The “futurist” aesthetics of ISIS
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ABSTRACT
ISIS propaganda differs from that of other (Islamic or non-Islamic) religions or cults as it is not so much concerned with imagination and exotic fantasies but accentuates the maximal exploitation and demonstration of available technology. The Islamic State does not only excel through the extensive use of high-tech weapons, social media, commercial bot, and automated text systems; by putting forward the presence of speeding cars and tanks, mobile phones, and computers, ISIS presents jihad life as connected to modern urban culture. The article shows that the aesthetics of the Islamic State is “futurist” by comparing it with Italian Futurism. Futurism glorified cars, industrial machines, and modern cities while praising violence as a means of leaving behind imitations of the past in order to project itself most efficiently into the future. A profound sense of crisis produces in both Futurism and jihadism a nihilistic attitude toward the present state of society that will be overcome through an exaltation of technology. The futurist project to integrate life and art is paralleled by ISIS’s desire to integrate life and religion. In both cases the result is achieved through violence.

One of the most remarkable features of ISIS propaganda is the implication of aestheticizing approaches towards politics with a strong emphasis on technology. A futurist form of modernism has become palpable since the action-movie-style and “bullet time” effects reminiscent of The Matrix became the trademark of countless ISIS videos. The term “modern jihad” is not new: it first referred to foreign fighters fighting in the Afghan-Soviet war. However, in the case of the newest jihadi aesthetics, “modern” cannot merely be understood in the sense of “contemporary”: it is now deliberately linked to the image of high-tech savvy young people emerging from an urban environment. As a result, modern life appears very much as an enactment of style or lifestyle. ISIS can therefore be interpreted as an intensification of the “modernity as an attitude” philosophy that was also important for futurists. Very striking is the ISIS emphasis on communication technology. The international media keeps pointing out that ISIS is an “internet phenomenon as much as a military one” (David Talbot in the MIT Technology Review 2015). ISIS uses technology better than most tech start-ups and created its terror network with an unusual efficiency. ISIS utilizes almost every social app available to communicate its messages. Futurism specialist Giovanni Lista said that “a Futurist of today would be a fan of computer-

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generated images” (Lista 2001, 10). Futurists would certainly also use the most recent communication methods. In 1910, Marinetti threw eighty thousand leaflets from the tower of St. Mark’s in Venice demanding that the city’s palaces be ripped down. Communication-wise futurists were always one step ahead.

Futurists and ISIS are “primitives of a new sensibility” (the expression is taken from “Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto”). A profound sense of crisis produces in both Futurism and ISIS jihadism a nihilistic attitude toward the present state of society, a state that is supposed to be overcome through an exaltation of technology. As “primitives of a new sensibility,” Futurists and ISIS decide to transform horror “into elation, but elation so extreme that it suggests horror” (Rainey, Poggi, and Wittman 2009, 6). At the same time, both ISIS and Futurism have moralistic concerns regarding the “danger of corruption by the materialism, mechanization, and hedonism” inherent in “Americanism and its degraded popular culture” (Payne 2003, xvi, on Futurism); both also share a disdain for the ruling class. Futurists yearned for a war they hoped would rid them of the Austro-Hungarian oppression as Italy was still reclaiming some territories under Austro-Hungarian control. Futurists publicly burned the flag of Austria. In 1911, Marinetti issued a manifesto in support of the colonial war, which included the slogan “Let the tedious memory of Roman greatness be cancelled by an Italian greatness one hundred times more powerful” (Untitled Manifesto TIF, 339, quoted from Poggi 2008, 2). Futurists also actively supported the Italian invasion of Libya, and a war film was made in Libya in 1911 by futurist Luca Comerio. Marinetti flew to the Libyan front in 1912.

Futurism bears an ambiguous link with fascism. The founder of Futurism, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876–1944), became one of the first members of the National Fascist Party when his own “Futurist Political Party” was absorbed into Mussolini’s “Italian Fasci of Combat.” Futurists claimed to loathe everything traditional and emphasized speed, technology, youth, and science. In the “Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” Marinetti asks his disciples to “destroy museums, libraries, academies of every kind” and to “free this land from its smelly gangrene of professors, archeologists, tour guides [ciceroni] and antiquarians” (Marinetti 1909, 52). The futurist war on the old was meant to prepare “for the birth of an industrial and militarized Venice, capable of dominating the great Adriatic, the Great Italian lake” (“Contro Venezia passatista,” in TIF, 33–34, quoted in Poggi 2008, 77). In 1919, a group of proto-fascists close to Mussolini and which included Marinetti invaded the offices of the socialist daily newspaper Avanti in Milan, smashing its presses and equipment. Four people were killed and thirty-nine were injured (see Paxton 2004, 6–7).

The myth of the unification of Italy (Risorgimento) as a yet incomplete political and moral revolution fueled Futurism as well as fascism. It has an equivalent in the myth of a “lost caliphate” that is so important for ISIS. While fundamentalists frequently refer to this myth, the fascist myth of “Italianism” (though admittedly not shared by all futurists) made Mussolini say in 1922 that “Our myth is the nation” (Gentile 2003, 60). Finally, both futurists and ISIS believe that culture has a militant function. They share this particular conception of culture with the movements of the modernist avant-garde: the word “avant-garde” does obviously have military connotations. In the cases of Italian and Russian Futurism the militant character is manifest because both went through revolutionary experiences. However, the rest of the historical avant-garde is determined by militancy, too. In his now canonical Theory of the

Figure 1. Ugo Gianattasio, Racecar, 1920.
Avant-Garde (1984) Peter Bürger defined the avant-garde as an intensely militant artistic project because the artist was not supposed to withdraw into the sanctuary of art for art’s sake. To reflect this concept against the aesthetics of ISIS can yield new insights into the character of this terrorist movement.

