

The Medium is the Message

Jonathan Rowson

One of my more eccentric secondary school teachers had two things written on her blackboard at all times: 'The word 'interesting' is banned!' and 'The medium is the message!' Over time I came to appreciate that 'interesting' doesn't mean very much, and when I found myself wanting to use that word, it was beneficial to be forced to think more precisely about what I was trying to say. However, I was never too sure what to make of the second statement. All I knew was that if I ended my essays with 'The medium is the message!' I was awarded with a big red tick, and some extra marks.

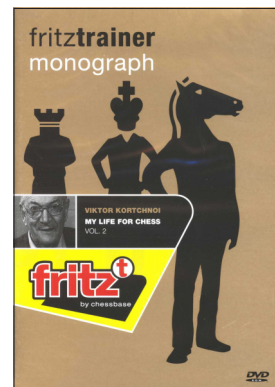
It turns out that the expression comes from Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian professor considered the patriarch of media criticism, and perhaps even more famous for an unexpected appearance in *Annie Hall*, probably Woody Allen's most famous film. As far as I can make out, McLuhan's point is that the way that information is delivered is not innocent, because it defines our experience of the content of the information and shapes us in ways that we are not full aware of. So whether a set of ideas are delivered in a book, a magazine, online, on a DVD, on a video, or in a play, says more about the kinds of people we have become than the content of those ideas. In McLuhan's lingo: media forms are 'not passive wrappings, but active processes' and the 'message' that new mediums like the Internet,

iPods, DVDs etc offer is clear to anyone who can take some distance from them and see what they are doing to us. In McLuhan's words: 'we become what we behold'.

I would like to understand McLuhan's ideas more fully, because I find them hugely intriguing, but for now their role has to be limited, and focused on the fact that many chess 'books' these days look more like flying saucers for two dimensional aliens than reconstituted trees for humans. Moreover, these 'books' will only yield their content when you take them out of your hands, and place them out of sight, inside a machine (The Mothership!) that does your 'reading' for you. So is there a 'message' in the 'medium' of chess DVDs? I pondered this while considering *How to play the Najdorf* volume 1 and *How to play the Queen's*

Gambit by Garry Kasparov; and *Viktor Kortchnoi My life for Chess* volumes 1 and 2 (all produced by ChessBase).

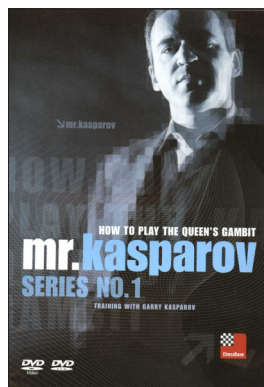
The first message seems to be that technology creates its own



My life for Chess
Viktor Kortchnoi

agenda. When the good people in Hamburg realised that they could record strong players analysing their games and show us a changing position simultaneously with changing facial expressions and largely spontaneous verbal analysis, they realised that they could mass-produce the experience of private tuition. I doubt if they stopped to ask whether this was a step forward for humanity, or the effect that chess DVDs would have on *The Zeitgeist*. More likely they understood that this medium would be profitable and took advantage of the gap in the market.

Which brings me to the second



How to play the Queen's Gambit
Garry Kasparov

message: most chess players would rather watch a strong player analyse a position than analyse a position themselves. This is understandable, because we all want to learn from stronger players, but it is also a form of laziness, because we would probably learn more by making our own effort than trying to decipher the efforts of another. I think this creeping laziness may be related to new mediums like analysis engines and DVDs because although they seem to assist us in our efforts, they also make much of our effort superfluous. In this sense, they might be inadvertently taking us away from the rewards of productive thinking, which is the uniquely human experience that makes chess so enjoyable in the first place.

Perhaps I am going too far, but it often seems that we become so used to being entertained that we have lost touch with our capacity to entertain ourselves. This applies in many domains of life, and is shown for instance by the fact that more people watch cooking programs on television than actually cook. Many seem to have forgotten that being a participant is usually more rewarding than being a spectator.

I think this gets to the heart of the trade off involved with chess DVDs. They are wonderful entertainment, but they render you almost completely passive, as if you are watching a film. The experience is pleasant, and you might learn a thing or two from what you are watching, but I don't think this medium allows you to really grow as a person or a player, because you are not being called upon to change your psychological shape by thinking for yourself. On the contrary, you are asked to plonk your physical shape down and leave all the effort to Kasparov or Kortchnoi, or whoever you are watching.

