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VISUAL PERFORMATIVITY OF VIOLENCE: POWER AND RETALIATORY HUMILIATION IN ISLAMIC STATE (IS) BEHEADING VIDEOS BETWEEN 2014 AND 2017¹

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The significance of visual propaganda and imagery in war and conflict, currently carried by terrorist organisations on popular social media platforms, has never been debated so much as it has been since Islamic State (IS) started gaining global attention for its sophisticated Jihadi-Salafi media campaigns in 2014. Although IS visual propaganda contains a wide tapestry of narratives, the images and videos of gruesome beheadings have for years been the centre of attention for scholars,² and for supporters of IS ideological doctrines as well.³ This graphic violence involves deliberate choices in terms of image composition, lighting, camera angles, and overall editing techniques deployed to produce the maximum effect in terms of viewing experience and ideological interpretation among its targeted audiences. These videos produced and disseminated by IS, especially since the declaration of its caliphate in June 2014, are not only evidence of tactical choices and strategic products and tools in warfare: they are also communicative artefacts.

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² For more on the visualisation of torture in IS media campaigns, see Molin-Friis (2015) and Euben (2017).

³ For more extensive discussions of the role of online supporters for the dissemination of propaganda, see Krona (2020).

This chapter aims to dissect a particular mediation of performative violence: the visualisation, through moving images, of beheadings as multi-layered and multimodal media artefacts, produced with the dual objective of inciting fear among adversaries and, in addition, strengthening the in-group identity of the organisation for its supporters. How videos of IS beheadings of foreigners, alleged apostates or spies are designed is crucial for our understanding of the role of visual propaganda in IS contemporary warfare. It also contributes to a larger discussion of the significance of graphic representations of power and retaliatory humiliation in radicalisation processes. This chapter is based on the qualitative visual analysis of beheading videos produced and disseminated by IS's official media wings between 2014 and 2017, with a particular focus on image composition and sequencing, contextualised through a theoretical discussion about how power and retaliatory humiliation are constructed through the visual performativity of violence.⁴

Militant Jihadist Beheadings and IS

Despite the fact that IS had emerged, developed and extended its territorial reach in both Iraq and Syria long before the appointed caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi stepped up for his first address to the *ummah* in the Grand Mosque of Mosul in June 2014, it was mainly during the weeks following that speech that wider international attention to the proto-state project that is Islamic State was generated. A significant reason for this global outreach was the al-Hayat video entitled *A Message to America*,⁵ in which the US photojournalist James Foley was beheaded by the UK citizen Mohammed Emwazi.⁶ However, the use of decapitation videos broadcast on contemporary media platforms is by no means the invention of IS. Leaving aside this established execution method as a tool for intimidating adversaries used by, for instance, Mexican drug cartels (see Koch 2018), the significance of beheading videos within the twenty-first-century militant jihadist milieu can only be described as essential in its *modus operandi* (see, *inter alia*, Jones 2005).

⁴ Screenshots have been selected taking into account ethical restraints and considerations, though they may seem provocative and graphic in nature.

⁵ Produced and released by IS's main media wing for international audiences, *al-Hayat Media Foundation*, in August 2014.

⁶ Emwazi became known as 'Jihadi John' in major Western media outlets.

But before entering the role of strategic and propagandistic mediations of IS beheadings, one must consider a contextual framework to understand the contemporary use of beheadings in IS warfare, namely the historical precedent and sectarian dimensions behind the divide between Shia and Sunni within Islamic scripture and history. Even though there are several dimensions involved in this split, a historical important factor is the beheading of Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of the prophet Muhammad. He was killed in the battle of Karbala in 680 after having confronted Caliph Yazid ibn Muawiya (appointed by his own father in the first Sunni Arab dynasty). Husayn ibn Ali, as a Shia imam, was considered the spiritual leader of Muslims and Yazid ibn Muawiya had only temporal power, a fact he was aware of. After Husayn ibn Ali had claimed his position to preserve the pure and true foundations and values of Islam, an army of men sent by Yazid ibn Muawiya caught and beheaded Husayn ibn Ali and his group of seventy-two followers, which ended with their heads being put on spears⁷ and presented to the Caliph in Damascus (Campbell 2006: 585).

This and several other historical events and developments within Islamic scripture are often used by Salafi-jihadist organisations like IS as a means of justifying the use of beheadings as a method of execution (see Furnish 2005). There are several reasons, aside from the symbolic ones, for IS performing this violent act instrumentally and doing so in front of cameras for the world to see. From a military strategic point of view, IS militants have employed this method as a catalyst for deterrence in anticipation that enemies and adversaries would surrender in order to avoid further victimisation. In several videos, there are also demands for or mentions of halting air-strikes, even though it is more relevant to consider that this is not a desired or achievable end-goal. It is, rather, a means of provoking reactions from the international coalition fighting IS since late 2014. In either case, the beheading videos are not merely propaganda but, in addition, evidence of IS's saliency and its reliance on 'its messaging value and recognition of Internet media's wide reach' (Zech and Kelly 2015: 85).

