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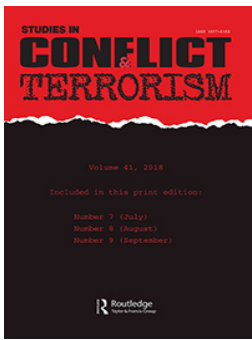
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Jihadi Kitsch: The *Promesse de Bonheur* of Islamist Terrorism

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ABSTRACT


Elaborating on conceptualizations of kitsch in the realm of art and sociology in the context of ISIS propaganda and culture, this article introduces the concept of jihadi kitsch. Kitsch is characterized by a compulsion to escape from the banality of daily reality and lack of coherent meaning in modern society through, in the words of the philosopher and sociologist Theodor Adorno, a self-made and futile *promesse de bonheur*, i.e. promise of happiness. The article explicates and illustrates seven distinct aspects of jihadi kitsch: (1) escape from daily life, (2) eroticization of power and “pornokitsch,” (3) “kitsch of death”: romanticized and trivialized violence and death, (4) purity and filth, (5) moral collapse, (6) simplism: an easily accessible worldview, (7) nostalgia: looking back with longing to an authentic past. Capturing the kitsch aspect of jihadi propaganda and culture, the article contributes a new theoretical approach to the existing literature discussing the attractions of jihadism, and ends with a discussion on how the concept of jihadi kitsch can potentially contribute to combating Islamist terrorism through humor.

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... facing the kitsch aesthetic is the unfathomable world of myths; facing the visions of harmony, the lights of the apocalypse; facing the young girls crowned with flowers and the snow-capped peaks of the Bavarian Alps, the call to the dead of the Feldherrnhalle, the ecstasy of the Götterdämmerung, the visions of the end of the world. Facing Hitler as Everyman—the fonder of blond children and fancier of adventure films and cream tarts—a blind force thrown toward nothingness, butcher hooks, and visions of cities going up in flames. Facing the tranquil force of moral values is the flickering light of the fires of extermination. In this contradictory series, it is not one thing or another that is decisive in itself; it is their coexistence that gives the totality its significance.¹

Numerous scholars have pointed to cultivation of traits such as violence, martyrdom, brutality, cruelty, sadism, shock effects, theatricality, spectacle, sentimentality, pomposity, apocalypse, horrorism, and messianism as the most distinctive and prominent aspects of violent jihadi² propaganda and culture, especially of Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS).³ This article points to the fact that there is one characteristic of violent jihadi propaganda and culture that has been ignored in scholarship: the kitsch aspect.

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The concept of kitsch is used derogatorily in the realm of art where it is traditionally associated with bad, cheap, and mass-produced art, which with banal effects satisfies nostalgic wishful thinking and the wish to surround oneself with homey abundance.⁴ Kitsch objects cannot fulfill the promise of what they pretend to be (i.e. good art), and therefore they seem (to the connoisseur of art) to be pretentious and esthetically inadequate.⁵ Kitsch commonly relies on the formulaic and stock emotional responses, as it evokes emotions that are enjoyed without much intellectual or esthetic effort.⁶ Moreover, to create strong emotions in the consumer it presents reality in an overly simplistic way.⁷ In a wider sociological conceptualization of kitsch as a distinctive form of experience in modern society, kitsch is a facile and widespread way of satisfying longing for simplicity, clarity, and harmony.⁸ Its promise of easy, esthetical solutions to the complex problems of modern quotidian life constitutes its main power of attraction.⁹ The philosopher and sociologist Theodor Adorno states that kitsch “is created by a desperate compulsion to escape from the abstract sameness of things by a kind of self-made and futile *promesse de bonheur* [i.e. promise of happiness].”¹⁰ By experiencing the world in a kitschified way, one can seek to escape from the drabness and banality of daily life and the lack of coherent meaning in modern society.¹¹ Temporally, one escapes either to a reconstructed and selectively remembered self-biographical past or to “the idyll of history,” back to some imagined golden period of a nation or religious group.¹² Spatially, the escape has to do with illusory and exotic countries, the prominent traits of which are their foreseeability, simplicity, and existential security and purity.¹³ One laments the norm breakdown of modernity and yearns for closely knit communities, a *Gesellschaft* as described by the German philosopher and sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies.¹⁴ Adorno stresses that one of the most tenacious characteristics of kitsch is “prevarication of feelings, fictional feelings in which no one is actually participating, and thus neutralization of these feelings” and summarizes his insight: “Kitsch parodies catharsis.”¹⁵

In the context of political extremism, the concept of kitsch has previously been used by the Czech-American historian Saul Friedländer¹⁶ in research on Nazi ideology, and by Gillo Dorfles¹⁷ and Alejandro Yarza¹⁸ in research on Italian and Spanish fascism. Specifically, relevant to the context of Islamist terrorism, several scholars have previously used the concept of kitsch in research on the sociology of religion.¹⁹ Furthermore, Mehmet Ümit Necef has developed the concept of “ethnic kitsch” to criticize Westerner’s approach to non-Western societies as well as immigrants and their descendants in the Western countries.²⁰ According to Necef, ethnic kitsch is a nostalgic form of experience that uses various esthetic means, expressed in sentimental, idyllic, and romanticizing clichés about pre-modern and “exotic societies.”²¹ It is a certain way of aestheticizing pre-modernity based on an esthetic lie that creates a false, dreamlike, and fictional universe.²² This kitschy way of perceiving pre-modernity is, according to Necef, a way for (late) modern society to project out its longings, desires, fears, and frustrations, and thus does not intend to represent a pre-modern reality.²³ Instead, it is a way of constructing “a stranger” that is in opposition to (late) modernity, and which helps to construct modern identities.²⁴

This article aims at theoretically elaborating on the concept of kitsch in the context of jihadi propaganda and culture, and introduces the concept of jihadi kitsch. Indeed, it is our conviction that scholars in the research field of Islamist radicalization and terrorism studies have previously touched on the kitsch aspect, though without explicitly

using the term kitsch.²⁵ Thus, we do not claim to be either the first or the only researchers to observe certain aspects of the violent jihadi propaganda and culture as kitsch. However, aiming at contributing theoretically to the field of Islamist radicalization and terrorism studies by introducing the concept of jihadi kitsch, we are, to the best of our knowledge, the first researchers to explicitly theoretically elaborate on the concept of kitsch in the context of jihadism. In our explication of the concept of jihadi kitsch, we will use several illustrative examples of the phenomenon from ISIS propaganda and culture. These examples are taken from so-called official propaganda (i.e. propaganda produced by terror organizations) as well as unofficial propaganda (i.e. propaganda produced by individuals themselves).²⁶ While both official and unofficial propaganda obviously provide insights into propaganda, unofficial propaganda can in addition reveal much about jihadi culture among its supporters. Indeed, analyzing unofficial propaganda cannot only shed light on the propaganda narratives attracting people to Salafi-jihadism, it can also function as a unique lens through which to gain insights into the attractions of Salafi-jihadism.²⁷ Drawing on a phenomenological approach to the conceptualization of attractions of terrorism, we posit that terrorism is as much an existential matter as it is a political one, involving “a set of feelings, concerns, aspirations or desires” relating to one’s being-in-the-world,²⁸ and thus one’s culture. More specifically, some of our examples are official propaganda taken from the ISIS online magazine *Dabiq*, while the rest of our examples are unofficial propaganda taken from scholarly texts or open sources. Our illustrative examples contain elements of what the communication theorist Jacques Ellul²⁹ in his differentiation between two types of propaganda has characterized as strategic and tactical messaging. Strategic messaging intends to establish the political identity of a movement by describing its ideological agenda. Tactical messaging, by contrast, aims at inciting emotions by aestheticizing and sentimentalizing politics and seeks to obtain immediate results in the form of *inter alia* radical decisions and violent action. Notwithstanding the context, one of the main goals of political movements is agitation, that is, to “arouse feelings of frustration, conflict, and aggression, [all of] which lead individuals to action.”³⁰ Accordingly, we see jihadi kitsch as a constitutive aspect of jihadi propaganda and culture, and not just a sporadic aspect. With this article we of course do not claim that jihadism can only or mainly be understood through the prism of kitsch. Instead, we seek to supplement the previous literature on jihadi propaganda and culture with a new understanding of this as jihadi kitsch, thus bringing into focus the emotions, images, and phantasms that animate jihadi culture.

In the following, we start by reviewing the existing research implicitly touching on kitsch in the context of violent jihadi propaganda and culture. Then we outline our further elaborations on the concept of jihadi kitsch, before ending with a concluding discussion on how the concept of jihadi kitsch can potentially contribute to combating violent jihadism through humor.

