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## The Projectilic Image: Islamic State's Digital Visual Warfare and Global Networked Affect

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# The Projectilic Image: Islamic State's Digital Visual Warfare and Global Networked Affect

## Abstract

Islamic State's (IS) image-warfare presents an auspicious opportunity to grasp the growing role of digital images in emerging configurations of global conflict. To understand IS' image-warfare, this article explores the central role of digital images in the group's war spectacle and identifies a key modality of this new kind of warfare: global networked affect. To this end, the analysis focuses on three primary sources: two Arabic-language IS books, *Management of Savagery* (2004) and *O' Media Worker, You Are a Mujahid!*, 2nd Edition (2016), and a video, *Healing the Believers' Chests* (2015), featuring the spectacular burning of a Jordanian air force pilot captured by IS. It uses the method of 'iconology' within a case-study approach. I analyze IS' doctrine of image-warfare explained in the two books and, in turn, examine how this doctrine is executed in IS video production, conceptualizing digital video as a specific permutation of moving digital images uniquely able to enact, and via repetition, to maintain, visual and narrative tension between movement and stillness, speed and slowness, that diffuses global network affect. Using a theoretical framework combining spectacle, new media phenomenology, and affect theory, the article concludes that global networked affect is projectilic, mimicking fast, lethal, penetrative objects. IS visual warfare, I argue, is best understood through the notion of the 'projectilic image'.

## Keywords

digital image, digital video, global networked affect, ISIL, ISIS, Islamic State, operative image, projectilic image, spectacle

## Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

## The projectilic image: Islamic State's digital visual warfare and global networked affect

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### Abstract

Islamic State's (IS) image-warfare presents an auspicious opportunity to grasp the growing role of digital images in emerging configurations of global conflict. To understand IS' image-warfare, this article explores the central role of digital images in the group's war spectacle and identifies a key modality of this new kind of warfare: global networked affect. To this end, the analysis focuses on three primary sources: two Arabic-language IS books, *Management of Savagery* (2004) and *O' Media Worker, You Are a Mujahid!*, 2nd Edition (2016), and a video, *Healing the Believers' Chests* (2015), featuring the spectacular burning of a Jordanian air force pilot captured by IS. It uses the method of 'iconology' within a case-study approach. I analyze IS' doctrine of image-warfare explained in the two books and, in turn, examine how this doctrine is executed in IS video production, conceptualizing digital video as a specific permutation of moving digital images uniquely able to enact, and via repetition, to maintain, visual and narrative tension between movement and stillness, speed and slowness, that diffuses global network affect. Using a theoretical framework combining spectacle, new media phenomenology, and affect theory, the article concludes that global networked affect is *projectilic*, mimicking fast, lethal, penetrative objects. IS visual warfare, I argue, is best understood through the notion of the 'projectilic image'.

### Keywords

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Technological developments and the rise of global non-state actors have transformed global conflict in recent decades. Rather than pitting nation-states against each other or against local guerillas, contemporary conflict often involves transnational non-state actors waging asymmetrical warfare against states and/or against each other. With the rise of global networks, cyberspace emerged as a new field of conflict, enabling rogue actors to strike in distant locales and disseminate images globally. Contemporary conflicts encompass heavy use of information technology and, according to W. J. T. Mitchell (2011), are 'fought by means of images deployed to shock and traumatize the enemy, images meant to appall and demoralize, images designed to replicate themselves endlessly and to infect the collective imaginary of global populations' (pp. 2–3).

The group that calls itself Islamic State (IS), which arose after the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, uses conventional, guerilla, and image-warfare (Kraidy, 2017a). Only 10% of IS' numerous visuals are videos (Milton, 2016), which typically feature 'close combat footage, execution videos, martyr farewells, biographies of martyrs, operational summaries, and original music' (Whiteside, 2016, p. 25). Not all IS visuals, including videos, depict ultra-violence: 48% have 'military' themes, but 20% focus on 'governance', 7% on 'commerce', 7% on religion, and 19% on 'other' – including 'lifestyle' – issues. Execution videos are only a fraction of all 'military' visuals (Milton, 2016, pp. 23–29). Nonetheless, some of IS' infamous videos are ultra-violent. As Atwan (2015) wrote, this 'may seem like an undisciplined

orgy of sadism', but is in fact 'systematically applied policy' (p. 153). To understand this image-warfare, this article explores the central role of digital images in what I previously described as IS' 'spectacle of death' (Kraidy, 2016) and identifies a key modality of this new kind of warfare, which I define as *global networked affect*, building on the notion of 'networked affect' (Hillis et al., 2015). IS' image-warfare presents an auspicious opportunity to grasp the growing role of digital images in emerging configurations of global conflict.

This article analyzes two IS books and the February 2015 IS video featuring the spectacular burning of a Jordanian air force pilot. It uses the method of 'iconology', which considers images as 'both verbal and visual entities, both metaphors and graphic symbols ... concepts, objects, pictures, and symbolic forms' (Mitchell, 2011: xvii), within a case-study approach. Several factors justify a case-study analysis: the high number of IS videos would be exceedingly difficult to account for in one article; focusing on one major video allows extensive conceptual discussion and theory building; this video is particularly rich in clues about IS and epitomizes IS' image-warfare. The video provides images that Mitchell (2011) called 'operative forces in sociopolitical reality, attaining what is commonly known as "iconic" status – widely recognizable, and provocative of powerful emotions' (p. xvii; see also Hariman and Lucaites, 2007). Finally, the case-study approach is 'a preferred strategy when 'how' and 'why' questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context' (Yin, 1994: 1). An iconological case study that articulates the books and video under study to wider networks of objects and discourses enables a probing examination of IS' spectacular image-warfare.

