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Brothers in arms: Visual commonalities between US and IS recruitment strategies

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Article

Brothers in arms: Visual commonalities between US and IS recruitment strategies

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Abstract
This article claims that the visual image contributes to, reflects and supports the dominant discourse of two powerful armed groups that have operated in Iraq and Syria: the US military and the Islamic State (IS). This research uses multimodal discourse analysis to explore two crucial insights into the ideological power of the visual image: the power of the image as spectatorship or spectacle and the sublime or transcendental nature of the visual image. The authors conclude that US and IS recruitment and propaganda videos share these two crucial ideological elements: pride in the spectacle of their military power, discipline and technologies, and sublime commitment to the act of killing and dying for the cause. In this sense, the US military and IS are brothers in arms.

Keywords
image, Iraq, IS, Islam, jihad, military, multimodal, propaganda, recruitment, spectatorship, sublime, US

Introduction

The US military and the Islamic State (IS) have both perpetrated atrocities in Iraq. Pentagon officials presented the killing of Iraqi people as collateral damage (Global Policy Forum, 2019). The US slaughtered more than 1,201 children in Iraq between 2003 and 2011 (Iraq Body Count, 2012). US commanders used kill counts to rack up competition between soldiers. Soldiers tossed grenades into rooms during house searches and raped, tortured and murdered prisoners. Marine Major General Steve Johnson dismissed such atrocities as 'a cost of doing business' (Joyner, 2012). IS has similarly terrorized Iraq. In 2014, it targeted Yazidi communities: shooting, beheading and burning thousands of Yazidi men; raping and enslaving thousands of Yazidi women (*The Independent*, 2017). Thousands of Yazidi children died of hunger and thirst.

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This article argues that both US and IS media production supported and promoted such practices in Iraq. In 2014, IS declared itself the first Caliphate since the Ottoman Empire (Ingram, 2014: 4). It controlled land on both sides of the Syria–Iraq border, suggesting that it had no respect for national borders, peoples or cultures.

The contempt in the voice of one IS presenter rams this point home as he takes his audience on a sightseeing tour of the old border between Iraq and Syria (*End of Sykes-Pikot*, 2014). The walls and fences have been ripped apart. Iraqi border guards and Yazidis are rotting in prison. The presenter sneers at the trembling prisoners. The border between Iraq and Syria – between two desecrated nations, two tragic war zones – has been obliterated. IS has seized control.

In the midst of this death, terror and turmoil, US and IS recruitment boomed: a total of 31,510 Marines were recruited in the fiscal year 2014 (US Marine Corps Recruitment, 2004). *The Washington Post* estimated that IS media campaigns brought 'more than 30,000 foreign fighters from more than 115 countries' into the battlefields of Syria (20 November 2017).

The purpose of this article is to understand the role of the visual image in both US and IS media campaigns, claiming that visual images have played a crucial role in supporting US and IS interests, practices and atrocities.

Justification

It could be argued that there are crucial ethical differences between the atrocities committed by the US military in Iraq and those committed by IS, and that it is unjust to compare the two. Mainstream US media channels portray the horrors that US soldiers have unleashed in Iraq as misconducts that are not supported by a doctrine, faith, or school of thought. The atrocities of IS, on the other hand, reflect radical Islamist ideology and resonate with the values of IS imagined communities. This article, nevertheless, explores similarities between the US and IS in the use, justification and promotion of extreme violence, claiming that in investigating such similarities we can bridge the gap in our understanding of both *Us* (the US) and *Them* (IS).

The principle of the 'just' war has been used to defend (and promote) the use of violence in international interventions (Lango, 2014). This principle is enshrined in the Report of the United Nations High Level Panel (2004) that categorizes the main threats to the security of states and people as 'poverty, infectious disease, environmental degradation, conflict between states, conflict within states, weapons of mass destruction, terrorism and transnational organized crime' (Lango, 2014: 19). Lango questions the use of violence to secure states and people, claiming that the threat must be serious enough to justify war, that the primary purpose of the proposed intervention must be to halt the threat, that the intervention must be a last resort, that the means must be proportional to the threat, and that there must be a reasonable chance of success (p. 19).

