**Deflating the Iconoclash: Shifting the focus from Islamic State’s iconoclasm to its realpolitik**

Abstract

This article explores the tension between religious and political motivations in the strategy of Islamic State. It develops the Arendtian model of politics as a space of appearance through the work of Silverstone, Devji and Cavarero to consider how Islamic State exhibits itself in this space using religious modalities. This space is conceptualized as a global media ecology. Whilst no political actor can control how it is recognized within that ecology, religious and even ethical modalities grant Islamic State a compelling attention-grabbing and persuasive capacity. However, greater exposure of its pragmatic, realpolitik behaviour might deflate that identity. The second half of the article sets out several examples of such behaviour. The article concludes by suggesting that icons are something all societies live with but the news media that constitute the global space of appearance remain transfixed by iconic acts or icon-smashing. This leaves publics-cum-audiences adrift, uncertain and anxious about the nature, actions and threat of Islamic State.

Keywords: Icons, Islamic State, Terrorism, Media, Visual politics

**Introduction**

From 9/11 to the most treasured temple in Palmyra, Islamist destruction reminded us that we (not Islamist extremists) have objects and values we hold as untouchable and inviolable. A narrative has emerged anchored around the idea of an iconoclash (EUNIC, 2015) as images cascade across global audiences: bizarre images that anger, transfixing images of horror, and terrifying images that repel. These take the form of what are already the templates or stereotypes of, respectively, the angry pointing cleric clip and the antiquities vandalism montage, the beheading video and the burning man in a cage gif, interspersed with live footage of the latest terrorist attacks. This narrative about the circulation of images expresses a visual economy akin to the economic exchange of valued goods; a clash through the tit-for-tat of icons and images that signify something of worth (Bourdieu, 1991; Gursel, 2016; Mitchell, 2011). Each ‘side’ in the war on terror has shown trophies of valuable people, objects, targets destroyed or being destroyed, the exchange of shock then horror and awe at audacity. This visual economy was exemplified by the orange Guantanamo jumpsuit prompting the production of the orange hostage jumpsuit. In all of this, the public-cum-audience is positioned as passive, left with no choice but to gaze at mass-mediated atrocities and feel that the very media used in everyday life – the web, smartphones – are themselves sources of the dangers that enable these atrocities.

In this article I argue that if we are to properly respond to this iconoclash, we must understand why it is happening. It is happening in part because of Islamists’ drive to restore pride and dignity and avenge historical humiliation, by creating a game of equals. However, this iconoclash is ultimately driven by geopolitical strategy and must be responded to in those terms. Yet it is that very tension that provides resources to undermine the spectacular and appealing religious and ethical claims Islamic State projects through global media. Whilst accounting for the additional capacity that a religious dimension affords political violence, greater attention to the geopolitical, secular motives and actions of Islamic State could help deflate its presence and reduce its appeal.

This article first sets out a conception of the global space of appearance through which Islamic State performs its violent gestures and others react. The first section of analysis introduces Hannah Arendt’s understanding of politics as the exchange of claims within a space of appearance. Since McLuhan’s (1962) notion of a global village and the widespread adoption of transnational broadcasting in the 1990s and digital media in the 2000s, it has become possible to speak of a global space of appearance (cf. Silverstone, 2007). Internet access is not universal and problems of firewalls and translation remain. However, it is conceivable not only that individuals on any part of the planet can explore live and recorded footage from most other parts of the world. They can interact with and share digital content themselves, and also produce their own content (Merrin, 2014). They can present themselves and their political claims to the world. Anyone can enter the space of appearance. These conditions allowed Al-Qaeda to construct themselves as a global political entity in the 2000s and allow Islamic State to follow a similar strategy in the 2010s. The logics driving behaviour in this global media space are set out in the first, largely theoretical section this paper. In this context, it becomes possible to make sense of Islamic State constructing their identity and presence in the world as a game of equals in a single space of appearance rather than something external to our cosmos.

The second section of this article compares Islamic State’s actual behaviour with the way it has been constructed – by itself and by journalists around the world – as waging an image war against icons dear to its opponents. This analysis concludes that any image war *can be presented as* secondary to political strategy; that its constructed identity as a fearsomely puritan actor motivated by transcendent ideals is at odds with the realpolitik driving its observable actions. This is not to reduce the religiosity of Islamic State to captivating disguise or ephemeral status, nor to argue that religiosity is just another form of motive alongside ethnicity that is ultimately secondary to political interests. Rather, the aim is to show how the religious dimension of the movement provide unique materials that can be harnessed for tactical and strategic aims, not least by producing what Brubaker (2016) calls different ‘modalities’ of media content that are compelling to audiences they seek to recruit or seek to intimidate. Non-religious modalities would not prove so compelling.

