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# A social semiotics analysis of Islamic State's use of beheadings: Images of power, masculinity, spectacle and propaganda

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## ABSTRACT

Despite their predominant role in terrorist practices, beheadings have not received sufficient theoretical or empirical attention. The aim of this paper is to explore images of executions by employing social semiotics theory and visual analysis and assess their function. Beheadings by the Islamic State will be employed as an example of spectacular violence. Decapitation will be discussed as a theatrical strategy that attempts to legitimise the Islamic State (and its political project) and to impact upon recruitment of new militants: this is achieved not only by causing material damage, but also by triggering more mundane sentiments in young people who may be more inclined to be attracted to extremist discourses.

All throughout history, the act of decapitation has exercised contradictory sentiments: a power battle between horror, disgust, fascination, hatred and entertainment. Like other areas that have recently witnessed a revival of 'old ways' -e.g. the return to old healing texts in order to fight microbes and bacteria (Harrison et al., 2015) or 'cupping' trends among Olympic athletes and celebrities-in the past few years some 'criminal justice systems' across the globe saw a resurgence of ancient punitive practices: China has been accused of medieval torture methods by Amnesty (Phillips, 2015) and has recently invited residents in Guangdong to watch 10 people being sentenced to death in a sport stadium (Haas, 2017); in 2014 Saudi Arabia executed 158 people (Agerholm, 2017), whereas in 2016 beheadings in the country reached the highest level in two decades (Associated Press, 2016); in this global landscape, actions by the Islamic State, in particular, its punitive behaviour towards 'infidels' are frequently associated with medieval punishment.

This frequent association is the rationale for this article. The article will focus on the spectacularisation produced by the act of beheading: sentiments like horror, fascination, amusement, along with the idea of carnivalization will constitute the core of this discussion. These 'emotions' have not been selected randomly; to echo Larson's words, heads are truly amazing (Larson, 2014), no wonder they capture our imaginary like no other body part:

there are lots of good physiological reasons why people find heads fascinating and powerful and tempting to remove. The human head is a biological powerhouse and visual delight. It accommodates four of our five senses: sight, smell, hearing and it draws in the air we breathe and delivers the words we speak. As the evolutionary biologist Daniel Lieberman has written, 'almost every particle entering your body, either to nourish you or to provide information about the world enters via your head, and almost every activity involves something going on in your head'. (Larson, 2014: 11)

Traditionally, heads are symbols of reason and power; removing somebody's head, along with its public display delivers a strong message of dominance. In the past few years, the Islamic State has made wide use of this symbolic form of execution, whose message transcends cultural boundaries. As I shall argue in this article, understanding this strategic choice of punishment (and its fascination)

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can cast some light on the reasons why so many young people, especially western-born, feel attracted to racialization discourses.

At the end of April 2016, Canadian hostage John Ridsell was killed by Abu Sayyaf militants (a pro al-Qaeda group) in the Philippines. His severed head was found in a remote island, 5 h after the expiry of a ransom deadline. Once again, Westerners were brutally executed by the hands of extremists. Existing discussions regarding extremism and radicalisation found new vigour in various areas: from politics to social media, from the academic arena to diplomacy. However, despite their predominant role in terrorist practices, beheadings (and videos of executions) do not seem to feature frequently in terrorism scholarship. Friis (2015) noted how beheadings and execution videos have neither been subject to extensive empirical study nor received substantial theoretical attention. Traditionally, terrorism research has developed around (but it is not confined to) the axis of cultural/religious radicalisation (with particular focus on Islamic terrorism), the psychology of terrorist behaviours/collective resistance and, more recently, critical studies on terrorism (Pearlstein, 1991; De Mause, 2002; Stern, 2003; Benmelech et al., 2012; Phillips and Pohl, 2014). Beheadings have been absorbed by broader discussions on 'new terrorism' and its greater brutality (Jäckle and Baumann, 2015), but they have not received adequate primary focus.