Glennon (2006: 614) calls into question the idealistic nature of the UN report, arguing that the report 'evinces a view of a world governed by objective, universal morality rather than by competition for power and shifting national interests'. Lango (2014: 19) claims that the principle of the just war prohibits harming non-combatants intentionally,

and that the UN report does not address this crucial justification of – and barrier to – injustice, cruelty and misery.

President Bush's justification of the intervention in Iraq – portraying the US as a great nation that defends 'freedom and all that is good and just in our world' (US Presidential Statement, 9 November 2011) – reflects the general principle of the just war and a general belief that the US has 'a special role to play in human history' (McCrisken, 2003). The US tragically breached the UN Charter on Human Rights, entered Iraq illegally – according to the UN Secretary General (*The Guardian*, 2004) – and committed horrific atrocities against both combatants and non-combatants.

There has been much compelling research into the unjust nature of the US campaign in Iraq. Oddo (2011, 2014) uses inter-textual analysis to compare Presidential speeches and calls-to-arms, claiming that successive US Presidents use similar rhetoric to malign their designated enemies, align their audiences against designated perpetrators and justify atrocity. Hinnebusch (2007: 209) deplores the 'radical cleavage between the justifications for war advanced by its proponents – Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) – which proved to be hollow, and the actual motives and causes'. Hinnebusch therefore focuses on interest and strategy rather than ideology. Interests included oil and Israel. Strategies included war, unilateralism, and neoliberalism (p. 219).

The Global Policy Forum (2019) provides an insight into a stream of 'criminal homicides' in Iraq, claiming that the Pentagon has created a climate of impunity, that the US and its allies regularly kill Iraqi civilians at checkpoints and during military operations, that 'trigger-happy' soldiers slaughter Iraqi civilians daily under the 'shoot first ask questions later' principle, and that US troops have been ordered to engage in '360 Rotational Fire' as a standard operating procedure against civilians, suggesting – contrary to just war theory – that countless non-combatants in Iraq have indeed been harmed intentionally, and unforgivably.

The US engaged in 46 military interventions from 1948 to the end of the Cold War in 1991 and in 188 operations thereafter, suggesting that the US uses violence to promote its neoliberal business interests. Townshend (2002) makes a theoretical distinction between war and terrorism, claiming that terrorism is based on 'collective alarmism and an almost mystical belief in the transformative potential of violence' (p. 15). But both the US and its designated enemies – the terrorists – are committing unspeakable crimes. Zwick (2018) suggests that capitalism itself is the root of all Evil, and that 'depending on one's location in the distributed global network of production and consumption this violence will be experienced as physical, symbolic, ritualistic or psychological' (p. 914). Other researchers have called into question the ethics of being a professional soldier. Schulzke (2013: 95) argues that professional soldiers operate in 'conditions beyond their control'. His research suggests that logic and morality are inevitable casualties of the fog and friction of war (p. 97). To conclude, the US military has committed terrible atrocities, thereby inviting comparison to their designated enemies, the terrorists.

This brings us to the atrocities of IS. In contrast to professional US soldiers, there is a strong ideological basis to Islamic terrorism. Indeed, the very names of IS recruitment and propaganda videos – such as *Preparation of the Terrorists for the Enemies of the Religion* (2015) – suggest that IS embraces terrorism: the use of violence both against others and themselves to meet their ideological and spiritual goals.

Abu Bakr, author of *The Management of Savagery* (2004): 11), claims that the ideal Islamic State can only be achieved by securing territory – 'a region of savagery' – and by using that territory as a base to unleash terror (p. 11). He argues that jihadists should provide food, medical treatment and Sharia justice, and should 'raise the level of belief and combat efficiency' in their territory (p. 12). But most important of all, IS discourse has an apocalyptic current (Fromson and Simon, 2015) that embraces violence, thereby distinguishing it from the 'prudent rhetoric and considerate targeting' of Al-Qaeda (Arosoaie, 2015).