Previous Research Touching on Kitsch and Jihadism

To the best of our knowledge, the only person who has previously explicitly used the term kitsch to describe jihadi culture is the British journalist and author Andrew Anthony. In his profile of the Norwegian scholar Thomas Hegghammer and the book

he edited in 2017, *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists*,³¹ Anthony quotes Hegghammer as observing that jihadis have a “rich aesthetic culture that is essential for understanding their mindset and worldview.”³² Anthony comments that “rich” is an unusual choice of word to describe a culture that is primarily concerned with prohibition of expression, imagery, literature, sexuality, sensuality, and a huge range of human activities.³³ Instead, Anthony states that a more fitting word is perhaps “kitsch” and points to two traits of much of jihadi poetry and artwork presented in the book: sentimentality and self-glorification.³⁴ In particular, he draws attention to the visual jihadi material in one of the book chapters entitled “The Visual Culture of Jihad” by Afshon Ostavar, which, according to Anthony, is replete with “heavenly representations that wouldn’t look out of place hanging on the fence of Kensington Gardens, alongside paintings of cute cats and doe-eyed children.”³⁵ Anthony’s further dialogue with Hegghammer himself shows that although not being explicit about it, Hegghammer is, in the view of Anthony, not blind to the kitschy elements in jihadi culture, with Hegghammer stating in the interview with Anthony: “It’s a very romantic culture, insofar as they see themselves as historical heroes, knights in shining armor, every one of them. And they can be very pompous. Humor is unevenly distributed in the movement—some of them can be quite funny and self-ironic, but the average level of self-irony is very low. It’s a movement that takes itself very seriously.”³⁶

Later, Simon Cottee, in *ISIS and the Pornography of Violence* (2019), in his reflections on Hegghammer’s *Jihadi Culture*, agrees with Anthony’s critique of Hegghammer’s description of jihadi culture as a “rich culture,” but he does not employ the concept of kitsch himself.³⁷ However, Cottee’s own reflections on Hegghammer’s book *Jihadi Culture* verge on an analysis which recognizes the kitschy elements. Among other things, Cottee seems to recognize what both Higgins³⁸ and Friedländer³⁹ describe as “incongruous juxtaposition” (i.e. placing incompatible and disharmonious things or concepts together literally or figuratively to create emotional responses). For example, Cottee does not hesitate to describe the mindset of a jihadi mockingly: “Yes, it is possible to saw off heads and feel no remorse. To produce third rate poetry but two steps away from one’s sex slave.”⁴⁰ Cottee also points to the irony of the founder of Islamic State, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s, twin nicknames in jihadi circles: “the Slaughterer” and “He Who Weeps a Lot.” “The Slaughterer” is a reference to videos where he is seen beheading people, while “He Who Weeps a Lot” refers to the fact that he was known for getting emotional and weeping during prayer and when speaking about Muslim women’s suffering under foreign occupation. Cottee comments on the apparent “incongruous juxtaposition” by remarking: “It is possible to enjoy your work as a proficient beheader of the ‘infidels and apostates’ and still partake in a good cry.”⁴¹ In the jihadi mindset, weeping and beheading, which respectively signify sensitivity and cruelty, apparently fit together. Cottee praises Hegghammer’s book *Jihadi Culture* for being original and ground-breaking, but also criticizes it for being a work of “studied scholarly open-mindedness that foregoes the considerable opportunities for making fun of a culture that takes itself very seriously indeed.”⁴² On the contrary, Cottee himself, as for example in *Black Flags of the Caribbean* (2021), does not miss an opportunity to mock the U.S.-born radical cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, who in a short video clip directs a diatribe against America: “Awlaki is wearing a green camouflage

jacket, with a large, gold-plated knife precariously shoved down his pants. He looks and sounds utterly ridiculous, and you wonder how he has become such a touchstone for Western jihadists.”⁴³ While Cottee apparently perceives many aspects of jihadi propaganda and culture as kitsch and holds it up to ridicule, Hegghammer is reluctant to ironize certain aspects of jihadism which border on being obviously ridiculous.

There may be several reasons why scholars have previously not explicitly used the concept of kitsch to explicate jihadism and why few have shown interest in investigating the potential of the use of humor in combating Islamist radicalization and terrorism. One reason may be that jihadism for some can be a controversial and sensitive subject to treat in a humorous way. Humor is in its essence a complex phenomenon and the ambiguity associated with the “real” meaning assigned to humorous statements by the narrator allows the narrator to risk messages (even serious messages) that might be unacceptable if stated seriously.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, mentioning groups like Islamic State, with their associations of brutality and gore, might keep some from making fun of jihadism. Then there is the “whataboutery”: why concern oneself with Sunni jihadis but not other political forces using violence. In *Joking about Jihad: Comedy and Terror in the Arab World* (2020) Gilbert Ramsay and Moutar Alkheder describe this argument as “the attempt not to broaden the debate, but simply avoid it.”⁴⁵ Other more deep-seated reason can be found in Cottee’s reflections on the sociologist Stanley Cohen’s warning against the danger of being “too respectful” in decoding the “subcultural detritus” of deviant groups,” as it is the core task of the sociologist of deviance to “understand without being too respectful.”⁴⁶ However, according to Cottee: “If there is a tension in *Jihadi Culture*, it is that it leans too far in the direction of the latter.”⁴⁷

Jihadi Kitsch

In the following, elaborating on conceptualizations of kitsch from the realm of art and sociology in the context of jihadi ISIS propaganda and culture, we introduce the concept of jihadi kitsch by explicating and illustrating seven distinct aspects of jihadi kitsch: (1) escape from daily life, (2) eroticization of power and “pornokitsch,” (3) “kitsch of death”: romanticized and trivialized violence and death, (4) purity and filth, (5) moral collapse, (6) simplism: an easily accessible worldview (7) nostalgia: looking back with longing to an authentic past.

Escape from Daily Life

In *Radicalization* (2018) the British sociologist Kevin McDonald analyzes the young American jihadi Moner Abu-Salha’s Facebook postings.⁴⁸ Abu-Salha went to Syria and shortly before he carried out a martyr operation on 25 May 2014, he posted a video in which he stated:

I lived in America. I know how it is. You have all the fancy amusement parks and the restaurants, and the food and all this crap, and the cars and you think you’re happy? You’re not happy, you’re never happy! I was never happy. I was always sad and depressed. Life sucked. I had to walk from work to home, I begged Allah, crying a lot, to get me

out of this land. All you do is work 40, 50, 60 hours a week, and then you go waste it on garbage, and then you do the same thing over—this is what you do your whole life.⁴⁹

Abu-Salha's description of why he left America is a good illustration of this young man's—expressed in the words of Adorno—, “desperate compulsion to escape from the abstract sameness of things” and how he is fascinated by a “kind of self-made and futile *promesse de bonheur*.”⁵⁰ In the statement, he demonstrates distance from the boring daily routine life in America where all you do is work and repeat the same things. Instead, Abu-Salha seems to be attracted to ISIS's “promise of happiness” and excitement, and with his statement he actively participates in the construction of this false dream.

Inspired by Adorno, Calinescu emphasizes kitsch's “vague hallucinatory power, its spurious dreaminess, its promise of an easy catharsis.”⁵¹ Consequently, “the esthetics of deception and self-deception” is an important aspect of kitsch, according to Calinescu.⁵² Let's see how these theoretical considerations can help us to understand the kitsch aspect of jihadi propaganda. Exactly one year before Islamic State lost control of its largest city, Mosul, in July 2017, followed by the loss of its *de facto* political capital of Raqqa, Islamic State managed to publish the 15th issue of its online magazine *Dabiq*. In this last issue a text entitled “Why We Hate You and Why We Fight You” begins with a pompous declaration: “We hate you, first and foremost, because you are disbelievers,”⁵³ and continues:

We have been commanded to fight the disbelievers until they submit to the authority of Islam, either by becoming Muslims, or by paying *jizya*⁵⁴—for those afforded this option—and living in humiliation under the rule of the Muslims. Thus, even if you were to stop fighting us, your best-case scenario in a state of war would be that we would suspend our attacks against you—if we deemed it necessary.⁵⁵

The text continues in the same reiterating and preaching tone on the reasons for the hatred:

We hate you because your secular, liberal societies permit the very things that Allah has prohibited [...] Your secular liberalism has led you to tolerate and even support “gay rights,” to allow alcohol, drugs, fornication, gambling, and usury to become widespread, and to encourage the people to mock those who denounce these filthy sins and vices. As such, we wage war against you to stop you from spreading your disbelief and debauchery—your secularism and nationalism, your perverted liberal values, your Christianity and atheism—and all the depravity and corruption they entail.⁵⁶