This article elaborates the notion of global networked affect in connection with IS' image-warfare. My analysis of the two books and one video concludes that IS' global networked affect is *projectilic*, mimicking fast, lethal, penetrative objects. Building on scholars who discussed 'images weapons' (Mirzoeff, 2005), 'images as weapons' (Bolt, 2012), and 'image munitions' (Roger, 2013) from representational perspectives, this article proposes that approaching the topic via a combination of iconology (Mitchell, 2011), new media phenomenology (Hansen, 2006), spectacle (Debord, 1992), and affect theory (Hillis et al., 2015; Massumi, 2000) is better suited to understanding the role of digital images as operative (Farocki, 2004; Hoelzl, 2014), and not only representational, in contemporary conflict.

### **Images in global conflict: from mass propaganda to spectacle of the war machine**

In the decades following the Vietnam War, which generated a long-standing debate about images in warfare (Griffin, 2010; Hallin, 1986), the Middle East emerged as a key scene of change in the role of images in conflict (Hammond, 2007; Mirzoeff, 2005; Mitchell, 2011; Roger, 2013). The Gulf War of 1991 consecrated television, particularly CNN, as supreme mediator of conflict for global audiences. The attacks of 11 September 2001 highlighted the ability of terrorist groups to create iconic global visuals like the collapsing Twin Towers. During the 2003 Gulf War, coordination between the US military and news networks touted 'high-precision' weaponry, a slick arms pornography obfuscating the human cost of war. If the Gulf War of 2003 was the pinnacle of image management by states and their armies, then the ongoing battle with IS demonstrates the growing inability of states and media corporations alike to control images and heralds the rise of spectacle in global conflict. Today, IS' images, the production of which by-passes corporate media circuits, but the distribution of which thoroughly exploits their circulatory logic, are difficult to counter because they embody what some propaganda scholars, after

Deleuze and Guattari (1980), call 'rhizomatic communication' (Fuery and Fuery, 2003; Roger, 2013): networked, diffuse, hence unstoppable and global.

In 1967, Guy Debord published *La Société du Spectacle* (1992) as a critique of capitalism, but his ideas apply to IS. Debord grasps spectacle as a 'paralysis of history and memory' (p. 156); by resurrecting the Caliphate, IS rekindled memories of pre-World War 1 Muslim unity under a sovereign who combined earthly rule as Sultan and divine power as Caliph. Spectacle for Debord is 'the opposite of dialogue' (p. 23), the 'uninterrupted discourse that the prevailing order holds about itself, its laudatory monologue', in short, 'the self-portrait of power in the era of its totalitarian administration of the conditions of existence' (p. 26). IS weaves a self-righteous, exclusionary, uncompromising identity and narrative. IS' global ambitions and auto-mythmaking echo Debord's (1992) claim that spectacle 'covers the whole surface of the world and basks indefinitely in its own glory' (p. 21).<sup>1</sup>

Crucially, spectacle inverts life because it reduces society to a mere representation of itself. *Edarat al-Tawahhush* (Naji, 2004), a book penned by an al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI, an IS predecessor) ideologue, conjures up a toppling of social order. The Arabic original appeared online in 2004 and then in English translation 2 years later as *Management of Savagery* (McCants, 2006) – *tawahhush* also means 'chaos' or 'anarchy'. The book, influential in IS circles, offers nothing short of a blueprint for a jihadi spectacle – the planning, timing, execution, recording, and circulation of extreme, sensational violence to achieve maximum publicity – a media doctrine of sorts. Naji (2004) identifies three stages of jihad in which media play a vital role: (1) 'vexation and exhaustion', when incessant attacks lead to (2) a state of anarchy and savagery, when the mujahidin intervene to reestablish order, and (3) the 'establishment of the Islamic state' (Naji, 2004). In the second and 'most critical stage', IS' comprehensive doctrine of image-warfare comes in full view: in addition to forcing the enemy into direct confrontation, it is important to launch 'qualitative operations ... that will grab people's attention' (Naji, 2004: 40). This requires a 'media strategy targeting and focusing on two classes ... [1] the masses ... [2] the troops of the enemy' (pp. 50–51) – the first to be rallied and the second to be recruited. In addition, *Edarat al-Tawahhush* explains how to organize media campaigns, when to use press releases, and when to focus on economic or political issues.