Such an analysis develops the trajectory of work on media and politics as a space of appearance running through the writings of Arendt, Silverstone, Devji and Cavarero, four scholars who have previously not been explicitly linked but who have all considered how politics involves the display of violence within a shared, visible space. All are useful for bridging the concerns of Media and Communications scholars with the logics that underpin how groups and individuals use media technologies in everyday politics and domestic protest (e.g. Aslan, 2015) with the concerns of Political Science scholars about how strategy is formulated and enacted in these media spaces, and how these media spaces allow the sedimentation of particular political and religious discourses that groups like Islamic State can utilize to legitimize their goals and behaviour.

Alongside the development of this theoretical trajectory, the analysis is also concerned with the practical problem of reducing the attractiveness of Islamic State to potential recruits. The article points to contradictions in the presentation and actuality of Islamic State that could be exploited by political leaders, journalists, and those in the ‘radicalization industry’ (Hellyer, 2008) charged with de-legitimising Islamic State.

**A Global Space of Appearances?**

Hannah Arendt provides a framework for thinking about how Islamic State uses media. She argues that the “political” is a horizontal series of human interactions that continually re-establishes the basis for a community through the voicing of a full diversity of claims and perspectives (Arendt, 1963). Cavarero summarises this theatrical model of politics as a ‘plural and interactive space of exhibition’ (Cavarero, 2000: 57). Since it is a shared space, one can only exhibit one’s identity and claims *in relation to* others. While any actor tries to control and project its narrative, its narrative is also being told by others: it is a joint venture. For this reason, Al-Qaeda operated a media monitoring unit to observe how its identity was presented and discussed in Western as well as Arabic news media (Awan et al., 2011). Did the identity of the Al-Qaeda narrated by journalists coincide with the identity Al-Qaeda wished to be seen as? The affordances of global digital media made it possible for Al-Qaeda to know this, and adjust strategy if it felt mis-recognised, for instance for a short period by producing videos with Al-Qaeda figures dressed in Western suits to appear more credible to European audiences (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2011). Indeed, for Arendt, it is in *acting* that one is seen. Action is what makes a difference: ‘It is the function … of all action, as distinguished from mere behavior, to interrupt what otherwise would have proceeded automatically and therefore predictably’ (Arendt, 1970: 30-31). However, the legitimation of one’s actions – one’s words and deeds – remains the gift of the other: consent is relational, bestowed by one’s audience or constituency, not innate and decided by oneself (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2010).

This leaves all political actors vulnerable: Arendt’s notion of politics as a space of appearance seems to elevate exhibitionism, even narcissism, but all actors are exposed to criticism, misrepresentation or simply being ignored. Islamic State acts, others witness those acts, and turn their reflections into a narrative about Islamic State. What do Islamic State’s acts signify? In what context is it understood? As audiences reflect, drawing on information from the journalists, politicians and others who acts as intermediaries and interpreters of global news, Islamic State’s identity forms: who they are and what they are. As for what they stand for, in an Arendtian space of appearance, debate and action are not driven by the rational exchange of reasoned claims, as per the Habermasian public sphere (Habermas, 1989). Rather, persuasion demands rhetoric, gesture and performance.

The task for Islamic State is to control to the best of their abilities what aspects of their words and deeds are witnessed, and by whom – and what aspects are not. It has to project its uniqueness if it is to retain its identity: claiming attacks in Dhaka or Nice might give Islamic State a sense of momentum or presence, but does it become “just another Al-Qaeda”, following the template of a scattered network of self-radicalising individuals who happen to claim their flag? They face the difficulty of becoming known to a global audience. Writing in the Arendtian tradition, Silverstone notes that, since the proliferation of satellite television, ‘the mediated images of strangers increasingly define what constitutes the world’ (Silverstone, 2007: 4). What kind of strangers do Islamic State present themselves as?

At first glance the ongoing iconoclash illustrates Islamists’ efforts to show *our* (Western) cultural interpenetration and equivalence with *them*. Arendt posited a single space of appearance; the fundamental problem of politics was how we all get along together in that space. Islamic State seek to be counted, to be recognized, alongside others (of course in a violently antagonistic way that betrays the spirit of Arendt’s space). It is about showing we share the same visual regime and thus the same space, now. It is not a clash of spaces but a clash within a single global media ecology (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2010; Volkmer, 2014; cf. McLuhan, 1962; Postman, 1970; Fuller 2007). It is about changing how we think of the terrain within which the clash plays out.

