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Beyond Consumption of Violence:

Performativity of ISIS' atrocities against hostages in execution videos from 2014-2015

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Introduction

Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood.
Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less.
– Marie Curie

Fear is the mind-killer.
– Frank Herbert, *Dune*

Two men are standing on a barren desert hill. One is kneeling with his hands behind his back, wearing a plain orange jumpsuit which suits his clean-shaven head. The other is clad in black clothes that conceal everything but his eyes and hands. In a serious tone, the man in orange gives a short speech and after he is finished, the man in black says his piece in turn. Once he concludes his monologue, the black-hooded figure takes a knife in his left hand, grips the other's head by the cheek, and determinately starts cutting his throat.

This scene is depicted in the first of a number of execution videos which the Salafi jihadi extremist militant group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) released on the internet. Very quickly, still pictures, excerpts, and transcripts of the video spread across the global news media, whether online, in print, or on the radio or television. Despite their immense news coverage especially in the West, the videos did not receive a deeper analysis. Rather, these violent spectacles were simply treated in a sensationalist manner. By lazily reducing the execution videos to expressions such as "depraved" (CNN 2015c) or "barbaric" (CNN 2014d), the examination of potential underlying meanings was dismissed. As such, the average viewer took part in an unreflective consumption – or pornography – of violence.

The topic of this master's thesis tackles precisely this issue by scrutinising ISIS' execution videos for meanings. By looking beyond superficial descriptions of the violent acts, this paper tries to facilitate the understanding of ISIS' execution videos. At the basis of this research stands the premise that primordial accounts of these violent displays do not portray them accurately at all. Although academic debates on violence reject such limited perspectives, the global media and consequently the average media consumer are very much part of this pornography of violence. Herein lays the relevance of the research puzzle: the nuanced understanding of ISIS' extreme acts and public display of violence.

While purely instrumental approaches are more useful than the unreflective stance exhibited by many news media, even they do not encompass all that there is to ISIS' execution videos. Instead, this research thesis argues that the videos contain instrumental as well as

expressive aspects, which means that context and meaning systems matter in the creation and distribution of these public acts of violence. In other words, this paper addresses the various dimensions of ISIS' execution videos in order to advance a deeper understanding of their nature.

Consequently, this paper does not offer any solutions on how to stop the production or spread of such violent videos; nor is this paper able to positively name the exact reasons for why these videos were created. Rather, this research examines how the videos are performed and how this performance is communicative in certain ways. Underlying this endeavour is the firm belief that the first step to addressing any puzzle is the acquisition of a proper grasp of the issue.

In this case, the puzzle is that ISIS' use of execution videos seems counter-intuitive from a strategic point of view. The killing of foreigners in graphic and brutal ways only galvanised and unified the governments and populations in a combined effort against ISIS. Although the U.S.-led military coalition against ISIS preceded the first execution video, the militant group cemented its status as the most evil organisation at the time in the eyes of the coalition members. To give just one example, the Jordanian government and people were outraged after the release of the immolation video of Jordanian fighter pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh, and retributive aerial bombardments against ISIS positions quickly followed (Thompson 2015). If the execution videos are predictably detrimental from a tactical or military point of view, what elements of the videos make them worthwhile for ISIS?

In order to identify significations and highlight communicative elements, this paper investigates the performativity – the capacity to construct meaning through action – of ISIS' execution videos. Thus, this research views ISIS' public executions as depicted in the online videos as social performances, in which actors express meaning through behaviour. The theoretical lens of social performance was chosen because of the highly theatrical nature of ISIS' execution videos. For instance, although it is not used in the analysis due to the time constraints of this paper, one ISIS video from 5 July 2015 makes the performative character of the executions very clear by staging it in an actual amphitheatre (Saul 2015). Furthermore, the instrumental components of this study deal with elements of fear and power. The main research question thus asks "how ideological-performative acts of violence are carried out in ISIS' hostage executions made public for Western audiences in order to maintain an image of power in execution videos from 2014-2015."

