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The communication of horrorism: A typology of ISIS online death videos

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Abstract

In this article, the authors theorize the communicative logic of ISIS online death videos from the burning and shooting of individual hostages to mass battleground executions. Drawing on Adriana Cavarero's reflections on contemporary violence, they demonstrate how ISIS' digital spectacles of the annihilated body confront Western viewers with horror— or rather with different “regimes of horrorism” (grotesque, abject and sublime horror). These spectacles of horror, the authors argue, mix Western with Islamic aesthetic practices and secular with religious moral claims so as to challenge dominant hierarchies of grievability (who is worthy of our grief) and norms of subjectivity. In so doing, the authors conclude, ISIS introduces into global spaces of publicity a “spectacular thanatopolitics”—a novel form of thanatopolitics that brings the spectacle of the savaged body, banished from display since the 19th century, back to the public stage, thereby turning the pursuit of death into the new norm of heroic subjectivity.

Keywords

ISIS; spectacle; death; horrorism; recontextualization; thanatopolitics

Introduction: horrorism and ISIS' aesthetics of death

[...] it is all about death, not only about the violent irruption of death in real time—“live”, so to speak—but the irruption of a death which is far more than real: a death which is symbolic

and sacrificial—that is to say, the absolute, irrevocable event. (Baudrillard, 2003, pp. 16–17).

ISIS digital communication is indeed “all about death” in that death is the trademark visual feature of ISIS online videos. This spectacle of death is, we argue, not the endpoint but, rather, the starting point of ISIS terrorist acts. It signals the moment when the annihilation of human life enters the symbolic realm and becomes “the absolute, irrevocable event.” Our focus in this essay is on these digital messages of human annihilation through which ISIS addresses the world. Our aim is to explore ISIS’ “death spectacles” as aesthetic practices that use the dying or dead body to invite a range of moral responses on behalf of their online publics in the Arab and Western worlds and, in so doing, to communicate a specific ethico-political project—what Murray (2006) calls thanatopolitics or the use of death at the service of political life.

Instrumental to our approach is Cavarero’s (2009) distinction between terrorism and horrorism. Cavarero argues that, while terror is associated with proximity and addresses the eyewitness of violent death, horror is associated with mediated witnessing and addresses the distant spectator. Taking Medusa’s gaze as its prototypical figure, Cavarero implies that horror operates in the “realm of the eye” and, as opposed to the effects of frantic movement incited by the instinct to survive a terror attack (terror as panicking fear), it bears the effects of physical paralysis at the sight of massacred bodies (horror as freezing disgust). There is, in her words, “an affinity between horror and vision” that turns us into passive viewers of the spectacle of corporeal destruction (ibid). Even though horror has indeed an irreducible corporeality that cannot be contained in its visual dimension, for our purposes, the key distinction here is between terror as lived experience and horror as a mediated one.

Pace Cavarero, however, our interest in the visuality of horror moves beyond her “instinctive disgust” towards analyzing how exactly the aesthetic practices of ISIS videos invest the dying or dead body in a range of normative engagements with death. Echoing Zelizer (2010), we argue that we cannot fully understand the ethico-political implications of ISIS’

global communication, what she calls the image's "subjunctive" or normative mode, without analyzing how it visually performs violent death and how it invites us to relate to it. By this token, what matters in the realm of mediation, as Cynthia Weber has succinctly put it, "is not only that we encounter horrorism but *how* we encounter horrorism and what we do when we see it" (2014, p. 254, emphasis added). What, then, are the aesthetic practices of death in ISIS' videos? How does the victim appear to die and what are the semantic fields within which their death acquires meaning? What normative assumptions about death and mourning do these videos communicate and what forms of subjectivity do they imagine for their publics?

We reflect on these questions by examining three cases of English-speaking atrocity videos released by ISIS in 2016: the burning of two Turkish soldiers (December 8, 2016); the shooting of five UK presumed intelligence agents (January 3, 2016); and mass battleground executions in the Syrian–Iraqi war zones (January 2, 2017). We show that, instead of a purely religious message, horrorism operates through a logic of recontextualization, which fuses Western with non-Western genres and narratives with a view to mirroring and ultimately subverting dominant hierarchies of grievability in favor of what we introduce as a spectacular thanatopolitics—"grotesque," "sublime" and "abject" spectacles/regimes of horrorism. We define ISIS' spectacular thanatopolitics as a distinct aesthetic and ethical project that re-introduces ferocious death spectacles (banned since the 19th century) into Western public spheres with a view to performing an anti-humanist politics of critique. And we discuss the nature of this politics as the performance of three communicative acts, namely: retribution (denouncing the enemy's way of war, in the grotesque); disgrace (humiliating the West, in the abject) and redemption (glorifying its own mythical subjectivities, in the sublime).

The value of this horroristic approach lies in enabling us to rethink ISIS' online communication in at least two new ways: (i) conceptualizing videos of violent death not only, as the dominant literature has it (see the next part of this essay), in terms of ISIS branding or

visual propaganda, but as aesthetic performances that articulate meaning around the body and its mortal vulnerability and (ii) re-conceptualizing these aesthetic performances in terms of a logic of recontextualization that appropriates and harnesses Western genres to its own ends, namely to promote new norms of heroic subjectivity. These insights contribute to an enriched understanding of ISIS which, *pace* dominant perceptions of it as “medieval”/primitive or “evil”/transcendental¹ (Patruss, 2016 for criticisms), establishes that, while neo-fundamentalist religion is a key component of its message, ISIS *also* relies on Western popular culture and secular rationalities to legitimize the sanctification of violent death in the moral imagination of digital platforms.