Moreover, the text “Why We Hate You and Why We Fight You” does not hold back from attacking “liberals”: “What's important to understand here is that although some may argue that your foreign policies are the extent of what drives our hatred, this particular reason is secondary,”⁵⁷ and the tirade goes on:

The fact is, even if you were to stop bombing us, imprisoning us, torturing us, vilifying us, and usurping our lands, we would continue to hate you because our primary reason for hating you will not cease to exist until you embrace Islam. Even if you were to pay *jizya* and live under the authority of Islam in humiliation, we would continue to hate you.⁵⁸

The text ends with “the three exits we provide”: “Islam, *jizyah*, or—as a last means of fleeting respite—a temporary truce.”⁵⁹ These statements can be described as noisy ranting and can undoubtedly be analyzed through the prism of concepts such as

radicalization, extremism, and subculture to interpret the bitter rage in the text. However, they can also be seen tongue in cheek as kitsch and expounded as the delusions of a self-glorifying, arrogant, and garrulous teenager who is trying to look tough. The ISIS operative talks like a high-pitched member of a street-gang who demands “protection money” from a local shopkeeper. Probably not many people have experienced the text as kitsch at the time it was published, since ISIS had an aura of dreadfulness, resoluteness, and sheer brutality. Associations to human suffering do not normally go hand in hand with kitsch experience. However, when read retrospectively, the kitsch aspect becomes more obvious. As the sociologist Henning Bech underlines in his elaboration on kitsch, there is a “built-in temporal dimension” in the glide of aura toward kitsch and the related phenomenon, camp.⁶⁰ In the text “Why We Hate You and Why We Fight You” ISIS arrogates itself an immense power it did not have, just as it promises easy spiritual catharsis of the “filth” of *kuffar* society such as homosexuality, alcohol, drugs, etc., through becoming “real” Muslims and performing *hijrah* (i.e. emigration) to ISIS—which is also an illusion. These are the hallucinatory and self-deceiving aspects. Moreover, there is another feature which braces the kitsch experience: desire for power combined with pleasure of fantasizing that one is powerful.

To sum up, we have pointed to the delusional trait of jihadi kitsch and illustrated how jihadi kitsch helps Islamic State sympathizers to escape from the boredom of daily life and cultivate the desire for happiness, excitement, easy spiritual catharsis, and power.

Eroticization of Power and “Pornokitsch”

Friedländer, who *inter alia* analyzes the relation in Nazism between power and eroticism on the one side and kitsch on the other, is a useful resource to analyze any violent and brutal ideology with the concept of kitsch.⁶¹ He draws on scholars such as the French philosophers Michel Foucault and Georges Bataille, as well as the German philosopher Walther Benjamin. Friedländer quotes Foucault as holding that “power has an erotic charge.”⁶² Both Foucault and Benjamin are cited as arguing that Nazism gave the German people nothing but the ability to express themselves and thus power. Foucault asks why there were Germans who fought to the “last drop of blood” unless they had emotional attachment to the regime.⁶³ Nazism could apparently in some peculiar way satisfy the Germans’ emotional and erotic needs. Bataille has also accentuated the harmony between erotic play and the spectacle of power in which people inflict violence and death on others.⁶⁴ With these theories in mind, let’s look closer at the *Dabiq* text “Why We Hate You and Why We Fight You.” With statements such as, “We have been commanded to fight the disbelievers until they submit to the authority of Islam,” as described in the previous section, the text seems to be influenced by the tone and the language of BDSM (i.e. bondage and discipline, domination, and submission) literature such as Erika Leonard’s *Fifty Shades* trilogy. These novels are notable for their explicitly erotic scenes featuring elements of sexual practices involving BDSM. A quick glance at BDSM literature shows that it sports statements we can summarize as: “submit to my authority, I may afford you this option, you will live in humiliation under my dominance, when you accept my dominance in humiliation I will suspend my harsh behavior—if I deem it necessary, I will enslave you and sell you on the Internet slave market,” etc.

Another instance of vulgar erotic babbling can be found in one of Adnani's—the spokesman of Islamic State—diatribes against the West: “We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women. If we do not reach that time, then our children and grandchildren will reach it, and they will sell your sons as slaves at the slave market.”⁶⁵ Let us pause here and elaborate on the concept of “slave” in a late modern Western context. Normally this term is only used either in erotic parlance or metaphorically, say, discussing the bad conditions of certain sections of the labor market. Despite all the diatribes directed against the West's debauchery, sexual freedom, decadence, etc., the authors of these texts are apparently influenced by Western pornographic literature. Furthermore, the erotic pleasure the authors obviously take seeps through. These statements are not only expressions of fantasized religious and political superiority, but also of some kind of particular erotic pleasure.

Fantasizing that one is talking tough to an imaginary West, to be enslaved soon, in such stylized dominant-master jargon apparently gives the author and the sympathetic reader a feeling of superiority, a psychological empowerment and erotic pleasure. However, this feeling of superiority is an easily attained catharsis and pleasure through self-deceit. No enemy, let alone “The West,” can be beaten with these kinds of eroticized fantasies which can only give meaning in private life among consenting adults. These utterances apparently, in the words of Calinescu, have “hallucinatory power with their spurious dreaminess and promise of an easy catharsis” for supporters of jihadism, but for many who are not blinded and fascinated by this kind of propaganda it can be experienced as kitsch.⁶⁶ Friedländer contends that in the Nazi universe, which is characterized by “eroticization of power,” kitsch interplays with “the yearning for destruction and death.”⁶⁷ We see a similar trait in the above-mentioned pieces of ISIS propaganda. Cottee has also some considerations on Islamic State's approach to violence and death which are similar to Friedländer's considerations on Nazism. Cottee emphasizes Islamic State's “cultish embrace of death” and “violent pornography” and poses some disturbing questions: “Why did they [ISIS fighters] go far beyond the call of duty, not only fighting their enemies but subjugating them to pornographic rituals of degradation and bestiality? What sense of sacred devotion prompted that? Perhaps devotion had nothing to do with it; perhaps it was pleasure, the power-high associated with inflicting suffering on other human beings.”⁶⁸ Cottee highlights that jihadists were activated by many different motives, but “it seems hard to deny that they [ISIS recruits] were also motivated by grander, more despotic kinds of emotions, to do with power and cruelty, particularly the desire to control, humiliate and degrade.”⁶⁹ Thus, in line with Foucault,⁷⁰ Cottee stresses the relation between power and erotic pleasure.⁷¹

In this context, we can introduce another related concept to describe elements of jihadi kitsch, “pornokitsch,” which the Italian semiologist Ugo Volli describes as “false, sickly, sugary and slightly cold-blooded pornography adapted for kitsch-man.”⁷² Its traits are crudeness, realism, hyperbole, and “eroticism and horror are often wed in kitsch.”⁷³ Let's look at a visual example of “pornokitsch” based on “eroticization of power” from The Program on Extremism's Twitter archive: the twin pictures of an ISIS fighter, Abu Khalid al-Amriki, who was killed in Syria in 2015.⁷⁴ In one of the pictures he had uploaded on Twitter, he is sitting on a chair with a kitten on his lap. In the other picture, still sitting, he poses with a bulky gun on his crotch. He seemingly cared a lot about his masculinity. Two years before his death he had written

with capital letters on Twitter: “WHEN ‘MEN’ NEGLECT JIHAD, ALLAH REPLACES THEM WITH ‘REAL MEN’. ALLAHU AKBAR!!!” Friedländer’s observation that Nazism’s attraction “lay less in any explicit ideology than in the power of emotions, images, and phantasms” seems also to be well suited to jihadism.⁷⁵ Likewise, jihadism does not present Muslims a rational program to defeat any power they choose to combat, but a counter-productive and self-destructive venue to express their frustrations and wrath. Moreover, despite the inflated self-confident manner in the text, the whole performance sounds more like bravado.

As demonstrated, delusionary visions of power have sexual elements, and this is a central aspect in jihadi kitsch.