Why is this comparative study of terrorist propaganda and futurist art necessary? Futurism is known as a political and artistic movement much researched by literary critics and art historians, whereas ISIS is a radical terrorist organization. Are those comparisons not random? They are not random because they are supposed to demonstrate the modern character of radical Islam. The purpose of this article is to deliver an analysis of the phenomenon of ISIS and I believe that a reading of the most recent episodes of Islamic terrorism and religious radicalization through the lens of Futurism is able to highlight the modern character of those movements.

Differences

Some people will still not be convinced that phenomena coming from different eras and different social spheres can be compared. Futurism is a product of troubled political cultures typical of the twentieth century with roots reaching into the nineteenth century, whereas ISIS emerged in the context of post-modern globalization. On the other hand, both Futurism and radical Islam have roots in nineteenth-century philosophies, which grew on different territories but which have certain things in common. Dissimilarities need to be acknowledged but comparisons remain pertinent. First, I do not suggest that Futurism and ISIS are equally barbaric. The context and the scope of their actions are unequal. Futurist aesthetics set landmarks in art and architecture and influenced international movements like Bauhaus, De Stijl, and Russian Constructivism, while ISIS shocks the world through images of brutality. No twist of the perspective can seriously maintain that futurists are entirely like ISIS. Though Marinetti occasionally describes “the thrill of killing three Arab soldiers with his own hands” (Rainey 2009, 13), in reality, futurists rarely committed brutal actions in real life. Above that, the ironical dimension that is so important for Futurism is entirely missing in jihadism. Futurists are playful and parodic and their style is often aristocratic or determined by the habitus of middle-class intellectuals. Nothing can be more opposed to ISIS. As a matter of fact, most—though not all—comparisons developed in this article are meant to be unidirectional. The aim is not to liken futurists to the practices of the Islamic State but rather to find patterns in the aesthetics of ISIS that can be identified as “futurist.” This approach will lead to new and revealing insights into the character of this terrorist organization.

At the same time, this does not mean that ISIS propaganda should be elevated to the status of art. From an artistic point of view, the productions of ISIS are inferior and not worthy of any mention were it merely for aesthetics’ sake. However, the novelty that has been introduced into radical Islam in the form of a “futurist aesthetics” (note the quotation marks) is interesting and will help to explain ISIS as a new and popular international cultural phenomenon. While the terrorists are obviously no artists, it would also be wrong to depict ISIS as a bunch of fanatics whose existence is entirely incomparable with that of the educated and culturally sensitive futurists. While common fighters (and foreign converts in particular) might often (though far from always) have a low level of education, one should never forget that ISIS emerges from an old tradition of radical Sunni Islam whose programs and reflections have always been highly sophisticated. One should also never forget that ISIS is much more than a shadowy terrorist cell; it is a proto-state receiving attention and support from a large part of the Muslim community.

Progressive conservatism

Before analyzing the aesthetics of ISIS propaganda material, the problem of “modernity” needs to be considered within the broader historical context of religious fundamentalism from which ISIS emerges. ISIS attempts to unite progressive and conservative attitudes. How do radical Islam and ISIS in particular bring tradition and modernity together? Can fundamentalism be modern and progressive or does it not necessarily hark back to an ideal past and remains therefore conservative? Western spectators often have difficulties grasping the modern, anti-traditional input in fundamentalism and tend to see it as simply anti-modern and regressive. Scripturalism, chauvinism, the insistence on faith, or the stress on absolute authority can barely be called modern in the Western sense. Still, the idea of “progressiveness” remains important for many radical Islamic groups. In this it parallels fascism and Futurism where, in the words of Roger Griffin, “the arrow of time thus points […] forward even when the teacher looks over his shoulder for guidance on where to aim” (Griffin 1992, 32). Bassam Tibi sees the most radical branches of jihad Islam as modern and not as an expression of ancient Islam (Tibi 2007) and explains that fundamentalism is not traditionalism: “although fundamentalists do draw on traditions, they do so clearly within a modern context and with a nontraditional mindset” (Tibi 1998, 29). Many conservative Islamic activist groups have based their vision of an ideal
Islamic state not on a retrospective or nostalgic model but on a utopian model and scholars have noted that the recent wave of Islamization does not signify a return to traditional Islam and its scriptures but that it is possible to “see in the Islamist movement elements of a forward-looking project: a populist attempt to redefine modernity in Islamic terms” (Badran 2009, 224).6

The sacramization of technology and urbanism

The Beirut-based Al Akhbar newspaper has described ISIS as “the cinematic caliphate.” What are the main characteristics of ISIS “cinema”? First of all, the aesthetics is submitted to the cults of irrational violence and of technology. This is the most essential “futurist” slant of ISIS. A polemical account of futurist paintings issued by the rivaling group “La Voce” in 1909 fits the overall aesthetic impression of Jihad videos: take “fifteen cars, seven planes, four trains, two steamships and two bicycles, various electrical generators, a few red-hot boiler engines; add your best flower of impotence and pomposity; blend it all into a lake of grey matter and aphrodisiac dribble, bring the mixture to a boil in the emptiness of your soul” (quoted in Gentile 2003, 30). Islamic State cinematic productions are not merely documentaries meant to inform but are highly aestheticized. The 62-minute-long video The Clanging of the Swords Part IV, the single most important video of the year 2014, which has been cited as important in preparing the ground for the fall of Mosul (Fernandez 2015, 6), begins with overhead shots of Fallujah taken by a camera attached to a drone. The video, which develops the themes contained in the action sequences of the ISIS video series “Windows Upon the Land of Epic Battles,” produces futurist fantasies similar to Tullio Crali’s painting Nose Dive on the City (1939) or to what futurists had called an “aeropaint.” Islamic State videos are always “optical” in the futurist sense because they are dynamic and related to moving objects. A futurist touch is also achieved through a willfully colorful and fragmented presentation of reality. In the feature-length Flames of War, whose purpose is to explain the IS’s seizure of the Syrian army, the color is so saturated that the combatants appear to glow with light.