From the perspective of media and communication studies, the very practice of mediating beheadings becomes even more interesting around the

⁷ In several IS videos of beheadings, the victims' heads are also placed on spearheads.

millennium shift when the practice was starting to be broadcast and/or disseminated online – thereby changing the nature of hybrid warfare and the digital circulation of videos among supporters of, for instance, AQI⁸ or other contemporary militant jihadist organisations. Since then, a number of internationally recognised beheadings have been videotaped and gained attraction around the world. When the *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl was beheaded in 2002 and the video of his death was found on media platforms to be viewed around the world, it helped spark a modern-day resurgence of this Salafi-jihadist ritual rooted in Islamic scripture, even though Chechen rebels, for instance, had also rather substantially evoked this method of execution in the battlefield already in the late 1990s (see Furnish 2005).

In IS videos, the victims and opponents are portrayed as criminals deserving to be punished, and, according to IS, the sought-for audience for these videos is meant to observe fair executions rather than illegitimate murders. Unlike during the French Revolution, when France promoted the guillotine to standardise capital punishment in a manner symbolic for modernity and equality, IS utilises an extra-judicial and more religiously crude interpretation and implementation of beheadings as execution method, for instance by using knives and hence showing determination and force of manual and prolonged decapitation (Zech and Kelly 2015: 87). This and several other symbolic actions are explicitly exhibited in the visual representation of IS beheadings analysed later in this chapter.

Methodology

The videos selected for analysis have all been collected through covert observation⁹ on Telegram. From a methodological point of view, the advantages of using covert observation monitoring IS Telegram channels are: the immediacy in attaining raw data, authenticity, because IS carefully chooses the channels on which it releases official propaganda, and archival purposes regarding Telegram's architectural design allowing the easy and fast downloading of material for

⁸ An infamous example of a jihadist beheading video from 2004 of a Western citizen shows AQI (Al-Qaeda in Iraq) leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, wearing a headscarf and standing in the middle of four other disguised militants, with the US-company-contracted Nick Berg kneeling in front of them, beheading Berg after reading a statement about his 'crimes'.

⁹ See Given (2008) for a comprehensive discussion of covert observations.

analysis.¹⁰ Furthermore, from an ethical perspective, it is vital to recognise the challenges of representing graphic empirical material along with the necessary considerations around integrity and respect for victims. The choices made in this chapter regarding how to represent and discuss videos containing beheadings have all been made in the strong conviction that in order to pursue a significant argument and enhance the understanding of a potential appeal for IS supporters in these videos, some visual representations are important in terms of their being highlighted. But in this process, an awareness and careful consideration have been secured so as to show respect for the victims.

The videos selected for analysis have been extracted in accordance with a purposeful sample strategy – choosing videos, from the years 2014 to 2017,¹¹ with attributes that can best provide answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: What characterises the visual imagery and construction of power and humiliation in the selected IS beheading videos between 2014 and 2017, and which, if any, changes can be traced over time?

RQ2: How can IS beheading videos be understood as visual representations of both instrumental and expressive forms of performative violence?

The selection of videos has subsequently been made with the purpose of including videos, first, which derive from each year in the time frame and, second, which contain a variety of qualitative attributes. In this case, these attributes are visual techniques and strategies for mediating the performative violence and constructing positions of power and humiliation. With the aim of discussing the plethora of visual strategies concerning editing, after-effects, camera angles, image composition and symbolism as well as environments, a total of thirteen videos were selected for qualitative visual analysis. Another distinction was the focus on the scenes and sequences revolving around the executions themselves. With the overall narratives in the video of which they were a part, this excludes much of the political and religious narratives

¹⁰ Telegram has levels of encryption and offers possibilities for remaining relatively anonymous when monitoring channels.

¹¹ Additional searches have been made on databases such as jihadology.net in order to verify titles and translations.

surrounding the beheadings. Instead, the spotlight is directed on the violence itself and the visual choices made during these acts.

The visual analysis performed in this chapter relies on Gillian Rose's argument that visual artefacts and communication can be analysed through the joint understanding of three so-called 'sites': (1) site of production, (2) site of the image and (3) site of audiencing (Rose 2001: 14–16). Depending on the research questions and focus of the inquiry, one could choose to perform a combined analysis of the three sites or an in-depth close reading of visual material highlighting certain aspects of production, image *or* audiencing. For this chapter, a special interest is primarily devoted to the site of the image, which, according to Rose and under the conceptual framework of 'compositional interpretation' (ibid. 52), entails analytical dimensions of image composition, lighting, and editing techniques. Even though this framework was intended for analysing still images, it is applicable also to moving images, not least when adding the concept of multi-modality and understanding it as a form of 'frame sequencing (how visual frames are edited in cohesive sequences)'.¹² This allows for an analytical reading of the empirical material combining in-depth visual analysis of screenshots/still images and their function in a sequence in relation to other frames.¹³ We can gain further knowledge of the symbolic and expressive function of IS videos as communicative acts and aesthetic practices by analysing not only what the videos say (or show) through the means of visual imagery, but also how they work – in this case, as visual representations of performative violence through the construction of power, and as humiliation.¹⁴