“Kitsch of Death”: Romanticized and Trivialized Violence and Death

In the following, we will illustrate how Friedländer’s concept of “kitsch of death” is an element of jihadi kitsch.⁷⁶ At first glance, the expression “kitsch of death” sounds like an oxymoron, since kitsch and death do not appear as concepts that come across as congruous. In his analysis of Nazism, Friedländer asks how such a dramatic and sometimes tragic event as death can be experienced as “everyday *Gemütlichkeit* [i.e. coziness]” that is kitsch.⁷⁷ “There is a kitsch of death,” states Friedländer and highlights that one of the characteristics of Nazi propaganda is surprises and unexpected comparisons, and “the juxtaposition of the kitsch esthetic and of death.”⁷⁸ He illustrates his point with several vivid examples from world literature such as ex-Nazi memoirs and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, religious rituals, and popular culture. He concedes that the kitsch of death, of destruction, and even of apocalypse, is a special category of kitsch and differentiates between spectacular and cataclysmic kitsch on the one hand and ordinary kitsch on the other.⁷⁹ Two contradictory elements are amalgamated in a kitsch representation of death: an appeal at the same time both to harmony and emotional communion, and solitude and terror.⁸⁰ To elaborate on this point, Friedländer refers to the German philosopher Ludwig Giesz’s statement that one of the traits of kitsch is precisely “the neutralization of ‘extreme situations’, particularly death, turning them into some sentimental idyl.”⁸¹ Giesz also adds sex, war, suffering, guilt, distress, and struggle to the list.⁸²

Let’s take a look at how violence and death is experienced as kitsch at the grassroots level in unofficial online propaganda disseminated by ISIS fangirls. Laura Huey, Rachel Inch and Hillary Peladeau describe a “fangirl” as an individual who is overly enthusiastic about Islamic State because she believes it is “cool” to belong to the subversive IS-network.⁸³ Fangirls often tweet about their home and school life and celebrate extreme violence.⁸⁴ Laura Huey and Eric Witmer contend that perhaps the single defining characteristic of a fangirl is simply her apparent belief in violent extremism as something that is cool and romantic.⁸⁵ Moreover, for these young girls extreme violence is also associated with fun. The authors highlight that fangirls appear susceptible to such messages and illustrate this with a fangirl’s retweet in which the tweeter evinces her support for the immolation of the Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasabeh, shot down by Islamic State, by adding burning emoticons in a cartoonish way on an image of the incident.⁸⁶ Huey and Witmer add that when fangirls speak about terrorist

acts committed by ISIS, they exhibit a similar “cartoonish sensibility.”⁸⁷ In addition, the fangirls often speak about violence and death in a “childish, i.e. humorous, sarcastic, and ironic fashion,” as Huey et al. further illustrate:

[Fangirl Tweet]: someone buy me a gun ==

[Fangirl Tweet]: Someone give me the evidence that burning alive is allowed?⁸⁸

In the jihadi universe death is not only neutralized and banalized and turned into “kitsch of death,” but is also rendered as fun. It is as if the analyzed fangirls live in a fantasy world in which they can realize their peculiar dreams.

Another example of “kitsch of death” can be found in *Dabiq* issue 15 in the text entitled “How I Came to Islam,” signed by the Finnish convert to Islam Umm Khalid al-Finlandiyyah.⁸⁹ Umm Khalid was unsatisfied not only with Christianity but also with her life in Helsinki, and started studying Islam for some time. In an encounter with her Muslim neighbor who had introduced her to Islam a few years earlier, the neighbor asked if she wanted to become a Muslim, and her answer sets the scene in a sentimental mood:

So, I said, “Yes,” and both she and her husband began crying. I pronounced the shahada in their home, and they began teaching me how to pray. It was a wonderful feeling. After continuously searching for the truth, finding it was just such a relief. I felt so much peace.⁹⁰

Later, Umm Khalid traveled to Syria with her husband to join Islamic State. This is how she describes the Caliphate:

Life in the Islamic State is such a blessing. You face difficulties and hardship, you’re not used to the food or the change of life, you may not know the local language, you hear bombings, and the children may get scared, but none of that takes away from the gratitude you have towards Allah for allowing you to be here.⁹¹

Although Umm Khalid seems to express some kind of care for children when stating: “you hear bombings, and the children may get scared,” her caring for children is indeed quite truncated. Her caring for her own child has a peculiar form which apparently makes perfect sense in her mental universe:

After four months of us being here, my son was martyred, and this was yet another blessing. Every time I think about it, I wonder to myself, “If I stayed in Dar al-Kufr⁹² what kind of end would he have had? What would have happened to him?” Alhamdulillah (thank god), he was saved from all that, and what could be better than him being killed for the cause of Allah? Obviously, it’s not easy, but I ask Allah to allow us to join him.⁹³

In Finländer’s understanding, kitsch and death remain basically incompatible at the individual level.⁹⁴ However, in Umm Khalid’s text we see how she “neutralizes” by romanticizing her child’s death by presenting it as sentimental martyrdom, as if a child can decide to be a martyr. Let us dwell on her description of the death of her son as “yet another blessing.” This is not what one expects a typical mother, whose child has suffered a violent death and who is directly responsible for taking the child to a war zone, to say. This utterance turns her sentimentality into kitsch. The text’s intention is clearly to create an identification with Umm Khalid. One can either choose to take her seriously and admire her for her sacrifice of her child, as ISIS supporters are

expected to do, or see it as a piece of cold-blooded propaganda, dissociate from the futile attempt to impress, and simply see it as jihadi kitsch.

To sum up, although death and kitsch at first sight seem to be incongruous concepts, there is indeed an element of “kitsch of death” in jihadi propaganda and culture, as persons following extremist ideologies do not apparently refrain from sentimentalizing and neutralizing, and thus, in the word of Calinescu, kitschifying even death.⁹⁵

Purity and Filth

Friedländer highlights another kitsch trait which is relevant in this context—purity, “a key theme in Nazi ideology.”⁹⁶ According to Friedländer, purity is “a carrier of all the sentimentality” in the Nazi literature of uplift and edification constituting a striking contrast to all the violence and bloodshed caused by Nazism.⁹⁷ He highlights that purity also brings together all the themes underlying a certain kind of religiosity and antimodernism: “God calls home to Him all the entirely pure beings, who are much too pure to stay long on this earth.”⁹⁸ The Czech author Milan Kundera has also vivid considerations on purity. Repeatedly in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* Kundera returns to the concept of kitsch and describes it as an esthetic ideal, which “excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence.”⁹⁹ He highlights that the “communist kitsch,” for example in May Day parades, pretend an ontological agreement with being in the world in which “shit is denied, and everyone acts as though it did not exist.”¹⁰⁰ Likewise, Umm Khalid, whom we introduced in the previous section, uses the ideal of purity and the dichotomy between purity contra filth in her explanation for why she feels so happy in the Caliphate:

Also, unless you're living here you don't realize what kind of life you had before. The life here is so much more pure. When you're in Dar al-Kufr (the lands of disbelief) you're exposing yourself and your children to so much filth and corruption. You make it easy for Satan to lead you astray. Here you're living a pure life, and your children are being raised with plenty of good influence around them.¹⁰¹

In exploring processes of female radicalization into ISIS, McDonald has also described how the construction of the binary good (*dar al-Islam*, i.e. land of Islam) versus evil (*dar al-Kufr*, i.e. land of the infidels) gradually mutates into purity versus impurity and filth.¹⁰² In another text in the last issue of *Dabiq* entitled “The Fitrah of Mankind—And the Near-Extinction of the Western Woman” we see the same contrast, as the *fitrah*, which is described as the inborn nature instilled in man by Allah that will aid him in distinguishing good from evil,¹⁰³ also:

aids him in generally distinguishing between pureness and filthiness, between decency and obscenity, between mercy and cruelty, between justice and tyranny, between truth and falsehood, and between right and wrong.¹⁰⁴

In addition to this example and Umm Khalid's concern about raising her child in *dar al-kufr*, the juxtaposition between purity/good/right and thus morality on the one hand and impurity/evil/wrong and thus immorality on the other hand can also be seen in a statement which the Bangladeshi-British Mannan family had released two months after they had arrived in Syria to live in the Caliphate.¹⁰⁵ Three generations of the family, corresponding to twelve individuals, had left Britain in 2015. The statement reads:

We release this statement to confirm that indeed we are in the Islamic State. A land that is free from the corruption and oppression of man-made law and is governed by the shariah, the perfect and just laws of Allah. [...] Muslims from all corners of the world [...] are willingly leaving the so-called freedom and democracy that was forced down our throat in the attempt to brainwash Muslims to forget about their powerful and glorious past and now present. [In the Caliphate] a parent doesn't feel the worry of losing his child to the immorality of society. [...] Race to your state. Race to what will give you honour in this life and the hereafter.¹⁰⁶

Commenting on the Mannan family's statement the Hungarian-British sociologist Frank Furedi states that Islamic State propaganda "not only condemns but dehumanizes those it castigates as its "dirty kafir" (unbeliever) opponents."¹⁰⁷ Thus, the ISIS sympathizers' ideal of purity and the dichotomy between purity and filth draw parallels to the Nazi regime, which, as noted by McDonald, presented the German-Jewish population as a "cancer" and a "national filth."¹⁰⁸ The Mannan family's statement also reads: "we feel safer [here] than we have ever felt before."¹⁰⁹ Ironically, however, four years later the safety they had in mind turned out to be delusional, and the entire family was dead. Seven members of the family, including three young children, died in an airstrike, three sons were killed in battle, and the elderly parents died of natural causes.¹¹⁰ In the text written by Umm Khalid and in the Mannan family's statement we see that they are not only hallucinating, but they are also trying to entice others with a false glorification and romanticizing. Thus, these examples illustrate the absurdity of the juxtaposition of death as such and specifically child death and small-minded puritanism.