Both ISIS and Futurism decide to exalt civilization by acclaiming urbanity and technology. Modern urban technology is not seen as the source of decadence but supposed to overcome decadent civilization. The environments in which ISIS operates are little urban, and views of nature and natural landscapes would have been a more logical option for jihad videos. In spite of this, ISIS makes big efforts to endow itself with urban connotations by putting forward pictures of modern weapons, speeding cars and tanks, mobile phones, and computers. It seems that nature is the least interesting element for ISIS ideologists: urban life is found most energizing. This is not only incompatible with the veneration of nature and rural life so often sported by the Nazis, but also with the “hippy” aesthetics of New Age sects or that of Christian rock. ISIS should therefore be seen as a classic case of “subculturation.” In subculture, as Dick Hebdige famously explained, style is most typically found by following transformations that “go against nature” (Hebdige 1979, 18). What is true for nature is also true for traditional cultures present in the environments in which ISIS operates: those elements will rarely be shown, but in ISIS propaganda, orientalizing elements are almost limited to the nasheed (a cappella) chant. This is surprising given that the center of operations is situated in the Middle East.

Modern media

The recruiting material distributed by ISIS via the internet has fascinated many journalists and bloggers. ISIS’s successful recruitment strategies have become a serious challenge for the international community. ISIS employs a multifaceted online media strategy for its targeted populations. Since the establishment of the “Caliphate” in June 2014, ISIS’s al-Hayat Media Center has published the online magazine Dabiq. Producing an online magazine is not a novel approach to recruitment; Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) had already revolutionized English language messaging in radical Islamic contexts with its print media source Inspire. However, the Dabiq series differs significantly from the Western-language campaign of Al-Qaeda. Begun in 2010, Inspire was designed as a practical guide for individual terrorists planning attacks in the West. It provides, for example, instructions for bomb-making. Though Inspire has some theological content, it does not attempt to launch new large-scale religious, military, or political visions. Dabiq, on the other hand, is full of religious justifications and apocalyptic claims because its aim is to provide a cultural and moral basis of the Caliphate.

In print publications, ISIS is eager to adapt to the most recent media trends and uses graphics and photography reminiscent of those found in online publications like Vice and Adbusters (see Zakaria 2014). The Carter Center found that by its tenth issue, nearly 45 percent of Dabiq’s images “were being re-appropriated from major Western media sources such as The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times” (Carter 2015).

The contrast between Inspire and Dabiq is strong not only in terms of content but also in aesthetic terms. Dabiq uses “neoliberal” advertising forms that are current in commercial media of corporate retailers like H&M. The latter often connect glossy images to radical and important social causes embedded in multiracial and multinational agendas. Images of young people of
different races are supposed to symbolize diversity and multiculturalism. The problem is that the alleged “liberalizations” produced through this commercial rhetoric emerge within a neoliberal environment where media and advertisements are required to be deregulated and where profit is more important than anything else. ISIS propaganda takes the cue from those neoliberal media, which is why it can appear as “modern” in some sense. Al-Qaeda propaganda looks old-fashioned in comparison.

Hezbollah had already attracted the attention of journalists in its 2006 campaign because it clearly employed a mainstream global advertisement rhetoric and aesthetics. At that time, the *New York Times* wrote that “the campaign supersedes the expected Islamist rhetoric by being aesthetically and tactically comparable to global advertisement. Like a modern brand image, ‘The Divine Victory’ is ‘catchy’ and ‘neat’” (quoted in Maasri 2012).

**Technology**

The most consistently progressive element in ISIS propaganda is technology. Here it differs from that of other (Islamic or non-Islamic) religions or cults as it is not so much concerned with imagination and exotic fantasies but accentuates the maximal exploitation and demonstration of available technology. Even the ubiquitous traditional *nasheed* hymns are auto-tuned using advanced computer software. Like for futurists, the motorcar seems to have become “a classic Freudian fetish” (Poggi 2008, 167). Long rows of identical cars (preferably pickups and SUVs) occur in most footage and have become the trademark of the ISIS imagology. ISIS has looted tanks and hi-tech weapons from the Iraqi army and bought more material from the West. These machines are constantly paraded through the cities they have conquered. The proliferation of weaponry in Iraq, historically due to mismanagement of Saddam’s army during the Iran-Iraq war, would benefit ISIS later. Equally beneficial was the disbanding of the Iraqi military following the US invasion that resulted in the misappropriation of arms by soldiers. From 2003 to 2007, the US and other coalition members brought massive amounts of weapons into the country despite the fact that the army was poorly structured. On 11 October 2016 *Le Monde* reported that two members of the French Special Forces had been attacked by explosive drones constructed by ISIS (Guibert 2016) in Erbil, Iraq. The explosive drones were not military ones but self-made objects derived from commercial types. The new type of warfare represents not only a threat but also feeds into a techno myth that ISIS intends to develop when spreading montage photos of drones parading with ISIS convoys for its propaganda campaign.

