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Fatal Aesthetics

**A study on the theatrical representation of the public execution in the
Islamic State's Palmyra execution video**

A Master's Thesis for the Degree Master of Arts (Two Years) in Visual Culture

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Abstract

Since the rise of the Islamic State the world has seen a proliferation of public executions in which spectacle and theatricality have come to play an important role. Their propaganda has adopted an aesthetic style in which violence is openly displayed, celebrated and glorified. This thesis explores the role that aesthetics has in the performed and mediated execution videos of the Islamic State, by analysing the ISIS execution video that was recorded in the amphitheatre of the Ancient Syrian city of Palmyra in May 2015. The first part of the thesis is focussed on the execution as a visual spectacle within a mass-cultural tradition of display and theatricality, by discussing theory of 17th and 18th century executions in Europe. This will be followed by a discussion on the cinematic representation of executions and its effect on spectatorship. The second part will be placing the ISIS execution videos within the contemporary debate on the relation between the image and violence, by discussing the ISIS propaganda in relation to the work of Jean Baudrillard and Susan Sontag. Finally in the third part an in depth visual analysis is conducted on the Palmyra execution video, in which the role and function of aesthetics is fully explored. A study on the aesthetics of the Palmyra video resulted in the findings that the video is fully immersed in a complex set of different political, cultural, religious and historical discourses. By hijacking cinematic tropes and incorporating a theatrical ritualistic narrative, the Islamic State reintroduces a performed violence that trivialises and challenges the notions of spectatorship and enables them to showcase and sell their fantasies and controversial ideas.

Keywords

Aesthetics – Public executions – Islamic State – Palmyra - Spectatorship

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Introduction

Presentation of topic

The video starts. We find ourselves in what appears to be an imposing amphitheatre, looking towards a stage that consists of beautiful Roman columns which come together into a grand stage entrance in the centre. After taking in the impressive Roman structure, our eyes are being drawn to the enormous black and white flag that is hanging right in the middle of the stage and as viewers we are positioned in such a manner so that we are fully to appreciate the symmetry of the stage composition. After a little while, from both sides of the frame a group of men enter the scene, they meet right in the middle and positioning themselves in front of the flag. It is a strong image. However, as soon as the men are lined up on the stage our camera position is being shifted as we now find ourselves on the steps of the amphitheatre among a crowd watching the stage. Until now, apart from some minor sound effects that accompanied the flickering of the screen, the scene has been completely silent in anticipation. But then the singing starts, and while a song with an hypnotic melody is being played, we see that in front of the stage, again from both sides, a group of young boys are marching towards the centre. A close up of the boys entering the scene is being shown, and it is almost as we are watching them enter their school performance. They are all dressed identically and their movements seem to be carefully choreographed as they all march in complete synchronization. The video is then fast-forwarded, and we are brought back to the central position in front of the stage, as we see the young boys all neatly lined up behind the now kneeling group of older men. A last view is being given of the boys and the men on the imposing stage, before the screen fades into overall whiteness.

This fragment, which in its description is still rather innocent, continues in a graphic next scene in which the young boys, who are referred to as 'Lion Cubs', each take out a gun and brutally kill the men kneeling before them. It may sound like a rather twisted and nightmarish scene from a movie, however the video represents an absurd reality. The fragment is part of a ten minute long slick execution video by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which got released somewhere at the end of May 2015, and in which a group of 25 Syrian men, who are thought to be Syrian soldiers fighting for President Bashar al-Assad, are being captured during battle whereupon they are imprisoned, and later on executed on stage by a group of teenage militants in the Ancient Roman city of Palmyra in Syria.

The first time I encountered this video I was completely mesmerized by it, which simultaneously made me feel rather uncomfortable, for it felt it was not the appropriate way to

respond to these imagery. I was supposed to be revolted by the blunt violence of the video, by the manner in which kids were used as executioners, by the ruthless killing of these men, and although I was, the fascination with the surreal imagery excelled my feeling of horror. I found myself watching the video over and over again, getting completely absorbed in the absurdity of the cinematic spectacle that ISIS had created. The ‘theatricality’ of execution was the element I was most fascinated about, first of all because of the surreal backdrop of the Ancient amphitheatre of Palmyra, which literally seemed to suggest the execution as a theatre display, and secondly by the manner in which the camera was used to emphasize on this theatricality. The whole video seemed disturbingly familiar, like I was watching a scene of the modern version of *The Gladiator* (2000).

Problem Diagnoses and Background

The video, which has not been dated, was published short after the Islamic State took over the modern city of Tadmur, which in English is often referred to as Palmyra. Besides the execution at Palmyra, the video furthermore shows the demolishing of the Tadmur prison complex, a controversial prison that is close to the modern city of Palmyra, which during the regime of President Bashar al-Assad was used to host political prisoners.¹

Since 1980 Palmyra has been listed as an UNESCO World Heritage, for its rich containment of monumental ruins which date back as far as the 1st and 2nd century. The region of Palmyra, also known as ‘the bride of the desert’, was an important trade route that connected the Roman Empire with Persia.² The art and architecture of the site therefor reflect a rich blend of Graeco-Roman art together with traditional local Persian elements. During the occupation of the city by ISIS, multiple historical sites have been deliberately demolished or damaged by Islamic State violence.³ Therefore, since 2013, as the growing threat of the approaching Islamic State has become apparent, Palmyra has been added to the List of World Heritage in Danger.⁴

Capturing executions in a cinematic manner has become representative for most of the Islamic State’s propaganda. The Palmyra execution, thus, belongs to a large body of graphic propaganda material produced by media centers of the Islamic State, which sole focus is to

¹ Amnesty International, *Syria: torture, despair and dehumanisation in Tadmur military prison*, 18 September

² UNESCO, *Site of Palmyra*, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/23> (accessed 22 May 2016)

³ K. Shasheen, ‘ISIS blows up another monument in 2000 year old city of Palmyra’, *The Guardian*, 5 October 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/05/isis-blows-up-another-monument-in-2000-year-old-city-of-palmyra>, (accessed 22 May 2016)

⁴ UNESCO, *List of World Heritage in Danger*, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/danger/> (accessed 22 May 2016)

enlarge the ‘virtual’ presence of the Islamic State. ISIS’s virtual propaganda strategy first became apparent in 2014 when they released an execution video of American journalist and video reporter James Foley. Since then the self proclaimed Caliphate has continued to release carefully staged and violent propaganda videos, in which ISIS has become known for framing violence through a staged and mediated representation of killing. The wave of ISIS propaganda, over the past couple of years, has therefore resulted in an increase in visual imagery that present events of murder, torture and execution in a rather staged and theatrical manner, thus creating a spectacle out of its atrocities.

In the relatively short history of the Islamic State, the self-proclaimed Caliphate has managed to completely change the game for extremism. Relying heavily on the distribution of visual propaganda such as video’s and images on the Internet, ISIS has positioned itself as one of the most marketing savvy extremist groups we have yet come to know. As an organisation they aim for maximum visibility by a ‘marketing of savagery’ through different social media platforms, which are focussed on continually feeding the Internet with new content.⁵ A research done by Quilliam, a London based think-tank which specializes in counter-extremism, concluded, that the Islamic State publishes around 38 different types of propaganda material per day.⁶ Their public display of violence is being seen and shown all over the world by hijacking the power of the digital media. And as Brendan I. Koerner of *Wired Magazine* notes: ‘never before in history have terrorists had such easy access to the minds and eyeballs of millions’.⁷

Relevance of work

Within the field of visual culture studies the development of the Islamic State as a whole is rather fascinating, for it marks a time in history in which digital propaganda is applied on such a large scale, with such quantity and with such quality. The visual nature of its online propaganda marketing has been unprecedented, and is challenging the notion of extremism in the age of social media technologies. As Charlie Winter, author of *Documenting the Virtual ‘Caliphate’* (2015), rightfully points out: ‘The days when we saw grainy video footage played on Al Jazeera and propaganda was limited to stagnant speeches made by terrorist leaders are

⁵ J. Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, London, William Collins, 2015, p.3.

⁶ C. Winter, ‘Documenting the Virtual ‘Caliphate’’, *Quilliam*, October 2015, <https://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/FINAL-documenting-the-virtual-caliphate.pdf>, (accessed 20 April 2016), p.5.

⁷ B. I. Koerner, ‘Why Isis Is Winning the Social Media War’, *Wired*, 30 March 2016, <http://www.wired.com/2016/03/isis-winning-social-media-war-heres-beat/>, (accessed 25 April 2016).

long gone.’⁸ This new digital jihad is highly visible and has adopted an aesthetic style in which violence is openly displayed, celebrated and encouraged. And although videos of killings are not unique to the Islamic State, the sophisticated and aesthetic handling of these videos definitely is and therefor differs considerably from other extremist videos. As illustrated by the fragment of the Palmyra video, ISIS puts in a lot of effort in order to make a visual spectacle out of its executions. This thesis, therefore, explores the phenomenon of the ‘theatrical execution’, the execution that is being staged, stylistically rendered and performed. Overall, I will be looking at the proliferation of the public execution as a theatrical spectacle and its interpretation from a Western perspective.

Research goals and questions

The research will be using the execution video at Palmyra as its main empirical material and thus as its departing point, since in this video the theatricality of ISIS’ propaganda machine is so blatantly visible. Unlike other execution, for example those of James Foley, Steven Sotloff and David Haines, the Palmyra execution applies a form of execution that appeals much more to the imagination. Where the now well known executions performed by ‘Jihadi John’ are more politically charged, the Palmyra execution uses the spectacular in order to create a fantasy, or moreover, a fantasy of ideology.

Although the executions of Westerners have been widely discussed in Western media, the Palmyra execution has had significantly less scholarly attention, for the majority of the attention quickly moved its focus to the threatened faith of Palmyra as an archeological site. To my knowledge this means that until now there has been no in depth analysis of the video, neither has there been an attempt to place the execution within a larger framework of historical and popular representations of public execution.

The aim of this thesis is to provide a better understanding of the public execution as a visual phenomenon, to understand it as a phenomenon that is embedded in a mass-cultural tradition of display and theatricality, by placing the Palmyra execution video within both a broader historical and cultural discourse. The thesis will therefor answer the following research question: what is the role of aesthetics in the ISIS Palmyra execution video? By answering this question the research will add to the understanding of the role of aesthetics in the intensions and pretensions of ISIS in their execution videos. Furthermore, the thesis will

⁸ C. Winter, ‘Documenting the Virtual ‘Caliphate’’, *Quilliam*, October 2015, <https://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/FINAL-documenting-the-virtual-caliphate.pdf>, (accessed 20 April 2016), p.4.

be looking at to what extent the ISIS execution videos can be regarded as a new phenomenon, or to what extent they are a continuation of a longer tradition of public executions? And in conclusion the thesis will problematize the position of the viewer, by asking what it means to watch these videos?

Methods and Theory

The research for this thesis will be done through a combination of theoretical analysis complemented by an in depth visual analysis of the Palmyra execution video in the third chapter. As Sandra Weber in *Visual Images and Research* (2008) notes: ‘what a specific image can mean or represent at any given time depends on a lot of factors [...]’.⁹ To expose these ‘factors’ and to make sense of the ‘meaning-making’ of the execution video the first two chapters will be used as a theoretical background in order to provide different angles from which the imagery can be interpreted.

The first part of the research will be used in order to construct a historical and cinematic framework for the aesthetics of the public execution. It will foremost be concerned with exploring the concept of the public execution as an aesthetic phenomenon and as a site for meaning production. By discussing among others the scholarly work of Michel Foucault, Steven Wilf and V.A.C Gattrel, I will be able to identify certain aesthetic elements of the historical ritual of execution and how these elements can be applied in order to enhance the viewers’ visual experience as either a ritual of deterrence or a ceremony of spectacle. Furthermore, the spectacle of execution will be discussed in light of its cinematic representation. The research by Sarat et al. will be discussing the role of the medium of film in relation to the aesthetic representation of the public execution, as it argues that the theatricality and aestheticization of the death penalty is still being emphasized in its cinematic representations. Thus, Sarat et al. present the research with a useful theoretical framework to which the execution videos of the Islamic State can be compared. Besides discussing theory that is concerned with the aesthetic representation of the public execution in both history and contemporary cinema, thirdly, the public execution will be discussed as a potential aesthetic experience, by using the concept of the Sublime. Although I will briefly refer to the classical sublime of Edmund Burke (1729-1797) and the appropriation of his Sublime in the ‘murder aesthetics’ of Thomas De Quincey (1785-1859), a majority of the theory will be presenting

⁹ S. Weber, ‘Visual Images in Research’, in J.G. Knowles and A.L. Cole (ed.), *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples, and Issues*, Thousand Oaks, CA, SAGE Publications, 2008, p. 43.

modern applications of the Sublime and its challenges with contemporary catastrophic events. Especially the writings on the Sublime by Francois Debrix, who argues for a contemporary use of the Sublime as an ideological tool in the age of increasing visual technologies, will be used to construct a theoretical framework for the execution videos.

However, in a world in which we are surrounded and confronted by constant intermingling images that are being recycled, altered, copied and re-used, it has become of great importance to stay critical towards images, and especially now that images are actively involved in the violence of contemporary extremism. The second chapter will therefore focus on the understanding of the existence of the execution video as an image. The complex but interesting scholarly works of Jean Baudrillard and especially his concept of the image-event, which he coins in *The Spirit of Terrorism* (2012), will be taken as a departing point for this chapter and provide theoretical grounding in his range of ideas on the image and its involvement in our contemporary culture. Complemented by the recently published *ISIS: The State of Terror* (2015) by Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, the research will explore to what extent Baudrillard's legacy is still applicable to today's Islamic State. Furthermore, the writings of Susan Sontag will be taken into consideration, especially her ideas on authenticity and realism in the context of the representation of violence. By applying her writings in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004) onto the propaganda of the Islamic State I will outline how the Islamic State is challenging the understanding of realism and authenticity. In conclusion the second chapter will be presenting how the theatrical display of violence of the Islamic State is successful in its contrast to Western visualization of violence.