A decade ago Devji observed how Al-Qaeda appeared to be using global media to ensure a universal focus on Islam. He wrote:

It is no exaggeration to say that only in this globally mediated landscape does Islam become universal, uniting Muslims and non-Muslims alike in a common visual practice, even in a fundamental agreement over the Islamic nature of the spectacle … We might say that a religious universality expressed in the vision of converting the world has been displaced here by the conversion of vision itself, to make of Islam a global spectacle built out of the convergence and complicity of innumerable lines of sight? (Devji, 2005: 93)

Islamic State extend this process, constructing a global spectre of Islam upon which lines of sight are trained from across the world. That other Muslims wish to contest this spectre, labeling Islamic State as Daesh instead, is recognition of Islamic State’s strategy.

In establishing that sense of co-existence and universal presence, Islamic State employ tactics involving the production and destruction of imagery, proceeding through an ever-escalating tit-for-tat. This signals a visual economy, in which certain images have greater value as they go into circulation and others sink and go un-sold or un-seen (Gursel, 2016; Poole, 1997). The use of the now iconic orange Guantanamo jumpsuit by those opposed to the US and its allies to clothe their hostages indicates the *convertability* of one life for another, but also the convertibility of Guantanamo and its jumpsuits for Western injustice per se – a doubling up from like-for-like to particular-for-general, or from direct exchange to metonymy (Burke, 1941). Islamists use their knowledge of what we say we find valuable in order to lure us into feeling, lure us into acting, and even lure us into believing: believing in their belief, their steadfast belief that gives them apparent eternal fortitude and indefatigable resolve. In other words, their efforts to manage their own identity double-back onto how we in the West manage ours. Silverstone, again, writes, ‘since it is in the relationship we have with others which defines the nature of our own being, then such links as we might have with these mediated individuals are increasingly becoming the crucial ones for us too’ (Silverstone, 2007: 4).

Our relations with Islamic State force us to reconsider what we value. Islamic State remind us we are entangled with them: their objects are our objects, their media circulations are enmeshed with ours, and we are chained together, in struggle, as equals. By producing spectacles about objects that were settled for us, in place and not disturbed, Al-Qaeda and Islamic State perform an act of *breaching* (Appadurai, 1986); our frameworks are shown to be vulnerable and dependent on actors who may be opposed to us. Al-Qaeda and Islamic State have forced us to restore our faith in our own faith in visual totems: we value the Twin Towers and the Temple of Bel in Palmyra because they signify what we hold dear, in this case, respectively, global trade, nationalism or the freedom to shop, and global culture and heritage. As these totems are attacked, we must suture the breach to repair ontological security and in doing so, affirm our values within a cosmos that is suddenly, for us, shared with them.

Islamic State project a cycle of still and moving images that engender different affective states. Some images may terrify; that is, produce feeling of disorder, panic, the urge to flee from the scene, even if mediated. The helplessness of the victims may be intended to signify the helplessness of the global audience. The sheer indeterminacy of who is radicalized and who happens to be caught in an attack: the lorry in Nice in July 2016 only became part of an intelligible strategy afterwards, reminding global audiences that not even Islamic State control who commits terrorism in their name. Other images may be designed to horrify; that is, produce a sense of paralysis, of being frozen, alone, as one gazes on the image, feeling repugnance at the destruction of human bodies. Bodies are put before audiences in the global space of appearance only to be burnt or beheaded: the beheading video as the dismemberment of the body’s ontological wholeness, the burning to the point it is impossible to name the body and affirm a human identity. Adriana Cavarero (2011) argues for this distinction between terror and horror, but notes that neither are new. As warrior, Achilles created fear and trembling, while Medusa’s disfigurement engendered horrified paralysis. What *is* new is the global space of appearance in which the production, circulation and political effects of any such image are radically undetermined. Which person around the world happens to commit a crime in the name of Islamic State cannot be known in advance, nor which images will become iconic. It is enough simply to guarantee enough such images are produced; some will stick.

Why do this? I have argued that Islamic State use images to speak to us in a way that changes how we think of ourselves and them – to make ourselves presences in each other's lives such that we must find a way to accommodate one another on new terms. They are reaching out to people in the region, people who may feel Islamic State is about to conquer their territory, or people who may wish to join and support them. They may be showing fellow Sunnis that only they, Islamic State, are the true Muslims; showing Shia that they have backed the wrong interpretation and should recant or die. But whether the audience is near or far, they are establishing that *they* are what is happening to *us*.