Since the analysis of ISIS execution videos requires knowledge of the context of ISIS and the Syrian conflict as a whole, Chapter 1 gives a brief overview of the rise of ISIS and the

military effort against the military group. Subsequently, the theoretical framework of this paper addresses the constituent elements of the main research question. Accordingly, Chapter 2.1 discusses the sensitising concept of *power*, while Chapters 2.2 and 2.3 focus on the concepts of *fear* and *performance* respectively. The three sensitising concepts come together in Chapter 2.4, which will construct a coherent theoretical lens out of them with which the data can be analysed.

To answer the main research question, the theoretical framework draws on a multiplicity of theories, reorganising them in order to form a combined approach. This reconstruction required the garnering of ideas, some of which only served as an inspiration but did not make it into the final framework. For instance, Foucault's concept of biopolitics was initially taken into consideration as a lens for studying ISIS' public executions but was ultimately discarded. However, it was still a useful blueprint to demarcate what this research is and is not able to do, an unsuitable concept against which this paper's understandings could be highlighted.

Such being the case, the analysis chapter addresses these individual components through a number of sub-questions, which can be categorised as definitional, descriptive, or explanatory. The definitional sub-questions deal with the sensitising concepts of the research question, namely the performative elements of the execution videos (*What are the behaviours, languages, use of props, and aesthetics utilised by ISIS in their public executions for foreign audiences?*), the fear-instilling components (*What aspects of the performances in ISIS' public executions for foreign audiences are meant to stir fright, fear, and/or anxiety in the audience?*), and the aspects relating to power (*In what ways is control over bodies and life present in ISIS' public executions for foreign audiences?*). These will be addressed in Chapters 5.1.1, 5.2.1, and 5.3.1 respectively.

The descriptive sub-questions in Chapter 5.3.2 address findings related to the sensitising concepts (*In what ways does the population (of foreign audiences) represent a problem of power to ISIS?*; *What communication, power relations, and contestations can be found in ISIS' public executions for foreign audiences?*). The explanatory sub-questions, then, concern themselves with how the findings from the above sub-questions work and interact with one another: Chapter 5.1.2 asks "*How do ISIS' public executions for foreign audiences transform the executed victims into symbols for their whole respective societies?*", Chapter 5.1.3 focuses on the question of "*How do the performances construct & maintain ISIS' collective social identity?*", Chapter 5.2.2 inquires "*How are fear-instilling aspects strengthened by the violent ideological performances?*", and 5.3.3 asks the last sub-question of

"*How does this interplay of fear-instilling aspects and ideological-performative aspects maintain an image of power?*".

The manner in which these analytical questions are answered is addressed in Chapter 3. This chapter deals with the details of the data collection and analysis method. Specifically, it describes the open source data research approach which this paper applies. The data is collected from online sources available to the general public, which includes the original ISIS execution videos as well as news reactions to them. A combination of unobtrusive, content, and semiotic analysis is then employed to process the information. The nature of the question simply did not allow for interactive, on-the-ground fieldwork as the main research method, since it would have implicated momentous and unnecessary risk. Thus, this research utilises a qualitative method to interpret open source data.

Due to the limited scope and time constraints of this master's thesis, the analysis only takes a number of ISIS execution videos into consideration. Initially, this paper meant to focus on execution videos of Western hostages alone. However, due to new developments – specifically the beheading of Japanese hostages Haruna Yukawa and Kenji Goto, the immolation of Jordanian hostage Kasasbeh, as well as the mass executions of Syrian soldiers and Egyptian Coptic Christians – there appeared to be the need to shift the focus.

Therefore, the common denominator for the scrutinised execution videos was no longer the cultural background of the hostages, but the shared target audience. Although ISIS published the video online for the whole world to see, there are several indicators that show that the videos were specifically targeted at members of the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS. While Japan and Egypt were not directly involved in the U.S.-led coalition, they still expressed their support against the group during a summit in Paris September 2014 (Tran 2014). Moreover, all videos – including the killings of victims from the Middle East – make direct or indirect reference to the struggle of ISIS values against those of the West. Therefore, this research paper focuses specifically on the Western world as the imagined target audience of ISIS' violent performances. However, it goes without saying that ISIS is not only oppositional towards Western values, but also towards Middle Eastern and even moderate Muslim ones. Additionally, the Muslim world certainly is also part of ISIS' audience, but the focus of this research is the Western audience in order to highlight ISIS' formation of oppositional identities.