The third part of the research will thus consist of a visual analysis in which the aesthetical qualities of the execution video at the Ancient amphitheater of Palmyra will be studied. Throughout the analysis the theoretical background provided by the previous chapters will be taken into close consideration while exploring the visual text. The aim of the analysis will be to create an understanding of the strategy of 'spectacle' that the Islamic State applies in its brutal portrayal of violence. Furthermore, the analysis will bring up questions about our relationship towards images, and to what degree reality has become infiltrated by representations and simulations.

I based my selection first of all on the notion that the Palmyra execution video takes the concept of violence as a ritualistic performance to another level. The Palmyra video seems to apply an approach that is much more concerned with the production of an aesthetically 'pleasing' and accessible image, and although the video still contains shocking and brutal

elements of violence, which as an offence certainly should not be taken lightly, the video does, however, in comparison with other execution video's contain a lesser degree of 'gore'. The video adds another layer of performance, which I did not encounter in any other ISIS's videos. Nevertheless, the Palmyra video still resides on the extreme side of the spectrum, in the context of depicting real violence, and this will be taken in consideration throughout the thesis.

Secondly, since the Islamic State literally overflows the world with visual propaganda it can become quite easy to drown in the amount of potential material. Thus, by limiting the analysis to one particular case study, I will be able to conduct a more detailed and in depth visual analysis. Furthermore, discussing the visual workings of this video particular video, I believe, can provide for a framework or at least an alternative perspective to interpret ISIS's other execution videos.

The method of analysis will be discussed in more detail at the beginning of the third chapter; however, a brief account on the selection of the empirical material will be in place. Since the research is dealing with such delicate imagery, I have been confronted with some ethical dilemma's regarding the enclosing of graphic imagery. In selecting the visual material I have relied on my own individual moral framework, and in doing so I have done an attempt to select images in which the graphic violence will not be that blatantly visible, thus taking into consideration that more graphic imagery of violence might be offensive to others. However, in cases in which I did include screenshots in which graphic content is being shown, I chose to do so since I thought it was necessary in relation to the argument or point I want to make. Furthermore, those depicted in the video that can be considered victims of the violence of the Islamic State; I have tried to protect their privacy and dignity as much as possible, by not including close-ups or frames in which full facial recognition is possible.

Accountability for sources

Since this thesis was written almost six months after the initial Palmyra execution video was released the original source which published the video has long been gone. This meant that in order to watch the Palmyra video I had to reside to more obscure secondary sources. Furthermore, the Islamic State often publishes their propaganda through social media or other online sources and as a result some sources that I have used in order to retrieve my empirical material might have the chance of being shut down by Internet service providers.

Current research

As the thesis is dealing with such recent events, the scholarly work on the Islamic State's digital presence is still relatively sparse. However, from the moment the Islamic State started its online media war much attention has been given to the slick deployment of its marketing strategies and its use of the Internet as a breeding ground for extremism. Extensive amounts of research have been done and is still being done on ISIS's media strategy and their use of social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Research centres such as the previously mentioned Quilliam, and similar institutes such as the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism in The Hague, have published multiple reports in which the media strategy of ISIS is closely analysed and documented.¹⁰ Much of the debate around ISIS online media strategy is simultaneously concerned with the finding of a potential Western online counter-narrative to the avalanche of propaganda material that ISIS continues to distribute, as researches of William H. Allendorfer and Susan C. Herring and Max Lewontin illustrate.¹¹

Although this thesis will not be concerned with the research for a potential Western response to the Islamic States online propaganda, the aesthetic approach of the thesis project will contribute to a better understanding of the Islamic State propaganda. By placing the execution videos in a historical and cultural discourse, new knowledge will be produced on the public execution as a visual phenomenon, which will add to a deeper understanding of the working of aesthetics in the production of meaning making, and our current relation to images in the context of violence.

¹⁰ B.T. van Ginkel, 'Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effective Counter Narrative', *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism in The Hague*, 31 March 2015, <http://icct.nl/publication/responding-to-cyber-jihad-towards-an-effective-counter-narrative/> (accessed 22 May 2016)

¹¹ W. H. Allendorfer and S. C. Herring, 'ISIS vs. The U.S. government: A war of online video propaganda', *First Monday: Peer Reviewed Journal of the Internet*, vol. 20, no. 12, 2015, Available from: <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/6336/5165>, (accessed 25 April 2016)

Chapter 1: Aesthetics and executions

1.1 *A historical perspective on the spectacle of the scaffold*

The mid-eighteenth century in Europe is characterized by a dark fascination with violence and crime, a time in which social horrors were part of popular entertainment within novels, wax museums and theatre plays.¹² Unlike recent times, public capital punishment was very much part of daily life and although public hanging was abolished in the United Kingdom in 1868, a few decades prior to this between 1780 and 1840 one would have been able to witness 400 executions just at Newgate alone, the primary execution site in London at the time.¹³ In France the number of executions seemed to be equally high, sometimes reaching to three or four executions a week.¹⁴ The executions were of course not just performed for the spectacle, but had specific meaning within a society that relied on the criminal deterrence of physical punishment. The public punitive system at the time was needed to ensure social order ‘by destroying, humiliating and ridiculing what was defined as evil’, it was meant to bring forth fear and set an example of what not to do.¹⁵ However, at the height of the execution wave in Europe the deterrent function of the public execution was almost overshadowed by the excitement and the thrill that it produced. It transformed into a social event at which occasionally hundreds, even thousands, of people would watch the spectacle.

As Steven Wilf in his article *Imagining Justice* (2013) describes, public executions were designed in such a manner as to leave a memorable impression on the viewer, in which the aesthetic process of the execution was used in order to influence the viewer and to emphasize the visual experience and ritual. Wilf takes an interesting stance towards public punishment by regarding the phenomenon of the public execution as a readable text. The spatial organization, ceremonial elements, the ‘participants’ and the audience can all, according to Wilf, be seen as aesthetic elements which shaped the ritual of the execution.¹⁶ Treating a public execution as a readable text, insinuates that the execution itself can be seen as a form of communication in which multiple meanings and messages can be incorporated. Therefore, by regarding the Palmyra video as a readable text, we might get a better insight into the

¹² N. Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, ‘Gericault’s Severed Heads and Limbs: The Politics and Aesthetics of the Scaffold’, *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 74, no. 4, 1992, pp. 610-612.

¹³ V.A.C Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 32.

¹⁴ N. Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, *The Art Bulletin*, p. 605.

¹⁵ P. Smith, ‘Executing executions: Aesthetics, identity, and the problematic narratives of capital punishment ritual’, *Theory and Society*, vol. 25, 1996, p. 241.

¹⁶ S. Wilf, ‘Imagining Justice: Aesthetics and Public executions in Late Eighteenth-Century England’, *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2013, p. 53.

workings of its communication, and how aesthetical choices have shaped the perception of this video.

The most obvious element of the theatricality of a public execution is of course the usage of a stage as the dramatic center of the death ceremony, an almost direct reference to the theatre itself. The location of the scaffold would be a prominent one, one that was highly visible and therefore were frequently built up at the central squares of towns, thus ensuring maximal visibility and accessibility to the public. Furthermore, most executions were orchestrated around a strict narrative, a set routine that was known to the spectators, the condemned and others involved. V.A.C Gatrell, author of *The Hanging Tree* (1994), stresses the importance of this repetitive narrative in execution, as he argues that it is the story, the narrative or the fixed ritual that made the horror accessible to its audience.¹⁷ Part of this narrative of execution was the incorporation of the procession of the condemned from his or her place of containment to the scaffold. In the case of executions in London; the condemned was taken through the city in an open cart; a journey that according to the text *Recasting the Theatre of Execution* (2002) could take up almost two to three hours.¹⁸ The execution procession was subject to an aesthetic vision, a vision that was to articulate the journey as a procession of subordination and humiliation. Wilf gives the example of an occasion in which a privileged member of society used a closed mourning coach painted in black for his journey to the scaffold, transforming his last journey into a mournful and sober funeral procession. However, through this the condemned was taken away from the view of the crowd and thus defeated the 'public' and 'visual' element of the execution. The open cart that was usually used enabled the crowd to see and hereby shame the condemned, and thus made the crowd, besides being witness to the execution, participants in the punishment.¹⁹ The presence of the audience and their ability to see the execution gave the ceremony meaning and as Michel Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) the audience was the main character of the public execution. Besides their role as target audience; those who were to be deterred; they also formed part of the punishment.²⁰

Foucault, in the same text, elaborates on the specific function of the spectacular ceremony of the public execution. He describes it as 'a ceremonial by which a momentarily injured sovereignty is reconstituted. It restores that sovereignty by manifesting it at its most

¹⁷ V.A.C Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree*, p.2.

¹⁸ S. Devereaux, 'Recasting the Theatre of Execution: The Abolition of the Tyburn Ritual', *Past & Present*, no. 202, 2002, p.128.

¹⁹ S. Wilf, *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities*, pp. 57-59.

²⁰ M. Foucault, *Discipline And Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. A. Sheridan, New York, Vintage Books, 1995, pp. 57-58.

spectacular.’ Moreover, what Foucault suggests is that the public execution should not be regarded as a means to re-establish justice (i.e. that after the person is punished for its crime justice is brought back to its former balance), but as a means for the sovereign to ‘reactivate’ its power, thus a means to present the actual imbalance of justice. The public execution, according to Foucault, was not solely to be seen as a manner to deter the public, as for example Wilf proclaims, but most of all to create awareness of the power of the sovereign. This meant that in order for a sovereign to ‘reactivate’ its power the process should be visible to its subjects, hence the public ritual.²¹

Another functional explanation of the execution ritual comes from Dwight Conquergood, known for his research in performing studies, who argues that even in contemporary executions in the United States, the performance of the execution ritual, which of course is now far less spectacular than those previously discussed, depends on a ‘performativity’ in order to establish a clear dividing line between judicial killing and plain murder. ‘The distinction is dramatised through the careful and elaborate staging of props, participants, and players’ and is utilised in order for the execution to reflect ‘order, control, propriety, and inevitability’.²² As Conquergood argues, the performative violence conducted by the state power functions as a means to take the execution out of this grey zone between legitimated and illegitimated killing. Walter Benjamin, who in his *Critique of Violence* briefly elaborates on the ritual of the public execution, goes even further by arguing that the spectacle functions to mask the actual illegitimacy of state power, i.e the law. Benjamin saw capital punishment as the ultimate example to showcase that the power of the sovereign was not based on justice, but on violence. The choreographed staging of the public execution hence functioned as a tool to reinforce the execution as a judicial act, which without it could not claim to be anything else but a murder on behalf of the state.²³

However, the more spectacular the executions became the more indifferent and voyeuristic the crowd seemed to become. According to Paul Friedland, the first sign of indifference towards both the political and judicial meaning of the executions was brought forth by the execution of Lutherans, who became to be known as entering the scaffold rather joyful and unrepentant. The curiosity and excitement of the spectators towards what might

²¹ M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 47-49.

²² D. Conquergood, ‘Lethal Theatre: Performance, Punishment, and the Death Penalty’, *Theatre Journal*, vol. 54, no. 3, 2002, p.360.

²³ W. Benjamin, ‘Critique of Violence’, in P. Demetz (ed.), *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, New York, Schocken Books, 1986, pp.285-288.

happen during the ‘final moments of the condemned’ transferred to other executions that did not necessarily have a religious motive.²⁴ It was the active participation of the convict itself that was part of the attraction of the spectacle. Smith argues that the aesthetics and the narratives of a public execution gave the opportunity for the condemned to create and make visible a personal identity. The victim was able to shape the execution in such a manner as to generate empathetic public responses. However, the excitement that came along with the possibility of a flamboyant convict who made a spectacle out of its own execution made the execution an almost suspenseful form of entertainment and began to defeat the actual purpose of the ritual. Moreover, the entertainment value was enhanced by the business that was conducted during these events, from street vendors selling their goods amongst the crowd, to nearby houses with windows with excellent views on the scaffold would be rented out for those who were interested in seeing the execution from a good position, phenomena that would be associated with contemporary festivals or sports events.²⁵

The role of the audience during a public execution had always been rather ambiguous, but by the end of the 18th century, instead of witnessing an execution the crowd seems to be most closely associated with the vulgar spectatorship of a grotesque play. The emergence of a more civilized and humanitarian administration of the law followed the abolition of the public execution in the 19th century. The aesthetics of the public execution: the stage, the procession, the whole ritual as such, became too much of a form of uncivil entertainment. A more Foulcaudian stance would be to consider the abolition of the public execution as a realization of its ineffectiveness, as the increasing theatricality of the public execution eventually ‘killed’ its purpose, by losing its ability to deter.²⁶ However, as Gattrel has written, even today our imagination and our interpretation of the phenomenon of the public execution, still relies heavily on the collective memory that we have from this period of time.²⁷

²⁴ P. Friedland, *Seeing Justice Done: the age of the spectacular punishment in France*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, p.125.

²⁵ P. Friedland, *Seeing Justice Done*, p.156.

²⁶ P. Smith, *Theory and Society*, p. 248.

²⁷ V.A.C. Gattrel, *The Hanging Tree*, p. 32.