IS is more violent than other jihadist groups. Abu Bakr (2004: 31) argues that Jihad is 'naught but violence, crudeness, terrorism, frightening (others) and massacring' and that 'the ingredient of softness [compassion] is one of the ingredients of failure'. He claims that 'the Companions of the Prophet (may God be pleased with them) understood the nature of violence, even burning people with fire' and recommends that jihadists should adopt the strategy of 'paying the price' (p. 33). If ransoms are not paid, 'hostages should be liquidated in a terrifying manner'. Issue 2 of the IS online magazine, *Rumiyah/Rome* (2016) picks up this same thread, using identity choice messaging that targets true belief rather than mere interest (Ingram, 2016).

Issue 2 of the IS magazine eulogizes the perpetrators of a massacre in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh – their modesty, generosity, patience, obedience and truthfulness – and their eagerness to 'slaughter the Crusaders and the apostates' (Rumiyah, 2016: 11). This magazine glorifies the original jihadists 'that melted the eyes of their enemies with heated nails and cut off their hands' (p. 23) and recommends so-called 'just terror' tactics that address those who might still be 'squeamish at the thought of plunging a sharp object into another person's flesh' (p. 12).

Muslim scholars have repeatedly preached the importance and benefits of jihad, interpreted as 'the punishment of recalcitrant groups' – infidels and heretics – that 'can only be brought under the sway of the Imam by a decisive fight' (Ibn Taymiyyah, 2004: 391). Qutb (2004: 394) argues that 'the eternal armed struggle for the freedom of man' – the murder and martyrdom – should 'continue until the religion is purified for God.'

US and IS recruitment

Eichler (2014) explores the dramatic transformation in US military recruitment policies, from draft to voluntary recruitment to the current globalized recruitment of soldiers. She criticizes the current neoliberal policy of outsourcing military labour to cheap 'marginalized workers from the global South' that are not citizens of the US (p. 603). She claims that there is 'an over-proportionate recruitment of working class and lower-middle class Americans' as well as people of colour (p. 601) and concludes that the US military is 'not so much a volunteer force as a force relying on a poverty or economic draft' (p. 604).

Harris (2009) claims that minorities in the US traditionally legitimized themselves through the military, but that criticism of US military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan has eroded recruitment (p. 410). US military recruitment has become heavily dependent on corporate advertising, market research agencies and the militarization of US culture (Rech, 2014). The Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) has played a key role in creating a culture of war in low-income schools that propagate 'militarism, aggression,

violence, repression, the demonization of others, and mindless obedience (Ayers, 2006: 596). Moskalenko (2010: 250) concludes that 'an average young man or woman joining the army does so more for selfish than for ideological or patriotic reasons.'

Brown (2012) in contrast claims that US Marine advertisements continue to highlight 'challenge, elitism, and martial masculinity' that are encapsulated in slogans such as 'Every Marine a rifleman' and 'We're looking for a few good men' (p. 156). During the 1980s, Marine recruitment depicted Marines on the parade ground, dangling out of a helicopter, or crawling through the grass with their rifles. In the late 1990s and 2000s, Marines battled through obstacle courses.

Through this unrelenting focus on 'boot camps' and 'austere environments' (Snow, 2018), the Marines continue to meet their annual quotas of 30,000 recruits. The latest campaign promises to turn recruits into 'successful fighting men'. Reacting to the disillusionment of Vietnam, and the subsequent reduction in suitable recruits, the US Navy twisted its tentacles around Hollywood. The blockbuster movie, *Top Gun* (1986) paid the Navy $1.8 million for its use of installations, planes and pilots. This synergy of military and media power boosted recruitment (Waxman, 2016).

Turning to IS recruitment strategies, Ingram (2014: 7) claims that, in September 2014, Islamic State had between 20,000 and 31,500 soldiers stretched across roughly one-third of Syria and Iraq. Gates and Podder (2015) suggest that the majority of foreign fighters were from neighbouring countries or the Maghreb, and around one-fifth were from Europe and the US. Wignell et al. (2017) claim that Western foreign fighters tend to be disillusioned young Muslim men from urban backgrounds. Gates and Podder (2015: 109) suggest that their motivations range from ignorant novices who see joining up as a male rite of passage to diehard militants looking for combat and martyrdom.