As we have demonstrated, the dichotomy of purity and filth is popular in ISIS propaganda and culture, and plays an important role in jihadi kitsch. Cultivation of the ideal of purity is another way of sentimentalizing the way one conceptualizes one's political and moral universe. In that way, one can conjure up Islamic State and the self-declared Caliphate as perfect entities with no faults and construct a "kitsch world."

Moral Collapse

In this section, we briefly present the story of the moral collapse of an ISIS-woman and use it as a prism through which one can grasp the kitsch aspect of violent jihadi ideology. In November 2013, then-19-year-old Mahmood, raised in an affluent neighborhood in Glasgow, abandoned her university course in pharmacy, left her home, and moved to the Caliphate.¹¹¹ During her approximately five year stay in Raqqa, she climbed relatively fast up the hierarchical ladder of Islamic State, and was suspected of holding a senior role in the all-female "moral police" *al-Khansaa*. In September 2015, the U.N. Security Council had placed Mahmood under sanctions, and the media later reported that she was killed during the fall of the Caliphate in February 2019. McDonald has analyzed her extraordinary social media footprints, which she left behind on Twitter and Tumblr between 2010 and 2015, which demonstrate that the radicalization process Mahmood engaged in was constructed through "affective communications" online.¹¹²

Already in 2012, Mahmood began to cultivate the image of "real men" and "pure fighters": "her posts are populated by images of men riding horses or camels set against dramatic backgrounds of vast deserts or lakes, recurring images that combine romance,

beauty, mystery and adventure,” which, according to McDonald “points to the promise of virility and sincerity” of “real men.”¹¹³ These images circulated among young women on social media in, according to McDonald, the same way that young women circulate images of smoldering film stars and models.¹¹⁴ While a good deal of visual ISIS propaganda materials do indeed show jihadists on horses or camels, the fact that ISIS warriors do not in reality do so, but instead use modern vehicles, clearly illustrates that Mahmood’s presentation of jihadi men is a kitschy approach to jihadism. In the sensory world of images, the masculine “beauty” of the *mujahideen* (i.e. Islamic fighters) also figured in her tweets of images of heavily armed young men taking the time to stroke or feed cats and kittens to which Mahmood commented: “Mujahideen of Syria and their compassion and mercy to even the animals.”¹¹⁵ McDonald elaborates: “The mujahideen not only have smoldering eyes, but they also possess a childlike innocence, taking time to care for kittens even in the midst of terrible destruction.”¹¹⁶ The beauty and innocence of the *mujahideen* are sharply contrasted in Mahmood’s grotesque photoshopped images of Shia Muslims in order to provoke a reaction of rejection and disgust.¹¹⁷ Mahmood also posted typical ISIS propaganda narratives about the suffering of Muslims and the decadence of the “others.”¹¹⁸

After less than a year with Islamic State, Mahmood’s postings change character and degenerate into bizarre greedy booty counting, as she begins to post about the benefits accruing to those associated with Islamic State:

Know that honestly there is something so pleasurable to know that what you have has been taken off from the Kuffar... Some of the many things include kitchen appliances from fridges, cookers, ovens, micro-waves, milkshake machines ... and most importantly a house with free electricity and water provided to you due to the Khalifah and no rent included.¹¹⁹

According to McDonald, the statement demonstrates “a total destruction of any capacity for empathy with others,” and furthermore notes that as Mahmood becomes an important figure in ISIS, her postings no longer focus on sacrifices but on rewards:

In these lands we are awarded for our sacrifices involved in our Hijrah for example one is by receiving Ghanimah [*booty*]. And know that honestly there is something so pleasurable to know that what you have has been taken from the Kuffar and handed to you personally by Allah SWT¹²⁰ as a gift.¹²¹

We see these utterances as an expression of the circumstance that Mahmood has fallen into so deep a delusional self-deceit that she praises the plundering of other people’s homes and the theft of their property as Allah’s gifts. Referring to the United States and Great Britain, Mahmood expresses additionally such hallucinations as:

We have conquered these lands once and we will do it again. This Islamic Empire shall be known and feared worldwide.¹²²

After only 18 months in Syria, Mahmood apparently gets so intoxicated with ISIS ideology and the pleasure it obviously gives her that she even begins to justify sexual slavery of women:

If Allah enables the Muslims who are striving and sacrificing their lives and wealth ... to make the word of Allah over the kafirs, then He allows them to enslave the kufar when they capture them.¹²³

McDonald highlights that Mahmood tags her posts under two headings: *mulk yamen* (female slaves) and concubines.¹²⁴ He does not elaborate on this, but the thought that a person who can imagine and justify a beautiful and masculine “pure” jihadi fighter with his concubines and slaves must be getting erotic pleasure out of these fantasies is not an unreasonable assumption. Thus, it seems that Mahmood not only feels “empowered” but also aroused by her fantasies. However, this is indeed a very peculiar form of excitement. In another context, McDonald reflects on a fascination with death and violence which merges into a kind of virtual love, resulting in what the French investigative journalist and author Soren Seelow describes as “reality fatigue combined with deadly delusion.”¹²⁵ Indeed, something similar seems to be the case with Mahmood.

As we have previously described, kitsch is self-made.¹²⁶ The consumer of jihadi kitsch plays an active role in both living out the jihadi dream and developing it. Disregarding the active role of the consumer of jihadi kitsch will inevitably lead to conceptualizing the consumer as a victim of propaganda, more as a sinned against than a sinner. Several scholars have proposed and elaborated on the concept of the “kitsch-man” to avoid such a mistake.¹²⁷ The concept of *Kitschmenschen* (i.e. “kitsch-man”) was coined by the Austrian author Hermann Broch¹²⁸ in 1950. Calinescu defines a “kitsch-man” as a person who tends to experience even non-kitsch situations as kitsch: “one who involuntarily makes parody of esthetic response.”¹²⁹ To paraphrase Calinescu, in the context of jihadi propaganda and culture, the “kitsch-man” or what we in the context of the case of Mahmood could call the “kitsch-woman,” wants to fill his/her life with maximum excitement, derived from, among other things, high politics and high religion in exchange for minimum cognitive effort.¹³⁰ Thus, the “kitsch-man” should not only be thought of in esthetic terms but also in ethical terms. A combination of an esthetic and ethical approach is unavoidable because the esthetic attitudes of the kitsch consumer as well as the kitsch producer, according to Calinescu, “imply a basic moral ineptitude.”¹³¹ Their kitsch thrives on “esthetic infantilism.”¹³² Apparently, jihadists imagine the Caliphate as their playground, where fantasies can be played out.

The brief story of Mahmood we have presented here demonstrates how a jihadi woman’s postings start with propagating for sacrifice for one’s high-minded and abstract ideals such as the liberation of Islam from oppression and degradation and degenerates into legitimizing the plunder of other people’s homes and accepting jihadi men’s taking female slaves. The total moral collapse of Mahmood underlines how important it is to include ethical considerations in an esthetic discussion of jihadi kitsch.