1.2 The execution as a cinematic representation

Although many Western societies have completely abolished state execution, the societies that still apply the death penalty do so behind the closed doors of prison walls. The execution ritual as a public aesthetic process transformed from a visual spectacle to a private affair away from the public eye, and has remained like this ever since.²⁸ This transformation from public to private is according to Slavoj Žižek exemplifying for violence at large. Taking in a Foucauldian perspective, Žižek describes the repression of both physical and ideological violence as one of the main focus points of our contemporary tolerant liberalistic society. With Western state power being more interested in the fostering and the administration of life, violence became something that must be avoided and therefore slowly moved out of the public discourse. Western society, if following the reasoning of Foucault and Žižek, is relatively shielded from actual physical violence.²⁹

However, we cannot deny that the spectacle of violence has not completely disappeared out of modern life; on the contrary, the spectacle of violence and death has become something that we have started to experience indirectly through literature, news, and in particular visual media forms such as photography and film. Finding a certain pleasure in the pain and the provocation of other people is therefore all but gone and as Susan Sontag states ‘it seems that the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show naked bodies’³⁰. Western society is fascinated with violence and although we morally condemn it, violence towards other human beings has remained a very popular form of entertainment, most often through visual representation. These visual representations of violence in popular culture are omnipresent, and are reflected in hundreds of films, television shows and videogames.

According to Margaret Gibson, author of the article *Death Scenes* (2001), the introduction of the television in the 1950's and 1960's has played a big part in taking the subject of death out of the private sphere.³¹ The introduction of visual technologies even gave rise to the discussion in the United States as whether to televise state executions, in order to make the punitive system more transparent. Although the potential for deterrence was being

²⁸ S. Wilf, *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities*, p. 53.

²⁹ S. Žižek, *Geweld*, trans. I. van der Burg, Amsterdam, Uitgeverij Boom, 2008, pp. 43-44.

³⁰ S. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, London, Picador, 2004, p.43.

³¹ M. Gibson, ‘Death Scenes: ethics and the face of cinematic deaths’, *Mortality*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2001, p. 308.

considered, according to Paul S. Leighton it was feared that with ‘America’s long history of turning criminals into heroes, and a more recent fascination with celebrity’ the televising of executions would offer ‘the potential for killers to become icons for popular culture.’³² The state execution, thus, only remained visible through its fictional representation. It is therefore interesting to explore whether or not the medium of film can be regarded as a contributor to the aesthetic experience of the public execution. Gibson argues that certain ‘types of death’ are being represented in a certain manner, guided by genre conventions:

‘Death scenes and representations of facing death work within established filmic or literary-based genres which have particular character formulas or stereotypes, visual techniques, and sound-based cues which the audience has been socialized to anticipate and expect.’³³

In *Scenes of Executions: Spectator, Political Responsibility, and State Killing in American Film* Austin Sarat, Madeline Chan, Maia Cole, Melissa Lang, Nicholas Schcolnik, Jasjaap Sidhu, and Nica Siegel researched these cinematic genre conventions in relation to state executions and concluded that:

‘Despite startling changes in film technologies and in the situation of capital punishment in the United States, scenes of execution consistently draw their viewers in by highlighting the theatrical quality of the state’s most awesome power.’³⁴

They state that even in fictional film the motive of ‘theatrical spectacle’ in relation to capital punishment remains a re-occurring trope. As an illustration the article brings forward what they consider to be the starkest scenes of spectacular execution, the trial scenes of *Chicago* (2002) and *Law Abiding Citizen* (2009). What binds these movies is the manner in which their execution scenes are being used in order to draw a parallel with theatre, by presenting the execution in juxtaposition to imagery of stage performances. In the case of *Chicago* the condemned is simultaneously being shown climbing up the theatre stage as well as the scaffold, completely synchronizing the play with the execution on the scaffold. While in *Law Abiding Citizen* the execution is being juxtaposed by a cello recital, synchronizing the

³² P. S. Leighton, ‘Televising executions, primetime “live”?’ , *The Justice Professional*, vol. 12, 1999, p.196.

³³ M. Gibson, *Mortality*, p. 311.

³⁴ A. Sarat, et al., ‘Scenes of Execution: Spectatorship, Political Responsibility, and State Killing in American Film’, *Journal of the American Bar Foundation*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2014, p.690.

moment when the curtains are being drawn.³⁵

Just as the theatricalisation of the execution in the 17th and the 18th century, these movies address the complicated position of the viewer, by problematizing the perspective as witness/spectator. These execution scenes focus the attention on what it means to watch when the line between execution and entertainment becomes unclear. Turning the execution into a theatrical spectacle is often done in films in which the viewer is positioned as being part of the audience. In this manner the scene can question 'the line between spectatorship, which we define as watching for pleasure or enjoyment, and witnessing, which we define as authorizing what one sees, is blurred.'³⁶

The viewer as part of the audience is one of the three motifs that Sarat et al. have identified in their research on execution scenes. The second motif positions the viewer backstage by allowing him an intimate view into the technical workings of the execution. In cinema, as Sarat et al. argue, this motif is often utilized in order to dwell on 'the technological apparatus of death', thus focusing on the execution devices.³⁷ Positioning the viewer in this manner also tends to fetishize death, by paying special attention to the dying human body. The viewer is not just an ordinary witness but is given a privileged perspective and provided with additional knowledge of the process of dying and execution.

The last and third motif gives the perspective of the person who actually gets executed; through which the viewer is actually made into 'executable subjects'. The aim of this perspective is to get the viewer to empathize with the convicted. It invites the viewer to become emotionally close to the condemned.³⁸ However, these scenes often only last a few seconds, and are often combined with the other motifs of spectatorship.

Nevertheless, taking these three motifs into consideration, they pose interesting questions on perspective, which can be taken into consideration while analysing the execution material of ISIS. Moreover, it illustrates that the medium of film can contribute to an aesthetic experience of public executions, and underlines the argument that the motive of 'theatre' in relation to execution can be regarded as a re-occurring trope.

³⁵ A. Sarat et al., *Journal of the American Bar Foundation*, pp. 696-701.

³⁶ A. Sarat et al., *Journal of the American Bar Foundation*, p.693.

³⁷ A. Sarat et al., *Journal of the American Bar Foundation*, p.701.

³⁸ A. Sarat et al., *Journal of the American Bar Foundation*, pp. 711-715.

1.3 The execution and the Sublime

Whereas the previous sections focused on the aesthetic representation of public executions, this section will be taking into account the execution as a potential producer of an aesthetic experience, by discussing the public execution in relation to the Romantic notion of the sublime.

The sublime as a concept has its origins in aesthetic philosophy, and describes a feeling of greatness, which is almost too great to comprehend. The sublime departs from the notion that there can reside an aesthetic quality within something terrible and ugly. It presumes that in certain occasions one can experience a feeling of horror but simultaneously a feeling of delight, something that is often ascribed to epic nature. The Sublime was re-introduced by the enlightenment philosopher Edmund Burke in his work *Philosophic Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). Burke's theory defines the sublime as something that harbors a sense of pleasurable terror. The incomprehensible immensity of avalanches, stormy seas, and imposing mountains ranges harbored a beauty in its destructiveness in the eyes of Burke, and produced this feeling of simultaneous horror and delight.³⁹ However, in the following quote taken from Burke's *Philosophic Enquiry*, Burke seems to suggest that a similar delight in destruction harbors within the execution spectacle.

'Chuse [sic] a day on which to represent the most sublime and affecting tragedy we have; appoint the most favourite actors; spare no cost upon the scenes and decorations; unite the greatest efforts of poetry, painting, and music; and when you have collected your audience; just at the moment when their minds are erect with expectation, let it be reported that a state criminal of high rank is on the point of being executed in the adjoining square; in a moment the emptiness of the theatre would demonstrate the comparative weakness of the imitative arts, and proclaim the triumph of the real sympathy.'⁴⁰

Although Burke does not directly refer to the execution as a sublime experience, he does underline the undeniable attraction that the spectacle of death seems to have over people. According to Joel Black, author of *The Aesthetics of Murder* (1991), this excerpt from Burke makes a case for the potential sublime experience of the death penalty. For, as Black suggests, the actual taking of someone's life seemed to have a far greater aesthetic impact on the

³⁹ E. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, 2nd edn., London, Penguin Books, 2004, p. 86, 97.

⁴⁰ E. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, p.93.

spectators than the mimetic violence and deaths in stage plays.⁴¹

Even though Burke would never have gone as far as to suggest that executions can produce a form of sublime spectatorship, a contemporary of his, namely Thomas De Quincey (1785-1859) came very close. Thomas De Quincey was a man of his time, for a great deal of his literary work reflects the era's fascination with violence. This fascination culminated in the controversial texts *On Murder as One of the Fine Arts* (1827), *Second Paper On Murder* (1839) and *Postscript* (1854), which are all concerned with a satiric and artistic formulations of murder, hereby changing the manner in which murder was usually represented. In his texts, De Quincey discusses the witnessing of a murder, be it from a safe distance, as a sublime experience, going as far as to praise the artistic qualities of the killer.⁴²

Joel Black, in his reviews on the work of De Quincey, constantly points out the parallels that De Quincey makes between murder and artistic performances. De Quincey goes to extreme lengths in his comparison of the killer and the artist, by stating multiple times that killers can become the designers of their own murder performances. While, De Quincey's texts are full of controversial and outrageous statements, some truth can be found if one considers the highly performative violence of ISIS, as ISIS almost postulates itself as the designer of its own murder spectacle, in which murder becomes part of a larger story.

⁴¹ J. Black, *The Aesthetics of Murder: A study on romantic literature and contemporary culture*, Baltimore/London, The John Hopkins University Press, 1991, pp. 3-4.

⁴² T. De Quincey, *On Murder*, R. Morrison (ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 8-34.

1.4 Modern applications of the Sublime

The Romantic notion of the sublime discussed by Edmund Burke mainly focused on the awesome manner in which nature is able to violently defeat our imagination. Nevertheless, as quoted by Joel Black ‘If any human act evokes the aesthetic experience of the sublime, certainly it is the act of murder.’⁴³ Although Thomas DeQuincy may have touched slightly upon human inflicted sublime destruction, the ideas of the sublime generally remained within the sphere of the natural world, and it wasn’t until relatively recently that these classical notions of the sublime were challenged.

The atrocities of the Second World War, and in particular the Nazi extermination camp of Auschwitz, have been regarded as a breaking point in relation to the sublime as exclusively produced by natural force. The postmodern philosopher Jean-François Lyotard is often the man to be mostly associated with this new notion of human inflicted sublime. Auschwitz, for Lyotard, presented itself as a plurality of unrepresentables, which was of such magnitude that it became unimaginable, hereby addressing the limits of reason. Auschwitz was sublime, according to Lyotard, not only in the sense of a paradox of terror and delight, but within the experience of freedom. As Debra B. Bergoff notes on Lyotard’s writing on the sublime, it is a feeling of sublime freedom, a freedom after Auschwitz that caused feelings of the sublime.⁴⁴ The sublime experience comes forth out of a simultaneous terror of Auschwitz, but at the same time it produces a feeling of what we might call the pleasurable relief or triumph of surviving unharmed. Auschwitz is seen as a threshold, which marked the capability of the human of producing the sublime, and ushers in what Lyotard called the post-modern sublime.⁴⁵

Although it is uncertain if Lyotard would have counted the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York City as sublime, as Christine Battersby notes in her essay *Terror, Terrorism and the Sublime*, it certainly is another example of a more contemporary catastrophic event that challenges the notions of the sublime.⁴⁶ The attack brought the world into new era of global virtual visibility of extremism, since the virtual magnitude was unique

⁴³ J. Black, *The Aesthetics of Murder*, p.14.

⁴⁴ D. B. Bergoff, ‘Interrupting Lyotard: whither the we?’, in H. J. Silverman (ed.), *Lyotard: philosophy, politics and the sublime*, New York, Routledge, 2003, p.133.

⁴⁵ G. Ray, ‘Reading the Lisbon Earthquake: Adorno, Lyotard, and the Contemporary Sublime’, *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2004, p. 1.

⁴⁶ C. Battersby, ‘Terror, terrorism and the sublime: rethinking the sublime after 1789 and 2001’, *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2003, pp. 67,68.

and unprecedented for its time. Battersby refers to the controversial comments of the composer Karlheinz Stockhausen, who in the aftermath of 9/11 proclaimed that the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers should be regarded as a subliminal work of art. Although she underlines the offensiveness of the comment, she does understand the parallel that is being drawn between the terrorist act as a performance, for isn't it 'through a framework of cinematic expectations' that the world came to know about the attack, which, as she continues 'blurs the boundary between the 'real' and the 'fictional', and the 'actual' and 'art'.⁴⁷ Her observation is still applicable for today's events and underlines the manner in which the notion of the sublime is being challenged within this age of increasing visual media technologies.

In his article *The Sublime Spectatorship of War* (2006) Francois Debrix provides one way of looking at the sublime in our contemporary media culture, by regarding the sublime as an ideological tactic, instead of a mere experience. Although Debrix discusses the deployment of the sublime as an ideological innovation within an American context, he presents a compelling argument for the sublime as a tool in propaganda. It is particularly in photojournalism and television shows, argues Debrix, that sublime aesthetics are being used in order to frame something that is normally regarded as horrible into something justifiable.⁴⁸ In the context of America's conflict with Iraq, Debrix claims that the American audience is being exposed to shocking and violent imagery of 'the other', i.e. Iraqi, but which is presented in such a manner as to justify the American violence.⁴⁹ He explains that the sublime imagery of America at war forces the viewer through an initial feeling of discomfort and shock, but which will 'finally adhered to a set of ideological beliefs'.⁵⁰

'What is sublime about these war photos is not just the shock or horror that they depict, but also the fact that they appear to demand a higher degree of attention on the part of the viewer, a concentrated gaze that arrests, disturbs, but soon also rechannels the initial sense of surprise towards an understanding that an important mission, supportive of a greater cause, is taking place.'⁵¹

⁴⁷ C. Battersby, *Postcolonial Studies*, p. 67.

⁴⁸ F. Debrix, 'The Sublime Spectatorship of War: The Erasure of the Event in America's Politics of Terror and Aesthetics of Violence', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 34, no.3, 2006, p.767.