Spectacles of death: strategic and political communication approaches

Contemporary literature across disciplines (media studies, sociology, political science and international relations) has engaged with terrorism and communication in terms of two analytical approaches: *strategic* communication, which is concerned with the instrumental value of terrorism as a means of propaganda and *political* communication, which looks into the broader political dynamics of the spectacle of terror.

The *strategic communication* approach relies on the claim that “communication and terrorism go hand in hand because communication is the oxygen of terrorist acts” (Wilkinson, 1997, p. 52). It explores the ways in which terrorist organizations use media as instruments of propaganda and recruitment in the context of the digital information economy (Nacos, 2016; Pattwell, Mitman, & Porpora, 2015). The first strand of this literature engages with what Ayalon, Popovich and Yarchi call the strategic use of “‘imagefare’—‘the use of images as substitutes for military means, namely fighting to establish their version of events or ideas as dominant’” (2016, p. 256). Given its state-building ambitions, emphasis here falls on ISIS’ organizational narratives as platforms that voice the aspirations of disaffected Muslims to

combat Western aggression and establish their own “universal” community, the “caliphate.” “The group’s narrative”, as Farwell puts it, “portrays ISIS as an agent of change, the true apostle of a sovereign faith, [and] a champion of its own perverse notions of social justice” (2014, pp. 49–50). Despite controversy within terrorist networks around the value of atrocity videos (see Farwell, 2014), ISIS’ platforms have successfully combined their terrorist message with global audiences’ proclivity to spectacles of apocalyptic violence (Cohen-Almagor, 2005), rendering such spectacles instrumental in sustaining the organization’s global “brand”.

A second strand of research within strategic communication draws on cultural analysis to explore ISIS’ savvy use of media platforms; as NYT journalist David Carr put it: “ISIS seems to understand that the same forces that carried the Ice Bucket Challenge’s message of uplift...can be used to spread fear and terror as well”.² While some examine its rhetoric in terms of, for instance, video games’ “flame, troll and engage” language (Al-Rawi, 2016), others look into visual genres, such as photographs, to show how ISIS’ prolific use of “about to die” imagery “has transformed the online environment itself into a medium of terrorism” (Winkler, El Damanhoury, Dicker, & Lemieux, 2016, p. 15). What ISIS’ communication strategies have produced, as Ingram (2015, p. 730) proposes, is a powerful “competitive system of meaning” that challenges mainstream ideas on justice, victimhood and friend/enemy relationships and proposes alternative versions of identity for Islamic populations across the globe.

Strategic communication research, in summary, indicates that violent death is not an additional component of ISIS’ digital practice, but an essential part of it, co-nascent with the management of its image as a state-aspiring militant entity. This is a key insight that drives our own adoption of horrorism both as digital practice that “extend[s] the reach of violent abuse into the boundless sphere of digital networks” (Pöttsch, 2015, p. 12) and as symbolic practice that constructs the ISIS brand.

The *political communication* approach is not concerned with the instrumental goals of

horrorism but with its socio-political implications. Images of annihilated bodies, this literature has it, participate in broader projects of ideological hegemony in global geopolitics. One strand of this literature focuses on the histories of Western interventionism in the Middle East as a cause for fundamentalist insurgency to gain ideological and military influence across the world (Mamdani, 2009)—paying extra attention on the role of religion in the formation of terrorist identities. While a large number of studies regards Islam as a key factor in the emergence of Middle Eastern militancy, including the emergence of its horrific death spectacles (Pelletier, Lundmark, Gardner, Scott Ligon, & Kilinc, 2016; Perlmutter, 2005), others problematize this privileging of religion as an inadequate or even misleading explanation (e.g. considering Islam as a coherent ideology which explains everything involving Muslims) for contemporary terrorism (Roy, 2004). We draw upon these criticisms to approach ISIS videos as relatively open texts that articulate a complex message, which includes but is not “exhausted to,” religious fundamentalism.

The second relevant research strand of political communication draws on studies of the socio-cultural implications of ISIS’ imagery. Giroux argues that spectacles of terror fuse the distinct logics of global consumerism, or “soft war,” with global militarism, or “hard war,” into one cultural experience, elevating violent death “to a new prominent feature of social and political power” (2014).³ His argument confirms both Kellner (2004) and Boal, Clark, Matthews, and Watts (2005) who link terrorist spectacles to a wider trajectory of mediated violence in the neo-liberal entertainment industry of the West. This trajectory, they maintain, has undermined the idea of the “historical monopoly of the means of destruction by the state” (Boal et al., 2005, p. 17) and has contributed to trivializing the sanctity of human life—a core value of the liberal imaginary.