The high concentration of technology in videos is partly due to the fact that half of all jihadi films document battles and attacks (Finsnes 2010). However, most other footage is techno-oriented, too. Images of young men clad in black drifting on tanks while their long hair is flowing in the wind (Figure 2) emphasize an adventurous kind of liberty that more traditional forms of Islam are unable to offer. The soldiers’ strange break with military dress code indicates an overruling attachment to an urban style more than to the rationale of military discipline or to the imperatives of religion.

The identity of ISIS is urban and in this it diverges from both fascism and earlier Islamic movements, which makes comparisons with Futurism more necessary than ever. Both fascism and Islamism insist on communitarian aspects of society (which earned them the reputation of being anti-modern in the eyes of some) and cultivate a nostalgia for the rural social organization. As a matter of fact, most totalitarian regimes follow this communitarian line, too, most probably because communities are easier to govern and to control than urban masses. Urban masses have been the cradle of communism and other popular movements. Fascism, many branches of Islamism, as well as other totalitarian regimes tend to channel those energies into more communitarian figurations. The result is a marked anti-urbanism. In the 1920s,
when both fascism and Islamism emerged, urban decadence would most typically be linked to an urban moral decline exemplified by Jazz and the “Roaring Twenties.” For Islamists like Sayyid Qutb this was experienced and denounced as an example of the decadence of Western culture.

ISIS propaganda goes the other way by presenting jihad life as connected to modern urban culture, which includes Hip Hop and other subcultures. We have come a long way from Palestinian resistance posters that were, until recently, representative of Arab struggle. Those posters were using an iconography still in line with the international revolutionary and anti-imperialist movements in Cuba or in the Soviet-Union (see Maasri 2012, 38–45) and have no urban subcultural appeal. The images of ISIS tanks drifting inside deserted cityscapes, on the other hand, can appear like a reenactment of the futurist vocabulary. Also, futurist painters “strove to depict movement and militarism, and the urban design associated with this movement was conspicuously devoid of people” (Dalke and Blankenship 2009).

The speeding tank has a parallel in the futurist racing motor-car described by futurists as a vehicle whose “frame is adorned with great pipes like snakes with explosive breath—a roaring motor-car that seems to run on shrapnel is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace” (“Founding and Manifesto of Futurism”, in Rainey et al. 2009, 53).

ISIS has also adopted the futurist ideal of the techno-man, that is, “the Futurist male, ‘multiplied’ by the machine, [who] would exemplify a new superhuman hybrid adapted to the demands of speed and violence” (Poggi 2008, 161). Marinetti famously celebrated the “mechanic who lovingly washes the great powerful body of his locomotive” and who must be praised because his are “the attentive, knowing endearments of a lover who is caressing a woman he adores” (“Multiplied Man,” 90; Marinetti (1910) 2009).

ISIS reenacts the futurist myth of the techno-man in the form of the jihadi fighter sleeping with his Kalashnikov. In the context of a religious movement like ISIS, this is not merely “aesthetically beautiful,” but it is also religious. In ISIS discourse, aesthetization morphs into sacralization resulting in technology adopting quasi-religious dimensions. Futurists took a similar path by elevating “speed from its former status as a new principle of beauty to that of a substitute for religion” (Poggi 2008, 253).

From symbolism to futurism

ISIS aesthetics represents a clear break with earlier jihadi propaganda. First of all, Al-Qaeda videos look extremely amateurish in comparison. For example, in a video from 9 November 2001 that bears no title, Bin Laden is shown for nine minutes talking with his fellow fighters about the 9/11 attacks. The video is shot in a square frame, date and time are displayed at the bottom, and the conception of the video must have looked outdated already in 2001. Aesthetic arrangement was not considered important; the aim was merely to make some statements. Not much is shown in the video.

The development leading from the aesthetics of Al-Qaeda to that of ISIS is more dramatic than the one that Zeina Maasri had observed in Hezbollah propaganda, and which was mainly due to a modernization of the media as well as to the party’s accommodation into the Lebanese political system following the end of Lebanon’s civil war (see Maasri 2012, 176). In 2006, the US Military Academy at West Point published over 300 jihadi propaganda images—most of them from the sphere of Al-Qaeda—accompanied by brief analyses of each (Combating Terrorism Center 2006).

The aesthetics of media jihad goes back to the Afghanistan war in the 1980s and was further developed in Bosnia, Algeria, Chechnya, and other places. The overall impression of the images discussed by the West Point Academy is that of a romantic, literal, and naïve presentation of a mythical world. Sunrise are frequent and layouts with superimpositions, softened contours, and fading colors are used on almost every picture. This aesthetics does not follow the rules of modern graphic design but is completely retrospective. At the same time there is no indication that it is supposed to be a “retro-aesthetic.” The colors are primary ones and sunravs and symbolisms of purity are emphasized on most pictures. Holtmann states that “polychromatic mixing of colors appeals to Islamic aestheticism [as] it expresses paradise imaginations” (Holtmann 2013, 39). Such symbolis devices were precisely what avant-garde art and especially Futurism attempted to overcome: the Futurists strongly rejected the overly self-conscious lyricism of symbolism. In contrast, Futurism presents shocking elements able to provoke a violent response in the viewer. This is also the approach of ISIS. Nina Couvert finds that Al-Qaeda’s visuals are merely declaring whereas ISIS videos show (Couvert 2015). There is a similar difference between historical Symbolism and Futurism: the former declared or made statements through poetic images that have metaphysical connotations while the latter merely showed pictures able to express a certain technological attitude. Symbolism pretended to communicate with some absolute, ethereal forces, and we clearly find this strategy in Al-Qaeda propaganda. ISIS, on the other hand, simply shows shocking pictures.
In the case of ISIS the overcoming of symbolist rhetoric signifies a clear shift towards Futurism. In Symbolism, poetical speech attempts to present a refined and infinite mental world. Such symbolist ambitions do exist in ISIS propaganda but they remain restricted to religious apocalyptic symbolism. ISIS replaces sunsets and hazes with whirring engines and explosions; further, the aim of ISIS propaganda is not merely to evoke a metaphysical world for its own sake but rather to establish the forces of a new futurist ideology in everyday life as a utilitarian force. Also this overlaps perfectly with futurist strategies of overcoming symbolism.