Gates and Podder also discuss the propaganda methods of the main IS media organization, Al-Hayat. Al-Hayat produces a broad range of videos, ranging from 'the cold terror of children holding decapitated heads' to portrayals of 'governance, justice and construction' (p. 109). One other key element is the call to action that 'highlights the wrongdoings of the enemy and the good deeds of Islamic State'. Styszynski (2014) investigates the images in the English language magazine, *Dabiq*: injured Iraqi soldiers, parades in invaded territories, executions of infidels (p. 12). Captions promote the IS brand: the Caliphate.

Ingram (2014) argues that IS disseminates two streams of information warfare: the official communiqués of Al-Hayat and the unofficial communications of its members. Official communiqués include the magazine, *Dabiq*, and the videos. Unofficial messages are relayed through social media platforms. Ingram claims that IS produces opportunistic messages that resonate with diverse audiences: hour-long videos such as *Flames of War* and shorter productions such as *The End of Sykes-Picot* that commemorate successful campaigns in the obliteration of state borders and the construction of the Caliphate.

Theoretical insights

This research into the power and role of visual images in recruiting soldiers – and in supporting the missions of the US military and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria – is based on

two crucial theoretical insights: insights into spectatorship (Debord, 1967; Huxford, 2008) and insights into the sublime (Burke, 1998; Žižek, 1989).

Spectatorship

The concept of spectatorship suggests that US and IS recruitment videos shift the focus of the audience from the informational content of images to their affective impact (Huxford, 2008: 8). Spectatorship reduces the horrors of modern warfare and capitalism to appearance. Debord (1967: 1) argues that, in advanced capitalist societies, life itself has been reduced to 'an immense accumulation of spectacles'.

   This research suggests that both IS and US recruitment and propaganda videos have a strong element of spectatorship. For example, the US recruitment and propaganda video, *Operation Iraqi Freedom* (2013), promotes the superior planning, training and technology of the US Marine Corps in Iraq, its organizational and disciplinary power, its flags and uniforms, its deadly weaponry, its muscular and victorious soldiers, almost all of them *men*. Such videos encourage young men to become *real* men: to become one of 'the Few, the Proud, the Marines'.

The sublime

The concept of the sublime suggests that US and IS recruitment videos produce a strong sense of awe or fascination (Huxford, 2008: 8). The term 'sublime' implies that intense visual images overpower our senses with astonishment: 'a state in which all the soul's motions are frozen in horror' (Burke, 1998: 41). Jameson (1991: 37, 38) argues that the sublime is an inevitable consequence of an unfathomable globalized world over which we can have no totalizing vision or empirical understanding, suggesting that we are hopelessly submerged in the unfathomable sublime.

   Baudrillard (1995: 49) claims that 'the closer we supposedly approach the real or the truth, the further we draw away from them both, since neither one nor the other exists.' He argues that the visual image bears no relation to any reality and that our sense of the sublime – of being immersed in the reality of war – is merely an aphrodisiac and a hallucination (p. 75).

   Žižek (1989: 229) concurs, arguing that 'no empirical object, no representation of itself can adequately represent the Thing' and suggesting that 'sublime objects of ideology' – images of Freedom or God – represent 'this very impossibility, this permanent failure of the representation to reach after the Thing'. Our soldiers murder the Other and/or sacrifice the Self in the name of sublime objects such as the President or the Sheikh.

   This research suggests that both US and IS recruitment videos have a strong element of the sublime. For example, the IS video, *The Chosen Few* (2015) depicts the life and death of Abu Muslim, a Canadian recruit. The protagonist insists that, in order to be true to his divine calling, he has to leave his homeland, Canada, the Land of the Unbelievers. Images contrast the majestic mountains and forests and lakes and cities of light in Canada and the grim gravelly terrain – the walls, search-towers, and ditches – at the Syrian airport where he met his Fate.

It is important to understand, however, that the power of this video does not lie merely in its visual images but rather in its multimodality: in the interweaving of voice-over, music and visual resources. It is the voice-over that calls our attention to the contrast between the two lives of Abu Muslim: the one of simple pleasures that corresponds to Canada and the one of sacrifice, martyrdom and eternal reward that corresponds to Syria.