While the religion-based analysis of ISIS death spectacles emphasizes the distinctive non-and-anti-Western fundamentalism of ISIS ideology, the broader socio-cultural analysis of

these spectacles points towards narrative continuities between ISIS and Western ideologies. In so doing, the latter problematizes ISIS' radical "othering" and forces us to see continuities between "us" and "them". In line with these two strands of research, our analysis is sensitized both towards commonalities in ISIS and Western tropes of representing death and towards the distinct moralities embedded in ISIS' spectacles of violent death.

In summary, strategic and political communication approaches have greatly contributed to clarifying the conceptual territory of digital horror either as a tool of ISIS branding or as a practice of power. Each of them nonetheless misses the whole picture. Strategic communication focuses on the message without attending to power; the broader ethico-political implications of digital spectacles of death "disappear" in the strategic analysis of terrorists' marketing campaigns. Political communication focuses on power but is not as attentive to the message; what disappears in this analysis is the detail of meaning-making practices through which power is articulated in particular digital spectacles. As a consequence, neither of the two approaches can offer insights in how death spectacles may produce ethico-political effects: how such spectacles may legitimize or challenge hierarchies of death and norms of subjectivity. What we aim to explore here is the co-articulation of the two, the message *and* power—horrorism being precisely an aesthetic logic of death at the service of a thanatopolitical project of power.

Analyzing horrorism: multi-modality and recontextualization

In its emphasis on the dead or dying body as both aesthetic object and ethico-political practice, we argue, horrorism is informed by a dialectical epistemology which attends both to the aesthetics of singular spectacles of death and to the global power relations in which ISIS seeks to intervene. Instead of prioritizing either message or power, horrorism approaches digital death as performative: as aesthetic micro-practices of corporeal destruction that, in the course

of re-presentation, simultaneously produce macro-effects of power—they provisionally fix the objects and subjects of death in specific relationships of power, or “regimes of horrorism”. Our methodological principle, it follows, similarly involves a two-dimensional conception of visual analysis that attends to the detail of ISIS’ aesthetic representations while also interrogating the ethico-political implications such representations bear on their contexts.

Our starting point for this dialectical inquiry is the claim that ISIS operates on the basis of a “competitive system of meanings”, (Ingram, 2015) which challenges *both* contemporary iconographies of Western publicity through, for instance, the introduction of graphic immolation videos *and* the normative boundaries of this space of publicity, namely whose death should legitimately be depicted as worthy of mourning and which identities we should endorse as desirable. Even though this synergetic relationship between imagery and norm has already been the focus of critical inquiry on Western visualities of death and their “orientalist” or “biopolitical” implications (for instance, Campbell, 2004; Chouliaraki, 2015), the focus on horrorism begs for an expansion of our analytical tools. Thus, while we borrow key insights from this literature, namely the focus on “multi-modality” so as to analyze the meaning-making articulations of image with sound in the videos, we further incorporate the concept of “recontextualization” in our analytical vocabulary.

The category of “*multi-modality*” offers the established categories of “frame sequencing” (how visual frames are edited in cohesive sequences) and “visual-verbal correspondence” (how language invests these frames in meaning) so as to “read” the dying or dead body as a visual grammar that produces meaning about humanity (Jewitt, 2009). The role of the body is instrumental in the production of horrorism insofar as the body that dies disfigured or dismembered, that is the body reduced into matter, challenges the very ontology of the human: “killing merely to kill is too little,” as Caverero puts it; horrorism “aims to destroy the uniqueness of the body, tearing at its constitutive vulnerability” (2009, p. 8).

Looking at the grammar of this corporeal “tearing” means, therefore, asking questions about how the human body figures within a filmic sequence, which semiotic resources are used in its aesthetic constitution and what moralizing function it comes to perform.

The category of “*recontextualization*” rests on the assumption that all story-telling is intertextually constituted through other stories. The concept is designed to identify the process by which each narrative selectively draws together genres, tropes and narratives of death, so as to re-situate and re-signify the body within different registers of moral evaluation (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Kissas, 2017). Recontextualization, we claim, is an apt concept to explore the extent to which ISIS’ “competitive system of meanings” intervenes in the global information landscape by *engaging with*, rather than opposing, the aesthetic tropes of death available in the West. While such engagements challenge Western rules of “taste and decency” (Campbell, 2004), they simultaneously mirror back and expose Western practices of death-at-war that largely remain invisible to its publics—for instance by confronting us with the forbidden imagery of the death of “our” soldiers in the battlefield. How and to what effect this recontextualization of death takes place in ISIS’ videos are precisely the questions of our analysis.

Our analysis of horrorism differs thus from prior approaches in that it brackets abstract or top-down explanations (for instance, privileging religion) in order to reconstruct the aesthetic logics of horror from the bottom up (multi-modality) and to re-describe the moral narratives that these logics privilege as desirable for their viewing publics (recontextualization)—see Chouliaraki (2006) for this “phronetic” approach in media research.

Regimes of horrorism in ISIS videos: grotesque, abject, sublime

ISIS' communicative strategy should be understood in the context of what Kaplan and Costa refer to as “fifth wave” terrorism—a mutation of Al Qaeda and the Islamic *Umah*, now developed into “a malign sectarian group of its own, whose dynamism and successes are attracting a global audience and support from Muslims in almost every country” (2015, p. 926). What, in their view, characterizes ISIS is, on the one hand, its “idiosyncratic...ideological orientation” at the service of its state-building aspirations and, on the other, its expert use of social media that “integrates traditional propaganda channels with the twenty-first century tools” (2015, p. 936).