Theoretical Framework

Without a doubt, brutal IS videos have been a significant part of its propaganda strategy and branding efforts, not least for Western audiences (see

¹² Chouliaraki, Lilie And Angelos Kissas (2018), 'The Communication of Horrorism: a Typology of ISIS Online Death Videos', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 35: 1, p. 28, which in turn utilises an approach borrowed from Jewitt, Carey (ed.) (2019), *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Research*, London: Routledge.

¹³ Rose (2001) presents this as inspired by Monaco, James (2000), *How to Read a Film*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

¹⁴ Ethical considerations are essential, above all for showing respect for the victims. Therefore, I have selected images with as much ethical restraint as possible.

Zelin 2014). One way of arguing for aims involved in producing and disseminating these videos is touched upon by Simone Molin-Friis (2015: 729), who states that the acts are carried out ‘not for the sake of murder in itself, but with the purpose of being reproduced and watched by an audience far larger than the one directly experiencing it’. Considering the layers included in the videos of beheadings throughout IS media campaign since the declaration of the caliphate in 2014, a striking impression is the level of ideological, symbolic and visual dimensions and, in particular, the contrasts between them. Relationships between them are extensions of the core instrumental part of the violence and encourage perspectives and meaning-making beyond the brutal act itself. Therefore, this chapter focuses on these intersections within the visual construction of violence, performativity, power and humiliation.

As a first level of distinction, IS videos of beheadings are considered aesthetic practices within the social realm of ‘horrorism’, rather than a means of conducting ‘terrorism’. By considering horrorism as connected to the mediated witnessing of violence for a distant audience, whereas terrorism involves proximity, more physical experience and the witnessing of violent acts, it is possible to contextualise IS videos as horror ‘in the realm of the eye’ and not as lived experience of panic and fear (Caverero 2009). Within this mediated representation of violence, it is necessary to analyse how it visually performs violent death and, in addition, how the audience is invited to relate to and understand it (see Chouliaraki and Kissas 2018; Zelizer 2010).

Performativity of Violence and Retaliatory Humiliation

For the purpose of understanding the role, attributes and significance of visual performativity of violence in IS beheading videos, Jeffrey Juris provides a useful definition of performative violence as ‘a form of meaningful interaction through which actors construct social reality based on available cultural templates’ (Juris 2005: 415). Here, violent acts are considered to have more than practical-instrumental dimensions, namely also symbolic-expressive characteristics (see Riches 1986). With regard to the application of the concept of the visual performativity of violence in this chapter, the implementation of the definition above would then be leaning more towards the symbolic-expressive aspect of violent acts: a representational context for

the symbolic interaction of violence in which the performative violent act in itself is re-mediated and re-contextualised through visual means.

In line with acknowledging the symbolic-expressive function, Tripp (2018: 168) argues that in political struggles violence exhibits an exercise of power in which acts bring about a social reality. In this view, the violence can both protect an established order and create a new configuration of power. Violence then becomes a projection of statehood, and performances, in addition, convey a message to those threatening to overthrow the new order.

The concept of humiliation, and, above all, the mediated enactment and construction of humiliation, stand in direct, mutual and necessary opposition to the position of power in which IS executioners find themselves. In line with Roxanne L. Euben's (2017: 1010) definition, humiliation is 'the imposition of impotence on Islam and Muslims by those with greater and undeserved power, while retaliatory humiliation both performs and produces an inversion of this relation'. If the concept of retaliation in relation to humiliation is incorporated, one must consider the theoretical context in which retaliation is expressed and justified. Bertram Turner argues that retaliation occurs discursively under four main framework conditions: *scientification*, *securitization*, *religiosification* and *juridification* (see Turner and Schlee 2017: 5). With regard to IS videos in this chapter, the framework of religiosification holds the highest merit. As Turner and Schlee go on to maintain, 'Religion may stipulate forbearance towards those who have wronged someone or, on the contrary, emphasise the exercise of retaliation as a religious duty, thereby fostering an intertwining of the religious and the secular in various domains. Tenets of faith may thus appear inextricably linked with notions of retaliation and reflect religious ideas about justice, repentance and remorse, punishment and salvation.' Moreover, the way IS claims legality through divinity by referring to scripture and divine law as justification for both method and punishment further supports the notion of seeking to embed retaliation in religious discourses in order to strengthen the impact of its messages to supporters and adversaries as well. Exercised humiliation does not come out of a vacuum, but from a religious and ideological context of justified retaliation.