The time span of this paper spans from August 2014 until and including February 2015. It should be mentioned that ISIS released additional execution videos of highly performative nature between March and July 2015, but it was not possible to add these to the analysis due to time constraints. Hence, the discussion focuses on ten public executions: the beheadings of

U.S. Americans James Wright Foley and Steven Sotloff, the beheadings of British citizens David Haines and Alan Henning, the mass beheading of 15 Syrian soldiers, the video addressing the beheading of U.S. American Peter Edward Kassig, the two videos of Japanese hostages Yukawa and Goto, the immolation of Jordanian pilot Kasasbeh, and finally the mass beheading of twenty-one Egyptian Coptic Christians. The following discussion will establish the relevant context, specifically the rise of ISIS and the allied military effort directed at the militant group.

1. Context

1.1. Overview and terminology

This paper deals with the social performances of a militant organisation and as such it is crucial that the background of its struggle and the greater conflict are presented first. In order to understand the meanings of ISIS' executions videos, all major parties involved must be established, which includes an overview of their motivations and recent developments. Therefore, this chapter starts with a brief summary of ISIS' inception in 2002 and the subsequent years, and embeds the militant group and its relevant oppositional actors in the context of the 2011 Syrian civil war.

ISIS' historical trajectory can be divided into three major periods (Stanford University 2015), dealing with the early years of ISIS under Abu Musab al-Zarqawi starting in 2002, the years of decline as a wing of Al Qaeda between 2006 and 2011, and the years of the group's rise under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi from 2012 until the present day. Before summarising the group's development, however, it is necessary to briefly address its different titles to avoid any confusion.

Since its inception, the organisation underwent a number of names. However, the ones most relevant to this research are ISIS, ISIL, IS, and DAESH – all of which have been used since the group broke with Al Qaeda and al-Nusra in early 2013. Before that year, it went by the name of *Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn* (Arabic: تنظيم قاعدة الجهاد في بلاد الرافدين) which translates to "(Jihad's) Base in Mesopotamia" but is commonly referred to as Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) (Cordesman and Roshan 2005; Stanford University 2015).

After turning away from Al Qaeda, the group changed its name to *ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fī 'l-ʿIrāq wa-sh-Shām* (Arabic: الدولة الإسلامية في العراق والشام) in April 2013 (Stanford University 2015; The Middle East Media Research Institute 2013). There are several English translations of this title due to the word *al-Sham*, which refers to the region between Turkey and Egypt. Since there is no exact equivalent in English, it is commonly translated as either "Syria" or "the Levant", giving the group the title of "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" (ISIS) or "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" (ISIL) respectively (Stanford University 2015).

Moreover, many Arabic-speaking opponents refer to the group as Daesh (also: DAIISH or Da'esh) which is the Arabic acronym. Its popularity with ISIS' enemies stems from the term's connotations: its plural form 'daw'aish' roughly translates into "bigots who impose their views on others" (Black 2014) and it is also reminiscent of the Arabic words 'daes' ("one who

crushes something underfoot") and 'dahes' ("one who sows discord") (Schwartz 2014). It gets even more confusing because on 29 June 2014 the militant organisation changed its name once again. It now refers to itself simply as Islamic State which is commonly abbreviated as "IS" (Stanford University 2015).

However, since the term implies that the group runs the only true Islamic state, it was rejected by many, including Western leader (Martinson 2015), Muslim leaders (Mandhai 2014), and the United Nations – with Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon even remarking that the militant group "should more fittingly be called the 'Un-Islamic Non-State'" (Ki-moon 2014). This research paper agrees with the criticism of the misleading inaccuracy of the title and does not use it. In addition, the term 'Daesh' did not gain popularity in the Western world until recently, and even now most news outlets still refer to the organisation as ISIS, ISIL, or IS. Thus, since the media as a distributor of ISIS' execution videos is an important component of this paper, the term 'Daesh' is also not adopted here. This leaves ISIL and ISIS. In the end, they both work quite the same way, but the option of using them interchangeably was discarded to avoid confusing. This paper chose 'ISIS' as the designation for the militant group, mainly because the media outlets discussed in the analysis section used this term in the majority of their coverage on ISIS' execution videos.