These uses of ISIS videos tactically fulfill many functions, including addressing their “polity,” recruiting new martyrs and inspiring local attacks, as well as threatening Muslim and Western publics alike. Guided by the three videos, our analysis fully acknowledges ISIS' sectarian polemics against Muslim populations, yet focuses primarily on its relationship with the West: how these videos engage with Western aesthetic and moral practices, and, as we shall see in the conclusion, how they address Western audiences through normative understandings of death and subjectivity.

Our videos were selected for purposefully engaging with Western audiences in that they were deliberately released in English as well as Arabic, and in that they directly address Western figures (former U.K. PM David Cameron) and Western viewers at large. They were also selected because of their “paradigmatic” status (Flyvbjerg, 2006): their particular features both assert and transcend their particularity, standing for a broader category of aesthetic performativity that each example comes to typify. As particularities, these videos constitute three historically distinct events of violent death: the burning of two Turkish pilot prisoners in Al Bab (“The Shield of the Cross”, released in Arabic on December 22, 2016 and in English on January 2, 2017)⁴, the shooting of five UK assumed spies (untitled, released in English on

January 2, 2016)⁵, and the large-scale atrocities across the Syria–Iraq war zones (The “Impenetrable Forces,” released in Arabic on November 8, 2016 and in English December 8, 2016)⁶—though, because of space, we do not engage with the historical specifics of these stories. As generalities, the videos constitute an indicative typology of performativities of horrorism (grotesque, abject and sublime) that together exemplify ISIS’ contribution to shaping an alternative moral imagination in the spaces of global publicity. Let us examine each in turn.

Grotesque horrorism

The burning of the Turkish pilots video, titled “The Shield of the Cross,” refers to the “secular apostate state of Turkey” and consists of two parts: a long introductory sequence and the execution sequence itself. The first part narrates Turkey’s involvement in the Syrian warfare. It is cast in the aesthetics of news documentary, in that it uses intertextual fragments of journalistic reports (news clips and photojournalism) so as to present “objective” evidence of the truth and make claims to authenticity. Turkey’s President Erdogan appears together with anti-ISIS world leaders (Obama, Putin, Assad, and the Pope) in a briskly edited series of news images, which is followed by footage of Turkish airstrikes in Al-Bab zooming on civilian casualties. This collage acquires narrative coherence through voiceover, which blames Turkey as an “apostate”—a religious brother who turned against the faith.

This part is followed by the execution sequence that comes late into the video, consisting of edited frames of two chained soldiers on a leash, briefly address the camera before they are set on fire through petrol-soaked material wrapped around their chains. These about to die frames are juxtaposed by images of civilian death, while the voiceover is now replaced by a speaking militant, who disgraces the victims—“the blood of one them is as base and inferior as that of a dog.” Written language is also used to control visual meaning; when the juxtaposition of about to die images with frames of civilian death is subtitled “The Crimes of

the Turkish Army Against the Oppressed” or when a fullscreen frame of a Quran quote interrupts this visual juxtaposition: “And if you punish, then punish them with the like of that with which you were afflicted (An-Nahl, 116).” The presence of Islamic verses complicates the documentary aesthetic by mixing it with religious preaching and the prisoners’ exhortation to their army to “leave the territories of the Islamic state.”

The execution frames themselves contain unprecedentedly graphic scenes of corporeal annihilation. The camera records the process in full detail, from the moment the fire starts making its way up the soldiers’ bodies to the moment they collapse unconscious, zooming into their foaming mouths and disfigured bodies. This visuality points to a grotesque aesthetic, a style that captures the excess of the human body in its distorted states—dismembered, burned or erupted, thereby highlighting the porous and often transgressive relationship of the body with nature (Russo, 1995). It is this intolerable visual intimacy of the grotesque, staged as an “intentional offence to the ontological dignity of the victim” (Cavarero, 2009, p. 9) that renders this spectacle horroristic par excellence. How is the story of this grotesque horrorism told? Which resources are brought together to recontextualize these deaths into ISIS’ normative narratives?

If multi-modality is, as we saw, about the aesthetic rendering of the annihilation of the prisoners’ bodies, recontextualization refers to their symbolic annihilation. In the context of Islamic moral norms, which forbid Muslims to harm innocent humanity, this symbolic annihilation takes place through the deployment of the animalization trope—itsself an element of the grotesque. The Turkish pilots are presented as “dogs”, through linguistic attribution (reference to “dogs”) and through visual association (dragged on a leash), while their burned, disfigured bodies have lost all attributes of humanity. By reducing human to canine life and then to matter, this trope evokes archaic Arab symbolisms of impurity and miasma (El Fadl, 2004) and, in so doing, recontextualizes the prisoners’ bodies from the realm of innocent

humanity to that of the profane. While symbolic annihilation renders their killing ethically possible, however, the moral validation of the killing emerges from a further recontextualizing move that embeds animalization into a narrative structure of justification.