While ISIS aesthetics makes a decisive step in this modernist direction, Al-Qaeda religious propaganda remains kitsch and is strongly reminiscent of visual material delivered by Jehovah’s Witnesses or New Age sects. With the latter it shares the preference of purple as the dominant color, though the jihadi purple is more subdued than the New Age one. Kitsch can also adopt other forms. According to Rüdiger Lohlker, Al-Qaeda writer Dhu I-bijadayn, who is famous for the launching of the jihadi technical magazine Al-Qaeda Airlines, displays “a fascination with some gothic elements (skulls and bones) and kitsch” (Lohlker 2014b, 9).

In the Al-Qaeda material analyzed by the West Point Academy, all colors except orange (which is practically never used) are encoded with clear symbolisms: black represents jihad and the Caliphate and therefore religious piety, but can more generally also represent a “counter world and rebellious narrative” (Holtmann 2013, 35); blue evokes a sense of hope and heavenly paradise, etc. In general, jihadists tend to use authoritative key symbols connected to myths of religion, community, and salvation. The symbolisms are most often embedded in a romanticizing visual language.

Al-Qaeda aesthetics resembles more that of the neo-fascists, who differ from the older fascists because of their completely different relationship with modernity and technology. Instead of exalting technology, neo-fascists romanticize pre-modern utopias. According to Gentile, neo-fascists consider the modern simply as “an epoch of corruption and degeneration dominated by mass conformity, materialistic-oriented cultures, the civilization of the machine, egalitarianism, and denationalizing cosmopolitanism” (Gentile 2003, 183). Contemporary right-wing radicalism flees from modernity and eschews technology as well as mass media.

The “futurist” aesthetics of ISIS

The above comparison with symbolist Al-Qaeda aesthetics has made the futurist aspect of ISIS propaganda graphically clear. I will now analyze some concrete techniques in order to reinforce this claim. Futurists developed a technique called “lines of force” that was supposed to convey sensations—especially those of speed—as they are experienced in time. This style has been found uniquely suitable for the illustration of World War I combats. “Lines of force” tend to radiate from the object towards the spectator or are placed as imaginary lines close to the moving object. In general, Futurism applied Cubist methods to themes that were not Cubist at all: motion, time, and technology. The Cubist method implies that an object’s full significance can be rendered by showing it from multiple points of view and at different times. The dynamics of movements within the static space of the canvas is captured through the simultaneous presentation of different positions of the object. Cubism was submitted to the influence of technical advancements like the telephone and fast transport, which revolutionized the perception of space and introduced the idea of simultaneity. In Cubism the linear perspective is deconstructed and the object is reassembled out of fragments. The object is submitted to a multiple perspective, which creates a multiperspective perspective. However, in spite of its pretension to dynamism, in Cubism those lines were static inasmuch as the object painted was usually not dynamic. Futurism combines Cubism with a dynamic perception of the object that is most often dynamic itself. One of the results is the line of force.

Usually, lines of force are simply drawn on the canvas but they can also appear as linearly stylized dust or smoke, as in Giacomo Balla’s Automobile in Corsa (1913). In Balla’s Speeding Automobile (1912) (Figure 3), the car can barely be seen as it is covered under lines of force. The dynamic system of lines via which the futurist reality is decomposed appears to be disciplined and uncontrollable at the same time. The effect is that of violent movements spread over time and place. Finally, the experience of motion becomes the object’s true essence: the lines become more important than the object itself (cf. Bowler 1991, 779). Sometimes the reality is more dynamic than the eye can bear. This is the futurist way of depicting “the destruction of a world gone mad, blowing itself up, tearing itself apart into fragments” (Willette 2011).

Also ISIS videos manifest a great interest in movement, and its cinematic manipulation follows elaborate devices making dynamic movement plausible. In the feature-length video The Flames of War, the use of slow motion and image manipulation is supposed to glorify the fighters. The video There Is No Life Without Jihad uses fast forward and fast backward movements of the same scenes, creating visual effects able to make movement more palpable. Images of exploding cars with bodies flying through the air are often repeated in slow
motion. Borrowing the terms of Margaret Bruder, who has done research on violence in cinema, one can say that ISIS aesthetics is “stylistically excessive in a significant and sustained way” (Bruder 1998). A common device in ISIS “cinema” is to film the death of an enemy first in normal speed and then show it again, slowly. Narrative events, especially explosions, are often repeated from multiple camera angles. This denotes a preponderant interest in the experience of simultaneity or in the experience of varied types of sensations “all at once,” which is precisely what futurists also aspired to. The presence is “spread out” over a time span much longer than the span covering the event in real time. The effect is not achieved through the simple use of slow motion but through a more sophisticated manipulation of time and space. Futurist presentations of speed seek a similar effect as they attempt to show the same object several times at different places, just as if our eye is too slow to grasp the “real” speed of the event. In futurist photography, this was obtained through complicated superimpositions, which led to the futurist concept of photodynamism developed by the photographer Anton Giulio Bragaglia. Bragaglia explained that “we despise the precise, mechanical, glacial reproduction of reality and take the utmost care to avoid it. We are not interested in the precise reconstruction of movement, which has already been broken up and analyzed. We are involved only in the area of movement which produces sensation, the memory of which still palpitates in our awareness” (Bragaglia [1913] 1973, 38). Similar devices have been noticed in ISIS videos. Steve Rose describes the “transitions between clips [which] are sheets of flame and blinding flashes. Graphics fly across the screen. Sonorous, auto-tuned chanting and cacophonous gunfire reverberate on the soundtrack.” Finally, the violent images from The Flames of War are edited into a “rapid-fire” resulting in “steroidal action montage” (Rose 2014). This is precisely what the futurists would have liked to do had they had the technical means.