The aspect of how retaliatory humiliation generates an inversion of power structures encompasses two main levels. First, the applied visual imagery in IS videos converts the physical punishment of the victims into a symbolic

punishment of the nation or the community they belong to. As in the case of James Foley, retaliatory humiliation is symbolically imposed on the American nation,¹⁵ and it simultaneously exhibits a form of dominance of IS over the USA. Furthermore, this is where sovereignty comes into play, as the sovereign power¹⁶ connected to the formation and implementation of nation states includes the right to judge and punish, and thereby exercises power over life and death. By legitimising this right, not least through its proto-state and its political project attempting to back up claims of Western understandings of sovereignty, IS additionally reverses the relationship between the 'state' and outlaws, or terrorists for that matter.

Through rhetorical constructions, the USA is positioned as the murderer, aggressor and terrorist state, and therefore, IS argues, it deserves punishment in a way similar to the humiliation of Islam and Muslims around the world (see Euben 2017: 1012). Conclusively, the concept of power should be understood as associated not only with sovereignty here, but also with dominance in different forms. In some of the early videos chosen as empirical material in this chapter, dominance over the victims is practised and performed in the videos by an IS executioner in the sense of visual composition, often standing tall over a kneeling prisoner. Besides, from a Foucauldian perspective, IS presents regular use of strapping the body of the victim preventing the freedom to move, usually with tied hands behind the back or by keeping victims in cages before executed. This can be contextualised as a transformation, as Michel Foucault explains in his work *Discipline and Punish*, from the aim of execution as punishment being to inflict pain on the body itself, into a focus on the disciplining character of contemporary punishment, leaving the body in an intermediary fashion and changing focus from the body itself to the actual act of depriving the prisoner of free movement as the main characteristics of public and non-public state executions (Foucault 1977).

¹⁵ In the video of James Foley's execution (A MESSAGE TO AMERICA, released August 2014), the ascription of guilt is conducted orally and visually and argued by both Foley reading from a prepared script blaming the US administration and their foreign policy, and hence the American nation, and by his executioner through a separate monologue aimed directly at an international audience.

¹⁶ 'Sovereign power' is here equal to definitions proposed by theorists such as Michel Foucault and Thomas Hobbes.

By invoking the excessive use of retaliatory humiliation, IS symbolically and ideologically challenges a status quo and provides a competitive system of meaning, a framework enhanced not least through the videos of beheadings (see Ingram 2015). The characteristics of these beheading videos have been identified and analysed in several academic contributions in recent years (see Impara 2018; Euben 2017; Friis 2015; Koch 2018; Chouliaraki and Kissas 2018). By focusing on the symbolic power of the violence performed and communicated, this analysis aims to provide insights into the way these videos of performative violence are constructed, and, furthermore, into the visual presentation of power and humiliation and how these constructions work. The purpose of the analysis is also to track potential changes over time to highlight the variety of visual techniques and their relation to the audience.

Analysis

One of the Quranic verses justifying beheadings most commonly used by IS is Surah Mohammad 47:4: ‘So when you meet those who disbelieve [in battle], strike [their] necks until, when you have inflicted slaughter upon them [. . .].’¹⁷ In the context of war and of defending Islam from outside interference and attack, which is the core foundation of doctrines conveying the ideological and religious framework of IS, beheadings are interpreted as a justified means. Reminding ourselves about the definition of retaliatory humiliation presented earlier in the theoretical framework of this chapter, the significance and application of Islamic scripture and actions, or interpretations in contrast to the IS Salafi-jihadist reading, is essential in any attempt to critically approach the IS retributive violence performed in these videos. For instance, the use of knives as weapons and tools for beheadings contains a layer of relevant ideological points. From perspectives of Islamic scripture, the knife, as a more convenient, intimate and individually-connected weapon than the sword, can be considered an extension of the hand. The connection to and similarity with the sword is obvious, which in turn constitutes ‘a

¹⁷ The full Surah (47:4) continues with ‘then secure their bonds, and either [confer] favor afterwards or ransom [them] until the war lays down its burdens. That [is the command]. And if Allah had willed, He could have taken vengeance upon them [Himself], but [He ordered armed struggle] to test some of you by means of others. And those who are killed in the cause of Allah – never will He waste their deeds.’

pre-modern weapon which is considered noble and is associated with early Islamic heroes and their jihads' (Campbell 2006: 604).

Fiction, Documentary – or Real Horrorism

One of the most significant and frequently used strategies in IS beheading videos is the deliberate blurring of the boundaries between fiction and reality. The concept of authenticity is relevant, as it 'rests on the visual's privileged epistemic status: it verifies and it brings the audience closer to the event' (Hansen 2011: 56). When authenticity is drawn upon it has a certain connection to the audience, as the genre of documentary film or observations is an invisible contract of anticipation between the filmmaker and the audience (see Nichols 1981). But IS videos of violence have a complex, or uneasy, relationship with reality and documentation only. The use of fiction in terms of staging scenes, after-effects and creative editing holds similar uncertainties for the audience.