It is specifically the cut from civilian casualties to the burning scene that situates the prisoners' death into a visual arrangement of sectarian argumentative causality: "your" war against "us" leads to "your" death as just punishment, as retaliation. Recontextualization occurs here through the intertextual mix of documentary news and religious preaching, which locates the pilots' burning bodies within a justificatory system of both military retaliation and religious punishment. While the former produces evidence of the soldiers as enemies of the "state" ("The crimes of the Turkish state..."), the latter proclaims their religious fall from grace—"The shields of the cross." It is this hybrid logic of treason, both secular and religious, that legitimizes their physical annihilation as a consequence of disloyalty.⁷

In summary, the grotesque pushes the dying and dead body beyond the boundaries of the human, by way of amalgamating two aesthetic styles: the documentary, a journalistic genre that speaks the Western epistemology of objective truth, and religious preaching, which introduces a transcendental epistemology of truth as religious faith. As ethico-political practice, these styles work to recontextualize the annihilated body through tropes of rational justification and animalization. While the latter situates human bodies into the realm of the non-human and thus removes moral obstacles to physical annihilation, the former explains this act of annihilation through a retributive rationality that combines proportionate retaliation with spiritual vengeance ("if you punish, then punish them with the like of that with which you were afflicted"). In so doing, grotesque horrorism relies on a mix of Western and non-Western styles and secular/religious truth claims in order to perform the communicative act of denunciation against the "coalition's" deaths and to establish itself as a force of self-righteous justice in global spaces of publicity.

Abject horrorism

This spectacle of horror records the point blank shooting of five hostages accused of working for the British intelligence service. Similarly to the previous one, this video consists of two parts too: the introduction, which contextualizes the story, and the execution itself. Unlike the previous one, however, the multi-modality of this one establishes the truth of the dying and dead body by drawing on Western entertainment rather than news documentary genres. Echoing the television genre of *CSI*-type police dramas, the video's first sequence includes animation visuals of a gun targeted at the viewer, a screaming face in black background, the presentation of the actors/hostages featuring in this episode and a closing trailer of the next "episode" (scenes of the next execution video). This *CSI* style comes to claim the authenticity of death not on the basis of objective facticity, as the previous one, but of the aesthetic realism of its own representations—promising not the truth of events but the truth of mediation itself.

The second part consists of three sequences: talking head frames of the orange uniform-clad hostages reading out a scripted confession in Arabic before they kneel down in front of their respective executioners; then the frontal frame of a hooded executioner threatening in English the then British Prime Minister, David Cameron; and finally the line up of the now hooded hostages, each shot point blank behind the head, by their respective executioner. Two features stand out in this part. Firstly, multi-modality is organized around contrasting distributions of the visual-verbal components. The use of Arabic in the hostage's confession steers attention away from content and onto his face as a communicative medium, while, subsequently, the lack of visual contact with the hooded executioner invites us to focus on what is said—a glorification of ISIS (the "state of Allah") and a humiliation of the Western coalition ("imbecile" for the U.K. PM metonymically standing for Western arrogance and deception). A tenuous semantic field emerges from this juxtaposition whereby, on the one hand, the face close-ups invite us to scrutinize the face of indescribable agony of the about to die (the tense

muscles and the agonizing gaze of fear) and, on the other, the focus on the executioner's language invites intense engagement with his speech acts (humiliation and threat).

Secondly, the final sequence of the execution is staged as a filmic choreography of carnage, as the camera, rather than flinching from, indulges in the five point blank shootings, following their successive occurrence in rhythmical repetition. Known as the “*CSI* shot,” this stylistic mannerism is about amplification; it enacts, what Allen calls, “the dynamic and visceral zooming into and through human bodies as they are punctured by knives and bullets” (2007, p. 6). The multi-modal properties of this video can therefore be said to represent the human body in its “abject” moment—the in-between moment suspended between life and death, when anguish is written on the body and the flesh is split apart by a bullet; “the abject,” as Kristeva puts it, is “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (1982, p. 4). Ultimately, like the grotesque, this is an aesthetic of excess that challenges Western norms of public visibility around death and, in so doing, further undermines the sacredness of human corporeality. How does the abject aesthetic participate in the recontextualization of the dead body in this video? What story is being told and which moral claims are inscribed in it?

The hybridity of the video recontextualizes death in two moves. In a first move, the *CSI* style works intertextually to re-position the body into a global register of media consumption, where it is the hyper-real effects of the camera that tell the truth of the victims' final moments. This is a kind of truth that in its magnification of the moment of death, deliberately highlights the all-too human fragility of dying. As opposed to the expressionless faces of the Turkish prisoners, which alluded to the sub-humanity of the “infidel,” this proximity captures vulnerable humanity in its most liminal state—dread at the awareness of impending violent death.

In a second move, the executioner's language introduces into the video a structure of evaluation that recontextualizes death by reversing the hierarchies of grievability at play in the liberal West. This reversal is organized around a juxtaposition of emotions, between love of life for British people, and love of death for the fighters of the "state of Allah," but also around a respective contrast of moralities between Western hypocrisy—claiming love for life but letting its people die ("do you really think your government will care about you when you come into our hands?" ...)—and Islamic protectionism ("where the people live under the justice and security of the Sharia"). While the first juxtaposition draws on religious (Sharia's view of death as martyrdom) and secular (masculinist conceptions of heroic soldiering) narratives so as to expose Western subjectivities as weak and incompetent ("fools who thought they could fight the Islamic State"), the second combines Sharia's tribal protectionism (Khouri, 2015) with a secular critique of Western geo-politics as hypocritical, so as to expose the West as evil and dishonest. Moving beyond the denunciation of the previous video, then, this one is a performance of disgrace and ultimately humiliation of ISIS' main enemy.