The four DVDs under consideration differ in content of course, but their form is the same, and if McLuhan is right, the form is more important. Even so, I probably should not tar all chess DVDs with the same analytical brush and I should also make it clear that some of them are very good indeed. Kasparov on the Queen's Gambit gives us Garry's distilled wisdom of an opening he has vast experience with on both sides. My only quibble with the presentation is that Kasparov looks absolutely exhausted, as if he has just travelled through several time zones, and this makes him appear more sluggish than normal. Moreover, Kasparov has an impressive command of English, but while in writing this is a great strength, on a DVD it is a mixed blessing, because the time taken to find the right word in a second language is 'dead time' for the viewer, disturbing the narrative flow.

This 'dead time' often lasts for several seconds and was a problem with Kortchnoi's DVDs too. However, I barely noticed this issue in Kasparov's second DVD because as a Najdorf player I was deeply absorbed and enjoyed learning more about my favourite opening from one of its main proponents. Moreover, the DVD format showed its strength at times, for instance in the Gothenburg variation: 6. ♖g5 e6 7. f4 ♗e7 8. ♜f3 h6 9. ♗h4 g5?!. I only knew that this line was no longer considered very good for Black, but I didn't know the whole story including the genesis of the idea, the day that Argentinian preparation was outgunned by Soviet preparation, the attempted improvement, and the modern positional refutation. This was all sewn together elegantly in a 20 minute segment, and I find it hard to imagine getting as much from

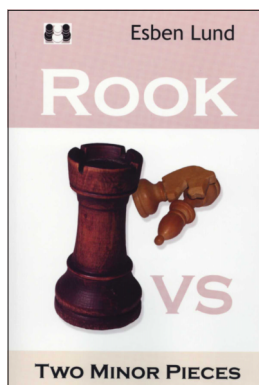
those twenty minutes in a book on the same material.

I gave a whole review column to Kortchnoi not so long ago, so I won't review his DVDs in detail here. Suffice to say that they seemed to be rather like the man himself: intense, expressive and captivating, but also a bit rough around the edges at times.

It is too early to reach firm conclusions about the pros and cons of DVDs as opposed to books, but it seems that chess bibliophiles have nothing to fear from this new medium for the time being. In any case, while enjoying the thoughts of Kasparov and Kortchnoi in a DVD format, it occurred to me that I would take time to consider the thoughts of these players in almost any medium, because they have such rich experiences and nuanced insight that it might be worth several hours of an awkward format for a single pearl of wisdom. I look forward to revisiting this issue of different mediums at a later stage, but for now we should return to the more primitive form of print and paper, and ask a question prompted by considering the greats: Do you have to be a strong player to write a good chess book?

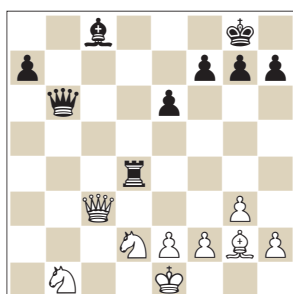
Well, 'strength' is a relative concept of course, and 'goodness' a rather subjective one, so there is no simple answer. Even so, this question was uppermost in my mind while considering *Rook vs Two Minor Pieces* by Esben Lund (Quality Chess Books). My impression is that this is an appealingly personal and quite original book, but it failed to win me over because in several cases I found myself disagreeing with the author's positional judgment. We are told on the back cover that Esben Lund is 'a young Danish Fide Master, who is chasing the international master title'. Lund

comes across as friendly and genuine in his writing so I wish him well, and have no doubt the con-



Rook vs Two Minor Pieces
Esben Lund

siderable effort he put into this book will help him in his chase. However, it is my duty as a reviewer to say that in spite of the author's efforts many of the positional assessments in this book are highly questionable.



Schandorff-Zucchelli
Politiken Cup Copenhagen 2002
position after 22. ♖c3

This position was given as an evaluation exercise and in the 'solutions' Lund comments: 'This position is similar to those previously discussed... Two knights instead of bishop and knight must be inferior for White, as the knights have more difficulties in positions with pawns on both sides... White is in a typical dilemma now: he would like to keep

pieces on the board, but the presence of queens reduces the strength of his king as an active participant in the game. So the best solution must be to exchange queens and keep the bishops! It becomes evident that White has problems in this position. It is difficult to suggest a really good plan, and to try to build up a kingside attack would probably make Black laugh. Black therefore has a clear advantage and White will have a hard time defending the position. Evaluation summary: ♣.