A commonly used reference is the notion of IS as constantly using techniques and visual imagery deriving from, or mimicking, Hollywood movies and familiar Western modes of cultural expression. However, although this might be true in many cases depending on how analytically we approach them, there is a vastly more elaborate and rich use of techniques applied for other purposes of making violence exciting and appealing for its supporters, including the direction of scenes. As Gruber (2019: 139) notices, the 'deadly scenes are carefully staged – the scenography and body movements practiced multiple times – before an actual killing takes place'. I argue that an emphasis of fictionalisation, here determined through the elaborate use of editing techniques and after-effects, has not only increased with time, but, in addition, has been designed to appeal to supporters rather than being utilised as a means of inciting fear with these videos. A comparison between two initial videos in the selected time-frame, *A Message to America* and *A Second Message to America*, released in fall 2014, with *Wa-in 'uddtum 'udanā #2* released in October 2015 shows how editing strategies aiming to blur boundaries between reality and fiction also have different levels of performativity. The first two videos depict the execution of James Foley and Steven Sotloff, while the third was released one year later. The prisoners' interaction and participation change. In the first videos, Foley and Sotloff are forced to speak and read

from a prepared script; hence, a portrayal of them as persons, individuals, is created, and they represent their nation symbolically. In the third and later video, the prisoners are visually represented first of all as a group rather than as individuals, consistently through acting in terms of being forced to walk in line and being held by their executioners, who lead them to a designated spot. The camera makes cinematic movements in order to capture the environment and relationship between executioners and prisoners.

There are different types of performances in play in the full empirical material. Dimensions such as participant movement and body language, poses and interaction between executioner and prisoner are all constructed through the interplay with decisions on how to enhance the symbolic and emotional effect with visual means (see Pfeifer et al., Chapter 7). The videos of Foley and Sotloff were aimed at a specific audience and had a clear political statement, while the third and later video in Arabic was designed for a different audience and could therefore have a more elaborate narrative. In this particular video (Figure 5.1, right), the actual beheading is later filmed with three camera angles, one from the side and two cameras from the front, filming from the ground with low-angle and both medium and close-up shots, switching between slow motion and normal speed, with some repetition of the decapitation sequences. In comparison to the 2014 videos mentioned above, the beheadings are now explicit and visible, accelerating the gore effect and impression of fiction. There is also an interesting de-humanisation of the prisoners in this video, as few individual faces are shown in close-up or even medium-shot. Instead, all prisoners are presented in one frame, as a collective

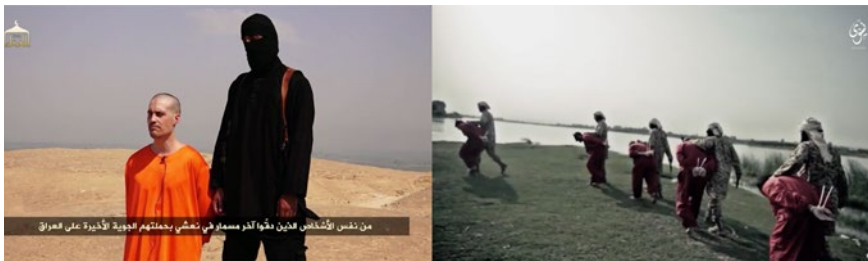


Figure 5.1 (Left) Screenshot from *A Message to America*, Al-Hayat Media Center 2014, showing James Foley's execution. (Right) Screenshot from *Wa-in 'uddtum 'udanā #2*, Wilāyat Nīnawā, September 2015, showing five IS prisoners being led to their execution.



Figure 5.2 Screenshots from *A Message Signed with Blood – To the Nation of the Cross*, al-Hayat Media, February 2015.

rather than as individuals, thereby strengthening the symbolic representation and decreasing the personal unique qualities of each individual.

In another infamous video, *A Message Signed with Blood – To the Nation of the Cross* released in February 2015, several aspects concerning both performativity and the use of fictionalising techniques in the editing process are similar. As the screenshots represented in Figure 5.2 show, there is a symmetrical visual imagery, carefully considered in terms of the line-up of executioners and prisoners, body positions of the black-covered men standing, clothing, and so forth. The symmetrical imagery also resonates with the performative violence to the right and the co-ordinated effort of pushing prisoners to the ground, one by one, and filming them from the side, which makes the action appear as a wave-movement.

In combination, this imagery generates strength, command and motion. When it comes to the beheadings later on, there is frequent cross-cutting between slow motion close-ups of beheadings and fast forward images, creating a visual performativity of violence characterised by a mix of sophisticated film techniques with theatrical performance, placing the audience in an uncertain position regarding expectations, performance and genre-mixing.