In summary, horrorism operates here through an abject aesthetic, where the liminal body of impending death becomes the site upon which a particular evaluation of Western subjectivity takes place. As aesthetic practice, the abject is recontextualized through the mixing of Western television drama conventions with religious preaching so as to portray this death in terms of "ecstatic" terror—magnifying the materiality of the act. As ethico-political practice, the abject operates as a structure of evaluation, which inserts this liminal moment in a hierarchy of thanatopolitical values: glorifying the love of death over the preservation of life. Organized around multi-modal juxtapositions, this hierarchy turns the abject into moral judgment by degrading both Western subjectivities as cowardly and weak and Western politics as hypocritical and callous.

Sublime horrorism

The “Impenetrable Fortress” video, in contrast to the previous two, focuses on celebrating the Islamic State amid the battle of Mosul, 2016–17 (for the significance of the city to ISIS see Gerges, 2016). The two-part collage structure of this video consists of battlefield footage and of talking head statements by ISIS militants. In contrast to the localized intensity of the previous video, the multi-modality of this first part capitalizes on the panoramic effect of the “neutral-reporter/observer” genre. Using visual editing, it tracks across space to show multiple battlefield deaths (suicide bombing, beheading, shooting, etc., of ISIS and its enemies, including Peshmerga Kurdish and Russian forces). It also tracks across time to tell the story of the birth of the Islamic State. News frames of the 2003 Iraqi Freedom operation (“largest Crusader campaign in the modern era,” in the voiceover), cut to spectacular scenes from the 2014 “re-capturing” of the city by the Islamic State (a “great mission in the name of Allah”), and conclude with images of an anti-ISIS alliance of international leaders (the “collusion against the Islamic State”). The second part of the video is a series of “testimonials” by ISIS spokespersons and militants, who call its audiences to arms against the “infidels”.

This collage hangs together through voiceover, which offers a historical narrative of ISIS; panoramic visuality resonates here with an epic narrative style, which frames the dead body in two ways. As documentary evidence, Muslim mass death relies on the “objective” truth of neutral observation to legitimize its call to jihad against the perpetrators—the “unholy alliance” of Crusaders. The documentary further establishes a contrast between two imaginations of death: ISIS’ imagination is portrayed in the figure of a groomed “rested-in-peace” body kissed farewell by a child, while the enemy’s one is presented in open-eyed, disfigured and infested faces, scattered in the battlefield. The grotesque, as we encountered it earlier, is again present albeit now thrown against the sublime: a style that beautifies ISIS’ death (peaceful face, child’s kiss) so as to both expose viewing publics to it and protect them

from the scene of violence, thereby introducing an ambivalent element of horrific pleasure into the spectacle (Hills, 2005).

The sublime is further amplified in the second part of the video, as militant talking heads reiterate religious praise for the martyrs of the holy war; speaking to “his brothers in Mosul”, an ISIS militant quotes the Quran: “[. .] little is the enjoyment of this world as compared to the hereafter” while another one exclaims: seeing His [Allah’s] face is the most complete of pleasures for mankind. It is Jannah that is sweet, as well as, its bliss.” How is the story of sublime horrorism told? Which resources are brought together to recontextualize these deaths in specific moral claims?

The imagery of mass death is doubly recontextualized so as to establish a hierarchy of grievability at the service of heroic subjectivity: while desecrating the hostile body, the video sanctifies the ISIS warrior. The sublime is the catalyst for the first recontextualization. It works through the contrast between exalted “us” and grotesque “them”, which resituates death within an implicit moral order: ISIS deaths deserve solemn grief as heroic but the Crusaders’ deaths remain “unrepresentable” and undeserving of mourning. The second recontextualization is established through a structure of narrativization: these sublime visualities of death, framed by a voiceover of martyrdom, are themselves embedded in the mythical story telling of the Islamic State (e.g. in the reference to the death of the Prophet’s grandson, Imam Husayn). Even though narrativization, an argumentative strategy that “recount[s] the past and treat[s] the present as part of a timeless and cherished tradition” (Thompson, 1990, p. 61), is a key component of all nationalist rhetoric, it is here used to put an apocalyptic religious discourse at the service of ISIS’ “revolutionary statehood” (Walt, 2015). In this way, the brief trajectory of the Islamic State not only turns into Islam’s end-of-history grand moment but also the imagery of the sublimated body of the ISIS warrior comes to stand as the norm of Islamic masculinity.

In summary, sublime horrorism turns the dead body into the site upon which ISIS' jihadist subjectivity is formed. As aesthetic practice, the hybridity of the video mixes, as before, the secular epistemology of objective truth with an epic religious eschatology, in ways that subordinate the grotesque to the sublime—to the pleasure-giving spectacle of heroic death. As ethico-political practice, then, the video operates through a structure of narrativization, which, on the one hand, situates death into a hierarchy of grievability that celebrates martyrdom, while, on the other, appropriates and inscribes this death into a sectarian narrative of Islamic eschatology that it claims for itself. In so doing, sublime horrorism intervenes in the global public sphere through a communicative act of glorification that renders death the master-signifier of Islamic masculinity.