Both Futurism and ISIS “decompose” objects over time and space. Futurist cinema in particular has been declared a magic instrument capable of creating cosmogonies and opening perspectives: “In futurist film, the most disparate elements will be used as means of expression: from slices of real life to spots of color, from the line to words in freedom, from chromatic and plastic music to the music of objects […] we will decompose and recompose the universe as our wondrous whims strike us” (Manifesto “Cinematography the Futuristic,” 1916, quoted in Brunetta 2009, 56). ISIS editing has a similar effect. What futurist paintings achieve through lines of force or photodynamism is achieved by ISIS with the help of Final Cut Pro or similar movie editing software. The result is a diffusion or dissemination of the violence over a larger time span.

Paul Virilio writes in his War and Cinema that the main aim of early war cinema was to develop a mechanical eye able to redefine the world and discover its new tempos and rhythms. Virilio concentrates on the “lines of force” because, originally, they were part of military vocabulary where they used to be called “faith lines” (lignes de foi). The soldier who is taking aim has to “align ocular perception along an imaginary axis that used to be known in French as the ‘faith line’” (Virilio 1989, 3). The faith line represents the “ideal alignment of a look, which, starting from the eye, passes through the peep-hole and the sights and on to the target object” (2). Though the word “faith” is no longer used because the line is today more objective and mathematically established through technology, the history of the line of force remains, according to Virilio, a line of “perceptual faith.” As in Futurism, the lines of force do not work towards a (cubist) geometrification of the image but towards a dynamic way of perception. In the realm of
military action the particularity of this vision of reality via lines of force or faith lines is that the world will be observed through the target tube of a weapon, or, to put it simply, through a weapon. This kind of vision is also most commonly applied in video war games by which the aesthetics of ISIS’s visual material is heavily influenced. A picture of two ISIS fighters inserted into a still from the game Call of Duty symbolizes the video game affinities of ISIS culture and has become famous as it has been widely circulated on the internet. In general, ISIS appropriates aesthetic codes from action movies and video games or it even appropriates entire games. The ISIS video Grand Theft Auto: Salil al-Sawarem is entirely made out of sequences from the video game Grand Theft Auto, reproducing only the most violent scenes and making the nasheed chant the only original contribution.

The futurist line of force technique produces a vision similar to the one most commonly applied in video war games. Marinetti’s famous portrait by the photographer Tato (1909) (Figure 4) looks as if the face is seen through a target tube. Watching the enemy through a tube, taking aim and destroying him in a blast, is also a favorite scene of ISIS videos. From a film theoretical perspective, this video game-inspired technique creates the curious device of a “caméra-fusil” (gun-camera) as the counterpart of the “caméra-stylo” (pen-camera) that was once celebrated as an intellectual cinematic tool by film theorists in the 1950s. The picture captured by the caméra-fusil is also a perfect description of photodynamism because everything that this camera targets is bound to explode.

The video game becomes the technical device summarizing the spirit of an “alternative modernity” in the same way in which the airplane summarized this spirit for futurists and fascists. Fernando Esposito, in his book on aviation and fascism, quotes Guido Mattioli who explains that “no machine requires as much concentration of the human mind, as much human will power, as the flying machine does. The pilot really knows what it means to govern. Hence there appears to be a necessary, inner spiritual affinity between aviation and fascism. Every aviator is a born fascist” (Esposito 2015, 3). Those qualities formerly attributed to aviation can today be found in video games, which is one of the reasons why the video game has been elevated by ISIS to a supreme aesthetic device.

The aesthetization of violence

In ISIS aesthetics and in Futurism, violence is central and represents the basis of those movements’ politics and aesthetics. Like futurists, ISIS cultivates in its videos a new “art of violence” for its shock value, and like in Futurism, violence appears in an extremely aestheticized fashion. Violence is stylized for the simple reason that everything is stylized. In Futurism, style was “the original and universal essence of a society and what transmitted its greatness to future eras” (Gentile 2003, 62). Similarly, the entire ISIS media phenomenon can be seen as a prime example of the “aesthetization of politics” that Walter Benjamin described in the postface to his The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction ([1936] 2003). Benjamin associates the aesthetization of politics with fascism and, more specifically, with Marinetti’s Futurism. On the one hand, Benjamin’s identification of Futurism with fascism is a simplification: the aesthetization of politics, like many other items, took different forms in fascism and Futurism. On the other hand, the particular mise-en-scène of politics in public speeches, events, marches, and weekly newsreels that Benjamin crystallizes in both fascism and Futurism appears in a similar way in ISIS propaganda. In any case, we are sure to be in the

Figure 4. Tato, Futurist Portrait of Marinetti (1909).
realm of fascism rather than that of totalitarian communist propaganda, which is in agreement with Benjamin’s theory according to which communism will rather engage in the “politicization of art” (44/242).