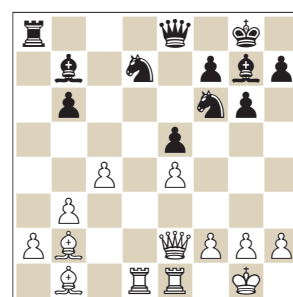
My first impression of the position was rather different. I saw that the bishop on c8 was *en prise* and I thought that Black's response to that issue would matter quite a lot. I also felt that Black's a-pawn was not particularly dangerous because it is so far back, White's king is so close to it, the two knights are reasonably well coordinated and there are no weaknesses on the kingside that are likely to change this. Moreover, I saw that White could increase his control of the queenside with the manoeuvre ♗e4-d3 or c2 at a suitable moment. Overall I felt that the position was unclear, and without further analysis I might even give slight preference to White. I was concerned that this judgment might simply reflect my own lack of understanding but Jon Speelman concurred with my assessment when I showed him the position, and he agreed that you would need to analyse the position carefully to be sure of the correct assessment.

The underlying 'story' in the position for Lund seems to be the one that he introduced earlier in the book, about the single rook who overruns the two knights by playing on both sides of the board. However, there are many other stories that might be told,

including the one about the knights who ganged up on the helpless a-pawn with the support of their king and bishop before out-gunning the rook in a 4v4 endgame. However, the most important point is that an accurate assessment can only be reached by considering how the position will develop over the next two or three moves.

22... ♗d7 looks normal, but after 23. ♘a3 Black does not seem to have any particularly constructive moves. 23... ♖a4 looks like it might be best, but then White plays 24. ♗e4 and seems to have control of the position. I think Black is the one who should try to steer the game towards a draw.

22... ♗a6 might be an improvement, because although it seems odd to block the a-pawn, it is useful to control c4. Then White has options but he could even consider exchanging queens with 23. ♖c6!? and I don't think he has anything to fear. I don't have space here for a fuller assessment, but I am sure that if the reader examines the initial position carefully for a while they are unlikely to find a clear advantage for Black.



Karjakin-Paunovic
Benidorm 2002
position after 18... ♗xe8

The author doesn't tell us that this is a rapid game, but I can forgive him for that because the position is instructive, and also because I unwittingly derived theo-

retical conclusions from a blitz game (Herneck-Anand, Munich 1996) in *Understanding the Grünfeld*, without any loss of life. In any case Lund comments: 'White has a rook and two pawns for two knights. After his next move he controls the position and has a clear advantage. Black has little counterplay.' Again I didn't feel that this assessment was compelling. When I see the position I don't think about rook and two pawns for two knights, but more about what each side might try to do. My first impression was that as Black I probably want to try to bring my f6 knight to d4 and as White I want to activate my bishop on b1.

19.b4 ♖c8?

Lund doesn't comment on this move directly, but it strikes me as a very serious mistake. When you think in terms of the material imbalances this move shouldn't affect the position too much, but when you think in terms of competing ideas it makes a huge difference. The rook was much more usefully placed on a8 because it restricted the bishop on b1 and when White plays a3 it will be easier to bring a knight to d4 because the bishop on b2 is also needed to defend a3. Lund does mention 19...♗h5!? 'To start play on the kingside or to create some weaknesses in White's camp was worth a try. Black's only hope is to create threats against the white king at some point, and he should seek his chances sooner rather than later!'

This is a reasonable comment, but I don't feel you can reach a clear assessment of the initial position until 19...♗h5 has been properly examined. The game continuation confirmed the author's assessment, but this improvement might completely falsify it. My hunch, for what it is worth, is that White is probably a little better in any case, but the position is very

tense and both sides have to be very accurate. After 19...♗h5 20.g3 is not forced by any means, but it is the most human reaction, preventing ♗f4. Then 20...♗f8 attacks b4 and forces 21.a3 and now I feel that there is everything to play for. Perhaps 21...♗g7!? Intending 22...♗e6-d4 or maybe 21...♗e6!? trying to cause some trouble with 22...♗h3. Again I don't have space for a full analysis, but I feel Lund has not shown the reader enough moves to justify his definitive assessment of the initial position. It looks to me like a highly unclear situation that might be a bit better for White, but could easily go either way depending on the next few moves—moves that we need to see before we can reach an assessment.

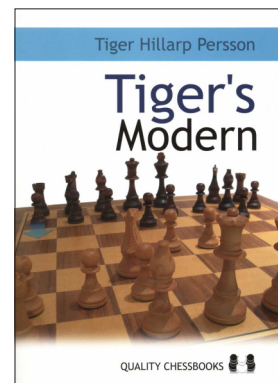
20.♗c2 ♖e6 21.♗a4 ♗c6?! 22.♗xc6 ♗xc6 23.♖c1 ♗h6 24.♖c2 ♗f8 25.a3

and now White does have a stable advantage, and went on to win.