The productions mentioned should also be seen as contrasting with other types of visual style in beheading videos being produced and disseminated by IS, which are characterised by more shaky and hand-held camerawork and a more documentary style of capturing events. For instance, in *Shifā' al-nufūs bi-dhabh al-jāsūs #1*, released in June 2015 (Figure 5.3), a hand-held camera in front of the victim is used, resulting in low-resolution



Figure 5.3 Screenshot from *Shifā' al-nufūs bi-dhabh al-jāsūs*, Wilāyat Khurasān, June 2015.

images with medium-shot of the kneeling prisoner, whose hands are tied behind his back. A single camera is employed only following the movement without edited cuts. The executioner stands on top, forcing the victim to lie down on the ground before lifting his head and moving the knife towards the neck.

Instantly, the images fade to black, which questions the authenticity and leaves the intrusive documentation of the violence just before its climax. The next visible image shows the decapitated head placed on top of the body. Bridging between frames of documentary film aesthetics and an elaborate fictional style with special effects is a technique repeatedly used in IS beheading videos from 2014 and 2015 – a time when the IS global media campaign in general and the production and design of beheading videos in particular was in a phase of transition as the brand of IS received increased international attention. Hence one would also assume increased expectations among supporters concerning the elaboration and development of visual propaganda strategies. The overall visual imagery of the videos is characterised by flexibility and an adaptive mode concerning the fictionalisation of true violence, yet with the reservation of never fully convincing the audience of its fictional character but leaving room for truth-claiming elements. Similar imagery is



Figure 5.4 Screenshots from *Shifā' al-nufūs bi-dhabh al-jāsūs #3*, Wilāyat Khurasān, October 2015.

used in a later video in the same series, *Shifā' al-nufūs bi-dhabh al-jāsūs #3*, released in October 2015, with a mix of staged execution and a prisoner being paraded along a country road, only to meet his death after being forced to the ground.

Performative Violence and Constructing Power and Humiliation

Videos are manifestations of power as dominance over others. Exercising power is realised (a) through the instrumental aspect of the violence, where IS executioners practise power over body and life, and (b) over the audience in the videos, in terms both of addressing us directly or indirectly and of the visual means by which this addressing is constructed. In contrast to how positions of power are constructed in the videos, the binary opposition of humiliation is included in the interpretative frames. Figure 5.5 is an illustrative example of a visual representation capturing both power and humiliation. The rite of placing the decapitated head back on top of the dead body is a recurrent theme of IS videos and also has long-standing historical and theological connotations (Campbell 2006).

In the video *Āqibat al-mundharīn*, released in July 2017, a scene of multiple beheadings ends with a close-up shot on an executioner's foot placed on top of the head of one of the prisoners, leaving an everlasting symbolic and physical impression of superiority. As the head also is a symbol of reason and thought, this impression becomes even more accentuated.

Aspects of retaliatory humiliation and, at the same time, an exercise of power and dominance can also be visually expressed through other means. In the video *Jazā' al-khā'inīn #2*, released in May 2017 (Figure 5.6, left),

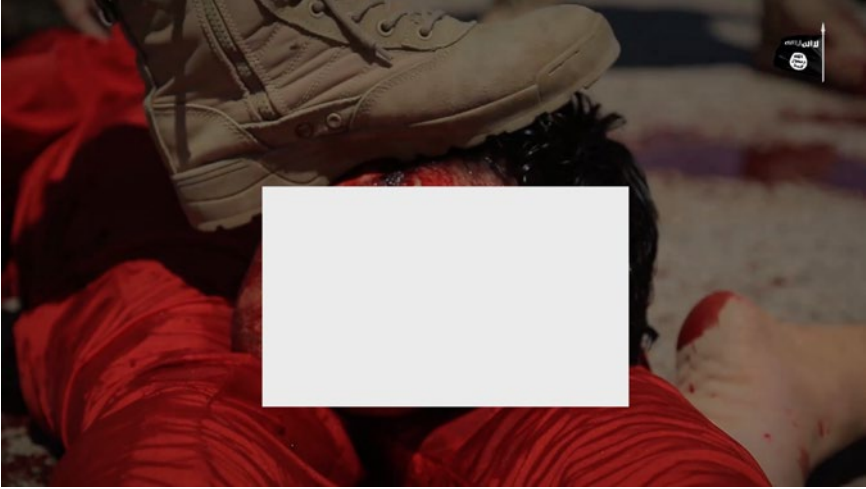


Figure 5.5 Screenshot from ending scene of *Āqibat al-mundharīn*, Wilāyat al-Furāt, July 2017 (note: image edited by author for ethical reasons).

the prisoners selected for execution by beheading are visually represented through a collage of superimposed images and multi-screens, as in a video game, when they are forced to admit their alleged crimes.

The use either of prisoners' interrogations with confessions, more or less forced, or of forced readings of scripts (like the examples of James Foley and Steven Sotloff) has remained over the years. This aspect, the fact that prisoners are forced to speak the words of their murderers during their last breath, captures an essence of the duality in the mediated construction of and between power and humiliation. It is not only an exhibition of dominance over another person, but also a confessional dimension attempting 'to control the narrative and legitimise the murders in the eyes of viewers' (Zech and Kelly 2015: 87).