Benjamin’s view differs from that of Gentile who believes that the “politicization of aesthetics […] not only inspired fascism’s attitude toward avant-garde culture, but stood at the very origin of the encounter between Futurism and fascism” (Gentile 2003, 44). The difference between the aestheticization of politics and the politicization of aesthetics might be subtle but Benjamin’s argument remains convincing in our context. A politicization of art as it is practiced in communism leads to different results: it does not lead to the irrational violence that is prominent in Futurism and in ISIS. The latter is rather dependent on the aestheticization of politics. A more or less straight line leads from there to the aestheticization of violence resulting in violence for its own sake. The latter is a rare phenomenon in social movements and almost unique to ISIS and Futurism/fascism.

Tarrow believes that violence is most of the time “an exacerbation of collective challenges [and] often the product of public clashes with police rather than the intention of the activists” (Tarrow 2011, 9). Normally, violence is a by-product or even an undesired by-product of subculture fights occurring in the margins of social movements. Even George Sorel, whose thoughts on violence were an inspiration not only for early fascists but also for anarchists and Marxists, did not preach violence for its own sake. Sorel saw proletarian violence as “a very fine and heroic thing” (Sorel 1908) that serves “the immemorial interests of civilization.” In other words, violence has the purpose to save the world from barbarism. It is life itself as it brings creativity and virtue. However, too much violence is a threat to civilization.

The aestheticized celebration of violence is consistent in ISIS videos where even the cruelest scenes are sprinkled with poetry. Also futurist poets and painters were supposed to be “beautiful in their violence,” writes Francesco Pratella in his “Manifesto of the Futurist Musician” (in Rainey, Poggi, and Wittman 2009, 75). A similar pattern exists in the behavior of ISIS: armed struggle, which had almost disappeared from the list of core definitions of the Muslim identity in modern times, has once more become central; and jihad necessitates violence. A spontaneous conclusion could be that the high degree of aestheticization is used because it makes violence more acceptable. However, in reality, the relationship between the aesthetic and violence works vice versa. First of all, the fundamentalist spirit is profoundly anti-aesthetic. At the same time, there is no propaganda without aesthetics. Therefore, for the fundamentalist mind, aesthetics becomes more acceptable when it is presented through violence. Strictly speaking, ISIS does not confront us with aestheticized violence but with an aesthetics that has been enriched with violence. Given the hostile attitude that fundamentalism has towards art, aesthetics enriched with violence is likely to be considered a suitable substitute for art because it is not art but violence. Fundamentalism remains dominated by anti-art prejudices and in the eyes of fundamentalists the worst aesthetic philosophy must be l’art-pour-l’art. This is in agreement with the above explained militant character of the avant-garde derived from Bürger’s theory. However, since aesthetics is inevitable in any propaganda, the ideology will shift towards an application of la-violence-pour-la-violence.

Many political groups employ violence but normally it is used to obtain certain goals. In ISIS we have a fascination with “pure” violence. Futurism followed a similar principle as it desired to integrate life and art by using violence. At least theoretically, this ideology contains an anti-life component similar to the one we could observe in fundamentalism. The lifestyle philosophies of both Futurism and ISIS are constantly underpinned by the presence of death. In that sense, they are not lifestyle but “death-style” philosophies. Spanish fascists used the motto Viva la Muerte (Long Live Death), and Eco believes that “the Ur-Fascist hero is impatient to die. In his impatience, he more frequently sends other people to death” (Eco 1995). Also Hassan Al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, was eloquent on the uses of death and wrote an essay famously punning on “the art of death” and that “death is art” (Berman, 2010).

The principle of la-violence-pour-la-violence is not the reasonable violence directed at the destruction of an enemy. To use the words of Olivier Roy, it is “more anthropological than political.” Roy, in his book on fundamentalism, alludes to the tribal violence that “aims to establish a complex system of priority, which can be expressed through other symbolic relationships” (Roy 1994: 148). The ritually established la-violence-pour-la-violence art is particularly convenient for another reason: ISIS is obsessed with the idea of purity. La-violence-pour-la-violence is as pure as l’art-pour-l’art though it does not have to face the reproach of aestheticism. Benjamin had characterized l’art-pour-l’art as a “theology” obsessed with aesthetic purity (Benjamin [1936] 2003, 17/215). Therefore, as it is detached from social questions, l’art-pour-l’art enables a quasi-religious enjoyment of art. The same can be said about la-violence-pour-la-violence.

When violence acquires not only an aesthetic but also a ritual function, the result is the sacralization of violence. We join here the main idea of Benjamin’s text. Benjamin explains how in the modern epoch the
autonomy of a work of art has been reinforced by its technical reproducibility. At the same time he states the decline of autonomous aesthetic experience. The “aura,” which includes the atmosphere of detached beauty in the context of aesthetic cults, gives a work of art its authenticity. Relying on its intrinsic power, it transcends ideological control or human interference. The aura disappears only partially with the disappearance of cults. Contrary to later theorists inspired by Benjamin, like John Berger, who believed that “the modern means of production have destroyed the authority of art” (Berger 1972, 33), Benjamin holds that modern art’s emphasis on autonomy can also be understood as a renewed cult of the aura. This is particularly obvious in the phenomenon of l’art pour l’art, which maintains a connection with ancient religious works (Benjamin 1936 [2003], 16/224). Benjamin refers, in this context, to Romantic and symbolist aesthetic ideals. In the modern world, art no longer functions in the realm of religious rituals; still it is able to function just “for itself.” This means that through technical reproducibility, art becomes even more l’art-pour-l’art.