It is the voice-over that reminds the Faithful of the discourse, life and martyrdom of Jafr Ibn Abu Talib, one of Mohammad's cousins, suggesting that through their example we too can enter Paradise. The voice-over tells us, 'to put Allah before your family, before yourself, before everything'. The soothing music fills the mind with images of spilt blood and perfumed flowers, the hope of forgiveness and resurrection. IS videos such as this are infused with a sublime sense of commitment to the ultimate cause: the sublime object (Žižek, 1989) of Eternal Life.

Method

This article uses multimodal discourse analysis to investigate the interplay between language and visual image in the production of spectatorship and the sublime. Multimodal discourse analysis is based on three meta-functions of meaning (Halliday, 1978): ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning and textual meaning. Ideational meaning refers to 'things like people, objects, actions, and places in the material world' (Wignell et al., 2017: 3). Interpersonal meaning relates to 'the social nature of communication'. Textual meaning 'connects text to its context and organizes messages into coherent forms'. In sum, meaningful communication is about something (ideational meaning), refers to the relationships between people (interpersonal meaning) and is part of a cohesive text (textual meaning). Multimodal discourse analysis suggests that language and images are interrelated systems of meaning that provide 'networks of options from which choices are made' (Wignell et al., 2017: 460).

This type of discourse analysis provides useful insight into power and ideology. Kress (2011: 47) provides insight into similarities and differences between the modes that are to be examined in multimodal analysis: 'meaning is shared among all modes – intensity, framing, foregrounding, highlighting, coherence and cohesion . . . even though they will differ from mode to mode'. For example, 'intensity may be materialized as loudness in speech and as saturation in colour, or as thickness or bolding in writing or in image.'

Multimodal discourse analysis has been applied to IS propaganda. Wignell et al. (2017) investigated English-language recruitment and propaganda materials produced by IS, providing insight into combinations of images and text – bonding icons – that are used to recruit support.

This article explores the three main levels of meaning in US and IS recruitment and propaganda videos: the ideational, interpersonal and textual (Halliday, 1978). On an ideational level, this research examines the material world represented in US and IS videos. On an interpersonal level, the research investigates the use of cameras and the nature of the gaze. On a textual level, this research explores structural elements – crucial recurrences – that bind these ideological materials together.

However, it is important to understand, once again, the role of polysemy. Such videos do not merely depend on visual resources. It is the interweaving of semiotic resources –

voice-over, captions, background sounds, music, tone and images – that captures the hearts and minds of recruits and supporters. IS videos integrate historical sources – the Koran, historical tracts and episodes – creating rich inter-textual productions. These powerful semiotic resources target the impressionable minds of the young.

Multimodal discourse analysis will be used to explore the interplay between these semiotic resources.

Samples

Samples of US and IS videos have been selected in order to compare and contrast the role of visual images in representing the process of becoming a man and fulfilling a higher purpose.

The sample of US YouTube videos (2003–2016) has been produced by US Marines. These videos portray recruitment, training and parading (*How United States Marines Are Made*, 2016; *US Marine Corps Commercials*, 2015), combat (*Operation Iraqi Freedom*, 2013), casualties and sacrifice (*Remembering the Sacrifice*, 2012) and celebration (*Marine Week in Cleveland*, 2017).

The IS sample (2014–2016), in parallel with the US sample, depicts recruitment, training and parading (*The Chosen Few*, 2015; *Indeed Their Appointment Is for the Morning*, 2015; *Preparation of the Terrorists for the Enemies of the Religion*, 2015), combat (*Aspects of the Conquests of al-Baghdādī*, 2015; *Storming the Barracks of the Peshmerga*, 2015; *Upon the Path of Lifting the Siege*, 2015), casualties and sacrifice (*From the Fortified Strongholds of Glory*, 2015; *Storming the Fourth Regiment of the Safavid Army*, 2015) and celebration (*End of Sykes-Picot,* 2014). The IS sample has been downloaded from an academic platform (www.jihadology.net) and uploaded into an internet archive (www.archive.org) in order to create a more permanent record.