⁴⁹ F. Debrix, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, pp. 779-780.

⁵⁰ F. Debrix, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, pp. 767,769.

⁵¹ F. Debrix, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, p. 11.

Deriving from a Kantian and Lyotardian interpretation of the sublime, Debrix seeks to go further, by arguing that the sublime produces a specific kind of viewer ‘or spectator that is more likely to consume, accept, or perhaps appreciate images of violence and war.’⁵² The representation of violence, and especially the medium of film constitute therefore a substantial element in the production of aestheticized and justifiable violence, in which the film is in control of the visual and the emotional interpretation. Debrix makes an argument for the ideological sublime as a tool to numb the feeling of moral outrage and thus provides a means to overcome the horror of the violent imagery. The article presents an ideological sublime that is focused on the American public. However, I believe Debrix’s argument can be used as a framework in order to explain the attraction of ISIS’ graphic imagery.

As where American sublime war imagery is used to give meaning to their violent encounters in Iraq, so is ISIS’ sublime propaganda imagery used to make their violence seem justifiable. It must be added, though, if discussing ISIS’s imagery in the context of Debrix’s ideological sublime, one must realize that it is only a specific audience to which this subliminal experience might apply. I here want to refer back to something Kant said in his *Critique of Judgment*, that in order to be prone to the sublime one must possess a certain ‘culture’. In his case he referred to the elite as having a privileged position to experience the sublime.⁵³ In the case of Debrix’s article it is the American public that has the privileged position, for the same sublime message will not work on an Iraqi citizen. Keeping this in mind, the sublime message of ISIS only works within an audience that is already sensible to the message of ISIS, and thus can almost be seen as a tool of recruitment.

As Scott Atran argued on the sublimity of the ISIS videos: they ‘are doing what the images of the collapsing twin towers did for al-Qaida, turning terror into a display of triumph over and through death and destruction.’⁵⁴ Aiming at an audience that is sensible for its message, the sublime is used by ISIS as an ideological tool in order to justify their extremely violent message.

⁵² F. Debrix, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, p. 769.

⁵³ E. Kant, *Critique of the power Judgement*, P. Guyer (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 148.

⁵⁴ S. Atran, ‘Jihad’s fatal attractions’, *The Guardian*, 4 September 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/04/jihad-fatal-attraction-challenge-democracies-isis-barbarism> (accessed 24 May 2016)

Chapter 2: Images and Islamic State violence

2.1 The radicalization of the image

‘The worst is that it all becomes a parody of violence, a parody of the war itself, pornography becoming the ultimate form of the abjection of war which is unable to be simply war, to be simply about killing, and instead turns itself into a grotesque infantile reality-show, in a desperate simulacrum of power.’⁵⁵

In this quote, taken from his article *War Porn* (2006), Jean Baudrillard comments on the extreme visualization and mediatization of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City in 2001. Violence, as he seems to suggest, can no longer be just banal violence, but will through its mediation always be a representation or mimicry of a previous violence. As Susan Sontag wrote in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, people who witnessed or managed to survive the attack on the World Trade Centre described their experience ‘like a movie’.⁵⁶ An expression that underlined the influence and the impact of motion pictures in the way people started to express their feelings. The event of 9/11 was such an unimaginable attack, the only way people seemed to be able to comprehend it was by comparing it to something that was within their reach of imagination; namely the cinema. The movie metaphor seemed to be used as a means of coping with this disaster, but simultaneously underlined a new form of terrorism; a form of terrorism in which the image plays an immensely important part, or more precisely, a type of terrorism in which the image becomes part of the violence of the attack. For many scholars 9/11 marked a threshold in contemporary modern history, since it seemed to be the start of the experience of violence through images, and the active involvement of the image in the violence.

In another work of Baudrillard’s, *The Spirit of Terrorism* (2012), which consist of an assembly of different articles on the terrorist attacks of 9/11, he argues that the 9/11 attack meant a radicalization between the image and reality in which our ‘fascination with the attack is primarily a fascination with the image’.⁵⁷ He describes the 9/11 attacks as a form of symbolic violence, in which the representation of the attack has become as important as the violent act in itself; the event being absorbed by the image and ready for consumption. As an

⁵⁵ J. Baudrillard, ‘War Porn’, *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2006, p. 86.

⁵⁶ S. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 19-20.

⁵⁷ J. Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, trans. C. Turner, London|New York, Verso, 2012, p.22.

event, the New York terrorist attack marked ‘awakening’ in which both the fascination with cinema and terrorism came together. It ushered in what Baudrillard called ‘our theatre of cruelty’, in which our reality has been infiltrated by ‘images, virtuality and fiction’.⁵⁸ The attack had turned into a mediatized murder performance with New York as the theatrical stage; and therefore 9/11 was described by Baudrillard as an ‘image-event’ in which the media has come to play an integral part in the production of violence and which resulted in, according to Baudrillard, the combination of the two biggest obsessions of our current century: cinema and terrorism.⁵⁹ Joel Black, author of *The Aesthetics of Murder* (1991), described this convergence of cinema and terrorism adequately by noting that:

‘Both the terrorist-killer and the film director know how to manipulate the media and how to play on the fantasies and the fears of their mass audience, and they are profoundly aware of the effect their action will have on their enthralled spectators.’⁶⁰

Joel Black suggests that both the film director and the terrorist are very capable of capturing the attention of their audience through the media. However, Joel Black still discusses the terrorist and the film director as two separate subjects, and it is exactly here that I believe the propaganda of the Islamic State has made a move away from this distinction, for within the Islamic State the film director and the ‘terrorist’ has morphed into one. ISIS has taken complete control over its own ‘theatre of cruelty’, by almost monopolizing the media output that is coming out of their self proclaimed caliphate. They have taken charge over the visualization of their own fantasy.

Furthermore, according to J.M Berger, what has been so innovative of ISIS is their realization that mere acts of violence were not compelling enough to bring people into their conflict. Berger, who is affiliated to George Washington University’s Program on Extremism and co-author of the book *ISIS: The State of Terror* (2015), suggests this narrative strategy in the Dutch documentary *Cyberjihad* (2016), which explored the virtual weapons ISIS has been using in order to radicalize and recruit young Westerners. According to Berger, ISIS has been very successful in including their tremendous violent acts within a story; a transformation that has been apparent over the years in which we have been able to see that terrorist organizations have consistently developed themselves into storytellers, and in particular visual storytellers.⁶¹

⁵⁸ J. Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, pp. 21,23.

⁵⁹ J. Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, pp. 22-24.

⁶⁰ J. Black, *The Aesthetics of Murder*, p.17.

⁶¹ *Cyberjihad, Tegenlicht*, VPRO, 10 April 2016, [TV Documentary]

Berger argues that the Islamic State, in their propaganda, apply a 'strange dichotomy of ultraviolence and civil order' through which they portray their violence as almost justifiable.⁶² A violence that is necessary to attain the highest goal, namely the Caliphate.

Souad Mekhennet and Greg Miller, journalists at the Washington Post, emphasized the importance of camera presence within the Islamic State. In 2015 Mekhennet, together with fellow Washington Post reporter Greg Miller, published a confronting but insightful article on the workings of the ISIS media department, by interviewing Abu Hajer al-Maghribi, a former cameraman for the Islamic State. The article reveals that media teams are omnipresent within the ISIS organization, and even take in a higher position than fighters within ISIS hierarchy. Abu Hajer describes that during military operations a minimum of two cameras would be joining, documenting everything in search for potential propaganda material.⁶³ It shows that ISIS attaches a lot of value to their virtual visibility in the world; however, it also shows that spectatorship has become a fundamental element of extremism, and with the usage of modern technologies the amount of spectators/viewers has obviously skyrocketed.

To return to Baudrillard, the Islamic State seems to be upping the ante on the image-event by focusing so much of their attention on their image creation. 'Rather than the violence of the real being there first, and the *frisson* of the image being added to it, the image is there first, and the *frisson* of real is added.' a statement by Baudrillard which seems eerily applicable to ISIS's image war.⁶⁴ ISIS is the contemporary example of symbolic violence, in which it almost becomes indistinguishable what came first: the violence or the image? As the producers of their own image-events they have further radicalized the relation between the image and reality.

⁶² J.M. Berger and J. Stern, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, London, William Collins, 2015, p. 114.

⁶³ G. Miller and S. Mekhennet, 'Inside the surreal world of the Islamic State's propaganda machine', *The Washington Post*, 20 november 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/inside-the-islamic-states-propaganda-machine/2015/11/20/051e997a-8ce6-11e5-acff-673ae92ddd2b_story.html (accessed 24 April 2016)

⁶⁴ J. Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, p. 22.

2.2 Challenging realism

The radicalization of the image, in the case of the Islamic State, mainly comes forth out of a theatricalisation of violence. However, if images of violence are being aestheticized or mediated to such an extent in contemporary culture, what do the notions of authenticity and realism still mean within the context of these images? How is the Islamic State challenging our perception of authenticity in their visualization of real violence?

Traditionally, authenticity is defined as '[...] a cultural concern with what is realistic or true about its representation.' as Gwyn Symonds notes in the introduction of the book *The Aesthetics of Violence in Contemporary Media* (2008).⁶⁵ When it comes to the depiction of 'real' violence, we have a certain visual 'code' that we apply onto violent imagery, in order to present imagery of violence that is honest and not sensational. Susan Sontag, author of the essay *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004), seems to be in tune with this concept of authenticity. In her text, Sontag gives numerous explanations on how war photography or, photography of brutalities in general, should capture real physical violence in a manner that is not regarded as 'artistry'. Sontag argues that images that depict horrific events have a higher chance to be regarded as authentic when they adopt a so-called 'anti-art' style, a mode of representation that stays away from over stylized compositions. Images that do have this artistic rendition of atrocities are seen as more manipulative, less authentic, and less 'real'.⁶⁶ This friction between aesthetics and authenticity is not just sensible in the context of photojournalism, as described by Sontag, it also transcends to the realm of film making, and in particular that of documentary. Symonds reflects on the angst that comes along with the editing of a documentary, for when does the editing of reality becomes 'a form of corruption of authenticity'?⁶⁷ Even if an image is not deliberately seeking to visually excite, but happens to just be in the right place at the right time, and turns out to look like a still from a movie, authenticity of the image becomes jeopardized.⁶⁸ Sontag, throughout her essay, seems to firmly emphasise a clear distinction between the visualization of 'fictional violence' and 'real violence', a distinction that should prevent real violence from becoming a form of spectacular entertainment. However reasonable the statements on authenticity might sound, when it

⁶⁵ G. Symonds, *The Aesthetics of Violence in Contemporary Media*, New York, The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 2008, p. 58.

⁶⁶ S. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 23.

⁶⁷ G. Symonds, *The Aesthetics of Violence in Contemporary Media*, p.58

⁶⁸ S. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p.61.

comes to contemporary representations of violence these notions are completely brought into question.

The controversial documentary of Joshua Oppenheimer, *The Act of Killing* (2012), is an example of a theatrical representation of violence in which this line between fictional and real violence is deliberately being blurred. Although his documentary was released just before ISIS started its fierce propaganda war, the documentary has some uncanny resemblance in the manner in which violence and spectacle come together. In *The Act of Killing* Oppenheimer gives the old members of a 1965 Indonesian death squad complete freedom to re-enact the murderous atrocities they committed all those years ago, by presenting them in popular Hollywood movie genres. The documentary is a confronting piece, in which the distinction between fiction and non-fiction becomes extremely blurred and almost indistinguishable. Moreover, it is controversial in its blunt depiction of gangsters and violence, which results in a paradoxical and surreal visual experience, in which the love for movies is juxtaposed with the horrific atrocities committed during this time in Indonesian history.

Just like the Islamic State, *The Act of Killing* points to a broader discussion about the visual aesthetics involved in violence, and the diffusing role of the killer as an ‘actor’ in the performed violence. The manner in which Oppenheimer visualised the war atrocities through a theatrical spectacle is often criticized, for exactly the reasons Sontag and Symond have brought forward. However, Oppenheimer defends his decision, by arguing that through the theatricality the gangsters were given the freedom ‘to stage themselves on camera as a way of documenting how they see themselves and make sense of their world’.⁶⁹ It gave Oppenheimer the ability ‘to make something invisible visible — the role of fantasy and imagination in everyday life.’⁷⁰ By having the gangsters acting out their crimes through cinematic genres, such as the gangster movie, musical and action film, Oppenheimer got an intimate view into the way these men saw themselves. He found truth in the simulation.

Whereas *The Act of Killing* is more concerned with the re-enactment of murder atrocities, ISIS has gone a step further by taking the ‘theatrical representation’ of violence into its own reality, in which the staging and the violence happens at the same time.⁷¹

⁶⁹ N. Bradshaw, ‘Build my gallows high: Joshua Oppenheimer on The Act of Killing’, *Sight and Sound online*, 4 August 2015, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/interviews/build-my-gallows-high-joshua-oppenheimer-act-killing> (accessed 23 May 2016)

⁷⁰ *ibid.*⁶⁹

⁷¹ M. Zelenko, ‘Talking to Joshua Oppenheimer about his devastating follow-up to The Act of Killing’, *The Verge*, 15 July 2015, <http://www.theverge.com/2015/7/15/8971233/the-act-of-killing-joshua-oppenheimer-interview-the-look-of-silence-documentary> (accessed 17 February 2016)

Nevertheless, to relate Oppenheimer's view to the imagery of the Islamic State, it gives us an insight into their 'fantasy and imagination'. Thus, the theatrical and performed imagery of violence, do not necessarily present a realistic account of the workings of the Islamic State, they do, however, provide a means for them to visualize their fantasies of a utopian Caliphate.