Simplism: An Easily Accessible Worldview

One of the recurring elements in most sociologically oriented definitions of kitsch has to do with an easily accessible worldview, which facilitates “quick and predictable effects.”¹³³ Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog observe that all versions of extremism have a similar trait they call simplism, a term they borrow from the American sociologists Seymour Lipset and Earl Raab who define simplism as the “unambiguous ascription of single causes and remedies for multifaceted phenomena.”¹³⁴ Gambetta and Hertog draw parallels between violent jihadism and different forms of extremism

and highlight that they are all characterized by a penchant for simple and unambiguous explanations of the social world and its ills.¹³⁵ In addition, they highlight that simplism is reflected both in the extremists' world analysis and their solutions. They think it is obvious that in order to carry out violent activities, extremists of all stripes need "a considerable degree of cognitive naiveté" concerning how the world works, especially about the causes of the state of affairs that particularly incense them, and they refer to, among others, Western plots and Jewish conspiracies to achieve world dominion.¹³⁶ Simplism is also reflected in their proposals concerning how the status quo can be changed. The examples they give are about how the attacks of the armed vanguard will provoke the enemy to commit reprisals against the "passive" masses and as a result the masses will awaken from their slumber. The authors call this "imaginary clock-work reasoning."¹³⁷ A similar fanciful expectation apparently also guided the founder of Islamic State, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, as he articulated a strategy of deliberately attacking the Iraqi Shi'ites with the intention of provoking them to attack the Sunnis, stoking civil war and in that way rallying Sunnis to the cause of jihad in Iraq. Cole Bunzel quotes al-Zarqawi as writing: "If we succeed in dragging [the Shi'a] into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger and annihilating death...."¹³⁸

Another example of simplistic thinking is the naïve fantasy that one can bring down the Western economy by terrorist attacks on property and civilians. There is a consensus among scholars¹³⁹ that the Islamist strategist Abu Bakr Naji's book *The Management of Savagery*¹⁴⁰ had a great impact on Islamic State and especially on Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. In the text, Naji presents a "simplistic" plan for draining the Western economy. He recommends that the jihadis should: "diversify and widen the vexation strikes" against the enemy everywhere to drain its economic resources as much as possible.¹⁴¹ For example, striking a tourist resort in one place will force the enemy to increase security of all tourist resorts around the world, with a consequent huge increase in spending.¹⁴² If the jihadists attack a bank, all banks will require additional security and "the (economic) draining will increase."¹⁴³ Attacks on oil facilities will prompt "intensive security measures" and as such will further drain enemy economic resources.¹⁴⁴ Draining the American economy with the help of terrorist attacks has apparently been a popular idea among jihadists of all kinds. In a video Osama bin Laden released in October 2004, he presented in detail the cost effectiveness of the 9/11 attacks and concluded: "(E)very dollar of al-Qaida defeated \$1m by the permission of Allah, besides the loss of a huge number of jobs."¹⁴⁵ Bin Laden declared triumphantly that: "Al-Qaida will bleed America to the point of bankruptcy" through similar attacks.¹⁴⁶ To imagine bringing down the Western economies by terrorist attacks and calculating costs and benefits involved in terms of money, are but infantile views that suggest a shallow knowledge of how large economies function. As Gambetta and Hertog highlight, "cognitive naiveté" and overconfidence in one's beliefs are prominent characteristics of simplistic jihadi propaganda, and these traits leads to ideological extremeness.¹⁴⁷

As demonstrated, the mixture of simplism, a Manichean worldview, and a certain cognitive naivete about how the world is structured creates a sentimental universe in which violence is seen as the only way to get free of the suffocating clutches of evil

powers. Thus, there seems to be a relation between kitsch and gore in jihadism. The jihadi kitsch paves the way for the jihadi gore, and the gore requires kitsch to maintain and legitimize itself, and consequently a self-perpetuating mutual interplay starts. This approach has implications for the debate about whether it is the emotions or ideas and beliefs that lead to extremist radicalization and subsequently to terrorism.¹⁴⁸ People who subscribe to simplistic analyses of the social and political reality are more prone to being easily incensed than people who operate with more complex and nuanced analyses, and they tend to be attracted to more radical solutions, which can end in a resort to violence. Likewise, people who are more prone to violence seek simplistic analyses.¹⁴⁹ Inspired by Hannah Arendt's controversial formulation "The Banality of Evil," we can coin the term "The Kitsch of Evil and the Evil of Kitsch" in the context of jihadism. Banal ideas can instigate evil deeds, and evil acts need banal ideas to be legitimized.

Nostalgia: Looking Back with Longing to an Authentic past

As previously mentioned, yet another aspect of kitsch is nostalgia, which is a sentimental yearning for a return to a glorified past and "an escape into the idyl of history where set conventions are still valid."¹⁵⁰ According to Broch, replacing historical or contemporary realities with prefabricated clichés is the simplest and most direct way of soothing this nostalgia.¹⁵¹ Inspired by Broch's parallelism between romanticism and kitsch, Friedländer in his analysis of Nazism writes that: "(k)itsch emotion represents a certain kind of simplified, degraded, insipid, but all the more insinuating romanticism."¹⁵² In his eyes, "Nazism looks backward, back to the lost premodern world, the archaic universe before the deluge."¹⁵³ As pointed out by Broch, the "kitsch-man" temporally escapes either to a reconstructed and selectively remembered self-biographical past or "the idyl of history," back to some imagined golden period of a nation or religious group.¹⁵⁴ The "kitsch-man" can also flee to an adventurous future by means of the clichés of an ideological or religious belief or of science fiction.¹⁵⁵ Spatially, the flight has to do with illusory and exotic countries, the prominent trait of which is their foreseeability, lucidity, and existential safety.¹⁵⁶ One conjures away the norm breakdown of modernity and lack of closely-knit communities. It is a quest for some sort of peace of mind.¹⁵⁷ In the case of ISIS, the jihadis escaped temporally to "The time of the Prophet" and spatially to the Caliphate.

Gambetta and Herzog emphasize that nostalgia and simplism are interrelated.¹⁵⁸ A trait closely related to simplism is a "need for cognitive closure," which denotes a preference for order, structure, and certainties, as well as intolerance for ambiguity. Gambetta and Herzog observe that once translated into local context these traits seem to reflect those of both peaceful and violent Islamists, among others a hierarchical and authoritarian vision of social order, traditionalism, and a yearning to restore a lost order, maintenance of groups norms and traditions and cultural conservatism.¹⁵⁹ Islamic State is a Jihadi-Salafi movement.¹⁶⁰ The term Salafi comes from the Arabic *al salaf al salih* (the pious forefathers).¹⁶¹ It is a nostalgic movement advocating the resurrection of the past purity and glory of Islam. Taking examples from Robin Creswell and Bernard Haykel we will take a glance at how the Jihadi-Salafi ideology reflects on the

jihadi cultural products.¹⁶² Let's first look at a poem of Ahlam al-Nasr, who is known as "The Poetess of the Islamic State."¹⁶³ When al-Nasr's first book of verse was published by an Islamic State outlet in 2014, she was already a literary celebrity in jihadi circles. Her poetry collection, equipped with a pair of prefaces by senior ideologues, circulated on social media.¹⁶⁴ In the following lines, one can sense the romantic nostalgia:

The glory of Islam has returned:

People, welcome the lions.

Come, let's build our state

and bring honor back to our religion.

[...]

Islam's banners have been raised

and hope is rekindled.¹⁶⁵

Al-Zuhayri, another jihadi poet, captures this anachronistic imagery and medieval martial mood in a poem dedicated to al-Zarqawi:

Wake us to the song of swords,

and when the cavalcade sets off, say farewell.

The horses' neighing fills the desert,

Arousing our souls and spurring them onward.

The knights' pride stirs at the sound,

while humiliation lashes our foes.¹⁶⁶

Creswell and Haykel illustrate that the jihadi culture is a culture of romance and it promises adventure and pretends that the codes of medieval heroism and chivalry are still relevant, and argue that while "the knights of jihad" may be "tilting at windmills, the romance seems to be working."¹⁶⁷ Islamic State recruits do not imagine they are emigrating to a dusty borderland; "but to a caliphate with more than a millennium of history."¹⁶⁸ Creswell and Haykel highlight that jihadists view their Caliphate as a "pure resurrection of the past."¹⁶⁹ They refer to the aforementioned poetess Ahlam al-Nasr as describing Raqqa, the capital of Islamic State, as a place of everyday miracles, a city where believers can go to be born again into the old, authentic faith, and al-Nasr as writing: "In the Caliphate there are many things we've never experienced except in our history books."¹⁷⁰ The nostalgic aspect of jihadi kitsch can also be found in visual propaganda products. Creswell and Haykel point out that the jihadis' obsession with purity is also evident in their "self-consciously archaic" imagery.¹⁷¹ Commenting on the visual culture of the general jihadi movements, Afshon Ostovar writes that abstractions of the *mujahid* (i.e. Islamic fighter) "can take on a premodern guise, depicting the fighter along with other symbols such as horses and swords to evoke connotations of Islam's past."¹⁷²

To sum up, nostalgia is a constitutive element in jihadi kitsch. Jihadis' yearn for an illusory return to the glorious past instead of trying to figure out what the challenges of the contemporary world are and how to tackle them in a rational way.