The sample of IS videos discusses one issue that is rarely explored in US propaganda: extra-judicial execution. US media production on the invasion of Iraq rarely explores 'the relentless drumbeat of civilian deaths' (*The Guardian*, 22 October 2010). IS videos, on the other hand, rejoice in the sadistic torture, trial and execution of prisoners. Humiliation, murder and mutilation are framed as revenge and justice. Two IS videos (*A Considerable Warning to Anyone*, 2014; *Liquidation of the Apostates*, 2016) have been selected in order to explore the role of the visual image in justifying such murderous practices.

Results

Spectatorship in US recruitment videos

Rather than subject recruits to the blood, horror, or even guilt of war, there is a strong element of spectatorship in US recruitment videos. Such videos display the power, technology, discipline and manliness of the 'Marines, the Few, the Proud' (*US Marine Corps Commercials*, 2015). Such commercials promote the current products of the US military–industrial production line: the jets, battleships and speedboats. This celebration of military power culminates in the parade ground. Here, the spotless US flags, the

immaculate uniforms, the marching, the perfect discipline and the preparedness for battle are proudly portrayed. It is a technological rite of passage, a process of becoming a modern male soldier, a high-tech killing machine.

These texts are personal or impersonal rather than interpersonal (Halliday, 1978). US soldiers are focused on their orders and on the mission on hand rather than on each other or on the audience. The crucial textual element that binds these ideological materials (Halliday, 1978) is the spectacle of becoming and being a Marine and a man.

How United States Marines Are Made (2016) displays the rigorous training of Marines, their unquestioning obedience under stress, their supreme levels of discipline, power, agility and endurance. Recruits are depicted climbing ropes, slithering under barbed wire, engaged in close combat bayonet training, shooting from standing, kneeling and lying positions.

America's Few (2017) displays a muscular black man dashing through a plantation, the medium close-up clip of a basketball player making a shot, the target turning to the camera and responding to the call of duty. Young men stand to attention before boarding the bus to the boot camp. Here the virtual recruits are turned into *real* men – clambering over obstacles, diving into the ocean – becoming *real* soldiers: performing their drill on the parade ground. Such videos operate on a visual level, using minimal voice-over and music.

Spectatorship in IS recruitment videos

IS recruitment videos have a high level of spectatorship too, displaying the power, technology, discipline and masculinity of the Faithful. *Indeed Their Appointment Is for the Morning* (2015) depicts masked men training, doing push-ups, manhandling bayonets and practising the noble art of impaling. *Preparation of the Terrorists for the Enemies of the Religion* (2015) provides images of jeeps and machine guns, uniforms and robes. *Upon the Path of Lifting the Siege* (2015) displays the spoils of war – captured trucks, tanks, weapons – deployed in their acts of divine justice.

These texts are spiritual rather than interpersonal (Halliday, 1978). IS soldiers are focused on their mission to annihilate the enemies of Islam and build the Islamic State rather than on each other or on the audience. The crucial textual element that binds these ideological materials together is the spectacle of becoming and being a soldier of the jihad.

Such videos use a broad range of semiotic resources. *Indeed Their Appointment Is for the Morning* (2015) is an opportunistic internet response to an Al Jazeera report that suggests that the downfall of IS might be approaching. The voice-over insists that 'Our submission is only to Allah.' He claims that 'we are making ink out of our blood' – highlighting the importance of communication in their ideological struggle – and promising both paradise and revenge. Images of training and live action – the hum of bullets – support their call to action and commitment to the cause, encapsulated in the promise that, 'with our [own] blood and [our own] carnage, we will liberate the land.' The music supports the image of the Promised Land.

Music reverberates throughout these videos, stirring the minds of recruits and supporters, reassuring us that we are on the right path. In *Upon the Path of Lifting the Siege*

(2015), IS soldiers proclaim the Greatness of Allah as we travel through the darkness. Street sounds and the firing of rifles tell us of another world out there – outside the screen and the simulacrum of Baudrillard (1995) – where we can fulfil a higher purpose, by putting our lives on the line.