1.2. The inception, decline, and rise of ISIS

The first of ISIS' three main periods starts with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian born extremist (Teslik 2006). In 2000, Zarqawi reportedly came in contact with Osama bin Laden, notorious leader of the terror organisation Al Qaeda. Due to ideological and tactical differences, Zarqawi refused to join Al Qaeda, but allegedly received funding from Bin Laden in order to set up a training camp in Afghanistan (Kirdar 2011). Here, Zarqawi had trained at least 2,000 Salafi extremist militants by the time of Al Qaeda's 9/11 attacks and established a number of smaller organisations. These separate bodies were ultimately grouped together by the U.S. State Department under the name of the most prominent group, *Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad* (JTJ) (Stanford University 2015).

After the 2003 U.S. American invasion of Iraq, JTJ increased its activities in Iraq with the intention of driving the U.S.-led coalition forces out of the country (Boucher 2004). The group became notorious for its violent tactics and indiscriminate targeting of coalition forces, aid workers, and locals alike (Hashim 2014). Moreover, already this early version of the

militant group gained special attention on an international scale by the online publication of a beheading video of a U.S. citizen (Jehl 2004).

Although Zarqawi formally joined Al Qaeda in 2004 and his group was from then on referred to as Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) (Kirdar 2011), this union would not last long. Al Qaeda's leadership aimed at fighting the West, but Zarqawi wanted to focus on closer targets, such as the U.S.-backed Shiite Iraqi government. Because of this, a lot of Iraqi Sunni were sympathetic towards AQI, but the group's brutal attacks against civilians alienated these potentially supportive locals (Stanford University 2015). In the end, a U.S. American airstrike killed Zarqawi in 2006 (Filkins and Burns 2006).

Zarqawi's death heralded the decline and second major period of the militant organisation. Abu Ayub al-Masri became the new head of the group (Kaplan 2006). Around that time, AQI came under criticism by Sunni sympathisers in Iraq for its predominantly non-Iraqi leadership. Partly to address this issue, Masri established the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and made Abu Umar al-Baghdadi – an Iraqi – the leader of this group. Although the group continued to be referred to as AQI, this was its first attempt at rallying jihadi organisation from all over the world under its banner and to declare its opposition to the U.S.-led coalition forces in the Middle East (Stanford University 2015).

However, this precursor to a caliphate did not convince the increasingly disgruntled local population in Iraq. In fact, resistance against AQI sparked a Sunni movement which collaborated with the coalition forces against the extremist group (Al-Jabouri and Jensen 2010). This so-called Anbar Awakening of Sunnis fighting the extremist group played a crucial role in the decimation of AQI's leaders. By 2011, the combined efforts of coalition forces and tribal security forces had killed the majority of the leadership of AQI (Stanford University 2015). Eventually, both Masri and Abu Umar al-Baghdadi were killed by Iraqi and U.S. forces in 2010, and one Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was appointed as the new leader (National Counterterrorism Center 2014).

The withdrawal of the U.S.-led coalition in late 2011 marks the beginning of the third and current phase of the militant organisation. Due to reduced security presence and diminished pressure against AQI, Baghdadi led terror campaigns in Iraq which focused on liberating imprisoned members (in 2012) and fighting security forces (in 2013) (Stanford University 2015). In addition to local political tensions in Iraq, the ongoing civil war in Syria aided the rise of AQI. Under Baghdadi, the group expanded its operations to Syria and labelled itself Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in April 2013 (The Middle East Media Research Institute 2013). After Al Qaeda's leader at the time demanded that ISIS must not operate in Syria but

should focus on Iraq instead (Atassi 2013), Baghdadi officially rejected the order and continued to operate in Syria. Finally, after months of being ignored, the Al Qaeda leadership disowned ISIS in February 2014 (Joscelyn 2014).