Naji (2004) advocates excessive violence – 'savagery' – because it attracts extensive media coverage: '[T]hose who have not boldly entered wars ... do not understand the role of violence and coarseness against the infidels in combat and media battles' (p. 73). With violence, jihadists' renown will rise and their actions will make the enemy 'think one thousand times before attacking' (Naji, 2004, quoted in Atwan, 2015: 161). Violence must be spectacular, over the top: for bombing attacks, jihadists should use massive explosive charges that 'not only destroys the building or even levels it to the earth' but also makes 'the earth completely swallow it up'.<sup>2</sup> As a result, 'the enemy's fear is multiplied and good media goals are achieved'. When hostages do not generate demanded ransoms, they must be 'liquidated in the most terrifying manner which will send fear into the hearts of the enemy and his supporters' (Naji, 2004, quoted in Atwan, 2015: 161).

After the US–UK invasion of Iraq, when the Jordanian extremist Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi founded AQI, which eventually evolved into IS, he championed high-quality visuals, with videos featuring complex editing and visual effects to depict extreme violence. Whereas most videos in al-Qaeda's heyday circulated via 'analog' videocassettes and satellite television (Donghi, 2014; Kovács, 2015; Roger, 2013), Zarqawi inaugurated the era of digital jihadi propaganda (Stern and Berger, 2015; Whiteside, 2016).<sup>3</sup>

Although IS' violence is not exceptional historically, the group's circulation of gory imagery is unprecedented in quantity and reach. In a sordid preview of the burning of the Jordanian pilot, Naji (2004) reminds readers that the Prophet's companions 'burned (people) with fire even though it is odious because they knew the effect of rough violence in times of need' (p. 74). Today, IS videos produced by al-Furqan Foundation for Media Production or al-Hayat Media Center are professional broadcast quality.

Themes and instructions from *Edarat al-Tawahhush* recur in an official IS book: *Ayyuha al-E'lamy Anta Mujahidon (O' Media Worker, You Are a Mujahid! Second Edition)* (2016) casts communicative jihad (or 'jihad of the tongue') as more important than military jihad ('jihad of the self'). Epigraphs by leading jihadis emphasize that the Prophet Muhammad 'deployed the most important media modality in his era' to attack his enemies: poetry (*Ayyuha al-E'lamy*, 2016: 4). The book aims to spotlight 'the importance of jihadi media in the unfolding war between blasphemy and faith' (p. 9) and '[F]ocusing the efforts of the media workers on the importance of achieving a media triumph hand in hand with a military victory' (p. 12). The book includes standard Islamist fare about 'the media ... confronting a dangerous conquest that has come upon the minds and hearts of Muslims ... dried up the springs of their faith and killed their fervor ...' (p. 44), although it understands Western cultural war as a sign of military impotence. As we shall see later, *Ayyuha al-E'lamy* (2016) explicitly compares jihadi media to arrows, bullets, and bombs.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Digital images, affect and operative reality***

Numerous IS images are *digital* images. Digital images are 'difficult to apprehend' because they are 'constantly oscillating between visual entity and digital data' (Hoelzl, 2014). For Hansen (2006), a digital image is more than simply an image in digital – that is, not analog – form. In the digital age,

... we must accept that the image, rather than finding instantiation in a privileged technical form (including the computer interface), now demarcates the very process through which the body, in conjunction with the various apparatuses for rendering information perceptible, gives form to or *in-forms* information.

In sum, Hansen (2006) argues, 'the image can no longer be restricted to the level of surface appearance, but must be extended to encompass the entire process by which information is made perceivable through embodied experience'. This he calls 'the *digital image*' (p. 10; emphasis in original).

Hansen's understanding of digital images as operating at the level of embodied experience and the networks that enmesh the body, rather than only as representational surfaces, is helpful in understanding IS' image-warfare. Such an analysis focuses on how images reflect interconnections between processes, events, and bodies. In other words, the focus is not only on the information that images impart but also on the affect they convey. Consequently, authenticity is not a primary concern in digital images like the ones circulated by IS. As Mitchell (2011) argued, a critical examination of 'the *ontological unreality* of images' is no longer sufficient, and 'we need instead a method that recognizes and embraces *both* the unreality of images and their operational reality' (p. xviii; emphasis in original). In other words, exposing the lack of truthfulness of such images, or the lack of their correspondence with reality, is less important than tracing 'the process by which the metaphoric becomes literal, and the image becomes actual' (Mitchell, 2011: p. xviii). When spectacle dominates, authenticating images as

representative of truth is less important than grasping how images fit in broader circuits of sentiment and power.

But rather than dismissing representation altogether, we need to expand its definition. In his analysis of Bin Laden videos, Donghi (2014) argues that representation has two meanings: (1) *'the process of self-portraying*, that is, putting oneself into the image in order to create a virtual self-equivalent', and (2) *'the process of being substituted by the image ...'* When the image acts as a substitute to the subject, its role changes from *'the function of copy to the function of presence*; in this sense, its attitude is no longer only mimetic or repetitive, but becomes fully operative' (Donghi, 2014; emphasis in original). *Operative* images, in Farocki's (2004) definition, are 'images that do not represent an object, but rather are part of an operation' (p. 17). Such images conjure 'open-ended processes of becomings' and reflect that 'humans, apparatuses, and tissues form an integrated system' (Hoel and Lindseth, 2014). By enabling presence, such images create a sense that physical bodies coexist, and they can become important weapons that convey projectilic affect – a feeling of bodily harm and violation.<sup>5</sup> After all, a projectile entails *movement* toward, *presence* in proximity of, and finally *touching* its target.