News media enable this. Mainstream journalism has a history of amplifying cycles of insecurity that makes narratives like ‘war on terror for generations’ seem common sense: dramatizing, sensationalizing, and focusing on conflict while ignoring how productive multicultural relations continue in most places for most people. This is a major part of the ‘space’ that officials in Western governments and others are trying to contest (e.g. Fernandez, 2014). It often it is a space biased against peace because conflict is more newsworthy. If our connection to, and understanding of, groups like Islamic State is derived primarily from our experience with news media, then this puts a responsibility upon news media workers. Turning back to the Arendtian tradition of media analysis, editors, journalists and photographers ‘make the globe possible as a lived-in place, managed, travelled across, and crucially, relatable to the contingencies and uncertainties of everyday life’ (Silverstone, 2007: 10). News media are responsible for how we imagine and process the likelihood of a person travelling from your neighbourhood to Syria to join Islamic State; the likelihood of your child seeing a beheading video online; the likelihood of your nephew in the military being sent on a mission to bomb Islamic State; the likelihood of an Islamic State attack on your neighbourhood.

For just as news media connect us to Islamic State when a terrorist attack happens, they also disconnect audiences from forming an understanding of who joins Islamic State and why. Mainstream news media have censored Islamic State videos in recent years, or shown only stills, or ban the use of the names of Islamic State members who carry out terrorist attacks (Borger, 2016). Social media site Twitter has made substantial progress in removing Islamic State accounts from its service (Isaac, 2016). However, whether news media have informed audiences about what Islamic State is, what it wants and how it works, and why individuals join it or act in its name – this is doubtful. The consequence is a public concerned about something it does not fully comprehend, which compounds uncertainty and anxiety. Journalism left publics frustrated at their own ignorance of Al-Qaeda a decade ago at a time they wished to be informed (Awan et al., 2011). In the global space of appearance, Islamic State may be a universal upon which innumerable lines of sight are trained, but as a constant yet blurred figure on the horizon.

When they do lurch into view, they also appear religious. As Brubaker (2016) argues, it is not that religious violence is *sui generis*, with its own logics distinct from political or ethnic violence. However, religion has particular modalities: methods of communication that create expectations of possibility, contingency or necessity. Through these modalities the religious dimension of such groups can reinforce drives to violence in particular ways. First, religion can generate hyper-committed individuals, particularly those who convert, in this case to an Islamic State-approved Islam. That sense of commitment necessarily makes those individuals feel distinct from those they deem uncommitted and, therefore, less worthy. This feeds into both a cognitive and affective construction of extreme otherhood; that non-believers are radically separate and must be acted upon. Religion then offers specific rewards and obligations that can be used to justify that action, even violent action. While all of these mechanisms exist to an extent in other forms of violence, this religious dimension offers qualitatively different meaning, linking to transcendence. These religious modalities can all be exhibited in the space of appearance. We see them in Islamic State publicity materials: the antagonism with the uncommitted, who must be punished in a way so violent that the gesture of their murder demonstrates the Islamic State member’s commitment. This enters the global space of appearance to be witnessed.

Devji argues these gestures are as much ethical as religious. If we think of self-radicalising individuals who commit acts which Islamic State later claim, such individuals may be making choices without reference to an external authority. Devji invokes Kierkegaard (1985), whose analysis of Abraham’s decision to kill his son Isaac with no guarantee or even hope that God would spare Isaac suggests that the most ethical decision is one in which the person takes full responsibility for their actions. Abraham did not expect God to repair the situation; all fault lay with Abraham. In this sense, many acts of Islamic State and other jihadist groups affirm a person’s ethical commitment independently of any religious affirmation or doctrine. The individual cannot be accused of hypocrisy when acting so completely.

However, we have seen these religious and ethical gestures before from Al-Qaeda. What new terms are Islamic State offering, through the iconoclash they stage? They seek to replace the state system and imperialism with a caliphate. Anyone outside the caliphate is welcome to join and live on those terms or live on their own terms and die violently. It is not about whose projected afterlife is more attractive or real. It is about using imagery to change feelings and behaviour in the present. It is about a new political arrangement now. The truth of any image is secondary to this strategy. The performance of religious and ethical commitment through iconic acts is a means to make and win the clash.