ISIS presented itself to be unfazed by this and made large territorial gains in early 2014 due to its extensive military offensives in both Syria and Iraq. In June 2014, following the acquisition of major territories, such as Mosul in Iraq or Raqqa in Syria, the group eventually renamed itself Islamic State (IS) and declared a caliphate with Baghdadi as its caliph (Pizzi 2014). In autumn 2014, ISIS' expansion and attacks against the local Yazidi population ultimately led the U.S. government to declare that it would carry out airstrikes against ISIS (Obama 2014). The ensuing U.S.-led coalition of airstrikes targeted ISIS' military positions, oil wells and refineries, and limited the organisation's mobility considerably (Stanford University 2015).

Despite the combined military endeavours against ISIS, however, the group still controls significant territory. The self-proclaimed caliphate's capital is Raqqa, Syria, from which it governs its territory according to Sharia law (Caris and Reynolds 2014). In addition to taking over territory, ISIS also captures foreigners for financial reasons or – as the analysis section discusses – in order to produce execution videos. To recapitulate, ISIS is a Salafi militant organisation in Syria and Iraq which aims at the establishment and expansion of an Islamic caliphate.

Now, the discussion will turn to the theoretical framework. The chapter below discusses the sensitising concepts of power, fear, and performance by reviewing the relevant academic debates and situating them in the context of ISIS' execution videos. Once these theories are presented, the chapter concludes with a description of the combined, coherent theoretical structure of the analysis.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Power & violence

Foucauldian considerations of violence and power

The main focus of this research is on public executions, which are staged events of ending someone's life. In his book *Discipline and Punish*, philosopher and sociologist Michel Foucault discusses the change of the Western penal system and does so by reviewing the transformation that public executions underwent. In the Western world, within only a couple decades in the 19th century, torture (and punishment in general) as a public spectacle disappeared – and with it the body as the main target of punishment. As early as 1787, a speaker at the Society for Promoting Political Enquiries expressed his hope that public executions "will [soon] be regarded as the marks of […] barbarity" (Teeters 1935, 30 in Foucault 1977, 10).

The few theatrical elements that remained were de-emphasised. Contemplating this development, Foucault suggests that as the ceremonial aspect of punishment became unintelligible the rite started to be perceived as despicable as the crime it intended to address. He writes, "[i]t was as if the punishment was thought to equal, if not to exceed, in savagery the crime itself" (1977, 9). The display of prisoners through penal tasks of public works was abolished almost everywhere in the West by the beginning of the nineteenth century. The public execution of prisoners continued in France for a bit longer, but even then only under violent criticism (Foucault 1977, 8).

Through these developments, punishment became a concealed component of the penal process. As a consequence, it was no longer the intensity of the penal spectacle that was meant to deter future crime, but instead the certainty of being punished (Foucault 1977, 9). While criminal culpability was still perceived as reprehensible, the punishment of criminal acts became inglorious as well. Nowadays, there is even the need to conceal the responsibility for carrying out punishment, and to relieve it by numerous layers of bureaucracy (Foucault 1977, 10). Furthermore, the "shame in punishing" found in modern justice is mitigated by the emphasis on the disciplining character of contemporary punishment (Foucault 1977, 10).

The body itself was therefore no longer the focus of punishment. Today, even physical penalties (such as incarceration) address the body only in an intermediary fashion. The real aim is the deprivation of the freedom of movement, and the body is only the tool through which this is achieved. In other words, "[p]hysical pain, the pain of the body itself, is no longer the constituent element of the penalty" (Foucault 1977, 11). Even in today's non-public executions,

a doctor must supervise the killing in order to prevent the imposition of unnecessary and disproportionate pain in the process. In post-Enlightenment societies, arduous, painful, and slow deaths are a thing of the past (Foucault 1977, 12). This turning away from the infliction of pain and its highly visible display in the West is useful to the analysis of ISIS' public executions and their significance.

Foucault elaborates on this new focus on disciplinary power in further detail through his concept of biopolitics. Biopolitics can be understood as a "new technology of power" which integrates disciplinary technology and embeds "itself in disciplinary techniques" (Foucault 2003, 242). It deals with the "power that has taken control of both the body and life [, in other words] of life in general" (Foucault 2003, 253). Biopolitics addresses the man-as-species; that is to say, it is "massifying" (Foucault 2003, 243) yet it deals neither with society nor the individual, but with the population as a problem of science, politics, biology, and power (Foucault 2003, 245).