To continue in this line of thought it can be argued that not only do the imagery of the Islamic State not present events in a realistic manner, they also are not meant to give a realistic or authentic image. The propaganda is meant to 'sell' and the Islamic State knows very well that presenting reality will not do the trick, and thus selling their fantasy of the Caliphate has been rather successful. However, in order to sell something it must be packaged in the right manner, for the aim of the propaganda is to be reproduced infinitively, to be massed consumed, and to be easily recognized and remembered. In case of the execution video's the images are being composed in such a manner that reproduction is made possible, and not just necessarily the whole video, but screenshots that will easily attract attention, for who does not remember the image of Jihadi John standing next to the kneeling and dressed in orange James Foley? Staging reality, as the Islamic State does, has resulted in imagery that has a lasting impression. It resonates Walter Benjamin's article *Art in the age of mechanical reproduction* (1968), in which he argues that in the age of industrial reproduction the value of the authentic was being lost by the endless reproduction of it.⁷² In the case of ISIS it is not the original actual event that counts, it is not reality, but the millions of visual replicas that are produced as a result.

⁷² W. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', trans. H. Zohn, in Hanna Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*, New York, Schocken Books, 1968, available from: <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/benjamin.pdf> (accessed 24 May 2016)

2.3 A clash of representations

This last part of the chapter will look at the clash of representations that is momentarily occurring between the West and the Islamic State. Here, I will argue that the theatrical display of violence by ISIS's propaganda partly owes its success and its effectiveness to the contrasting manner in which the West and ISIS present their violence.

The West has created a complicated and ambiguous relationship with violence, for on the one hand real violence is to be condemned, but on the other hand fictional violence within the setting of film and television is regarded as entertainment.⁷³ This ambiguity, according to Hans Busstra who is the director of the previously mentioned documentary *Cyberjihad*, is rather hypocritical. According to him, we (the West) have a rather displaced notion of violence. In particular he commented on the one-sided media coverage of the West in relation to the Syrian conflict. Although Western media extensively reports on ISIS's violent encounters, the recent Western participation in the 'war' against ISIS seems to have far lesser media priority. Busstra particularly criticizes the Dutch government for the lack of insight that is given, since The Netherlands joined the international coalition against ISIS in 2014. Busstra seemed to suggest that partaking in violence, from a Western perspective, and showing it has almost become one of the biggest taboos.⁷⁴ The Western world is involved in a lot of overseas violence, but the West seems to administer a certain self-censorship when it comes to war making, turning contemporary Western warfare into an invisible affair.⁷⁵ Especially after the incident at Abu Ghraib, the American military in particular have been increasing their control over the outlet of military imagery.

The images of military operations that are being published to the public, however, present a conflict that is almost completely absent of any human involvement and give a rather abstract view on violence. Through digital satellite images, aerial drone photographs, and 3-D illustration, a new form of technological vision has taken the upper hand in visualizing Western participation in the Middle East conflicts. Technological war devices, such as drones, have taken over a large amount of physical human participation, and gave way to a certain form of machine aesthetics. The grainy black and white footage recorded from the cockpit of a RAF plane executing an airstrike, such as the videos released by the

⁷³ J.M. Berger and J. Stern, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, p.1.

⁷⁴ *VPRO Tegenlicht Meet Up Rotterdam: Cyberjihad*, [online video], 2016, <http://www.ustream.tv/recorded/85656919>, (accessed 15 May 2016)

⁷⁵ S. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 53.

British Military of Defense (MoD) in May 2016, has become a common way for the public to experience Western military contribution to the fight against the Islamic State.⁷⁶ (see: Figure A1) Contemporary warfare seems to be solely experienced through an element of virtuality, and lately drone warfare has come to represent a Western form of war making that serves to further enhance this detached and technological invisibility of Western violence.

Imagery by technological warfare machinery has the potential of giving way to an insensitive attitude towards violence conducted by the West. This is one of the reasons why Chris Cole, founder of Drone Wars UK, is fairly critical towards, for example, unmanned missile missions within military operations. In his Guardian article of 2015, he warns that the usage of armed drones as a lethal force will result in a lower threshold for the use of violence. Although armed drones may diminish the amount of human casualties, it will, as Cole argues, give way to a 'quick and easy' political measurement in contrast to the more time consuming option of diplomacy.⁷⁷ Cole seems to address what Slavoj Žižek calls the trap of the 'ethical illusion'; an ethical illusion that first and foremost is an optical illusion. Žižek argues that the violence towards someone in close proximity to the beholder generates a larger degree of revulsion, than when an order is given to activate a remote missile strike that might have thousands of deadly casualties but is out of sight. This illusion, as Žižek argues, has become a significant part of our contemporary society, in which violence has been taken away from sight and is being replaced by a violence that is distanced and technological.⁷⁸ An 'ethical illusion' that Western politics, according to Cole, seems to be drawn to.

Continuing in a Foucauldian line of thought, Western modern warfare administers a form of power that is characteristic of a more private and distancing application of violence. However, this does result in a Western society in which the public is relatively sheltered from violence, and thus whenever it is confronted with the savagery of the Islamic State, the greater the wave of outrage, shock and terror will be. Therefore, whenever ISIS showcases their brutal atrocities this will have major resonance in the West, and unfortunately the Islamic State is very much aware of this. Whereas the West seems to do as much as possible to distance itself from its violence, ISIS resides on the other end of the spectrum, by completely digitally flooding the world with its vicious brutality. Violence, opposite to the West, is not

⁷⁶ Military of Defense UK, Update: airstrike against Daesh, 24 May 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/update-air-strikes-against-daesh>, (accessed 22 May 2016)

⁷⁷ C. Cole, 'We need an debate on drone killings – whether they should be happening at all', *The Guardian*, 11 May 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/may/11/debate-drone-killings-military-conflict-committee> (accessed 22 May 2016)

⁷⁸ Z. Žižek, *Geweld*, p. 45-46.

muffled away, but celebrated. The Islamic State, in a way, breaks through this Western ethical illusion, by making their violence blatantly visible, knowing that in our Western concept of violence that would have been unjustifiable. Moreover, the Islamic State utilizes this opposition as a means to create an even bigger divide between itself and the West, flourishing in this binary opposition.

First of all, the Islamic State, contrary to the West, creates an illusion of a complete transparency when it comes to their blunt depictions of violence, by not shying away from a ‘marketing of savagery’, as Berger and Stern call ISIS’ media strategy.⁷⁹ Their violence is all out in the open, and they are not afraid of boasting about it either. The Islamic State is therefore often described as a type of ‘medieval reality show’, which provides its audience with scripted and graphic updates on a day-to-day basis. Taking aside the often-gruesome content of these ‘newsfeeds’, the Islamic State does in this example hold up a mirror to the West, by confronting us with how little we are informed of our own military operations.

Furthermore, the Islamic State seems to appeal to the idea of the ‘traditional fighter’, in which the mechanical and the detached kind of violence of the West is being contrasted by a more physical and personal involvement in combat. Their blunt depiction and use of violence, according to the previously mentioned Hans Busstra, is even used as a recruitment tool for attracting young Western men, by appealing to a certain ‘realness’; a ‘realness’ that no longer can be found in the ‘artificial’ West. Young Western men, who would normally seek their thrill through films and video games, are being seduced by ISIS to live up these violent fantasies in the name of the Islamic State.⁸⁰ It could therefore be argued that the promise of violence actually forms a significant part of ISIS’ attraction.

In conclusion, the Islamic State and the West seem to be in a clash of scopical regimes, in which both parties have different ideas on how to represent violence. The opposition between the West and the Islamic State in its core seems to be a power struggle in the representation of violence, in which the theatricality of the Islamic State should be seen as a successful counter strategy in which the proximity of violence is ‘forced’ upon us.

⁷⁹ J.M. Berger and J. Stern, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, p.3.

⁸⁰ *VPRO Tegenlicht Meet Up Rotterdam: Cyberjihad*, [online video], 2016, <http://www.ustream.tv/recorded/85656919>, (accessed 15 May 2016).

Chapter 3: Visual analysis of the Palmyra execution

3.1 Method

Accountability for Method of analysis

Researching the propaganda of ISIS means dealing with extremely sensitive material and it is important to keep this in mind while conducting a visual analysis of the Palmyra video.

Whereas, in our current day and age an aesthetic analysis on public executions in the 17th and 18th centuries might be less problematic since time has created a safe distance from which we can now analyse this phenomenon, in case of the imagery of the Islamic State we are dealing with very recent events and must therefore proceed with caution. The images of the presented empirical material is sensitive, since it depict multiple instances in which human rights are being abused and violated, and therefore, analyzing these images does present us with some difficulty regarding the method of visual analysis. For what is an appropriate method to follow when analyzing the imagery of ISIS, without coming across as insensitive and trivializing?

The manner in which I will be approaching the content of the Palmyra video derived from the approach taken by Stephen F. Eisenman in his influential book ‘The Abu Ghraib Effect’. In this work he uses an art historical framework in order to make sense and analyze the shocking and disturbing torture photographs taken by U.S. military of detainees in the Iraqi prison of Abu Ghraib. He argues that “The Abu Ghraib photographs, in short, are not works of art, but the materials and tools of art history are essential to understand them and counter their effect.”⁸¹. Although I won’t be looking at the Palmyra imagery from an art historical perspective, it does provide me with an approach similar to the reasoning of Eisenman, namely that the propaganda work of ISIS are not to be seen as cinematic works, not as art, but that looking at aesthetic elements of their work does provide the research with tools for conducting a visual analysis.

Method

Since the analysis will be dealing with a public execution that is presented through the medium of the moving image, the analysis will be loosely based on methods that are used

⁸¹ S. F. Eisenman, *The Abu Ghraib Effect*, London, Reaktion Books Ltd, 2007, p.10.

within film theory and visual analysis. In order to create an analysis that fits within the entire structure of the thesis, the analysis will occasionally be supplemented by the discussed theory of the previous chapters.

On the level of film theory the work of David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson will be used as a framework to analyse the basic elements of film technique. Their book *Film Art: An Introduction* (2010) will provide insight into film elements such as narrative, montage, and framing and how these elements are being put to work in producing the message of ISIS.

Moreover, meaning is not just created through the cinematic apparatus alone. In the first chapter I referred to Stephen Wilf and his perspective on the phenomenon of the public execution as a readable text, and how an analysis on the aesthetic elements of the ritual of execution can provide us with an exploration of meaning in the execution ceremony. Regarding the Palmyra video of ISIS as readable text can help us to explore the connotative meaning behind certain aesthetics elements of the videos. Although, he does not mention it, Wilf seems to use a rather semiotic approach in handling his interpretation of execution aesthetics. Therefore, keeping in mind the deeper level of meaning making the methods for visual analysis provided by Kress and van Leeuwen in *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (1996) and the work of Gillian Rose *Visual Methodologies* (2001) will be used as a guideline. Approaching the video as a medium of communication, the methods provided by Kress and van Leeuwen and Rose will grant the analysis with tools in order to interpret the creation of meaning on multiple levels. Social semiotics is convenient, for it provides an in depth research method and simultaneously a focus on the construction of meaning in a cultural context. How for example is the use of children in the video to be interpreted? What meaning and intentions could be behind the choice of location? And how important is the choice of location in relation to the whole video? By applying a method that is based on social semiotics the visual analysis will be able to look for and reveal hidden meanings of representation.

3.2 Analysis

As J.M Berger has said, ISIS has become known for its compelling storytelling. Having said that, by starting off with an analysis of the narrative of the Palmyra video, we will make a first attempt in opening up the messages and meaning that lie within structure of this complex video.

Narrative

As Bordwell and Thompson clearly describe ‘we can consider a narrative a chain of events linked by cause and effect and occurring in time and space’, this means that for the Palmyra video to have a ‘narrative’ it must include a series of events in a way that suggest connections between one event and the next.⁸² In the case of the Palmyra video the narrative structure is quite straightforward. And as a result of watching the video multiple times I have been able to divide the video into six plot segments that all follow a chronological structure:

Segment 1 00:00 min. – 01:24 min.

The first segment, which is about one and a half minute long, can be seen as an introduction and encapsulates the theme of victory after successfully taking in the city of Palmyra. The video starts with the presentation of the golden logo of the local media outlet: Islamic State Wilayat Homs (see: Figure A2). A narrator reads out a verse from the Quran (9:14) followed up by a shot of a crane above which the iconic black flag of the Islamic State can be seen waving, and a scene in which ISIS fighters cheerfully drive by in trucks. The feeling of triumph is further made visible by giving multiple lingering camera shots of dead regime soldiers and later on with footage showing the capturing of a group of men whom are supposedly Assad soldiers. It is with this group of captured men that the narrative continues into the second segment of the video.

Segment 2 01:25 min. – 02:04 min.

The second segment sees a group of twenty-five regime soldiers being led into a prison cell by ISIS fighters, which as we know to be located in the Tadmur Prison (see: Figure A3). After being led into the prison walls, the group of captured soldiers are then again being led out, and escorted out of the prison complex. Quite a considerable amount of time is being

⁸² D. Bordwell and K. Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 2010, p.79.

taken to visualise this process of imprisonment, however, the whole scene seems to be more of a symbolic suggestion of imprisonment. What is striking furthermore is the fact that the scene is almost completely silent, apart from a noise that seems to be coming from the rattling of chains, even though the men are not chained up.

Segment 3 02:18 min. – 02:35 min.

What follows is the third segment of the video. After the group is seen leaving the prison again, ISIS fighters have mounted on jeeps and drive out of the prison complex, while cheerfully waving with flags and weapons as they pass under the entrance arch of Tadmur prison. While the parade continues, the cars pass the ancient arches of Palmyra, here pointing out that the caravan has entered the ancient city (see: Figure A4). During this short segment the images are being accompanied by a jihadi song; an a cappella song that is known as a nasheed.⁸³

Segment 4 02:36 min. – 05:07 min.