The hypermediatization of ISIS propaganda videos benefits from precisely this pattern, and Benjamin’s thoughts about the reproducibility of art are here more pertinent than ever. ISIS propaganda evolved towards the la-violence-pour-la-violence scheme whose end is the complete sacralization of violence. Crone holds that “the current rise of visual and social media” enables religious violence by means of “aesthetic technologies of the self, such as for instance jihad and martyr videos” (Crone 2014, 2). This is precisely a description of the above process. However, while for Benjamin reproducibility brought about a secularization of the image, in ISIS subculture, the images of la-violence-pour-la-violence adopt clearly religious connotations.

Futurists were against l’art-pour-l’art, too, and thought that the world needs to be aestheticized by means of violence. Logically, the most efficient way to do so was to declare art and violence identical. In “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” Marinetti claims that “art can be nothing but violence, cruelty and injustice” ([1909] 2009, 53). Therefore war should be seen as a collective festival and as a ritual, and World War I should be seen as “the finest Futurist poem that has materialized till now” (“In this Futurist year,” Marinetti 2007, 232). In 1925, futurist Fortunato Depero won a gold medal for his painting War = Festival at the International Exhibition of Decorative Arts in Paris.

The parallels with ISIS are obvious. The aestheticization of Islamic militarism cannot be carried out by “civilized” means but it needs a sacred form of violence. In both ISIS and Futurism there is a circular reasoning about the relationships between politics, aesthetization, and violence: (1) politics can be aestheticized through violence; (2) making politics violent is easier when the violence has been aestheticized/sacralized beforehand. In the end, for ISIS, like for futurists, violence becomes art and art become violence. Georg Seesselen therefore very aptly writes that for ISIS “terror is not the resistance of a pre-modern, anti-enlightenment and anti-liberal movement against modernity. Rather it is the violent fusion with modernity” (Seesselen 2015). Futurism fits precisely into this pattern.

Conclusion

The futurist project to integrate life and art is paralleled by ISIS’s desire to integrate life and religion. In both cases the result is achieved through violence. ISIS propaganda always transmits the idea of a distinct lifestyle (or better: death-style) that the warrior should adopt. This alone can be seen as futurist. Futurists also rejected art for art’s sake and always wanted art to be applied to life. When these principles are applied in a radical fashion, style and violence remain the only options. In the end, a nihilism towards life leads both futurists and ISIS to a curious “death-style” philosophy.

Notes

1. ISIS means “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria” or “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.” The organization adopted this name in April 2013. On 29 June 2014, ISIS established its “Khilafah” (Caliphate) and began referring to itself officially as the “Islamic State,” and the acronym IS seems to be more appropriate. However, since “ISIS” has gained more traction in international media, I continue using the older term in this work.

2. Not all of Futurism is fascist, first of all because Futurism emerged when fascism had not yet. Many futurists never made the fascist turn and stayed leftist or anarchists. The fascism link revolved more around the personality of Marinetti than around the entire movement. Even Marinetti frequently socialist circles prior to his futurist activities. Later, while Mussolini maintained that only an all-out struggle against democracy would enable the proletariat to fulfill its historic mission, some of Marinetti’s statements remain clearly pro-democratic.

3. The lost caliphate can refer to the destruction of the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad in 1258 as well as to the dramatic abolution of the Ottoman caliphate in 1924.

4. This characterizes not only Futurism but also Cubism, Dada, and Surrealism because all those arts fought against “the thesis that art in bourgeois society is functionless” (Bürger 1984, 95).

5. See the World Bank report from 2016 which found that out of a sample of 3803 Western ISIS recruits
(sample taken between 2013 and 2014) 43.3% had finished secondary school and 25.4% went to a university; only 13.5% had not more than primary education, and 13.7% were illiterate; 16.3% provided no information (Burke 2016).

6. The “Islamic modern” has a long tradition. Ayatollah Khomeini, though conservative with regard to culture, saw himself as a progressive innovator of Shia thought and incorporated Marxist thinking into his discourse. His fundamentalism was a synthesis of political radicalism and religious conviction. While the Iranian Islamic revolution intended to solidify the unchanging truths of Islam, it also strove to install a progressive social order. Also, Saudi Arabia’s Wahhabism is not simply conservative but contains a utopian input, since its eighteenth-century founder ‘Abd Al-Wahhab saw traditional Islam as a degenerate version of pristine Islam and wanted to inaugurate an entirely new phase of Islamic culture. Similarly, the Muslim Brothers from Egypt see themselves as an “avant-garde that was ahead of and even above the ordinary masses” (Ahmed 2011, 53). Though their vision of Islam remains culturally conservative and is in many respects similar to that of the Wahhabi, their project of reviving an ideal, God-made Islam from the debris of human-made traditions was from the beginning launched in the form of a modern project.

7. Alexandre Astruc’s concept of the “pen-camera” establishes the expressions of cinema as an activity of writing. Astruc intends to grasp “any kind of reality” directly and not through signs. The caméra-stylo approach implies a complex dialectical exchange of objective and subjective positions: in a film “recorded” by a caméra-stylo there is neither the evocation of subjective, intimate symbols nor is there an objectively “recorded” reality, but the abstract language of cinema expresses itself directly (see Astruc 1968).

8. In a speech on the “beauty and necessity of violence” given in 1910, Marinetti refers to Sorel (Marinetti 1907. see also Eysteinsson and Liska 2007).  

9. The core definitions of Muslim identity in modern times are: to consider the Quran to be the verbatim word of God, to follow the Sunnah (the verbally transmitted teachings of the Prophet as well as reports about him), and the Five Pillars of Islam.

**Notes on contributor**

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