The spectacular thanatopolitics of horrorism

In our opening quote, Baudrillard highlights the catalytic role that violent death plays in “the spirit of terrorism.” Even though Baudrillard does not use the term “thanatopolitics,” his focus away from actual death (“a death far more than real”) and on the re-significations of such death in the media powerfully informs our argument on ISIS thanatopolitics. Against dominant understandings of the term as a subtle form of modern power that uses death to achieve political ends without speaking about it—“in the last two centuries we no longer properly speak about death” (Murray, 2006, p. 192), our own analysis sought to explore the new, visual grammar of ISIS counter-thanatopolitics—the grammar of the horroristic spectacle. Spectacular thanatopolitics, we argue with Baudrillard, is today more efficacious because it moves from the battlefield to the symbolic sphere, where, in his words, “the rule is that of challenge, reversion and outbidding” (2003 p. 17). By inserting violent death in the sphere of aesthetic representation and digital narrativity, our aim has been to trace how ISIS performs this very

symbolic struggle of “challenge, reversion and outbidding”, through spectacles of corporeal destruction.

To this end, we drew on a definition of spectacles of violent death as regimes of horrorism, as meaning-making practices that recontextualize the dead or dying body within tactically selected ideas of the beautiful and the ugly (the aesthetic) or the fair and the evil (the moral) with a view to producing normative accounts of worthy and unworthy subjectivities (hierarchies of grievability). In so doing, we were able to produce a suggestive typology of horrorism, where “grotesque,” “abject” and “sublime” deaths tell their own distinct, yet interrelated, stories about what ISIS stands for and how it addresses the world.

While all three aesthetic styles recontextualize death within Western and “non-Western” epistemologies of truth (journalistic objectivity or entertainment drama with religious faith), each regime relies on its own hybrid “truth” to propose distinct forms of desirable subjectivity. Grotesque horrorism fully dehumanizes the burning “infidels” and attaches their bodies to a sectarian logic of justification that treats their death as an act of retribution: secular and religious claims to revenge against the “apostates.” Abject horrorism, in a paradoxical gesture of hyper-humanization (through various magnification effects), inserts the about to die body in a logic of evaluation that speaks of their execution as an act of disgrace: secular (nationalist) and religious (transcendental) claims that deprive ISIS’ Western enemies of virtue and humiliate them as weak and dishonest. Finally, sublime horrorism relies on a moral contrast between dehumanization (grotesque “enemy”) and hyper-humanization (sublime jihadist), so as to attach death in battle to a logic of redemption: a nationalist glorification of pious martyrdom as the new norm of heroic existence.

It is these hierarchies of grievability, articulated through distinct communicative acts, which make up the spectacular thanatopolitics of ISIS. Retribution, disgrace and redemption are not only particularities, local manifestations of aesthetic practice, but also, in line with our

phronetic epistemology, generalities: structures of address that call up “competitive systems of meanings” (Ingram, 2015), wherein the savaged body, in its many variations, antagonizes the West’s clean spectacles of the battlefield and challenges its humanitarian ethics of war—its “empathic civilization” (Rifkin, 2009). These thanatopolitical structures of address work, in line with relevant literature, both to promote the ISIS brand for purposes of global legitimacy and recruitment (glorifying ISIS through its Islamic legacy and sanctifying sacrificial soldiering) *and* participate in ISIS’ sectarian and anti-Western struggle for ideological hegemony within and beyond the Arab world (threatening “infidels” or disgracing the West as evil and cowardly). Taking our lead on these insights, let us, in conclusion, reflect on two key features of these videos: narrative hybridity and the presence of the savaged body.

Hybridity and moral narratives

The first insight engages with the political communication literature. *Pace* accounts of ISIS as solely a neo-fundamentalist religious platform that renews Huntingtonian “clash of civilizations” scenarios, our videos cannot be reduced to Islamic fundamentalism. Instead, these digital spectacles of death bring together Western media genres with the Quran, religious fundamentalist with secular epistemologies (truth of facts and truth of faith) as well as sectarian logics of tribalism with aggressive nationalism (blood bonds of a specific Islamic tradition and territorial claims to statehood). While these are combined in various orders of horroristic meaning, the point here is that ISIS’ structure of address is not reducible to its parts as religion is always-already found within state-driven narratives. It is, in Mamdani’s words, both about “salvation and liberation” (2009, p. 148).

Our analytical focus on recontextualization was instrumental in identifying these hybrid constellations of meaning as aesthetic practices of death that serve a specific ethico-political project, in digital media networks. Recontextualization is, in this sense, not only a linguistic

but, fundamentally, a moral process of attuning and re-configuring heterogeneous narratives into powerful myths of revenge and redemption. In line with scholarship that insists on seeing ISIS as a intricate historical and geopolitical reality with a complex trajectory of emergence (Gerges, 2016), it is important that critical research on ISIS continues to develop, on the one hand, conceptual tools sensitive to the hybridity of narratives but also, on the other, comprehensive designs that capture the technological connectivities of digital platforms and their various transnational appropriations. If the horroristic spectacle enjoys a broad appeal that, as Kaplan and Costa claim, “even...the U.S. government openly admires and unsuccessfully seeks to emulate” (2015, p. 936), then visceral reactions to its brutal aesthetics of bodily excess should not be our only response. What techno-symbolic operations horrorism performs and how we can theorize and analyze these as aesthetic and ethical digital practices are not peripheral but central questions to comprehending ISIS as a platform of political communication.