The fourth segment is entirely devoted to setting the scene in the amphitheater of Palmyra. The camera provides the viewer with an establishing shot of the stage, i.e. the scaffold. On the stage of the amphitheatre a big black ISIS flag is placed in the center (see: Figure A5). While we see the group of regime soldiers being led onto the stage, the camera shows that the theatre is filled with people (see: Figure A6). As the regime soldiers are being positioned, a group of young boys march onto the scene holding guns, and come to a stop while standing behind the regime soldiers. Their entrance is being dramatised by the previously heard melodic nasheed that is being sung while they line up on the stage. After everyone seems to be positioned, an adult man, dressed in completely black, steps forward on the stage and starts speaking in Arabic. After the man has finished, the viewer is shown an establishing shot of the stage on which the ‘Lion Cubs’, as young fighters are often called, position themselves behind the regime soldiers while the screen transitions into a white background, onto which a similar golden logo appears (see: Figure A8).

Segment 5 05:08 min. – 06:19 min.

This blunt ‘break’ in the video, which almost seems as an advert break, ushers in the fifth and most disturbing segment of the video. What follows is an extensive amount of close up

⁸³ A. Marshal, ‘How Isis got its Anthem’, *The Guardian*, 9 November 2014, available from: <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/nov/09/nasheed-how-isis-got-its-anthem> (accessed 24 May 2016)

shots of the kneeling regime soldiers, lingering on their faces. The shots of the regime soldiers are being alternated with swift glimpses of the young militants and their guns (see: Figure A10). In the background eerie and daunting music can be heard and as the music comes to its climax the screen turns black and someone shout ‘Allahu Akbar’. When the camera abruptly cuts back the viewer is set up on the side of the stage at the end of the line of boys and men, exactly during the moment the boys fire their guns and shoot the soldiers in front of them (see: Figure A11). While the men fall forward, the image is reversed, and we see the men move up again and being shot again. This visual effect is repeated a couple of times from different angles while all being done in slow motion (see: Figure A12). After the men have been shot dead what follows are multiple shots that focus on the mutilated bodies of the men (see: Figure A13). The execution scene is then brought to an end by the re-appearance of the golden logo.

Segment 6 06:20 min. – 09:40 min.

The sixth and final segment of the video is to be seen as a conclusion. We hear a narrator speak about the Tadmur Prison, while a man places explosives in the prison complex. Very swiftly, an execution by beheading is shown of an unknown man, however this promptly cuts away to a scene in which a man is seen holding a remote and presses the button, which then is followed by multiple panorama shots of the Tadmur Prison being blown up. Just as the execution, the explosion is shown over and over again in different forms by different special effects. The video stops at the point that the fighters start praying in what seems to be the remains of the Tadmur Prison.

Breaking up the video into different segments enabled me to better present the ‘cause-and-effect’ narrative that ISIS applies in this video. Moreover, if we ‘read’ the execution video as a text, just as Stephen Wolff did in his research, we find an almost identical ritualistic narrative to that which I discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. The ritual of the public execution of the 17th and 18th century is almost completely acted out in the ISIS video: the imprisonment, the journey to the scaffold, the entrance of the scaffold, and finally the execution itself in front of an audience. Moreover, it revealed that the editing of the video is done in such a manner as to make every segment seem to naturally transition into the next one. This form of editing, which is referred to as continuity editing, is used as a tool in order

to produce a clear and coherent narrative and to make shot transitions almost invisible.⁸⁴ The editing conventions used by ISIS are here used in order to serve the narrative of the ritual of execution. However, why go to such an extent as to present an execution in this manner? What function does this narrative of orchestrated ritualistic violence have in the process of meaning making? What message is to be taken from the plot of the Palmyra video?

A clear answer to these questions can unfortunately not be given, as the meaning and the function of the narrative can be interpreted in a number of ways. But let us start by looking back at the function of the ceremonial narrative in the 17th and 18th century public execution spectacle, as has been done by Walter Benjamin and V.A.C. Gatrell. As they note, it can be argued that by including the execution within a narrative it can make the horror of the execution seem more accessible to the public. As a viewer of the Palmyra video we might be given the impression that we are not ‘just’ watching an execution video, for in a way the ceremonial repetitiousness of the narrative is used to ‘legitimize’ the execution.⁸⁵ The inhumane slaughter of the regime soldiers is through the ritualistic narrative given purpose and meaning. It could therefore be argued that ISIS, by appropriating this ceremonial narrative, is trying to make its violence seem more comprehensive and justified. The video also, simultaneously, through the usage of the familiar narrative, gives the illusion of transparency. They show us ‘everything’, from the capturing, to the imprisonment, and the execution.

Although the main narrative of the video seems to be about the punitive ceremony of the regime soldiers, looking closer one detects that a theme of triumph is constantly apparent throughout the video. This is especially apparent in the instances in which ISIS slightly deviates from the execution narrative. In the first chapter of the thesis I have briefly discussed the deterrent function that the procession to the scaffold had in the overall spectacle of the execution. In the case of the scaffold procession of the 17th and 18th century, the procession was part of the punishment; it functioned to humiliate the convict. However, in the case of the procession that ISIS presents, the journey to the scaffold is transformed into a military parade with boasting ISIS fighters. ISIS’ triumph over the Assad regime is being celebrated in this procession. The journey of the regime soldiers is completely left out and it seems therefore that the humiliation of the regime soldiers is not that important, all that matters is the victory of ISIS. The execution ritual is therefore not necessarily to be seen as a ritual for justice or deterrence, but also as a vessel in order to display the military successes of the Islamic State

⁸⁴ D. Bordwell and K. Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, pp. 236, 237.

over the Assad regime. The narrative of the execution functions as a framework on which a lot more meaning is being attached, for the narrative of the public execution enables ISIS to incorporate the capture and destruction of the Tadmur Prison, the capturing of the city of Palmyra and the execution of regime soldiers.

Location and setting

The Tadmur Prison and the amphitheater of Palmyra are of course crucial to the narrative of the story, for they are of great importance to the production of meaning of the video. An absence of these settings would have resulted in a considerably less effective video, for both sites are places that are embedded in the political and cultural discourse. The taking over of Tadmur Prison as a victory over the Assad regime, and the Ancient city of Palmyra is an act of provocation towards the international community. The settings connote a military triumph over important political and historical symbols.

Using the stage of the roman Amphitheatre as a setting for an execution is of course done in order to stimulate aggravation within the international community, by violating an UNESCO site with such ferocity. To host such an act, which is by many other cultures considered barbaric, in such a ‘treasured’ and ‘civilized’ place, almost seems as a desecration of the Palmyra site. The offences acted out towards the roman city could almost be regarded as iconoclastic acts; i.e. the destruction of imagery for political or religious motives. It fits within the shock-and-awe strategy that ISIS has been utilizing. Moreover, it also seems to fit within a broader trend of global extremism, as Jean Baudrillard argues: ‘The violence of globalization also involves architecture, and hence the violent protest against it also involves the destruction of that architecture.’⁸⁶ Although Baudrillard is here referring to the attack on the Twin Towers in New York, it is not completely out of place. Palmyra has a symbolic value and therefore becomes a treasured site ‘worth destroying or sacrificing’.

However, despite the political meaning and the symbolic value of these places, the use of Palmyra also contributes to a further theatricalisation of the execution. The entertainment element of the video is being emphasized by the use of the theatre as a site of execution. It transforms the violence into a spectacle, and is almost comparable to an Ancient gladiator show. It painfully makes visible, again, this recurring trope of displaying public executions in a theatrical manner.

⁸⁶ J. Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, p. 32

Spatial Organization and Framing

So far I have mostly commented on the setting and the narrative functions of the execution ritual, but on another level aesthetic motifs also contribute to the production of meaning, for instance the manner in which space is organized within an image.

In multiple occasions the Palmyra video utilizes variations on geometrical perspective, a tool well known in the history of Western Art in order to create the illusion of three-dimensional space. However, it can also be applied as a means to create an image that seems harmonious and balanced and therefore appealing to the eye. Throughout the Palmyra video many scenes are framed in such a manner, but to give an illustration, in Figure A3 the emphasis on symmetry and perspective is most explicitly visible. In the image, we find ourselves on the courtyard of Palmyra prison while the regime soldiers are being led into a prison cell under close observation of the lined up ISIS fighters. The train of regime soldiers seems to literally vanish into the vanishing point of the frame, which is placed right in the center of the open door. The fighters who are lined up on the left side of the frame can almost be seen as a vector, directing the gaze of the viewer into the darkness of the door. It is an image that is aesthetically speaking very pleasing, for it makes the scene appear ordered and well organized. And although the vanishing point in Figure A11, in which we see a whole line of regime soldiers being held at gunpoint by the young boys, appears to be outside of the frame, a similar perspective tactic is used in order to create a harmonious image and simultaneously direct the gaze of the viewer to the left,

The use of linear perspective, but also symmetry, which is especially visible in the almost iconic screenshot of Figure A8, seems to be applied by ISIS in order to emit order, structure and control. Both linear perspective and symmetry have been pictorial devices in Art history for centuries, and have been used to create an illusion of stable order in two-dimensional images.⁸⁷ This underlines that besides the narrative, which can be a means to propagate a sense of authority, so as well does the spatial organization of the frames of the video. Both the narrative and the composition of space seem to signify or reflect how ISIS wants the viewer to view the Caliphate, namely as an ordered, disciplined and organized society. The manner in which space is organized in a frame should therefore not be seen as innocent.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ H. Honour and J. Fleming, *A History of Art*, London, Laurence and King Publishing Ltd, 2009, pp. 9-11, 14-16.

⁸⁸ G. Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, London, SAGE Publications Ltd., 2001, p. 45.

Another example of framing can illustrate how the different ‘actors’ in the video are being visually represented and here can produce knowledge about the power structures at hand. Take for example the manner in which the regime soldiers are being visually represented in comparison to the ISIS fighters. Throughout the video it becomes apparent that it is only the regime soldiers of whom the audience is shown relatively intimate shots. Especially during the imprisonment segment and the scene right before the execution, the camera continuously lingers on the individual faces of these men. We are given close ups of their faces and are able to see their expressions, and can detect that they have facial wounds. Within film theory, the close ups of faces are normally used in order to produce an emotional and intimate bond between the character and the audience. However, in the context of this video this might be seen as rather odd. For why should ISIS want its audience to become emotionally close to its enemy?

I want to argue that in this case, the close ups of the regime soldiers are not there to produce an emotional bond with the audience, but to give the audience the ability and the power to blatantly look, to subject the regime soldier to their gaze, and to revel in it. It is the power of looking, and the objectification of the regime soldiers as a result. And this is exactly the aim of ISIS, to objectify and even to dehumanize these men, by subjecting them to the lens of the camera. A power structure that is imbalanced, and a voyeuristic gaze that even continues after they have been shot dead, when the camera almost obsessively pans over the soldiers dead bodies. It resonates the thinking of Laura Mulvey, author of *Visual pleasure and Narrative cinema* (1975), who stated that participating in voyeurism makes the audience into an active viewer, a controlling and even sadistic viewer.⁸⁹ It is here one can argue that there can be a form of violence in looking, turning the gaze into a force that can objective and nullify a human being.

The framing of the regime soldier can therefore be used as an indicator as to how the viewer is being informed on the power relations within the video. For besides having the camera objectifying the regime soldiers by using long lasting close ups, the camera also literally looks down upon the soldier in disdain. Which sits in contrast to the way the ISIS fighters are being presented, always from a respectable distance. Even the young ‘Lion Cubs’ are treated with a form of respect by the camera, by often showing them from a low angle, giving the impression the audience is looking up at them. Furthermore, by framing the young

⁸⁹ L. Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, in J. Jones (ed.), *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, New York, Routledge Chapman Hall, 2002, pp. 49-50.

boys as militant soldiers, not only does it shock and provoke, it should also be regarded as sending a clear message of ISIS's future ambitions. An opinion that is being shared by Meira Svirsky, a journalist for the Clarion Project, who is of the belief that the usage of children in the Palmyra execution signifies '[...] a chilling display to the West,' in which 'the Islamic State is showing us its long-term plan: recruitment and indoctrination of the next generation.'⁹⁰

Costume

Although, it might seem insensible to speak of costumes, I do believe the Islamic State puts a considerable amount of effort in their physical appearance, as we know from previous execution videos in which the executed are often dressed in orange jumpsuits, as a reference to the controversial American detention center Guantanamo Bay. Costumes should therefore be regarded as 'important motivic and causal roles in narrative.' according to Bordwell and Thompson.⁹¹ In case of the Palmyra video, clothing is used in order to emphasize the binary opposition between the ISIS fighters and the regime soldiers. The regime soldiers who are barefooted look demeaned compared to the neatly dressed ISIS fighters. All the fighters are made to look almost identical, wearing sand colored camouflage clothes with a beige bandana. The uniformity in clothing presents ISIS as a unified group, with a sense of authority. This coherence in uniform is even translated to the young executioners, who just as the ISIS fighters, are dressed in sand colored camouflaged uniforms with beige bandana's, emphasizing their role as fighters. All together they look like a coherent 'piece', in which their role is made clear through their uniform.

The identifying role of both the ISIS fighters and the regime soldier's through their uniform is furthermore emphasized by the sheer normality of the audience's appearance. As Figure A6 and A9 illustrate, the men watching the execution are all dressed in normal everyday life attires, underlining the 'dressing up' that is being done for the ones that are seen on stage.

⁹⁰ M. Svirsky, 'ISIS Latest Execution Video: No Mere Gore Flick', *The Clarion Project*, 6 July 2015, <file:///Users/loeshoogkamer/Library/Application%20Support/Firefox/Profiles/yogphi5j.default/zotero/storage/66VH9GTK/isis-latest-execution-video-no-mere-gore-flick.html> (accessed 22 May 2016)

⁹¹ D. Bordwell and K. Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, p.125.