Integrating Hansen's digital image in Mitchell's iconology enables a focus on how IS' digital images elicit terror as affect, in addition to how they convey information. Massumi (2002) defined affect as a bodily intensity that precedes its representation in language and culture, arguing that affect is pivotal in reconsidering 'power after ideology' because ideology 'is now [only] one mode of power in a larger field that is not defined, overall, by ideology' (p. 42). Many analysts see a 'radical Islamist ideology' animating IS, but Massumi's argument makes sense when we consider that IS' ideology is an instrumental hodgepodge drawn selectively from Islamic texts and enforced in a body-punishing spectacle (Kraidy, 2016). Ideology is therefore one component among others of IS' influence. Affect theory is particularly apt for grasping the impact of IS' digital images because many of these images, as they are *informed*, are designed to elicit terror felt as affect, an embodied experience.

The human body is central to both the production and reception of IS' digital images. Bergson (1991) famously defined the body as 'an image which acts like other images, receiving and giving back movement, with, perhaps, this difference only, that my body appears to choose, within certain limits, the manner in which it shall restore what it receives' (p. 19). Crucially, Bergson defines the body as '*a center of action ... [which] cannot give birth to a representation*' (p. 20; emphasis in original). 'Center of action' here means a site for processing the impact that surrounding objects and images have on the body. Before it is refracted through the prisms of cognition and culture, this impact is affective. As a felt, pre-representational intensity, affect is vital to grasp 'our information- and image-based late capitalist culture ... characterized by a surfeit of it' (Massumi, 2002, p. 27). The IS immolation video creates an abundance of affect. But, as we shall see, representation – as media coverage that is both extensive (in quantity) and intensive (in the choice of words used to describe the video) – amplifies the affect of the video.

### **The image-event: the immolation of the Jordanian air force pilot**

IS developed an elaborate media structure headed by a Ministry of Media coordinating 33 local media bureaus. Although IS media appear in various forms (CDs, DVDs, print pamphlets and newsletters, social media postings, images, videos, online magazines, audio files, radio, apps), its prolific visual media productions have attracted most attention: between January 2015 and August 2016, IS discharged '9,000 videos, picture reports, and photographs', with approximately 52,000 photographs embedded in

tweeted picture reports (Milton, 2016: 21). IS video premieres mimic the unfolding of a (literal) spectacle: a drum roll and curtain raising (chatter about imminent offering), a performance (video posting on YouTube, anonymous messaging boards, and jihadi forums, with links circulated widely via 'open' platforms like Twitter, later via encrypted apps like WhatsApp and Telegram), and an intermission where the performance is commented widely ('mainstream' media coverage amplified by social media), before the cycle re-occurs.

As 'the vernacular form of the era' (Sherman, 2008: 163), video has affordances that help it circulate widely: the ability not only to post, re-tweet, share, and comment but also to play, stop, continue, rewind, fast forward, complete, replay, and repeat. Done systematically as part of a campaign, 'strategic' as opposed to 'incognizant' repetition 'bears with it the seeds of transformation ... each repetition is never the same as the former. In it, there is circulation, there is intensity, there is innovation' (Trinh, 1991: 190). Digital video, as we shall see next, constitutes a particularly potent combination of operative images that spreads global networked affect.

The video of the burning of the Jordanian air force pilot, Muath al-Kasasbeh, appeared online in February 2015, under the title *Healing the Believers' Chests*. The full video is a bit longer than 22 minutes, although the infamous sequence of Kasasbeh's immolation lasts around 7 minutes (the rest consists of various propaganda snippets). In the days leading to the video's posting, IS launched a digital drum roll, attracting attention to the impending release, reaching its crescendo right before the video was posted online. Next 'came links to copies of the film on JustPaste.it ([an] anonymous message board ...) and its Arabic equivalents, Nasher.me and Manbar.me, among many other anonymous platforms'. Now links to the video are proliferated,

tweeted with messages urging followers to re-tweet widely and for 'people with hi-speed connections' to download and archive the film ... on anonymous clouds or mirror websites (whereby the content of a known jihadist website is reproduced on hundreds of others under different names and identities). (Atwan, 2015: 22–23)

This ensured that links to the video survived Twitter suspension and website shutdown campaigns.

The ritualistic, tantalizing *mise-en-scène* captures the pilot's terrified face and supine body as flames engulf him, decelerating specific scenes in a terrifying aesthetic of stretched temporality accentuated by shrinking intervals and a focus on details from multiple angles. In the atrocious finale, the pilot succumbs to the flames and then an IS bulldozer dumps a pile of stones, burying the cage (on IS and temporality, see Kraidy, 2017b).

IS' ultra-violent images and the extreme abuse of human bodies they depict pose ethical challenges for research. On one hand, showing these images enables (1) descriptive precision and (2) analytical rigor; it also (3) furnishes evidence for a moral indictment of IS. On the other hand, any reproduction of these images may inadvertently amplify IS' spectacle and the global dissemination of fear that IS depends on, not to mention reproducing images of the dead, who are unable to give their consent. Video, in particular, is prone to viral dissemination and instant replay. Thus, this article does not include a link to the video or feature screengrabs from it. Instead, the analysis relies on a verbal description of key moments, as follows.



