understand the enemy, the challenge is the field and us – not the enemy.

Through guerrilla action and terrorism, the invisible enemy makes it impossible for others to perceive its physical being. The problem concerning invisible enemies is that they cannot be destroyed regardless of the amount of armed might used against them: they subsist and operate even among the opponent's troops.

The problem behind perception management is the fact that perceptions are contextual. According to the theory of Merleau-Ponty, the object of influence is always culture-specific and dependent on history. When two parties have different fields of perception, and a different history and culture, it may indeed prove impossible to overcome these barriers.

Finally, as regards the development of armed forces, it is worthwhile discussing what sort of knowledge and skills they would have to acquire in order to better understand the operative objective. The traditional structure of armed forces is based on authority and command, which have helped soldiers to overcome their fear of death in battle. In spite of all the new armaments technology and the professionalisation of armed forces, the command and control culture cannot be abandoned. If this were to be done, then the armed forces would lose their basis of operation and motivation.

Perception management challenges those waging information war to analyse words and images, and most importantly, to focus their attention on what is behind the phenomenon in their field of perception – the context and the enemy. If we only think through images in this emotion-centred society cont-

rolled by television, we are dangerously bordering a world where images start to control our thinking. We have begun our journey to a more primitive – and not a more sophisticated – level. If we see an image of the enemy before us or in our minds, it does not mean that we have a deeper understanding of the meaning of war. The ability to look behind a complex phenomenon requires the ability to look behind images and simple modes of speech. The information flow puts the operations centres' ability to concentrate and carry on analyses to the test.

The armed forces should be able to look outside the screen and not into it because the information war is around us and not in front of us. The problem of invisibility is not only limited to the enemy. For example, in the war against terrorism the actual invisible enemy was anthrax, which suddenly disappeared from the news after a period of time. It is not enough to define the enemy and keep it in the discussion. The system which gives shape to the enemy must also provide an official opinion about significance. Calling in question this interpretation as it is portrayed in the media is the key to understanding the whole truth.

On the other hand, the command and control culture contradicts skilful propaganda. When detailed propaganda is formulated, the entire command and control culture of the armed forces has to be overthrown to find the essential mental features on which the influence should be focused. Therefore, propaganda should not be designed by soldiers, but by experts outside of the armed forces. A soldier who fights with propaganda has lost his faith in the command and control culture, thus weakening his own troops in relation to those of the enemy.

The prerequisite for the justification of war, the bravery of battles and fearlessness in the face of death, is a certain blindness to the utmost motives of war. Hence, the best target of our propaganda is our own population and soldiers, and maybe our allies, because we can never have in-depth knowledge of the culture of an enemy. The "new wars" of our times do not differ much from the old wars, after all. We can never know the enemy well enough. According to Merleau-Ponty, there is always a middle ground, a field that distorts and delimits our view of the enemy. This means that we can only direct propaganda towards ourselves.

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Abstract**PERCEPTION MANAGEMENT IN THE ART OF WAR**

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Perception management is integral to the art of war. Skilful use of information warfare, psychological operations and propaganda is problematic, however. Based on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception and the practical examples presented in this article – the Finnish Winter War and the war on terrorism – it can be held that perception and its interpretation can never be certain. If perceptions are manufactured, they can become counter-productive. The way in which perceptions arise is characterised by dynamism. According to Merleau-Ponty, there is always a middle ground between us and the enemy, a field that distorts and limits our view of the enemy. Therefore, in this article we propose that we can direct propaganda only towards ourselves.

Keywords

Perception management, invisible enemy, propaganda, information warfare.