Lund tends to evaluate positions primarily on the basis of the general principles that he introduces earlier in the book rather than by concrete analysis of the position under consideration. This bothers me because most chess positions cannot be understood properly by applying a handful of helpful heuristics to illuminate the position from above, but rather by digging underneath the position and getting your hands dirty in analysis, thereby revealing the important ideas specific to the position that influence the assessment much more, in most cases, than general principles.

The foregoing discussion might give the impression that I don't rate Lund's book very highly, but in fact my main aim was to use it to show why the strength of a player can make a difference to the quality of a book. While

some of Lund's positional assessments may be dubious, the book as a whole contains a lot of fresh material that could be very useful for training purposes. Moreover, Lund has analysed two pertinent opening variations (the Catalan with 5...♗c6 and the Scotch with 4...♗f6) in impressive depth and his first two chapters on 'theoretical foundation' and 'fundamental endgames' are also strong. Therefore I would be inclined to recommend this book, but with the cautionary notes: beware of an over-reliance on general principles, and check the author's assessments very carefully!



Tiger's Modern
Tiger Hillarp Persson

Tiger's Modern by Tiger Hillarp Persson (Quality Chess Books) is based on Tiger's experience and insight into the a6 Modern, which typically begins: 1.e4 g6 2.d4 ♗g7 3.♗c3 d6 and then after most of White's standard fourth moves Black plays 4...a6. Tiger is a friend of mine whom I have known for almost a decade, so any attempt to give an impartial review of this book would probably fail. Suffice to say that this is the kind of chess books that I value most highly; one in which the author seems to have enjoyed the process of writing, and offers the reader the pleasant expe-

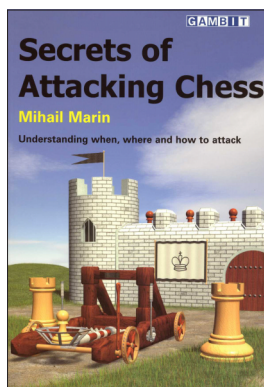
rience of direct communication from a thoughtful person.

The subject matter of the book is introduced with the following quotation: ‘The reasonable man adapts himself to the world, the unreasonable man persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends upon the unreasonable man.’ – George Bernard Shaw. A few paragraphs later the author admits: ‘Playing these lines is a constant struggle. Occasionally I wake up thinking ‘It’s crap, I must find something else, but then, a few mornings later (after some hard work) I wake up thinking ‘It’s alive! It’s a miracle!’ and so it goes on. Don’t let the first of these mornings scare you. If you are not too lazy, the other kind of morning is waiting around the corner. As Shaw put it, ‘all progress depends upon the unreasonable man.’

As Tiger would be the first to admit, the Modern, especially with

that the a6 Modern was ‘his’ alone. In any case, if you are looking to expand your repertoire, and consider yourself one of those ‘unreasonable’ men upon whom all progress depends, *Tiger’s Modern* is highly recommended.

Finally, *Secrets of Attacking Chess* by Mihail Marin (Gambit) is another excellent book by the Romanian Grandmaster, but thankfully I have run out space to say anything more. ‘Thankfully’ because if I gave this book the praise it deserved it would be the third of Marin’s books I have reviewed favourably here in just over a year. Perhaps one day Marin will write a really bad book so that some balance can be restored to my reviews, but until then I think it’s safe to say that if a chess book is written by Marin, it is likely to be very good indeed.



Secrets of Attacking Chess
Mihail Marin

...a6, is not for the faint-hearted. However, it helps a lot that Tiger clearly loves ‘his’ opening, although I know that he wasn’t too happy about the title of the book, and would not claim for a second

NOT YET A SUBSCRIBER?


You are not yet a subscriber to New In Chess (eight issues a year)? Give it a try. Take out an Intro-subscription on the premier chess magazine in the world today, and receive five issues for a special price. Only for new subscribers.



SUBSCRIBE DIRECTLY AT
WWW.NEWINCHESS.COM

New In Chess, P.O. Box 1093, 1810 KB Alkmaar,
The Netherlands. Phone: 0031-(0)72 512 7137,
Fax 0031-(0)72 515 8234, www.newinchess.com,
nic@newinchess.com

USA and Canada only: New In Chess, c/o Turpin Distribution,
The Bleachery, 143 West Street, New Milford, CT 06776
USA, Phone: 1 800 785 4410, Fax: 1 860 350 0039,
www.turpin-distribution.com, TurpinNA@turpin-distribution.com

	HOLLAND	EUROPE	U.K.	U.S.A. ✈️ & REST OF THE WORLD
Intro Subscription (5 issues)	26	32	£ 22	\$ 42
1 year (8 issues)	52	64	£ 44	\$ 84
2 years (16 issues)	99	124	£ 85	\$ 164
3 years (24 issues)	149	188	£ 129	\$ 248