In a long shot, the pilot, in a white undershirt, his groin and naked legs blurred out, is led out of the river in which his parachute fell by four IS fighters. His face betrays fear; their faces reflect elation. The four are dressed differently. Clearly, this moment was not meant to be in the video, but was tagged on subsequently as a prelude to the actual execution by fire. No logo is visible.

In another long shot, we see nine IS fighters in the background, in similar desert military fatigues, boots and balaclavas, clutching machine guns in a well-coordinated pose that projects discipline and readiness. The two fighters on the edges of the screen, cut in half, suggest that more soldiers may be standing outside of the frame. In the foreground, the Jordanian pilot stands, in the kind of orange prison gown made famous in pictures of Guantanamo detainees, his arms limp by his body, his face reflecting fear. Al-Furqan's logo is visible in the upper left corner.

In a medium shot, the pilot, whose bust we see, stares between the thick black bars of a metallic cage inside of which he stands. His face betrays total terror. IS' logo is visible in the upper left corner.

The shot is still a medium shot, but wider than the previous one. Now we see the pilot from the waist up, hands limp next to his body, head leaning forward in seeming resignation and surrender. We no longer see his face, but the hair on top of his head. The al-Furqan logo is visible in the upper left corner.

The camera moves to a medium shot of an IS fighter in desert uniform, kneeling with a torch in hand, starting a fire. The flame dominates the left side of the screen and the fighter fills the right side. No logo is visible on the screen.

Still a medium shot, although we no longer see any humans. On the left side of the screen, we see the lower corner of the cage. On the right, there is smoke. In the center of the screen, we see a linear flame on the ground. This screen establishes a connection between the torch and the cage. We understand the flame to be moving in a straight line toward the cage. The al-Furqan logo is visible in the upper left corner.

A high-angle medium shot shows the pilot bringing his hands to his forehead, in a gesture of prayer, as flames can be seen on the floor inside the cage, spreading in a square at the inner edges of the cage, clearly following a geometric spread pattern determined by a combustible intentionally placed there. No logo is visible.

A low-angle closer medium shot now focuses on the floor of the cage, showing the legs below the knees and the feet of the pilot from behind, standing in the middle of the cage, which is well lit by sunlight, as the flames have clearly grown higher inside the cage. IS' fluttering flag logo is visible in upper right corner, covering another logo, which can nonetheless be glimpsed.

The camera zooms out and moves to capture the pilot from the front. The screen is darker, and thick black smoke billows from the cage. Flames have invaded half of the pilot's body, up to his waist. His arms pull back, and his face, barely seen and only in contrast, suggests pain. But the pilot is still standing. No logo is visible.

The camera zooms out further and captures the pilot's body, still erect, arms raised, engulfed in flame. The camera is slightly to the left of the pilot, and we now see most of the cage, the center of

which is dominated by the body aflame, and the right side dominated by black smoke. IS' logo is visible in the upper left corner.

A high angle captures the entire ordeal. We see the cage and line of fire coming on the ground from outside to the inside of the cage, the entire cage engulfed in flame, the body of the pilot nothing more than a nebulous bodily contour in flame-orange and smoke-black. IS' logo is visible in the upper left corner.

Formally, the video is a peculiar hybrid of snuff cinema, reality television, and pornography. Camera angles and depths of field vary to either quicken the pace of action or slow it down so that viewers miss not a single excruciating detail – a horrid, slow morbidity staged as a tantalizing spectacle. The video showcases IS as a state, with multiple soldiers in similar uniforms, clutching their machine guns in unison, reflecting the synchronized movements of a regular army. Although the video is likely an al-Furqan production, different shots are emblazoned with different logos, suggesting IS' sprawling media organization which includes multiple media outlets. As a series of digital images, the video embodies the depth and scale of a Caliphate in-formation.<sup>6</sup> What is left out of the frame, we imagine, is a large, disciplined, and powerful organization with coordinated military and media departments.

The video combines and alternates temporalities (speed, slowness) and spatialities (desert, cage). Speedy actions and long hiatuses are stitched seamlessly in the video's temporal rhythms. The last moments of the life of the Jordanian pilot were stretched into an intolerable 7-minute video, while the entire *mise-en-scène* of the video must have taken hours to set up. We now also know that the pilot was executed days or weeks before the video's delivery, when IS pretended to negotiate – off-screen – with Jordan's government the pilot's discharge in exchange for jihadi prisoners, which adds to the cruelty of the video's timeframe. The video enacts a peculiar dynamic between stasis and movement. A stationary object (the cage) immobilizes the body of the pilot, while a moving object (the flame) approaches. Fire is a weapon, the flame a projectile. The brief moment of death decelerates digitally into a lengthy undertaking.

Rather than merely overturning life, the IS spectacle digitally decelerates life into death. Key to the video's enactment of speed-slowness is Virilio's notion of picnolepsia. In *Pure War*, Virilio argues, 'Our vision is that of a montage, a montage of temporalities which are the product not only of the powers that be, but of the technologies that organize time' (Virilio and Lotringer, 2008: 48). Picnolepsia is a 'momentary lapse of consciousness' (Virilio, 1991: 104, quoted in Cubitt, 1999: 128), a suspension of our attention that leads us to stitch separate fragments into continuous strands. Picnolepsia tricks us into stitching disjointed moving images into flows because our perceptual faculties allow us to taper over discontinuities in favor of the illusion of uninterrupted narrative, and narrative film has habituated us to do so.