**Portraying the Primacy of Political Strategy**

This clash of icons is a means to winning the strategic endgame. Islamic State play on our belief that they *really* believe that certain statues really come from the divine. We are all too ready to credit a naive religiosity to them, and many of their recruits join for these religious and ethical motives (Atran and Hamid, 2015). Islamic State rhetoric plays up to this. Western leader must make clear that while Islamic State wish to create and maintain a certain religious community – a caliphate – they can use non-religious means to get there. Their strategic documents draw on non-Islamic thinkers like Sun Tsu, Clausewitz and Paul Kennedy (McCants, 2015: 81). This is because their strategy is a means to an end.

That the truth of any image is secondary to strategy, for Islamic State, can be seen in their pragmatic approach to both politics and iconography (see also Rogers, 2016). The exemplary case of iconoclasm would appear Islamic State’s destruction by explosives of the palace of Nimrud in Iraq sometime in March-April 2015. In a video released on April 11 explaining the destruction, an Islamic State member says, ‘Whenever we take control of a piece of land, we remove the symbols of polytheism and spread monotheism in it’ (Romey, 2015). However, the timing of the video’s release coincided with Islamic State’s defeat in battle at Tikrit. The religious violence had the aim of political distraction.

In the domain of politics, their selective destruction of idols shows they don't truly, madly believe. In February 2015 Islamic State allowed Turkish troops to come and pick up an Ottoman shrine, the tomb of Suleyman Shah, from an area Islamic State had taken (Graham, 2015). Why did they not destroy this idolatrous object? Were the monotheists succumbing to polytheism, jihadists asked[[1]](#footnote--1)? The reason was realpolitik: at the time, it suited the leaders of Turkey and Islamic State to ensure the two sides avoided any violent conflict. Thus, Islamic State can swap the chains of obligation to a deity to chains of obligation to a nation-state like Turkey as it suits. In oscillating between rhetorics of modernity and barbarism Islamic State exasperate Sunni extremist rivals who find it hypocritical to do deals with devilish state-system leaders. They also confound their modern enemies who expect Islamic State to stay true to their divine chains. How can Islamic State talk of the eternal and transcendent, of the caliphate as the realization of prophecy, and then muddy themselves in the profanity of statecraft?

In the space of appearance they show themselves as true believers and they show themselves destroying things to prove it. Seeing is believing: we see them believing and we believe they believe. When President Hollande promised a ‘merciless’ fight against Islamic State ‘barbarians’ after the November 2015 Paris attacks, this fed into the characterization Islamic State seek insofar as it signals to their followers and prospective recruits Islamic State’s commitment to purification through personal sacrifice alongside destruction of the profane (Atran and Hamid, 2015, no page). However, when Islamic State captured the Syrian city of Palmyra in May 2015, rather than destroy the iconic temple and artifacts, they used them as a stage setting for beheading videos. The temple became a globally-witnessed backdrop for us to see them perform their belief. But if these icons were so idolatrous, why not destroy them? Why give them further attention by putting them in digital clips with an infinite afterlife? Here we see Islamic State put religiosity beneath political interests. Recruit, intimidate, now. As we hear the journalist’s solemn voiceover as the murders are reported, including the murder of the 82 year old archaeologist managing the site, the implication is that authorities were powerless to prevent this; that Islamic State have total control. It was only at the end of August that demolition began. The UK’s Channel 4 News (2015) reported that when Islamic State obtained artifacts from the Palmyra site, they sold them on to fund the war. This appears part of a systematic revenue-raising programme (Roberts, 2015).

Another example concerns Islamic State’s August 2016 loss of its stronghold of Manbij in northern Syria (Dewan and Alkhshali, 2016). To minimize the significance of the group's defeat in Manbij, its supporters online highlighted how Islamic State militants safely exited the town along with their families in a 500-vehicle convoy. Evidently, Islamic State surrendered Manbij to Kurdish-led US-backed forces because it realised it could not win the military battle there. Instead it chose to leave quietly, a pragmatic decision rather than the embrace of a divine warrior clash to the death. Islamic State’s jihadist critics, most of whom are Al-Qaeda supporters, strongly condemned the group for leaving the Sunnis of Manbij to be fend for themselves against Kurds. As with the Ottoman tomb example, Islamic State remained silent about its actions in Manbij.