Concluding Discussion

This article has introduced a new concept: jihadi kitsch. The theoretical gain from introducing the kitsch aspect of jihadi propaganda and culture to the research on Islamist terrorism is enriching and supplements the already existing literature discussing the attractions of jihadism. With this article we have moved beyond the dichotomic debates on whether cognitive or sentimental processes, pull or push factors, or even religious or secular factors play the dominant role in the attraction of Islamist terrorism. These debates are useful but cannot capture the kitsch aspect of jihadi propaganda and culture that contributes to attracting people to jihadism. Using several illustrative examples to demonstrate different aspects of jihadi kitsch, we have shown how some people produce kitsch to enlist fighters, and some people choose to consume it to have a meaningful and pleasurable life. In this concluding discussion we will return to Cottee's remark that scholars of jihadism should not forego "the considerable opportunities for making fun of a culture that takes itself very seriously indeed,"¹⁷³ by concluding with a discussion on how the concept of jihadi kitsch potentially can contribute to combating violent jihadism through humor.

Kitsch is a normative concept: it normally derogates what it denotes.¹⁷⁴ Thus, if you declare something as kitsch, you at the same time pave the way for introducing different types of humor, such as irony and sarcasm in approaching it. This can only happen if the kitsch object (e.g. an item, a statement, or an ideology) is produced to be taken seriously—very seriously—and to the extent the consumer experiences it as a part of the meaning of her life and her identity. Thus, on the political level, introduction of jihadi kitsch to the research field of Islamist radicalization and terrorism studies can contribute to the fight against violent jihadism. Ramsay and Alkheder in their research on the capacity of humor to combat Islamic State in the Arab world found that humor has the ability "to cut through the bombastic posturing" of the extremists whose "over-blown self-image and distinctive iconography seemed to be an irresistible target for humorous subversion."¹⁷⁵ They posit that an obvious merit of humor is that it refuses to take their ideology and propaganda seriously. Likewise, Creswell and Haykel observe that jihadi culture is premised on anachronisms, and the jihadis' cultivation of the authentic past as they see it apparently draws ridicule from their critics.¹⁷⁶ In addition, they note that jihadi propaganda videos "invariably show the militants on horseback with swords in the air, flying banners whose calligraphy is modeled on those of the earliest conquerors," and continue: "Such videos have already spawned a cottage industry of YouTube parodies."¹⁷⁷

Other scholars have presented similar considerations on the role of humor in different contexts. The sociologist Bjørn Schiermer lists *inter alia* the following in which there allegedly is a discrepancy between form and content which render them ridiculous: "fascist and popular socialist monuments and statues are often camp [...]. In addition, a lot of popular Arabic religious esthetic, representations of "great" heads of

state (North Korea, China), [...] leftist political manifestos and sociological Marxist academic literature from the late 1970s.”¹⁷⁸ Schiermer describes these examples as phenomena which contain something “exaggerated, overloaded, awkward, baroque, misbegotten, excessive, megalomaniac, pathetic, histrionic, naïve and vulgar.”¹⁷⁹ According to Schiermer, we can hardly take these phenomena seriously and can only approach them with ironic distance. He notes that in irony lies a “destruction of the stereotyped, the void and the unconscious, the ritualized, the automatized and the conventional, wherever it emerges.”¹⁸⁰ He elaborates on how irony interferes with and unmasks conceit, vanity, and illusions: “Where the individual thinks he is most autonomous, most independent of the world, most immersed in his own subjectivity, in authentic creation or most of all in truth; exactly there, where he thinks he is closest to the timeless, the world and time come in between.”¹⁸¹ Finally, we can also mention the French philosopher Henri Bergson’s thoughts on how irony mocks a person who promotes his/her beliefs as the absolute truth in a self-important and sanctimonious way. He notes that if we want to understand laughter, we must understand the illusions of vanity and the ridicule that clings to them, and states: “In this respect, it might be said that the specific remedy for vanity is laughter, and that the one failing that is essentially laughable is vanity.”¹⁸² Writing about the religious satire in Europe from the beginning of the seventeenth century, the researcher of satire Dennis Meyhoff Brink observes that a “novel skeptical laughter” began to spread as thousands of satirical counterarguments began circulating.¹⁸³ These arguments seized the power over time from the once so powerful bugaboos such as purgatory, witch hunts, burnings and demonology. The old specters could no longer provoke fright and horror. One could not dread things, which one gradually learned to laugh at.¹⁸⁴ Religious satire, which time after time knocked the clerics off their pedestals and weakened the people’s fear, was obviously not the only factor in this development, but it has “contributed to sowing doubt about old religious dogmas.”¹⁸⁵

Analyzing jihadi propaganda and culture through the lenses of kitsch and thus paving the way for making it an object of humor can tarnish the glamor and aura of jihadi propaganda and culture and disclose what it really is: sentimental, self-important, haughty, stereotypical, arrogant, bombastic, pompous, wordy, and simplicist propaganda. In other words, humor, like time, accelerates “the decay of the aura”¹⁸⁶ of a unique and enticing phenomenon, “de-auratizes”¹⁸⁷ and “de-glamourizes”¹⁸⁸ it. It must be stressed that being familiar with kitsch experience in late modernity is not sufficient. As Anna, who was working at a Europol unit which trawls the internet for Islamic State propaganda, explained to Cotte: “Crucially, you also need a sense of humor: you need to be able to laugh at the humorless jihadi be-headers and blowhards.”¹⁸⁹ Islamic State promises its followers eternal celestial happiness, deeper meaning in existence, a possibility to help the Muslims in need and reestablish the greatness of the former Muslim civilization and catharsis from the filth of *kuffar* society. However, its history since 2014, the year it was established, shows that its kitschy “*promesse de bonheur*” turned out to be futile and spurious. Some ISIS sympathizers took the “promise of happiness” seriously and took pleasure in participating in atrocities which have tarnished the prestige of Muslims, and which have been condemned by most Muslims. Others ended up praising and taking part in plundering people’s property

and enslaving women, though the declared ambition was to show that it is not Islam, but Western secularism and feminism, which suppressed women. Graeme Wood quotes George Orwell as writing:

Fascism is psychologically far sounder than any hedonistic conception of life [...] Whereas Socialism, and even capitalism in a more grudging way, have said to people “I offer you a good time,” Hitler has said to them, “I offer you struggle, danger, and death,” and as a result a whole nation finds itself at his feet [...]. We ought not to underrate its emotional appeal.¹⁹⁰

Nor in the case of Islamic State should scholars of Islamist radicalization and terrorism underestimate the appeal of its sentimental, nostalgic, and hallucinatory propaganda and culture, and thus the opportunities these kitsch aspects open up for combating violent jihadism through humor.

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Notes

1. Saul Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 131.
2. In this article we use the terms jihadism and violent jihadism interchangeably. We acknowledge that there are non-violent forms of jihadism as for example described by Graeme Wood, *The Way of the Strangers: Encounters with the Islamic State* (London: Allen Lane, 2017).
3. e.g. Simon Cottee, *Black Flags of the Caribbean: How Trinidad Became an ISIS Hotspot* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2021); Miron Lakomy, “Recruitment and Incitement to Violence in the Islamic State’s Online Propaganda: Comparative Analysis of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 44, no.7 (2021): 565–80; Olivier Roy, *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of Islamic State* (London: Hirst Publishers, 2017); Thomas Hegghammer, eds., *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Kevin McDonald, *Radicalization* (London: Polity, 2018); Abdel Bari Atwan, *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate* (London: Saqi Books, 2015). Adriana Cavarero and William McCuaig, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
4. Mehmet Ümit Necef and Henning Bech, “Racistiske repræsentationer? Et blik på dansk film” [“Racist Representations? A Glance at Danish film”], in *Indvandreren i Dansk Film og litteratur* [“The Immigrant in Danish Film and Literature”], ed. Søren Frank and Mehmet Ümit Necef (Copenhagen: Spring, 2013), 256–95.
5. Ibid., 261–62.
6. Kathleen Marie Higgins, “Kitsch,” in *A Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. Stephen Davis, Kathleen Marie Higgins, Robert Hopkins, Robert Stecker, and David E. Cooper (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 393–94.
7. Ibid., 394.