Critique and the savaged body

The second and related insight engages with ISIS as propaganda and recruitment—the strategic communication literature. All three communicative practices of retribution, disgrace and redemption are part of a vocabulary of aggressive propaganda, nationalist (revenge and humiliation of the enemy) as well as sectarian/religious (martyrdom as promise of heaven). Simultaneously, however, these practices should be seen as performing the function of critique.⁸ By showing both civilian deaths by, and soldier deaths of, the anti-ISIS coalition, the spectacular thanatopolitics of ISIS, let us recall, challenges the boundaries of visibility beyond Western economies of “taste and decency” and brings into focus the savagery of war deaths that is otherwise invisible to Western viewers. While this new visibility operates, in line with Joseph Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness”, as a mirror that reflects back on “us” the military

implication of Western interests in the violent histories of Arab statehood (Cavarero, 2009), its critical mirroring nonetheless entails no life-affirming, positive promise. Instead of the humanist sensibility that informs radical critiques of the Western ways of war as industrial mass killing or as a biopolitical project that kills through saving lives (Pöttsch, 2015), the horroristic critique is profoundly anti-humanist. It savagely challenges the very core of common humanity, the integrity of the body, turning its brutal annihilation into theater and relishing the ferocious spectacle.

The aesthetics of the grotesque, the abject and the sublime enact, in this sense, three distinct practices of anti-humanist critique that, by focusing on corporeal destruction, mirror, problematize and ultimately replace the universal sanctity of bodily integrity with a sanctification of brutal killing and death—a counter thanatopolitics of the spectacle. In this light, our horroristic approach does not simply introduce and incorporate the visual dimension of violent death into current conceptions of thanatopolitics. It also, importantly, highlights ISIS' use of the gruesome fragility of the human flesh as a new privileged site of global propaganda. If, as Khouri puts it, one of the key features of ISIS recruits is political disenchantment in the West and the Arab worlds, particularly among the young, then its videos' proposals of heroic self-sacrifice for a noble cause engages with precisely this disenchanted youth in their “search for order, meaning, and fulfilment” (2015, p. 14). In this sense, Farwell's claim that ISIS has today effectively branded itself as “the true apostle of a sovereign faith [and] a champion of its own perverse notions of social justice” (2014, pp. 49–50) is indeed fully reflected in our analysis. But we need to go further than this. We must persist in asking the crucial questions of *how* it achieves its ideological goals, what kinds of communicative practices it performs and how its normative imaginations and identities are put together in its own brutal narratives of faith and justice. How, ultimately, it manages to globalize its spectacular thanatopolitics as a dystopian manifesto that reverses Western norms of

‘humanitarian’ militarism and invisible death so as to celebrate the inevitable horrorism of all warfare.

Notes

1. Cameron D. (2014, September 1) “PM statement on European Council and tackling extremism”. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-european-council-and-tackling-extremism>; Obama B. (2014, September 24) “Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City”, Public Papers. Retrieved from <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/24/remarks-presidentobama--address-united-nations-general-assembly>. See also The Editorial Board, New York Times (2014, October 2). Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/03/opinion/the-fundamental-horror-of-isis.html>; Boyle, M. (2014, August 23) ‘The problem with “evil”’. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/23/opinion/the-moral-hazard-ofcalling-isis-a-cancer.html>
2. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/08/business/media/with-videos-of-killings-isis-honessocial-media-as-a-weapon.html?mcubz=0&r=0>
3. “ISIS and the spectacle of terrorism. Resisting mainstream workstations of fear” (2014, October 7). Retrieved from <https://philosophersforchange.org/2014/10/07/isis-and-the-spectacle-ofterrorism-resisting-mainstream-workstations-of-fear/> (accessed June 15th, 2017)
4. The video is available on different websites; indicatively see here: <http://heavy.com/news/2017/01/isis-islamic-state-amaq-news-the-cross-of-the-shield-turkey -turkish-soldiersburned-to-death-execution-wilayat-halab-aleppo-syria-english-translation-subtitles-video/>
5. This video is available online at: <http://heavy.com/news/2016/01/new-isis-islamic-statenews-pictures-videos-united-kingdom-english-england-invade-imbecile-execute-spies-fulluncensored-youtube/>
6. This video is available online at: <http://heavy.com/news/2016/12/new-isis-islamic-state-amaqnews-agency-wilayat-al-khayr-deir-ez-zor-syria-syrian-arab-army-saa-pkk-peshmerga-yprussia-forces-war-executions-footage-full-uncensored-mp4-video-english-subtitles/>

7. For the fluid boundaries of the categories religious/secular and Western/non-Western used throughout the analysis, see also Asad, Brown, Butler, and Mahmood (2009).

8. Critique is here understood, in Wendy Brown's terms, as "polemical rejection" (2009, p. 9).

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