The priority of political strategy is also evident in Islamic State’s approach to iconography. It is reasonable to ask, why do those opposed to icons seem so eager to make them? Islamic extremists make images to circulate in multiple formats and domains. They are crafted to produce an inner feeling of the soul for the individual in front of their private screen, an awakening of piety and anger that triggers an outward debate about justice and belonging for the family around the TV screen. These images don't “send a message” to anyone except those looking for messages - the UFOologists of our foreign ministries and security think tanks who fret about Islamic State’s powerful brand. The images produce a feeling, a rhythm, a ritual of attraction or repulsion, of social affirmation or consternation that ripple through our social networks. No single image has effects here. No icon changes the meaning of everything. Rather, the tactic is to build chains of amplification and immersion that make us feel that we are in this crisis together and only they have the strength to win out. This harnessing of old and new media logics to build waves of affect is not unique to Islamic State – studies show similar processes occurring among audiences during the Arab Awakening in 2011 and around the #BlackLivesMatter movement in the US (Freelon et al., 2016; Gerbaudo, 2016; Papacharissi 2015). However, polls indicate Islamic State’s communications are losing this affective engagement. Between 2015 and 2016 strong opposition to Islamic State among 18-24 years in 16 Arab nations increased from 40 to 60 percent and only 18 percent believed individuals joined Islamic State for religious reasons (ASDA’A Burson-Marsteller, 2016). Islamic State was viewed as what a person joins if they have no job or prospects. However, even among young men with little education or employment support is low, and support falls even further if those men are exposed to news about Islamic State violence against Muslims (Tessler et al., 2016).

And yet still: how dare they produce images? The answer is pragmatism, interests, and strategy. These images are tokens in a global exchange economy; in no way sacred, their value is immediate and imminent, in the action they can provoke now. Islamic State show other Muslims, visually, just how Islamic they are, chopping off hands and heads as they enact Shari’ a law more strictly than anyone else dare. When they suffer a military defeat, a quick, shocking video of an atrocity elsewhere can distract attention. They remind audiences of terror and horror committed by Western political actors, so as to present a universal moral threshold lowest level: that terror and horror are a problem of both them and us (Cavarero, 2011). This must be challenged.

And, in the final analysis, images are not even needed. Audiences can react to the *very idea* that Islamic State might be destroying something, just as some Muslims have rioted after hearing stories of US soldiers flushing a Koran down a toilet (O’Loughlin, 2011). Mediation is affective and experiential, but not strictly visual (Grusin, 2015). Hence we can experience a distant event and ourselves in relation to that event without seeing a picture of it. All Islamic State have needed to do is get the notion out there that they are doing this, or might do it, or once did it, and it becomes part of our experience. Now that each ‘side’ has expectations of the other and is ready to hear the worst, this cycle of hostility can operate as an iconoclash without icons. Indeed, the very fact that Islamic State have produced new images becomes a story in itself, even if the images are not broadcast. Journalists find Islamic State’s very act of communication newsworthy itself (Gursel 2016). This can also be challenged, and changed.

In short, while the religious and ethical dimensions of Islamic State’s actions make for compelling footage and persuasive claims to potential recruits who encounter these exhibitions in the global space of appearance, those seeking to delegitimize Islamic State would not lack material to demonstrate the banal, mundane and pragmatic aspects of its political strategy.

**Conclusion: We all struggle with icons**

Bruno Latour stages a conversation between a politician and a mob of critics of political iconography. The mob ask:

“Are you constructing a national representation?”

“Yes, of course,” they answer, “and from the whole cloth.”

“So you are inventing, through manipulation, propaganda, and trickery, what the representatives should say?”

“No, we are faithful to our constituents, because we are constructing the artificial voice that they would not have without us.”

“Blasphemy!” cry the critics. “We don’t need to hear any more! Lost in their illusions, they can’t even recognize their own lies!” (Latour, 2010: 23)

Flags, crowns, “the wisdom of public opinion”: Human societies construct idols which are then taken to be independent objects to be venerated and even worshipped. And yet, as the critics cry, these idols are not magical. These are things made by human techniques. For Latour it is pointless denouncing either naïve souls who workshop objects or iconoclasts who smash the objects as if to liberate the naïve souls. All social practices involve mediations through which we “see” what is otherwise invisible. Microscopes let us see tiny objects. A flag lets us see a nation. Statistics let us see poverty. The art, for Latour, is recognizing these mediations for what they are and what they do; it is perfectly possible to realize I made this sculpture but feel it represents something transcendent and thus feel a sense of religiosity near it. This, we could say, is living *with* icons not looking *up* to them or *down* on them.

Islamic State appear to oscillate between the two latter options. As their leaders and recruits seek to project their identities and ambitions into the global space of appearance, icons are either smashed in religious fervour or sold on the nearest market. This oscillation exposes a tension – contradiction perhaps – between a theological organization driven by religious motives and a bureaucratic organization seeking to construct a state. Balancing analysis of the political and religious dimensions of Islamic State affords tactical possibilities to play these off against one another in ways that may diminish Islamic State’s appeal.