Special effects

Special effects are omnipresent in the video and often function as an enhancement of a virtual game-like experience. Especially in the first segment of the video in which occasionally a green filter is used that is reminiscent of military infrared cameras. At first it seems to function as a means to mask the low production value of the first segment, but simultaneously it adds a feeling of ‘military’ professionalism. The effect enhances the feeling of ‘live-action’ in the field. In this instance it is also utilized in order to create the feeling of a game-like experience, by tapping into video games such as *Call of Duty* and *Grand Theft Auto*. These game references have become a trademark in ISIS propaganda videos, in which often elements of First-person-shooter video games are being incorporated into the images of real violence.⁹²

However, it is during the actual execution that the use of special effects becomes most provocative. Although slow motion and fast forwarding is used throughout the video, it is during the execution that these special effects really function to spectacularise the violence. As the viewer is set up on the side of the stage at the end of the line of boys and men, exactly during the moment the boys fire their guns and shoot the soldiers in front of them and while the men fall forward, the image is reversed, and we see the men move up again and get shot again. This trick or visual effect is repeated a couple of times from different angles while all being done in slow motion. It can here be argued that the special effects are used in order to emphasize the violence, to spectacularise it. A form of what Margaret Bruder would call ‘aestheticized violence’; the special effects are clearly used in order to dwell on the violence, to dramatize the killing and death. Again a form of fetishizing is apparent. The violence on the regime soldiers is among other things being celebrated through the ‘re-killing’ of the soldiers.

Sound and music

The overall use of music and additional sound effects is kept moderately simple in the video. In most of the scenes one only hears the diegetic sounds that come forth out of actions that are seen on screen, and as previously mentioned, sometimes these sounds seemed to be artificially added.

However, what stand out most are the nasheeds that are occasionally being played.

⁹² J. Lesaca, ‘On social media, ISIS uses modern cultural images to spread anti-modern values’, *Brookings*, 24 September 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/techtank/posts/2015/09/24-isis-social-media-engagement>, (accessed 24 May 2016).

Nasheeds, which can be described as Islamic hymns, have an important place in Jihadi culture, according to Behnam Said, who studied the use of nasheeds in jihadist movements.⁹³ In case of the Islamic State the nasheed has been made into its soundtrack, according to Alex Marshal, author of the article *How Isis got its anthem* (2016).⁹⁴ This is certainly noticeable in the Palmyra video, since throughout the video the nasheeds are being used in order to provide a score to the imagery. Especially in the more dramatic scenes, such as the procession to Palmyra, the entrance of the Lion Cubs into the amphitheatre and the demolishing of the Tadmur complex at the end of the video, the nasheeds are used to emphasize these dramatic moments, by simultaneously adding to the cinematic experience.

Additional note on the role of religion in the Palmyra video

Throughout the analysis the subject of religion has not been mentioned, and for a reason, since the images hardly contain any visual reference to the Islam, with exception of the introduction of the video, in which the viewer is briefly shown a text from the Quran. However, it must be noted that it is not through the visuals that ISIS communicates its theological message. If one does not understand Arabic, the theological message of the video will most likely be lost to the viewer, for it is through the narrators that the religious message is being transferred. According to Svirsky the narration in the Palmyra video mainly emphasizes the idea that the actions of the Islamic State are directly being blessed and executed due the will of Allah. Svirsky, who translated the text and of which a copy is added in Appendix B, argues that the video carries out the message that the triumph of the Islamic State over the Assad regime can be ascribed to the blessing of Allah, thus insinuating that the Islamic State directly executes the will of God.⁹⁵

It must be added though that the meaning of the imagery is not drastically altered by the narration, for it is mostly reporting what the viewer already understood by just watching the imagery. This, as I would argue, proves the power of visual storytelling of the Islamic State. For even without understanding the comments of the narrators, as a viewer, you are still perfectly capable of understanding the story that ISIS wants to tell the world.

⁹³ B. Said, 'Hymns (Nasheeds): A Contribution to the Study of the Jihadist Culture', *Studies in conflict & terrorism*, vol. 35, no. 12, 2012, pp. 863, 864.

⁹⁴ A. Marshal, 'How Isis got its anthem', *The Guardian*, 9 November 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/nov/09/nasheed-how-isis-got-its-anthem> (accessed 22 May 2016)

⁹⁵ M. Svirsky, 'ISIS Latest Execution Video: No Mere Gore Flick', *The Clarion Project*, 6 July 2015, <file:///Users/loeshoogkamer/Library/Application%20Support/Firefox/Profiles/yogphi5j.default/zotero/storage/66VH9GTK/isis-latest-execution-video-no-mere-gore-flick.html> (accessed 22 May 2016)

3.3 *The perspective of the viewer*

As previously mentioned, the Islamic State relies heavily on its media attention and therefore viewership has become an essential and crucial element within their virtual warfare. And as a result of their atrocious theatrical display, ISIS is now capable of reaching out to an audience of millions and millions. In the previous section, the visual analysis has laid bare how their theatrical display of execution is producing meaning, by dissecting the aesthetic qualities of the Palmyra video. However, what are the implications of these aesthetic motifs for the position of the viewer? What does it mean to watch such a mediatized spectacle?

I'd here want to refer back to Chapter 1, in which I referred to the article *Scenes of Executions* by Sarat et al. The article explained how the cinematic apparatus, i.e. the narrative, the compositional framing, etc., are responsible for positioning the viewer within a certain perspective in the context of cinematic executions. In the article three motifs of spectatorship were named in relation to cinematic executions: the viewer as an audience member, the viewer backstage, and the viewer as the executed. Although the article discusses Hollywood representations of death penalties, I believe that problematizing the spectator's position has, in light of ISIS' cinematic propaganda material become relevant. For to what extent is the Palmyra video positioning the viewer within a certain perspective? Are we as an audience made into spectators and invited to interpret the Palmyra video as an entertaining performance or are we merely witnessing an execution?

After conducting the visual analysis on the Palmyra video I'd argue that as a viewer we are both positioned as a member of the audience, while simultaneously we get to have an intimate look 'backstage'. Especially the latter seems to be dominant; for it is only during the fourth segment that the camera really takes in the position of an audience member (see: Figure A6). However brief, by positioning the camera within the audience the video here does tune into the collective feeling of watching a public execution, by first of all making the viewer aware that there is an actual physical audience present. As Sarat et al. argued, by creating the illusion that we as viewers are part of the audience ISIS 'invites viewers to join the crowd and imaginatively participate in what is about to unfold.'⁹⁶

⁹⁶ A. Sarat et al., *Journal of the American Bar Foundation*, p. 697.

During the video there are several moments in which the line between being a spectator and being a witness becomes problematic. To illustrate this I will go back to the first shot of the video, the logo as displayed in Figure A2. Every regular cinemagoer and television watcher will be familiar with the opening credits of film and television production companies such as MGM's roaring lion, Disney's magical fairytale castle and the snowy logo of HBO. For most people, seeing these intros often marks the beginning of an entertaining evening at the cinema or a cozy night at home. So normally, one would not be surprised to see such an opening sequence at the beginning of a movie, however, things become rather twisted and surreal when a video by an extremist group starts its opening credits with a similar slickly designed golden logo. As is the case with the Palmyra video, straight from the beginning, the cinematic tone of the video is being set. But instead of starting an enjoyable movie theatre experience, the carefully designed logo of ISIS's media center, in this case, preludes a rather different and gruesome kind of visual story telling.

Especially the display of the logo around the execution problematizes the position of the viewer, since it blurs the line between fiction and reality. The usage of the logo is reminiscent of fictional film or television to such a degree that it almost unconsciously makes you, as a viewer, a spectator, for one does not witness a film. The intention of watching the video as a cinematic text is set right from the start. On the other hand, this can of course be said about all the cinematic conventions used in the video, since it can be argued that they all contribute to a blurring between reality and fiction. Throughout the video, the cinematic conventions that are being used are insinuating that the execution video should and can be experienced as a movie.

Moreover, as the viewer, we are not only part of the spectating audience, we are simultaneously also given an intimate look backstage, the second motif. The ISIS video provides the viewer with an omniscient view of the execution, which for the normal audience is not possible to see. The viewer of the video is given a privileged position from which the execution can be experienced; a detailed experience in which the viewer is able to watch the complete process of the execution. In the article it is mentioned that this type of visualizing an execution is often accompanied with an obsession for the apparatus of death, and this is of course very applicable to the Palmyra imagery in which death and violence is almost being fetishized. As the visual analysis has shown, the objectification and the violence towards the death of the regime soldiers illustrate this fetishisation. The video gives the viewer the chance to shamelessly observe and look. While watching the video the viewer becomes aware of this voyeuristic position, making them uncomfortable.

In conclusion, ISIS is not looking for an objective visual style in order to present their violence. Because by using cinematic conventions it can control the manner in which the viewer perceives their imagery. What ISIS accomplishes with the positioning of the viewer as an omniscient onlooker is that it gives the idea of participation. By giving the viewer knowledge, showing him things that otherwise would not be visible, adds an element of involvement in the process. It could therefore be argued that by looking at the video, whatever its intentions, one is made complicit of the violence being done. ISIS proves that there is violence in looking, because the mere fact that someone looks makes the video successful in its aim to become a spectacle. Personally, this is why I felt rather uncomfortable while watching the video for the first time, for the cinematic conventions made me as a viewer debate on how I should perceive the content, if I was participating in this spectacle, since the cinematic style of the video is so misleading and highly paradoxical. However, I believe ISIS is fully aware of this blurring between fiction and reality, by incorporating this in its representation of violence, conforming to the cinematic expectations of the viewer. The Palmyra video is made to deliberately move within this grey zone of fiction and reality.

Conclusion

The aim of the thesis is to provide a better understanding of the Palmyra execution as a visual phenomenon by providing it with a framework that is able to place it in a mass-cultural tradition of display and theatricality. The thesis departed from the following research question: *What is the role of aesthetics in the ISIS Palmyra execution video?* The thesis furthermore investigated to what extent the ISIS execution videos are a new phenomenon, and to what extent they are a continuation of a longer tradition of public execution? Thus taking aesthetics into consideration, the thesis also reflected on the manner in which the viewer is positioned while watching these images.

The first part of the research focussed on defining the ‘aesthetic qualities’ of public executions by among other things discussing the phenomenon of the execution in a historical context. Public executions in the Europe of the 17th and 18th century were suspenseful, dramatic and intriguing ceremonies in which visible pain and suffering was being staged in front of large audiences. Using the approach of Steven Wilf, thus regarding the public execution as a readable text, allowed the research to specify the aesthetic motifs and accentuate their communicative properties. The first, and most obvious, element of theatricality of the execution is of course the application of a stage, a motif that is both visible in the historical execution as is in the execution in the Palmyra theatre. However, the utilisation of the Palmyra amphitheatre as an execution site adds a whole new level of meaning, since it on the one hand enhances the theatrical character of the execution, on the other hand it is used as an act of provocation or as an act of triumph over this historical international symbol. The amphitheatre of Palmyra as an image of historical and cultural value is completely being jeopardized by the violence that ISIS poses upon it.

Besides the stage being an important motif in constructing the visual display of violence, Wilf pointed towards the narrative of the public execution as a dominant aesthetic element in the construction of meaning. Taking into account the writings on the function of the ritual of the public execution, by V.A.C. Gatrell, Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault, the function of the ritual of public execution by the Islamic State can be interpreted in several ways. Taking in a Foucauldian stance, the ritual is not just aimed to serve the deterrent function of the public execution; it simultaneously provides a visual reminder of the power of the sovereign. The ritual presented in the Palmyra video can thus be interpreted as an assertion that ISIS regards itself as a ‘sovereign’ power, or prefers to present itself that way. As

Foucault suggest, the ritual of the execution should be seen as a display of power and authority, a notion that in the case of the Palmyra video, as I argue, is being further emphasized by the spatial organisation of the frames. However, taking Walter Benjamin's writings into consideration, the appropriation of the ritual is not just a display of power it is also a means to disguise the 'illegitimacy' of this power, by giving the violence an 'artificial' meaning through its incorporating into a story. Taking this to a broader context by referring back to J.M. Burgers statement that the Islamic State has developed itself into storytellers, the narrative of the Palmyra execution can be seen as an example for this. The violence of the Islamic State is being reinforced with meaning through the narrative of the ritual. Returning to the research questions, the performed violence of the Islamic State in many occasions can thus be seen as a continuation of the public display of the execution spectacle. Especially the Palmyra execution seems to fit in a long tradition of theatrical state killing.

However, although the ISIS executions can be explained through a historical context, the use of visual technologies to represent the event has added a whole new dimension to the display of executions. The ISIS executions are being indirectly experienced through the medium of film, and thus pose questions on the active involvement of imagery in contemporary extremism. The Palmyra execution has been part of a larger development within extremism, a development that saw the rise of the Islamic State as visual storytellers. By applying theory of Jean Baudrillard the developments around ISIS can be placed in a much larger contemporary phenomenon in which images become part of the execution of violence. This means that besides being a continuation of a historical phenomenon of execution display, it also addresses a phenomenon that is unique to our time, in which the image has become part of violent ideologies. Within the Islamic State propaganda the relation between the image and reality has been further radicalised, which according to Baudrillard started after the terrorist attack of 9/11. The Islamic State seems to be creating their own 'image-events' by using modern visual technologies to enhance their virtual visibility and underscore their need for spectatorship. By discussing Susan Sontag's views on authenticity and realism in relation to the Islamic State imagery, it became apparent that the aim of their propaganda is not to create a 'realistic' image of them, but that the function of the theatricalisation of the Islamic State lies in the fact that it enables them to visualise their fantasies. As J.M. Berger said 'terrorism is theatre' and thus spectatorship becomes fundamental for the Islamic State.⁹⁷ Taking into account this need for spectatorship the

⁹⁷ Cyberjihad, *Tegenlicht*, VPRO, 10 April 2016, [TV Documentary]

Islamic State seemed to have realised that portraying reality does not 'sell', deliberately moving within this grey zone of fiction and reality.