To be sure, Foucault's concept of biopolitics is not a concept appropriate to this paper's research at all. However, it is still mentioned here because it sparked many of the considerations on power discussed below. Therefore, this very limited account of biopolitics serves as an introduction to a number of points regarding power and violence. However, it is also presented in opposition to these points in order to circumscribe and clarify them.

For instance, this paper holds that violent acts can serve as display and exercise of power over both "the body and life" (and, consequently, death). However, biopolitics refers to life in general, including all of its facets. Biopower is not simply a decision of power over life and death, or the display of power through letting-life or causing-death. Furthermore, Foucault's considerations also inspired the idea that certain performative acts of violence can transform the victim into a proxy for a whole group, in other words "massify" the individual. However, biopolitics deals neither with the individual *nor* society. Instead, it handles the population as a problem of science, politics, biology, and power.

It is evident that biopolitics and biopower are not only inappropriate for the investigation at hand, but that their application to this case would be an incorrect use of them. Foucault's "biopolitics" and "biopower" cannot be used by any one group; and even though it is possible to use case studies to highlight the workings of biopolitics, one cannot simply attribute it to a specific case in order to highlight (non-biopolitical) micro-level power relations. Therefore, attention must be turned to alternative concepts of power in relation to violence.

The relation between violence and power

In order to be able to analyse public executions, it is crucial that the concepts of violence and power are clearly defined, some of their key qualities highlighted, and their relationship particularized. There are numerous definitions of violence, giving weight to different aspects depending on the application of the definition. Succinctly put, violence is the assertion of power (Schmidt and Schröder 2001, 3). This definition instantly illuminates that violence and power are related. Before scrutinising the latter, however, a number of qualities of violence must be mentioned.

According to Schröder and Schmidt, violence is always an expression of certain relationships with another party, and "the individual victim is likely to be chosen as representative of some larger category" (2001, 3). Furthermore, violence as a social act is always connected to instrumental rationality and is therefore never fully meaningless nor senseless to the perpetrator (Schmidt and Schröder 2001, 3). Additionally, they argue that violence is historically situated, "informed by material constraints and incentives as well as by historical structures and by the cultural representation of these two sets of conditions" (Schmidt and Schröder 2001, 3).

All in all, violence is both highly visible and relatively easy to carry out. Therefore, "it is a very efficient way of transforming the social environment and staging an ideological message before a public audience" (Schmidt and Schröder 2001, 4). As such, violence is expressive as well as functional. Thus, if it is to be socially meaningful, violence necessarily requires an audience: it needs to be performative. The below section on social/ideological performances discusses performative violence in detail, but one point should be emphasised already: Violent performative acts are highly effective in conveying meaning because the (potentially large) audience is addressed without being physically affected at all (Schmidt and Schröder 2001, 6).

If, as claimed above, violence is the assertion of power, then an understanding of violence requires an understanding of power. In social science, there are countless accounts of different kinds of power and a great variety of definitions. Bertrand Russel even held that just as *energy* is the fundamental concept in physics, *power* is the fundamental concept in social science (Russell 1938, 10 in Dunbar and Burgoon 2005, 207). However, most discussions on power in relation to violence focus on political power rather than interactional small-scale performative violent acts.

Already in the late 1960s, Hannah Arendt observed in her analysis of violence in the political realm that there is a consensus among scholars, holding that violence is simply the "most flagrant manifestation of power" (1969, 35). Arendt herself criticises the position that power is to be understood as power *over* others. Rather than the rule of one or few over many, she believes that power (in the political sense) arises from cooperation, which in turn stems from human plurality (Bernstein 2011, 9). Because of this view, Arendt holds that "[p]ower and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent" (Arendt 1969, 53).