Certainly Islamic State go with the grain of the global media ecology, and the Arendtian tradition of media analysis that conceptualizes politics as the robust exchange of claims in a space of appearance highlights why they might have been successful. However, we need to stop believing that while they believe we are more enlightened, distanced and reasonable. They don't all believe, particularly those at the top of their bureaucratic structure, hence they don't destroy idols and idolators immediately or consistently, nor do they fight to the death when under attack, but only when it suits, when the odds are in the favour. Their rhetoric can be deflated. Despite their pre-modern rituals and post-modern embrace of simulation, their immediate political objective is that of most if not all modern political movements, authority within territory: an Islamic *state*. To win the iconoclash we must show they are as grounded in the politics of interests as anyone else. The second half of this article has provided several examples.

While that deflation occurs, more urgent actions are needed to dampen the effects of Islamic State communications on Western societies. News media modulate Islamic State’s appearance before us and our incentives to engage with them, for instance through social media. If, as Devji argues, then Al-Qaeda and now, I would argue, Islamic State have made Islam into a global spectacle, this feeds into how anyone and everyone Islamic is understood. Devji suggested that this process creates a ‘generic Muslim’, a martyr, who loses all cultural and historical specificity (Devji, 2005: 94). Since Islamic State began attacks in the West or, rather, individuals started carrying out attacks in the name of Islamic State, attitudes towards Muslims have hardened, evident in several European countries’ response to the migration crisis since 2014. News media need to find ways to report Islam and Islamic State such that any conflation of religion, radicalization and migration

For just as news media connect us to Islamic State when a terrorist attack happens, they also disconnect audiences from forming an understanding of who joins Islamic State and why. Mainstream news media censorship and social media restrictions lessen Islamic State’s reach and presence. However, whether news media have informed audiences about what Islamic State is, what it wants and how it works, and why individuals join it or act in its name – this is doubtful. Whether news media have expressed consistently the tension in Islamic State between religious and secular goals is doubtful. The consequence is a public concerned about something it does not fully comprehend, which compounds uncertainty and anxiety. Uncertainty itself becomes a threat because one lacks the information upon which to act. Instead, one acts with Islamic State a constant yet blurred figure on the horizon.

References

Appadurai, A. (1986). ‘Introduction: commodities and the politics of value’ in Appadurai, A. (ed.) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3-63.

Arendt, H. (1963). *On Revolution*. New York: The Viking Press.

Arendt, H. (1970). *On Violence*. New York and London: Harcourt, Inc.

ASDA’A Burson-Marsteller (2016) *ASDA’A Burson-Marsteller Arab Youth Survey 2016*. Available at: <http://www.arabyouthsurvey.com/en/whitepaper> [Accessed 20 July 2016]

Aslan, B. (2015). The mobilization process of Syria’s activists: The symbiotic relationship between the use of information and communication technologies and the political culture. *International Journal of Communication*, *9*(19), 2507-2525.

Atran, S. and Hamid, N. (2015). Paris: The War ISIS Wants. New York Review of Books, 16 November. Available at: <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2015/11/16/paris-attacks-isis-strategy-chaos/> [Accessed 18 September 2016]

Borger, J. (2016). French media to stop publishing photos and names of terrorists. *The Guardian,* 27 July. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jul/27/french-media-to-stop-publishing-photos-and-names-of-terrorists> [Accessed 18 September 2016]

Bourdieu, P. (1991). Language and Symbolic Power. Trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson. In Adam Jaworski and Nikolas Coupland (ed.) *The Discourse Reader*. London and New York: Routledge.

Brubaker, R. (2016) Religious Dimensions of Political Conflict and Violence. Plenary Lecture. European Consortium For Political Research (ECPR) General Conference. Charles University, Prague, 8 September.

Burke, K. (1941). Four master tropes. *The Kenyon Review*, *3*(4), 421-438.

Cavarero, A. (2011). *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Cavarero, A. (2000). *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. London and New York: Routledge.