This results in a rather ambiguous position of the one watching the videos, as the theatricalisation of the Palmyra execution problematizes the manner how the viewer is suppose to perceive this video. We are not made witnesses to the horrible execution, but through the cinematic apparatus the viewer is being 'forced' into a position of spectatorship. By exploring how the cinematic apparatus has been contributing to the theatrical experience of the Palmyra video, the thesis was able to reflect on the type of viewership the propaganda stimulates. By applying the motifs of spectatorship that Sarat et al. developed within the context of cinematic representations of executions, the research was able to identify how these cinematic conventions were used in order to force the viewer into a more spectacular form of viewership. Through the application of cinematic conventions the intention of watching the execution video as a cinematic text, thus as a spectator, is being emphasized. On the level of the viewer the aesthetic qualities of the execution video, are thus used as a form of power, by forcefully taking control over the manner in which these should be perceived. Incorporating the ideas of Francois Debrix on the notion of the Sublime can complement on the control over the viewer. The aesthetic elements of the location, the narrative, and the cinematic conventions are put to work to overcome a feeling of discomfort and shock when seeing the violence, a process that can be ascribed to the sublime, according to Debrix. In their videos the Islamic State uses the sublime as an ideological recruitment tool, a persuasive instrument to numb moral values or create new ones. Simultaneously, it insinuates that through the image the spectator is participating in the violence, as the gaze of the spectator becomes a violent force. The active gaze of the spectator becomes involved in the objectification and the dehumanisation of the executed Syrian men. Thus by hijacking cinematic tropes and incorporating a theatrical ritualistic narrative, the Islamic State came up with a performed violence that trivialises the notion of watching, by controlling and steering it into a type of viewership that is close to accept and appreciate the imagery of violence.

In short, studying the aesthetics of the Palmyra video resulted in the findings that the video is not 'just' an execution, but is fully immersed in a complex set of different political, cultural, religious and historical discourses. As the thesis has pointed out the role of aesthetics in the execution video can be said to have multiple functions. The incorporation of a theatrical violence into a story has made their brutalities more accessible, it gives them the opportunity for a display of power, a theatrical display that at the same time also functions as

a means to mask the illegitimacy of this power. By moving away from realistic representations of violence, the Islamic State is able to showcase and sell their fantasies and utopian ideas. Furthermore, the theatricality of the violence attracts a versatile audience that can be provoked, intrigued and recruited. While simultaneously turning its audience into a weapon, by controlling the way in which they look, using their controlled gaze as a means to dehumanise and objectify.

Returning to my personal reflections on watching the Palmyra execution that I shared in the introduction of this thesis, even though I fully disagree with their ideas and actions, I still immersed into their spectacle of violence and their imagined view on reality. My own ambiguous feelings towards the Palmyra video thus conformed the 'like-a-movie' experience that ISIS aims to create, and made me into a consuming spectator of violence. The movie-like familiarity of the video makes it eerie, but simultaneously accessible, and made me able to watch the execution. In conclusion, my fascination and almost obsession with their surreal representation of violence, painfully proves the seductive power of their imagery.

Appendix A Imagery List

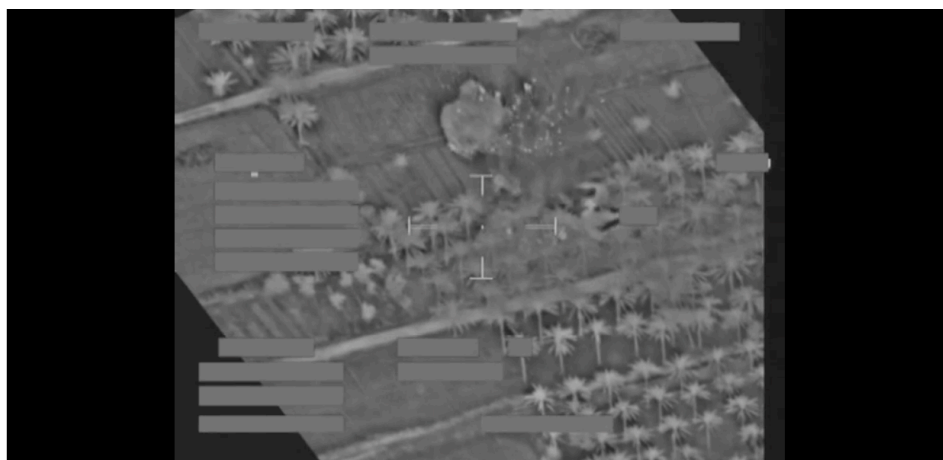


Figure A1

RAF Tornado strike Deash weapons cache 16 May 2016: The screenshot shows the bombing of an ISIS bunker containing ammunition and supplies by the British Air Force, taken from an RAF plane.⁹⁸



Figure A2

Palmyra Execution Video: The opening credits of the Palmyra execution video showing the logo of the media outlet Islamic State Wilayat Homs.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ 'RAF Tornado strike Deash weapons cache 16 May 2016', *Ministry of Defence*, 19 May 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/update-air-strikes-against-daesh> (accessed 23 May 2016)

⁹⁹ 'ISIS Child Soldiers Shooting Execution in Palmyra, Syria', *Islamic State Wilayat Homs*, 00:00:11 min., 4 July 2015. Available at: <http://www.zerocensorship.com/t/uncensored-isis-execution/136259-isis-child-soldiers-shooting-execution-in-palmyra-syria-graphic-video#axzz42WBgvpnj> (accessed 20 March 2016)



Figure A3

Palmyra Execution Video: Regime soldiers being led into a Tadmur Prison cell, while being guarded by ISIS fighters.¹⁰⁰



Figure A4

Palmyra Execution Video: A caravan of trucks mounted with ISIS fighters drive by Palmyra's Ancient arches on their way to the Palmyra amphitheatre.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ 'ISIS Child Soldiers Shooting Execution in Palmyra, Syria', Islamic State Wilayat Homs, 00:01:27 min., 4 July 2015. Available at: <http://www.zerocensorship.com/t/uncensored-isis-execution/136259-isis-child-soldiers-shooting-execution-in-palmyra-syria-graphic-video#axzz42WBgvpnj> (accessed 20 March 2016)

¹⁰¹ 'ISIS Child Soldiers Shooting Execution in Palmyra, Syria', Islamic State Wilayat Homs, 00:02:28 min., 4 July 2015. Available at: <http://www.zerocensorship.com/t/uncensored-isis-execution/136259-isis-child-soldiers-shooting-execution-in-palmyra-syria-graphic-video#axzz42WBgvpnj> (accessed 20 March 2016)



Figure A5

*Palmyra Execution Video: View on the stage of the Palmyra amphitheatre with in the centre the flag of the Islamic State.*¹⁰²



Figure A6

*Palmyra Execution Video: View on the stage from the perspective of the audience. The regime soldiers have been led onto stage, while the young militant boys can be seen marching in front of the stage.*¹⁰³

¹⁰² 'ISIS Child Soldiers Shooting Execution in Palmyra, Syria', Islamic State Wilayat Homs, 00:02:36 min., 4 July 2015. Available at: <http://www.zerocensorship.com/t/uncensored-isis-execution/136259-isis-child-soldiers-shooting-execution-in-palmyra-syria-graphic-video#axzz42WBgvpnj> (accessed 20 March 2016)

¹⁰³ 'ISIS Child Soldiers Shooting Execution in Palmyra, Syria', Islamic State Wilayat Homs, 00:02:48 min., 4 July 2015. Available at: <http://www.zerocensorship.com/t/uncensored-isis-execution/136259-isis-child-soldiers-shooting-execution-in-palmyra-syria-graphic-video#axzz42WBgvpnj> (accessed 20 March 2016)



Figure A7

Palmyra Execution Video: A medium close-up of the ‘Lion Cubs’ entering the stage.¹⁰⁴



Figure A8

Palmyra Execution Video: Establishing shot in which the Lion Cubs have positioned themselves behind the kneeling regime soldiers, while an ISIS fighter dressed in black has stepped forward.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ ‘ISIS Child Soldiers Shooting Execution in Palmyra, Syria’, Islamic State Wilayat Homs, 00:02:51 min., 4 July 2015. Available at: <http://www.zerocensorship.com/t/uncensored-isis-execution/136259-isis-child-soldiers-shooting-execution-in-palmyra-syria-graphic-video#axzz42WBgvpnj> (accessed 20 March 2016)

¹⁰⁵ ‘ISIS Child Soldiers Shooting Execution in Palmyra, Syria’, Islamic State Wilayat Homs, 00:03:03 min., 4 July 2015. Available at: <http://www.zerocensorship.com/t/uncensored-isis-execution/136259-isis-child-soldiers-shooting-execution-in-palmyra-syria-graphic-video#axzz42WBgvpnj> (accessed 20 March 2016)



Figure A9

Palmyra Execution Video: The audience members watching the execution. One man is shown waving with an Islamic State flag.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ 'ISIS Child Soldiers Shooting Execution in Palmyra, Syria', Islamic State Wilayat Homs, 00:03:43 min., 4 July 2015. Available at: <http://www.zerocensorship.com/t/uncensored-isis-execution/136259-isis-child-soldiers-shooting-execution-in-palmyra-syria-graphic-video#axzz42WBgvpnj> (accessed 20 March 2016)

-- The following pages contain graphic imagery --



Figure A10

Palmyra Execution Video: A young militant is shown from the back holding a gun while standing behind the kneeling regime soldiers.¹⁰⁷



Figure A11

Palmyra Execution Video: The young militants are seen lined up and holding up their guns while aiming at the regime soldiers in front of them.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ 'ISIS Child Soldiers Shooting Execution in Palmyra, Syria', Islamic State Wilayat Homs, 00:05:40 min., 4 July 2015. Available at: <http://www.zerocensorship.com/t/uncensored-isis-execution/136259-isis-child-soldiers-shooting-execution-in-palmyra-syria-graphic-video#axzz42WBgvpnj> (accessed 20 March 2016)

¹⁰⁸ 'ISIS Child Soldiers Shooting Execution in Palmyra, Syria', Islamic State Wilayat Homs, 00:05:50 min., 4 July 2015. Available at: <http://www.zerocensorship.com/t/uncensored-isis-execution/136259-isis-child-soldiers-shooting-execution-in-palmyra-syria-graphic-video#axzz42WBgvpnj> (accessed 20 March 2016)



Figure A12

Palmyra Execution Video: A frontal view on the young militants shooting the regime soldiers.¹⁰⁹



Figure A13

Palmyra Execution Video: One of the multiple shots in which the regime soldiers are seen lying dead after they have been shot.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ 'ISIS Child Soldiers Shooting Execution in Palmyra, Syria', Islamic State Wilayat Homs, 00:05:57 min., 4 July 2015. Available at: <http://www.zerocensorship.com/t/uncensored-isis-execution/136259-isis-child-soldiers-shooting-execution-in-palmyra-syria-graphic-video#axzz42WBgvpnj> (accessed 20 March 2016)

¹¹⁰ 'ISIS Child Soldiers Shooting Execution in Palmyra, Syria', Islamic State Wilayat Homs, 00:06:05 min., 4 July 2015. Available at: <http://www.zerocensorship.com/t/uncensored-isis-execution/136259-isis-child-soldiers-shooting-execution-in-palmyra-syria-graphic-video#axzz42WBgvpnj> (accessed 20 March 2016)

Appendix B Transcription and translation of the Palmyra video¹¹¹

‘Verse from the Quran (9:14)

Fight them; Allah will punish them by your hands and will disgrace them and give you victory over them and satisfy the breasts of a believing people.

Narrator:

The soldiers of the Islamic State are still fighting the Alawites and their allies. Islamic State soldiers are punishing them. After every battle you see their bodies thrown on the ground or taken as prisoners.

God gave his servants the city of Tadmur and also the check points and companies around it. Alawites prisoners fell in their hands, guilty of torturing Sunni citizens. They had to taste what they did.

Inside the theater:

Praise the Lord who helps the believers and humiliates the infidels. We sent three messages from the land of the Caliphate and the city of Tadmur:

The first message is to you, the Muslims: We shall give you victory and save your lands, even if you hate us.

The second message is to our Caliph Abu Bakr al-Bagdadi: Today we are fulfilling your oath when you said that we shall have our revenge, even if it takes time.

The third message is to the Arab idolators, the infidel idolators and the criminals: We arrived here despite your fortifications that you thought will keep God far from you. We broke through them.’

A youth speaks:

Here are the lion cubs of the Caliphate. They will execute the punishment of God against these Alawites prisoners that God enabled us to capture in the last battles of Homs.

Narrator:

The city of Tadmur can’t be mentioned without the memory of its prison, in which the Alawite regime committed its crimes. They used to torture prisoners here. Today, after the Islamic State soldiers arrived and purified it from the Alawites soldiers, they turned the last page of history for this prison.

¹¹¹ The transcription and translation is part of M. Svirsky, ‘ISIS Latest Execution Video: No Mere Gore Flick’, *The Clarion Project*, 6 July 2015, <http://www.clarionproject.org/analysis/isis-latest-execution-video-no-mere-gore-flick>, (accessed 22 May 2016)

Islamic State soldier:

God enabled Islamic State soldiers to free the city of Tadmur from the Alawites. This prison was filled with evil and treachery. Thousands of Muslims were killed and tortured here. Today the prison is what you can see (ruined). We tell the Alawites: With the help of God we shall free the prisoners and destroy your thrones and your prisons in all of the Muslim countries.'

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