The speed-slowness alternation explains much of the spectacle's potency. Speed is central to the nature of IS, which first irrupted on the global scene because of the speed of its military conquests. Echoing Hanna Arendt's claim in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that 'Terror is the realization of the law of movement' (quoted in Virilio, 2012: 21), IS rose to global public enemy number 1 by virtue of the confounding speed with which it captured Mosul, Iraq's second city, in a few days in June 2014 (Kraidy, 2017a, in press). Then, suspense began building in Western and Middle Eastern media, in feverish speculation about plans for the recovery of Mosul by an alliance of Kurds, Iraqis, Americans, and Turks, an operation that began in October 2016.

The video reflects how IS spreads global networked affect. Visual deceleration digitally manipulates temporal frames to elicit the terror affect, showing how '[I]ntensity is ... disconnected from meaningful sequencing' and is 'narratively delocalized' diffusing in order 'to register a state – actually to re-register an already felt state, for the skin is faster than the word' (Massumi, 2002: 25). A jolt of affect (skin) is reiterated as representation (word) that amplifies global networked affect, via IS productions and global media coverage. One IS tweet underscored that the video enacted a spectacle: 'Burn baby Burn!!! Starring "best scream" award winner Moath al Kassasbeh' (Atwan, 2015: 23). For several days, extensive media coverage focused on the video's extreme cruelty. To use US and UK media as examples, *The Washington Post* called the video a 'spectacle' (Sly and Naylor, 2015), and *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* described it as 'particularly gruesome' (Kadri and Nordland, 2015), a 'horrific incident' (Somaiya, 2015), an 'astonishing brutality' (Somaiya, 2015), a 'grisly killing' (Nordland and Kirkpatrick, 2015), 'extremely graphic' (Woolf, 2015), a 'barbaric murder' (MacAskil, 2016), and a 'horrendous reality' (Fraser, 2015). Heeding Mitchell's inclusion of verbal images in iconology, these press descriptions conjure up mental images that amplify textually the affect that the video delivers visually. IS had again succeeded in creating infectious cultural forms that circulate globally, attract attention, and diffuse the affect of terror.

### **Global networked affect and the projectilic image**

Close analysis of primary sources – two Arabic-language IS books and one IS video – shows that global network affect works by disseminating images-as-projectiles. In light of IS' swift military conquests and aggressive digital propaganda, deceleration is arresting because speed is expected.<sup>7</sup> The manipulation of temporal frames in digital videography – which sets up speed and slowness, acceleration and deceleration, in various configurations with images and events – is key to global networked affect. In jarring contrast to the slowness of the video, speed of transmission enables digital images, as affective projectiles, to move at high speed, hit us without warning, and inflict harm. As Virilio (2012) argued, speed causes the loss of lateral vision, which enables survival, since '[P]redators come from the back or the sides' (p. 37). Surprise, premised on speed, is vital to IS, which wages the kind of swift military-digital campaign that 'occupies you in the blink of an eye, leaving you dumbfounded, mesmerized' (Virilio, 2012: 15). Here, we get the full measure of IS' projectilic affect, where we feel 'hit' by the video as if by a hard projectile.

IS sees images as operative, which are, to reiterate, 'images that do not represent an object, but rather are part of an operation' (Farocki, 2004: 17). To IS, images are tantamount to bullets, rockets, missiles – weapons in an arsenal. Ayyuha al-E'lamy (2016) is chock full of evidence that IS considers images to be weapons: an epigraph by IS com-mander Abu Hamza al-Mujahir says,

[T]he battles ... occur ... the military front, and ... the confrontation with the demonic media ... as a threat to the umma [community of believers] and its men, media rockets exceed in their ferocity and danger the flames of bombs dropped from airplanes. (pp. 4–5; emphasis added)

Another epigraph recalls that in the Prophet's days, poetry was 'more extreme than arrows' (pp. 4–5). A key objective is to get 'rid of erroneous views of jihad and remembering that the weapon of the word can be more devastating than nuclear weapons' (p. 18; emphasis added). Elsewhere, Ayyuha al-E'lamy speaks of '[T]he arrows of jihadi news' (p. 21; emphasis added). A camera is akin to a machine gun, and images-as-weapons are so important they are worth dying for: 'Don't you see the photographer/

cameraman carrying his camera in lieu of the Kalashnikov and running ahead of the soldier in our conquests, welcoming bullets with his breast?' (p. 19). Finally, Ayyuha al-E'lamy (2016) compares media workers to suicide bombers: 'He did not exaggerate who he said that "the media worker is a martyr-operator without a belt"' (p. 18; emphasis added). By way of conclusion, the book beseeches God: 'O Lord protect the struggling (mujahideen) media workers; O Lord correct their aim and orient their opinion ...' (p. 50; emphasis added).