Channel 4 News (2015). Palmyra Archaeologist Beheaded by ISIS. 19 August. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CncFUCt892M> [Accessed 18 September 2016]

Dewan, A. and Alkhshali, H. (2016). Jubilation in Syria's Manbij as ISIS loses control of key city, CNN, 14 August. Available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/08/13/middleeast/syria-isis-manbij/> [Accessed 18 September 2016]

EUNIC [European Union National Institutes for Culture] (2015) Iconoclash. Available at: <http://washington-dc.eunic-online.eu/?q=iconoclash> [Accessed 18 July 2016]

Freelon, D. G., McIlwain, C. D., & Clark, M. D. (2016). Beyond the hashtags:# Ferguson,# Blacklivesmatter, and the online struggle for offline justice. Available here: <http://cmsimpact.org/resource/beyond-hashtags-ferguson-blacklivesmatter-online-struggle-offline-justice/> [Accessed 20 July 2016]

Fernandez, A.M. (2014). Confronting the Changing Face of Al-Qaeda Propaganda. The Washington Institute, 25 February. Available at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/confronting-the-changing-face-of-al-qaeda-propaganda> [Accessed 18 September 2016]

Fuller, M. (2007). *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture*. London and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Gerbaudo, P. (2016). Rousing the Facebook Crowd: Digital Enthusiasm and Emotional Contagion in the 2011 Protests in Egypt and Spain. *International Journal of Communication*, *10*, 254-273.

Graham, D.A. (2015). The Surreal Saga of Suleyman Shah, *The Atlantic*, 24 February.Available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/02/suleyman-shah-turkish-troops-raid-syria-isis-tomb/385864/> [Accessed 18 September 2016]

Grusin, R. (2015). Radical Mediation. *Critical Inquiry*, *42*(1), 124-148.

Gursel, Z. D. (2016). *Image Brokers: Visualizing World News in the Age of Digital Circulation*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Habermas, J. (1989). The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, trans. Thomas Burger. *Cambridge: MIT Press*.

Hellyer, H. A. (2008). Engaging British Muslim Communities in Counter-Terrorism Strategies. *The RUSI Journal*, *153*(2), 8-13.

Hoskins, A., & O’Loughlin, B. (2010). *War and Media: The Emergence of Diffused War*. Cambridge: Polity.

Hoskins, A., & O'Loughlin, B. (2011). Remediating jihad for western news audiences: The renewal of gatekeeping?. *Journalism*, *12*(2), 199-216.

Isaac, M. (2016). Twitter steps up effort to thwart terrorists’ tweets. *New York Times*, 5 February. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/06/technology/twitter-account-suspensions-terrorism.html?_r=0> [18 September 2016]

Kierkegaard, S. (1985). *Fear and trembling: Dialectical lyric by Johannes de silentio*. London: Penguin.

Latour, B. (2010) *On the modern cult of the factish gods*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.

McCants, W. (2015) *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.

McLuhan, M. (1962). *The Gutenberg galaxy: the making of topographic man*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Merrin, W. (2014). *Media Studies 2.0*. London: Routledge.

Mitchell, W. J. T. (2011). *Cloning terror: The war of images, 9/11 to the present*. University of Chicago Press.

O'Loughlin, B. (2011). Images as weapons of war: representation, mediation and interpretation. *Review of International Studies*, *37*(01), 71-91.

Papacharissi, Zizi. *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Poole, D. (1997). *Vision, race and modernity: A visual economy of the Andean image world*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Postman, N. (1970). The reformed English curriculum. In A. C. Eurich (Ed.), *High school 1980: The shape of the future in American secondary education*. New York: Pitman, pp.160–168.

Price, M. (2015) *Free Expression, Globalism, and the New Strategic Communication*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Roberts, D. (2015). Why IS militants destroy ancient sites. BBC News, 1 September. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34112593> [Accessed 18 September 2016]

Rogers, P. (2016). *Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threat from the Margins*. London: I.B. Taurus.

Romey, K. (2015). Why ISIS Hates Archaeology and Blew Up Ancient Iraqi Palace. *National Geographic*, 14 April. Available at: <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/04/150414-why-islamic-state-destroyed-assyrian-palace-nimrud-iraq-video-isis-isil-archaeology/> [Accessed 16 September 2016]

Silverstone, R. (2007). *Morality and Media*. Cambridge: Polity.

Tessler, Mark, Michael Robbins and Amaney Jamal (2016). What do ordinary citizens in the Arab world really think about the Islamic State? *The Washington Post* Monkey Cage blog, 27 July. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/07/27/what-do-ordinary-citizens-in-the-arab-world-really-think-about-the-islamic-state/?postshare=6651469624807379&tid=ss_tw> [Accessed 15 August 2016]

Volkmer, I. (2014) *The Global Public Sphere*. Cambridge: Polity.

1. Personal correspondence, anonymous source. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)