The concept of religious violence has been inherently connected to radical, extreme practices (Cavanaugh, 2009). Classical approaches to terrorism have discussed and analysed terror in terms of holiness and sacredness, illustrating how religion could provide a justification for extreme practices (Rapoport, 1984; Rapoport and Alexander, 1982; Laqueur, 1977; Price, 1977). Executions by Islamic State militants show an intention to construct a sacredness of both their action and their so-called state. Juergensmeyer (2003) explored how religion, humiliation, masculinity and violence are entangled in the tapestry of terrorist warfare, where violence and religion frequently come in tandem. Faith and religion are regarded as forces capable of instigating radical behaviour, creating, consequently, a 'different' form of terrorism: Hoffman (2006) considers the different value systems of this new form of violence, its ways of justifying and legitimising actions. He argues that religion is the most important component in current terrorist discourses today, effectively rendering religious terrorism one of the most lethal forms of violence. Beheadings play with sacred, religious images that evoke a sense of transcendence and can be understood by everybody independently of an individual's religious beliefs. However, Gunning and Jackson (2011) challenged the idea of 'religious terrorism', arguing that the religious label requires further qualification to enrich our understanding of violence. The authors suggest that it could be beneficial to seek alternative approaches to the investigation of how beliefs and institutional structures interact with political violence.

The notion that religious beliefs motivate fanatics of terror has frequently been discussed in tandem with radicalisation of Muslim youth (particularly, young men). Integration, alienation from both parental culture and culture of the country of birth, along with socialisation towards violence have been of central interest for terrorism studies and youth studies alike (Lynch, 2013; Horgan, 2008; Silke, 2008). It is also possible to locate the issue of youth radicalisation within the axes of history, culture and political engagement. Violent rites of passages have impacted upon our cultural history: not only have they demarcated important points of transition in life (Van Gennep, 1909/2011; and Bosnia et al., 2015), but they have also captured young people's imagination. The sense of belonging that comes with following a particular social or political cause represents another fundamental consideration for a well-rounded discussion on youth radicalisation and attractions to extreme dogmas. In a study on young Muslims living in London, Ryan (2014) noted how religion helps young Muslims to negotiate and navigate their identity within a secular society. In the example of the Islamic State, religion is closely entwined with political causes; consequently, research on young people's engagement with activism can enhance a discussion of Muslim radicalisation. Whereas belief in a cause cannot be associated to the experiences of radicalisation and extremism, it is worth noting that sharing social, religious and/or political beliefs allows young people to establish connections with others, to (re)affirm and shape their identities: this is especially relevant today where a good portion of socialisation takes place via platforms like Twitter and Facebook, which are also used by radical political groups to spread their message. Social media platforms also favour the circulation of pseudo-sacred images, like the ones featuring Islamic State militants executing western prisoners.

In recent years, with the introduction of new methods brought to the fields of criminology and terrorist studies (e.g. computational methods), a need to enhance more traditional scholarship has arisen. Critical terrorism studies emerged in response to what was thought to be a simplistic approach to terrorism by orthodox terrorism scholarship (eg. Schmid and Jongman, 1988; Reid, 1997; Silke, 2004; Ranstorp, 2006). Stronger methodological and epistemological rigour led a new research agenda that intends to extend and deepen the study of terrorism and terrorists (Gunning, 2007; Herring, 2008; Toros, 2008; Zulaika, 2008). This body of research has emphasised the need to tackle terrorist practices from a perspective that can integrate more traditional socio-psychological approaches. The use of decapitation as a terrorist strategy, along with the use of social media by both militants and terrorist sympathisers, should be analysed by employing an analytical framework that allows us to explore images of beheadings more rigorously.

Finally, orthodox and unorthodox research presents a valuable theoretical framework to advance the understanding of terrorist practices: discussion on the use of beheadings sits comfortably within the scholarship presented so far. However, I suggest this could be enhanced by exploring practices like beheadings from a more 'mundane' angle, looking at the possible entertainment that may raise from engaging (both passively and actively) with inhumane practices like decapitation, along with their context of consumption: in other words, I propose to explore the element of carnivalesque (especially in popular Western culture), which may impact upon the reception of the Islamic State's cultural production, regardless of their producers' intentions.

## 1. Ontology and methodology

The aim of this work is to address some of the gaps in the study of beheadings by the Islamic State. The main research objective is to explore the power of images and how these can be understood, not only as a means to advance terrorist politics (triggering military mobilisation and social division), but also as a way to 'impress' and involve potential sympathisers via the spectacularisation of

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