The sublime in US recruitment videos

Leap (2017) encapsulates the sublime spirit of the Marines, using the thoughts and emotions of a young muscular black man poised on a diving board to build up suspense, 'Facing one of the toughest challenges of [his] life right here'; he tells us not to quit, because 'If you quit now; you will always quit your life.' There is a slow-motion descent into the depths of the pool. Later, much later, there is physical and spiritual resurrection – the glorious sight of him clothed in the proud uniform of a US Marine, clutching a US flag – having risked it all and lived the dream. He proudly concludes, 'I jumped in. But I came up a Marine.' He has become one of us: 'the Few, the Proud, the Marines'.

On an interpersonal level (Halliday, 1978), US soldiers address the audience directly, gazing into our eyes, and promising Freedom (*Operation Iraqi Freedom*, 2013). The crucial textual element (Halliday, 1978) that binds these ideological materials is the power and self-sacrifice of the US soldier.

For Us All (*US Marine Corps Commercials*, 2015) depicts this sacred calling. The image of the young American mother cradling her child invokes patriotic belief, sublime ideological objects (Žižek, 1989) and connections: Life and Death, Family and Nation.

Operation Iraqi Freedom (2013) celebrates the role of Marines in freeing Iraq, capturing the spirit of self-sacrifice and patriotism in 'young men endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'. These rights are promoted, defended and sacrificed through the strategies and technologies of the commanders. The struggle has its rewards. The soldiers – or rather the survivors – return to their adoring families: hugs, kisses, tears, smiles, mission complete.

The sublime in IS recruitment videos

IS videos are infused with sublime commitment to a higher purpose too. *Indeed Their Appointment Is for the Morning* (2015) is based on a news report predicting that IS is about to collapse. Eyes gaze into space as one soldier reads from the Koran, evoking burning belief and hunger for Death and martyrdom: because 'our hearts are waiting breathlessly . . . for our departure from this Earth'.

On an interpersonal level (Halliday, 1978), IS soldiers address the audience directly, gazing into our eyes, and promising Justice. The crucial textual element (Halliday, 1978) that binds these ideological materials is the power and self-sacrifice of the soldiers of the jihad.

Preparation of the Terrorists for the Enemies of the Religion (2015) encourages us to kill and die for the cause. Euphoria is transmitted through the music and the lights in their eyes. In *Aspects of the Conquests of al-Baghdādī* (2015), one soldier stands guard while another prays; blood-spattered corpses of enemies litter the compound. Here, one soldier squats as he feeds bullets into a clip. He claims that 'The free man does not support the

Unbeliever', suggesting that he has the solution in his hands. The camera captures images of Death. The Koranic text clarifies their purpose in the scheme of things: 'The Earth will be inherited by My servants' (Sura, 21: 105).

Such videos are interlaced with Koranic messages. *Storming the Barracks of the Peshmerga* (2015) begins with the uplifting promise that 'God has given you shade . . . garments to protect you from the heat and from your violence' but concludes that in return for this, you – the supporter, the recruit – must *submit* (Sura 16: 81)

But it is the martyrdom and execution videos that best capture the notion of the sublime, the horrifying, overpowering nature of images of violence. In *Storming the Barracks of the Peshmerga* (2015), the martyrdom sequence is repeated three times, the driver turning the corner and the truck exploding into nothingness. The voice-over suggests that 'Only Allah can understand our intentions.' The blindfolded Kurdish captain is dragged like a sacrificial lamb to the slaughter. The IS executioner holds his knife up high, declaring, 'By God, we did not come to you in blood.'

He slits the captain's throat in front of the other prisoner and holds up his decapitated head. The head is placed perpendicular to the body; using the blood as glue. His companion meets the same fate. 'God is greatest' is repeated.

This sublime interlacing of horror and spirituality reverberates through *A Considerable Warning to Anyone* (2014). The prisoner is executed in the main square. The packed crowd is entirely male. They hold up forefingers to testify that God is one and that they are at one with God, ecstatically declaring that God is greatest.