A projectile's journey is swift but predictable: it begins with immobility, proceeds with high speed, and returns to stillness once lodged in its target. But by manipulating temporal frames to articulate movement and immobility in confusing patterns, the Jordanian pilot video generates anxiety. Affect, which is movement in the sense that it 'designates the doubling of an image, utterance, perception or sound' into embodied intensity, is intimately connected to deceleration since 'there is a specific affect that is a halting ... an inhibition of movement [:] anxiety' (Dean, 2015: 96). Mitchell (2011) goes further, arguing that '[t]error is a form of affect that tends to express itself as paralysis, the "deer in the headlights" syndrome' (p. 6), which, to reiterate Virilio, blocks lateral vision. The video sets up various moving images – the pilot being led by IS militants out of the river where he crashed, the militant moving with a torch to set the line of fuel dug in the sand on fire, fire moving on the ground, horizontally, reaching the cage, then slowly engulfing the body of the pilot as the flames move vertically – all leading to a conclusion that has been already defined as potential: the pilot's death by fire. Here, I use 'potential' in line with Massumi's differentiation 'between the possible and the potential'. For Massumi (2002), '[P]ossibility is a variation implicit in what a thing can be said to be when it is on target. Potential is the immanence of a thing to its still indeterminate variation' (p. 9). The video's power of manipulating temporal frames via digital imagery rests in its ability to capture spectators in a suspended present, both tantalized and terrorized by a *dénouement* – death – they fear is imminent, but hope to be a bluff, a bargaining move, a bloodless deferment.

Videographed depictions of executions are premised on our sense, honed by previous experiences with filmed death, of impending projectilic affect. When we see black-clad men brandishing knives, shuffling around a kneeling captive in an orange jumpsuit, we have been habituated, by previous IS beheading videos, to expect the blade to slash the neck – a matter of possibility rather than potential (see Massumi, 2002). Similarly, in the video of the Jordanian pilot, the *mise-en-scène* clues us in on his imminent death, which we expect at any moment, and then goes about showing the pilot and his tormentors from various angles, with multiple shots, halting life into death at the same time as it decelerates death into a spectacle. Projectilic affect links the screen to its outside. As Comolli argued in *Daech, le Cinéma et la Mort* (2016), violent IS videos are powerful because they 'remind the spectator of his inanity, his 'uselessness' since the abominations appearing on the screen were manufactured without him, against him, assuming and preempting his desire as taste for blood and enjoyment (*jouissance*) of violence' (p. 33; emphasis in original). By awakening our scopic drive and directing it toward death, moving digital images act as projectiles that subjugate our bodies to the spectacle, compelling us to experience terror as a bodily intensity. Here, the potency of digital video as a specific permutation of moving digital images uniquely able to enact, and via repetition, to maintain, visual and narrative tension between movement and stillness, speed and slowness, that diffuses global network affect comes into full view.

The IS spectacle produces and circulates terror through digital images as a global networked affect. Indeed, IS is at the center of 'affective investments, sensory impulses, and forms of intensity that

generate and circulate within networks comprising both human and nonhuman actors' (Hillis et al., 2015: 1). In IS' own words (Ayyuha al-E'lamy, 2016), this affect is intended '[T]o infuriate, exasperate, gall the enemy' (Arabic: ighazhat al-'adduw) (p. 26), and IS image-warfare produces '[A]nything that exasperates and harms/vexes the enemy is of jihad' (p. 27). Virilio (2012) used the metaphor of the 'informational bomb' to capture how the speed of information transmission leads to 'the synchronization of emotion on a global scale', which enacts a 'communism of affects' via the rise of 'instantaneous terror' (p. 31). This affect infuses social space with fear and anxiety, Naji's (2004) *Edarat al-Tawahhush* (Management of Savagery) echoing Virilio's *The Administration of Fear* (2012). If 'anxiety secretes its own theory' (Virilio, 2012: 54), then the perfect storm of anxieties IS elicits worldwide – about the breakdown of the state system, the dark side of digital communication, migration as threat to national identity, religion, violence, and security – constitutes an opportunity ripe for capture by White-nationalist demagogues, which in turn propagates the affect of terror as a blend of fear and anxiety. Fear may focus on IS itself, but anxiety has no object, so it is refracted and diffused in media panics, everyday conversation, and populist politics, reflecting how the establishment of fear as a global affect enables a 'transition from a democracy of opinion to a democracy of emotion' (Virilio, 2012: 31).

Global networked affect spreads quickly because it reaches us in familiar forms. Clearly discernible in the Jordanian pilot video are traces of the famous images of Abu Ghraib – the orange jumpsuit, the supine body, the cage – that André Gunthert (2008) argued 'will be remembered as the first event that made a place in history for digital photography' (p. 110). In fact, stylistic elements of the video can be read as a tit-for-tat inversion of the US 'shock and awe' military strategy during the 2003 invasion of Iraq that set a fertile ground for the emergence of IS. These intertextual components cast the video as a riposte to the invasion of Iraq and the US military's torture of detainees at Guantanamo. Clearly drawing on a visual repertoire furnished by the US military and by Hollywood's narrative film conventions (Comolli, 2016; Dauber and Robinson, 2015; Samir, 2016), the video seems to be the mother of all media format adaptations, with a twist.