It appears essential for IS to portray the prisoners through recurring elements emphasising the retaliatory humiliation, for instance as shown in Figure 5.6 (left), where the consequences of the alleged crimes of which the prisoner standing is accused are being presented underneath him on the screen. In Figure 5.6 (right), another prisoner awaits his death and the person behind the camera first zooms in on the prisoner's face and then slowly leads the audience's attention to the knife held by his executioner. The anticipatory

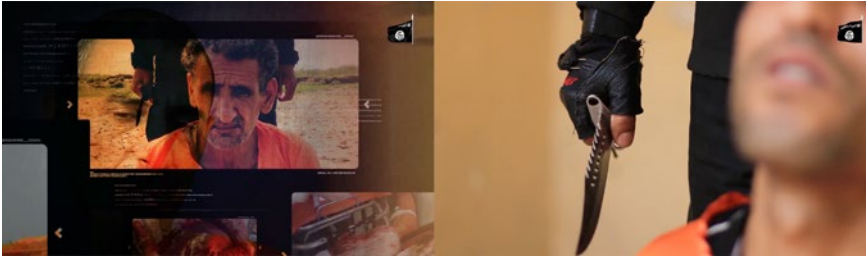


Figure 5.6 Screenshots from *Jazā' al-khā'inin* #2, Wilāyat Karkūk, May 2017.

character of composition and editing prolongs suspense for the audience, and yet another concept comes into play: fear. The faces of the prisoners fulfil an important narrative function as fear itself is also related to threat here. In Figure 5.6 (right), the defined threat is usually placed behind the prisoner, as is the case with several other similar videos like the one cited in Figure 5.7.

Threat is being constructed on two levels: one for the prisoner and one for the audience. These are usually contradictory, in the sense that the audience is not being kept in the dark regarding what will unfold, but the prisoner is almost exclusively so. The performativity of the violence represented in IS beheading videos requires some restraints concerning the purposeful



Figure 5.7 Screenshot from *Shifā' al-nufūs bi-dhabh al-jāsūs* #2, Wilāyat Khorasān, July 2015.

incitement of fear in the prisoners themselves. They are to remain as calm as possible in front of the camera in order to fit the storyline of retaliation, which includes confessing their alleged crimes and, besides, quietly accepting their punishment – aspects used to further legitimise the executions and to provide IS with forms of power drawing on its sovereignty. This dimension of visually-controlled fear reaches a theatrical climax in the video *Qiṣṣat al-nahr*, released in June 2016, in which the five prisoners are placed according to a clear pattern (Figure 5.8, right) where one of them is forced to watch the other four being executed first. Hence, this is a double form of punishment. However, his reactions towards what he witnesses are, although they are edited out, again controlling the fear in the representation of humiliation and power, and then finally he is beheaded as well.

Direct attacks against the enemy do not necessarily induce fear, and instead we can observe this staging through the lens of propaganda's and horrorism's role, concluding that 'beyond actually attacking your adversary, the best way to frighten him is to commit an atrocity that he observes' (Vinci 2005: 370). This relationship or interaction between the executioner and the prisoner highlights, on the one hand, a gruesome form of instrumental violence and, on the other hand, a strong visual and expressive act of performative violence seeking to enhance the dichotomy between divine power and retaliatory humiliation.

In Figure 5.8 (left) from the same video, yet another highlighting of this relationship is evident, as the five executioners look straight into the camera in front of them, when the narrator in the middle suddenly turns to address the kneeling prisoners and, with the help of another camera placed behind them, at the same time directly addresses the audience. This composition and performance places the audience in the prisoners' position. When the



Figure 5.8 Screenshots from *Qiṣṣat al-nahr*, Wilāyat al-Furāt, June 2016.

audience is directly addressed, this breaks the illusion of theatrical staging and brings the audience closer to the event, thereby also increasing the effect of power over life and death to power over mediation and the audience as well. The same holds for a scene from the video *Naşr min Allāh wa-faḥḥ qarīb #4*, released in March 2016, when the actual beheading is filmed from underneath and the executioner looks directly into the camera, which creates a bridge between the audience, the executioner and his actions.

Finally, I want to reconnect to Foucault and his notion of the transformation of capital punishment's focus from causing extensive pain to the body itself into the symbolic power of depriving the prisoner of free movement. Without these two aspects being mutually exclusive, we can observe that IS beheading videos almost all contain strapped prisoners, and this relates not only to the aspect of power and punishment, but also to the aforementioned control of fear and undesired reactions from the individuals facing execution. One video in which this is overtly emphasised and visually represented, both instrumentally and expressively, is *Shifā' al-nufūs bi-dhabḥ al-jāsūs #4*, released in November 2017. With a painting-like image composition, the method of execution involves more than a beheading as it is preceded by the prisoner being strapped around his wrists and arms and stretched as in a



Figure 5.9 Screenshot from *Naşr min Allāh wa-faḥḥ qarīb #4*, Wilāyat al-Khayr, March 2016 (note: image edited by author for ethical reasons).