Revenge is sweet in *Liquidation of the Apostates* (2016). The prisoners are unmasked to reveal their true treacherous identities. Prisoners are dressed in the orange uniforms of Abu Gharib in Iraq, historical site of US murder, abuse and humiliation of Iraqi men and women. There is ritual. The five bound prisoners kneel, gazing at the Earth, symbolizing submission; guards gaze down at the prisoners, symbolizing domination. This is a sublime moment, that awful, terrifying interlude between Life and Death.

IS videos use a broad range of semiotic resources. Music and lyrics play a powerful role, supporting the three martyrs in *Storming the Barracks of the Peshmerga* (2015): 'I am going to leave the luxuries of life behind. Tell my friends.'

Conclusion

This article argues that it is not visual images alone that capture the attention of recruits and supporters: that such videos use a broad range of semiotic resources – voice-over, captions, background sounds and soothing or stirring music – in addition to visual images.

US recruitment videos create a strong sense of spectatorship, sensationalism, commercialization and ritual, by advertising the superior discipline and technologies of US capitalism in general and of the US war-machine in particular, and by displaying the intelligence of US missiles rather than the intelligence or suffering of their enemies. These videos encapsulate the comforts of being on the winning side. This is represented in the 'about-to-die-moment' (Zelizer, 2004): multiple clean-cut images of US missiles being launched rather than gruesome portraits of mangled bodies, crushed skulls and rivers of blood. Recruits are invited to join up, join in, share in the success of the US, and in so doing become a man.

Likewise, IS videos produce a strong sense of spectatorship in their images of soldiers clambering over obstacle courses. But, in order to be effective in recruiting and renewing support in the light of the atrocities committed in Iraq, both US and IS videos must also appeal to our sense of the sublime, to our loyalty to sublime objects of ideology (Žižek, 1989), and to our blind belief in the US nation or the nation of Islam. Rather than suggesting that people have no totalizing vision or empirical understanding of the global world of images or that we have lost our grip on reality (Jameson, 1991), these videos suggest that we should embrace ideology, losing ourselves in 'the hallucinogenic pleasure of violence' (Baudrillard, 1995: 75).

This sublime spirit of self-sacrifice reverberates through US recruitment videos. It is embodied in the muscular black Marine hurling himself off the diving board (*Leap*, 2017), in the soldiers dashing towards the *Sounds of Chaos* (2017), and in the gaze of the soldiers that insist, 'we did our job; we freed that country' (*Operation Iraqi Freedom*, 2013).

Likewise, IS martyrdom and execution videos are suffused with spiritual commitment and hunger for Death. Their heroes desire both to kill and be killed. This is encapsulated in the burly, smiling IS soldier in *Preparation of the Terrorists for the Enemies of the Religion* (2015). He stands at the crossroads in his khaki uniform, hugging an automatic rifle to his heart, addressing us directly, thanking God for the gift of Islam, the gift of Faith, the gift of Jihad (Holy War) and preparing for war according to Sura 8, Verse 16 of the Koran: 'And prepare against them, whatever you are able of power and of steed of war by which you may terrify the enemy of Allah and your enemy.'

It could be argued that spectatorship (Debord, 1967; Huxford, 2008) and the sublime (Burke, 1998; Žižek, 1989) are two sides of the same coin – that spectatorship spills over into the sublime and vice versa – that the prime goal of recruitment and propaganda videos such as these is to produce sublime language and images that overpower our senses (Burke, 1998) and recruit us to the cause at all costs. Even if we do not respond to the call, we can at least act as if we do (Žižek, 1989).

This article, however, suggests that the distinction between spectatorship (entertainment and advertisement) and the sublime (awe or horror) is an important one. Both the US and IS use these recruitment videos to promote a strong sense of spectatorship, a spectacle of discipline, power, technical skill, manliness and success. Both the US and IS also use these videos to produce a strong sense of the sublime – of sacrifice and self-sacrifice – in the name of the US or IS and in the name of Freedom or Islam.

Such videos turn contingencies into purpose, illusions into realities, deaths into victories, ideology into Truth. Their mission is to guide us towards – to make us submit to – their construction of the Truth. Both use elements of spectatorship and the sublime to recruit our support and, in that sense, the US and IS are true brothers-in-arms.

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