To further illustrate her point, Arendt defines and distinguishes ideal types of power, strength, force, authority and violence: *Power* designates the human ability to act together and thus always belong to a group. *Strength* refers to a property possessed by an individual and it is always weaker than the combined efforts of the many (Arendt 1969, 44). *Force* should be reduced to signifying only the energy released by physical or social movements (Arendt 1969, 45). *Authority* is the quality of being recognised unquestioningly by the ones meant to obey, requiring respect but no active deeds. Of *violence*, Arendt speaks only in instrumental terms and claims that it is in fact oppositional to power (Arendt 1969, 45).

However, while the understandings of power as either *power over others* or as *power through cooperation* make for useful tools in political considerations, they are not valuable to the discussion of violence and power in public execution acts. The former are discussion of power and violence in abstract terms and on grand scales, but this paper's research looks at power at the level of interaction and direct violence – admittedly with reference to a larger audience. In order to address these types of power and violence, the discussion will turn away from power in political terms and focus on the opposite end of the spectrum, at the level of interaction.

Dunbar and Burgoon study interpersonal power struggles and bring new and useful concepts to the discussion at hand, namely *dominance* and *domineeringness*. In line with the consensus found in their field, they define power as the ability to influence others. As such, power is an ability, can be latent, requires active application, and can fail or succeed (Dunbar and Burgoon 2005, 208). By way of contrast, dominance is necessarily manifest. Instead of simply being a personality trait, it is argued that dominance designates "context- and relationship-dependent interactional patterns in which one actor's assertion of control is met by acquiescence from another" (Dunbar and Burgoon 2005, 208). In other words, at the interpersonal level, dominance is the purposive exercise of power through expressive, communicative, and relationally based acts. Dunbar and Burgoon also make a point of

distinguishing dominance from domineeringness. While dominance signifies both an individual's control attempts and the acceptance by the interactional partner, domineeringness simply refers to the individual's control attempts alone (Dunbar and Burgoon 2005, 208).

It seems the discussion is left at an impasse. The killing of one or several victims as proxies for a bigger audience by one executioner as proxy for a bigger performing group appears to qualify for neither a discussion of large-scale, nor that of interpersonal, power images. Rather, it is situated somewhere in between, exhibiting aspects of both. On the one hand, there is one individual killing another individual, which suggests an interpersonal, interactional level. On the other hands, images of power are not presented to the victim but to a large (imagined) audience which is separated by both time and space, thus preventing immediate acquiescence. This would suggest that *domineeringness* is at play, since *dominance* requires the acceptance of the control attempts by the interactional partner.

To reiterate, power is the ability to influence/control others. Dominance is the attempt of controlling others which is accepted by the person sought to be controlled. Domineeringness is simply the attempt of controlling others. Thus, a person with dominance has power, while a person with domineeringness attempts to gain power. They are behavioural manifestations of power (Dunbar and Burgoon 2005, 209). In addition, violence is the pronouncement of power. By committing a performative violent act, one expresses to the audience that one is powerful. If the audience is influenced by the violence, then power is indeed gained through it. But already inherent to violence is the ability to influence another person's well-being, and in executions the executioner exercises power over the life and death of their victim. Violence can thus also be a display of power, the control over another person made visible in the most startling way.

At point it might be useful to contextualise violence and power, particularly by exploring the relationship between terrorist violence and the terrorist's search for power. Andrew Silke identifies three major sources of power available to terrorists: personal power, physical power, and resource power (Silke 2000, 79-84). Respectively, they refer to the power stemming from being liked or feared, the power of superior force, and the power of possessing something which other people want. While the latter is of little importance to this paper, and personal power is linked to the section below dealing with fear, violence as a source of (physical) power for terrorist groups is useful to the current discussion. According to Silke, the "terrorist campaign itself is a violent attempt to influence a large number of individuals" (Silke 2000, 2008). Thus, since domineeringness as well as violence try to obtain power, they appear

to have the same relation to it. In other words, violence is not only the assertion of power but it can also be an attempt of achieving it.

Connecting the concepts of violence and power to the case of ISIS

In the analysis of ISIS' public executions, the disappearance of the theatrical elements and the public staging of violence in the West will be of great importance. According to Foucault's account of this transformation, the public infliction of shame is met with resentment even considered shameful in contemporary Western society. Moreover, the body is no longer the constituent element of punishment, but (if included in the punishment at all) a mere tool for the deprivation of liberties. As demonstrated below, ISIS' public execution invert this development in order to act out their collective identity, a concept which will be discussed in the chapter on ideological performance.