8. Mehmet Ümit Necef, *Etnisk kitsch—og andre (post)moderne fortællinger om “de andre”* [Ethnic Kitsch and Other Postmodern Narratives on the “Others”] (Copenhagen: Department of Sociology, University of Copenhagen, 1990); Necef and Bech, “Racistiske repræsentationer?,” 262.
9. Necef and Bech, “Racistiske repræsentationer?,” 213, 262.
10. Theodor W. Adorno, “Veblen’s Attack on Culture,” *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9, no. 3 (1941): 389–413, 401.
11. Necef and Bech, “Racistiske repræsentationer?,” 263.
12. Hermann Broch, “Notes on the problem of kitsch,” in *Kitsch: An Anthology of Bad Taste*, ed. Gillo Dorfles (London: Studio Vista, 1969), 49–76, 73. The text is a lecture given by Broch at Yale University in 1950.
13. Ibid., 73; Necef and Bech, “Racistiske repræsentationer?,” 262.
14. Necef and Bech, “Racistiske repræsentationer?,” 263.
15. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Athlone Press, 1997), 239.
16. Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism*.
17. Gillo Dorfles, “Monuments,” in *Kitsch: An Anthology of Bad Taste*, ed. Gillo Dorfles (London: Studio Vista, 1969), 77–84.
18. Alejandro Yarza, *The Making and Unmaking of Francoist Kitsch Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).
19. Leighanne Higgins and Kathy Hamilton, “Consuming Bondieuserie: Raising the Profile of Religious Kitsch Consumption,” *Advances in Consumer Research*, 44 (2016): 474–75; Betty Spackman, “Reconsidering Kitsch,” *Material Religion* 1, no. 3 (2005): 404–16; David Morgan, “Response to Spackman,” *Material Religion* 1, no. 3 (2005): 417–19; Vineeta Sinha, *Religion and Commodification* (London: Routledge, 2010).
20. Necef, *Etnisk kitsch*, 151, 155.
21. Ibid., 156.
22. Ibid., 159.
23. Ibid., 158.
24. Ibid., 50–155, 157.
25. Simon Cottee, *ISIS and the Pornography of Violence* (London: Anthem Press, 2019), 77; Cottee, *Black Flags of the Caribbean*, 33–35.
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29. Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes* (London: Vintage Press, 1962), 188.
30. Ibid., 188.
31. Hegghammer, *Jihadi Culture*.
32. Andrew Anthony, “The Art of Making a Jihadi,” *The Guardian*, July 23, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/23/the-culture-that-makes-a-jihadi-thomas-hegghammer-interview-poetry-militancy> (accessed November 18, 2022).
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34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Cottee, *ISIS and the Pornography of Violence*, 88–89.
38. Hegghammer, “Kitsch.”

39. Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism*, 26–27.
40. Cottee, *ISIS and the Pornography of Violence*, 88.
41. Ibid., 88–89.
42. Ibid., 89.
43. Cottee, *Black Flags of the Caribbean*, 34.
44. Joan Emerson, “Negotiating the Serious Import of Humor,” *Sociometry* 32, no. 2 (1969):169–81.
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47. Ibid.
48. McDonald, *Radicalization*, 22–65.
49. Ibid., 169.
50. Adorno, “Veblen’s Attack on Culture,” 401.
51. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 228.
52. Ibid., 229.
53. “Why We Hate You and Why We Fight You,” *Dabiq* (Break the Cross, issue 15), July 31, 2016, 31.
54. Meaning yearly taxation.
55. “Why We Hate You and Why We Fight You,” 31.
56. Ibid., 31–32.
57. Ibid., 32.
58. Ibid., 33.
59. Ibid., 33.
60. Henning Bech, *When Men Meet: Homosexuality and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press), 126.
61. Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism*.
62. Ibid., 74. Friedländer quotes Foucault in “Film and Popular Memory: An Interview with Michel Foucault,” *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 1974: 251–52.
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73. Volli, “Pornography and pornokitsch,” 230, 247.
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83. Laura Huey, Rachel Inch and Hillary Peladeau, “‘@ me if you need shoutout’: Exploring Women’s Roles in Islamic State Twitter Networks,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 5 (2019): 445–63, 450.
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86. Ibid., 5.
87. Ibid.
88. Huey et al., “@ me if you need shoutout,” 451.
89. Umm Khalid al-Finlandiyyah. “How I Came to Islam,” *Dabiq* (Break the Cross, issue 15), July 31, 2016, 36–39.
90. Ibid., 37.
91. Ibid., 38.
92. Meaning the land of the infidels.
93. al-Finlandiyyah, “How I Came to Islam,” 39.
94. Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism*, 26.
95. We take the term “kitschify” from Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 255.
96. Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism*, 32.
97. Ibid.
98. Ibid.
99. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 246–48.
100. Ibid., 246.
101. al-Finlandiyyah, “How I Came to Islam,” 39.
102. McDonald, *Radicalization*, 22–65.
103. “The Fitrah of Mankind and the Near-Extinction of the Western Woman,” *Dabiq* (Break the Cross, issue 15), July 31, 2016, 20.
104. Ibid., 21.
105. “Missing UK family ‘safer than ever with Islamic State,’” *BBC News*, July 4, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-33393628> (accessed November 15, 2022); Carol Anne Grayson, “Bye bye ‘British values’: Letter from Mannan family in Islamic State rejects ‘so called freedom and democracy,’” Carol Anne Grayson (Radical Sister) blog, July 4, 2015. <https://activist1.blog/2015/07/04/bye-bye-british-values-letter-from-mannan-family-in-islamic-state-rejects-so-called-freedom-and-democracy/> (accessed November 15, 2022).
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112. McDonald, *Radicalization*, 22–65.
113. *Ibid.*, 27–28.
114. *Ibid.*, 28.
115. *Ibid.*, 50.
116. *Ibid.*, 50–51.
117. *Ibid.*, 51.
118. *Ibid.*, 29–62.
119. *Ibid.*, 63.
120. SWT means Subhanahu wa ta'ala, which is Arabic for "The most glorified, the most high."
121. *Ibid.*, 63. McDonald does not correct the grammar and spelling mistakes in the text.
122. *Ibid.*
123. *Ibid.*
124. *Ibid.*
125. McDonald, *Radicalization*, 115. McDonald quotes Soren Seelow, "Ines Madani, la djihadiste qui sait fasisait passer un homme," *Le Monde*, November 8, 2016.
126. Adorno, "Veblen's Attack on Culture," 401.
127. Broch, "Notes on the problem of kitsch," 55; Ludwig Giesz, *Phänomenologie des Kitsches* (Heidelberg: Piper Verlag, 1960); Ludwig Giesz, "Kitsch-man as tourist," in *Kitsch: An Anthology of Bad Taste*, ed. Gillo Dorfles (London: Studio Vista, 1969), 156–74. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 259.
128. Broch, "Notes on the problem of kitsch," 55.
129. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 259.
130. *Ibid.*
131. *Ibid.*
132. *Ibid.*, 258.
133. *Ibid.*, 238.
134. Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog, *Engineers of Jihad* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 147. They quote Seymour M. Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790–1970* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 7.
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151. Broch, "Notes on the Problem of Kitsch," 73.
152. Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism*, 39.
153. Ibid.
154. Broch, "Notes on the Problem of Kitsch," 49, 73.
155. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 244–45.
156. Broch, "Notes on the Problem of Kitsch," 73.
157. Necef and Bech, "Racistiske repræsentationer?," 261–62.
158. Gambetta and Herzog, *Engineers of Jihad*, 132.
159. Ibid., 132–33.
160. Bunzel, "From paper state to caliphate"; Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants"; Wood, *The Way of the Strangers*, 6; Simon Cottee, "Mind Slaughter: The Neutralizations of Jihadi Salafism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 4 (2010): 330–52, 334–38.
161. Bunzel, "From paper state to caliphate," 7.
162. Robin Creswell and Bernard Haykel, "Poetry in Jihadi Culture," in *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists*, ed. Thomas Hegghammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017): 22–41.
163. Ibid., 22–23.
164. Ibid., 23–24.
165. Ibid., 24.
166. Ibid., 35.
167. Ibid., 35.
168. Ibid., 35.
169. Ibid., 41.
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171. Ibid., 40.
172. Afshon Ostovar, "The Visual Culture of Jihad," in *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists*, ed. Thomas Hegghammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 94.
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174. However, Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 236–37 also gives some examples of self-conscious kitsch.
175. Ramsay and Alkheder, *Joking about Jihad*, 4.
176. Creswell and Haykel, "Poetry in Jihadi Culture," 34.
177. Ibid.
178. Bjørn Schiermer, "Ironiens kultur og kulturens ironi" ["The Culture of Irony and the Irony of Culture"], *Dansk Sociologi* 19, no. (2018): 22–23. Schiermer describes these phenomena as "camp," which is closely related to kitsch.
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180. Ibid., 17 (our translation).

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184. Ibid., 33.
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