Figure 5.10 Screenshot from *Shifā' al-nufūs bi-dhabḥ al-jāsūs #4*, Wilāyat Khurasān, November 2017.

crucifixion position. Two men with swords stand behind him and start the torturous process with a simultaneous movement of cutting each arm with a forceful stroke.

The combination of strapping and the upcoming force of removing the prisoner's arms conveys a double manifestation of depriving individual agency, both literally and symbolically.

Although this graphic document of the atrocities performed and implemented by IS would easily remain an iconic image in public consciousness, it is important to nuance the symbology and visual imagery. As this analysis has revealed, one of the main purposes of the performative violence is to construct and accentuate the forms of power held by executioners and the retaliatory humiliation suffered by the victims. These constructions and the visual imagery of violent acts enable IS to portray itself as a powerful legitimate organisation with a preserved (and divine) right to implement punishment that is, in the cases analysed, carried out through beheadings. Victims are framed accordingly as representatives of nations, 'apostates' or 'spies', hence as criminals who, with forced confessions, are represented as deserving the humiliating positions they find themselves in.

In sum, much of IS's efforts to construct and design videos of beheadings

comes down to putting the audience in a specific relation to the victim. Moreover, to some extent, a common denominator across the empirical material presented in this chapter is the effort to reduce our sympathy for the victims, as if they deserved the punishment and humiliation performed. As Judith Butler writes about the precarity of life and our perception of other people and their lives: ‘specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living. If certain lives do not qualify as lives or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, then these lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense’ (Butler 2009: 1).

Conclusion

Drawing on theories of performativity, power and retaliatory humiliation, the analysis illustrates that there is no evident or causal chain of events leading to the conclusion of a stable line of innovative development and elaboration of visual strategies. Rather, it is clear that techniques and visual constructions are used depending on contemporary events and targeted audiences. Aside from the aim of using the beheading videos of westerners in 2014 to convey a political message and provoke responses, the videos of beheadings over the following three years have shifted substantially in visual imagery. The videos from 2015 and early 2016 exhibit an experimental and elaborate use of visual techniques, coinciding with transitional phases for IS in general certainly affecting production possibilities, for instance the increase of hostile air-strikes and dismantling of territorial land. Yet another way of interpreting the variety of techniques in terms of constructing power and humiliation in the interaction between executioners and victims is paved by the apparent efforts to appeal more to the regional population and sympathisers, rather than developing a trajectory of linear productions concerning visualisation of beheadings. The symbolic expressive mode of the performative violence visually constructed emerges as more carefully considered than the instrumental aspect of the acts. Nevertheless, it is possible that, at least, these are never separated from each other. The construction and legitimisation of sovereign power over life and death are magnified by the use of strategic relations between executioner and victim in terms of performance and interaction, by visual imagery enhancing effects of larger-than-life characters, and, above all, by exercising power over the

mediation itself and its audience through various techniques in body language, addressing and editing. The position of humiliation for the prisoner is constructed as a necessary opposition to the position of power, visually represented through the symbolic and instrumental act of removing the individual's choice of free movement, of the consistent forceful performance of them being pushed to the ground to meet their death, of their duty to be active participants in re-enactments, and of the use of forced confessions to their alleged crimes as well.

Framing these mediations as horrorism above terrorism allows a deeper understanding of the communicative and aesthetic aspects of the beheadings, something that is far more applicable in any attempt to design counter-narratives to IS's competitive system of meaning. Therefore, meaning-making process taking place in the relationship between the sequences themselves, and their audience is considered absolutely essential in understanding the significance of performative violence in IS branding. For instance, when the videos turn from sophistication in terms of staging, editing techniques and image composition in general to a grainier image quality, hand-held camerawork and improvised performances, this signifies a change in the relation with audiences. The camera techniques commonly used in contemporary visual culture production have connotations familiar to, not least, a Western audience and consumers of visual popular culture. By deploying similar techniques and style in the representation and performances, but narrating content drawing upon ancient scripture placed in a modern context, IS manages to stand out from previous terrorist organisations applying media strategies for branding purposes. The videos analysed in this chapter hence work and function in several capacities, because they are designed simultaneously to incite fear, encourage supporters, relate to Islamic and political history, and magnify and alter definitions of justice, power and humiliation, to name only a few. They move between political, ideological, religious and cultural discourses on society. Regardless of who interprets the content in general, and visual constructions of power and humiliation surrounding IS beheadings in particular, the conclusion is that their multimodal character and carefully considered visual imagery have contributed to strengthening the global brand of IS, as this imagery has become among the most iconic and recognised in the jihadosphere of propaganda. This is worth considering

when, at present, IS still produces and spreads these types of videos, working to further establish its own definition of good and evil and, above all, to maintain its position as a leading force in the mediated visual propaganda of performative violence.

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