Whereas Hollywood, for the most part, seeks to impart enjoyment, IS seeks to inflict pain. If, as Dean (2015) argues, '[C]ommunicative capitalism relies on networks that generate and amplify enjoyment', IS' image-warfare exacts harm and generates terror as a blend of fear and anxiety. In consumer society, digital media 'produce and circulate affect as a binding technique' where '[E]very tweet or comment, every forwarded image or petition, accrues a tiny affective nugget, a little surplus enjoyment, a smidgen of attention' (Dean, 2015: 90). The reverse applies to IS' image-warfare: every tweet, image, and video contributes to the global networked affect of terror. In fact, as Comolli (2016) argued, enjoyment and fear, life and death, are each other's flipside in how we relate to images. This is what Saint Augustine called *concupiscentia oculorum* (the lust of the eyes) that compels us to watch and even enjoy morbid spectacles (Comolli, 2016). Using fire in the Jordanian pilot video reflects IS' grasp of the affective power of flames. Fire has the ability to stir deep, intense, and complex feelings in humans. 'Among the world's objects that call us to reverie', Bachelard (1961) wrote, 'the flame is one of greatest operator of images' (p. 1), triggering our imagination to conjure up a plethora of images. What is more, 'the flame incites an intensification of the pleasure of seeing ... it forces us to look' (Bachelard, 1961, p. 3) – yearning eyes, on fire.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the analysis of two Arabic-language books published or adopted by IS that outline the group's beliefs about media and one official video produced by the group, this article offers insight into the media doctrine of one of the most challenging non-state belligerent groups of the contemporary era. In doing so, I articulated new parameters for the role of digital images in global conflict today. IS, this article demonstrates, considers images to be operative rather than representational: IS advances a notion of the image-as-weapon in its publications, that it executes in its video production. More broadly, relying on theories of iconology, spectacle, new media phenomenology, and affect, this article has analyzed IS' use of digital images as a death spectacle that manipulates temporal rhythms by using tactics of acceleration and deceleration, disseminated through digital networks as global networked affect.

If Massumi (2002) is correct that affect enables a new understanding of power unshackled by ideology, then analyzing how the IS spectacle launches projectilic images is tantamount to 'proposing an analog theory of image-based power: images as the conveyers of forces of emergence, as vehicles for existential potentialization and transfer' (Massumi, 2002: 43). In contemporary global conflict, images not only represent but also establish presence. They pack such an extreme dose of violence that the affect they transmit overwhelms those it touches, although most people will go to great lengths to avoid seeing such images – often unsuccessfully, because of morbid fascination – as most people would devote exacting efforts to avoid a bullet or an arrow. Digital images are also operative in the sense that they trigger actions with significant, material, life-or-death impact: the posting of the video led the Jordanian government to execute jihadi prisoners and to conduct multiple air bombings of IS facilities. A new era of image-warfare is now upon us, recon-figuring how belligerents wage conflict globally and how scholars understand it.

A global networked affect enacted through a spectacle of digital images embodies a new kind of strategic communication. It is misguided to approach IS' video warfare through a 'war of ideas' classic propaganda optic. Indeed, for Debord (1992), spectacle is 'fundamentally tautological', 'its means are its ends' (p. 21). Rebutting a message is futile when the medium itself is the message. IS thrives on this spectacle that numbs, frightens, or seduces, drowning contradictions in torrents of images. It is also a mistake to view these images as atavistic throwbacks to 'the stone age', back to which US military commanders threatened to bomb Afghanistan and Iraq. IS' images are more accurately grasped as self-conscious martial forms made for global circulation and designed to inflict harm on a wide scale: geopolitical visual projectiles. The impact of such images is best understood as a projectilic affect, an intense embodied sensation that we experience before we can represent it with words. As a constellation of bonds between people mediated by images, IS' deadly spectacle spreads terror as affect; it feeds populist campaigns, fuels media debates, and drives popular fears. IS exploits the rhizomatic character of global communication to spread a global networked affect of terror through its deployment of chilling operative images in a spectacle of death that penetrates the bodies of victims (literally) and of spectators (affectively). In this kind of warfare, images trigger intensities in addition to conveying ideologies: as it ushers the era of the projectilic image, IS underscores that 'the skin is', indeed, 'faster than the word' (Massumi, 2002: 25).

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### **Notes**

1. All quotes from French sources are the author's own translation from the original.
2. The jihadi group Jabhat Islamiyya demonstrated this in a May 2014 video shot in Aleppo, Syria.
3. This led al-Qaeda's Zawahiri to criticize Islamic State of Iraq's (ISI) Zarqawi for his extreme violence.
4. All quotes from Ayyuha al-E'lamy (2016) are the author's own translation from the Arabic original.
5. I adopt the concept of 'projectilic affect' from Deleuze and Guattari (1980), whose notion of the 'war machine' is central to my ongoing book-project on Islamic State (IS).
6. Stills of the video circulated as much as the video itself. Griffin (2010) remarks that some of the most viral images of the 1991 Gulf War 'were not photographs ... but still frames from Defense Department videos or snippets of video from CNN newscasts' (p. 27).
7. Islamic State (IS) can be grasped as thoroughly modern, recalling Rosa's (2015) argument that 'the acceleration of processes and events is a fundamental principle of modern society' (p. xxxiv).

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