Again, violence is the assertion/pronouncement of power. It is always expressive, relational, and the victim is likely chosen to represent a larger category. It is always tangled up in instrumental rationality and, thus, never sense- or meaningless to the actor. In order to be fully functional as well as expressive, it requires an audience. In social science, heavily criticised by Hannah Arendt, many discussions of (political) power understand it as "power over other", and violence is regarded as a flagrant manifestation of power. Dunbar and Burgoon claim that power is the (possibly latent) ability to influence others. The exercise of power through control attempts is defined as domineeringess, and if the attempts are accepted by a relational partner the authors speak of dominance. Therefore, both dominance and domineeringess are behavioural manifestations of power. Violence, too, is the behavioural manifestation of power over the body and life, specifically over a victim representing a larger category. Consequently, violence can be the display of power over a larger audience by means of addressing an individual. Violence can also be a source of power, as highlighted by Silke's discussion on terrorism. Through violence, actors can influence others.

To recapitulate, power is the ability to influence others, and violence is either the declaration of power, an attempt of achieving power, or the successful achievement of power. Therefore, this chapter deals with the instrumental side of violence, with violence as a tool to display the influence ISIS holds over the victim and, by proxy, over the audience. The performance of violence is therefore a mechanism of empowerment for ISIS. However, this functional review of ISIS' public executions is also accompanied by the role of fear and a more

expressive approach of violent ideological performance – both of which will be discussed in the sections below.

To summarise, with the sensitising concept of power in relation to violence, it is possible to highlight the instrumental side of this research, namely the maintenance of power images. Hence, the sensitising concepts are applicable to this research's sub-questions relating to:

1) the display of control over bodies and life ("In what ways is control over bodies and life present in ISIS' public executions for foreign audiences?"),
2) the problem of power posed by the foreign victims ("In what ways does the population (of foreign audiences) represent a problem of power to ISIS?"),
3) and the transformation of the victim into a representation of a larger audience ("How do ISIS' public executions for foreign audiences transform the executed victims into symbols for their whole respective societies?").

2.2. Fear

Building on what has been said about different sources of power, this section discusses the effects and uses of fear arising from violence. To reiterate, one source of power is "personal power", which stems from being either loved or feared. Notoriously, Machiavelli argued that "[…] *love* is preserved by the link of obligation which, owing to the baseness of men, is broken at every opportunity for their advantage; but *fear* preserves you by a dread of punishment which never fails" (Machiavelli 1993, 130-131 in Silke 2000, 79, emphasis added). Thus, fear can be a means of gaining power.

This is only further increased when fear is arising from violence. As Silke argued, "physical power" is the threat of using force in order to control others (Silke 2000, 80). In line with this, Anthony Vinci points out that the strategic approach to the creation of fear offers useful insights to otherwise incomprehensible features of conflict, such as atrocities. In his analysis of the Lord Resistance Army in Northern Uganda, he points out that while such "tactics may be barbaric in the extreme, they are rational and are directed at achieving ends" (Vinci 2005, 376). Thus, this account of fear in conflict is instrumental, viewing as a strategy – in other words as actions taken to achieve military or political goals (Vinci 2005, 362). In addition to being instrumental, it is argued that creation of fear through atrocities also has a

performative, expressive side to its violence (Vinci 2005, 364). Performative violent acts will be discussed further below.

Fear is said to be the most prevalent feature of war (Vinci 2005, 369). It is defined as a "physical and emotional response to a perceived threat or danger" (Vinci 2005, 369). Vinci distinguishes between three constituents of fear: *Fright* is the surprise in face of a dangerous situation, *fear* is a response concerned with a definite object, and *anxiety* is the state of mind induced by bracing oneself for danger (Vinci 2005, 369). For the discussion on public executions, fear and anxiety are the most important components, whereas the concept of fright does not apply.

In violent acts, threat is not only manifested in visibility of particular killing techniques – for instance, in ways that are painful and slow or generally, for lack of a better word, creative. It is also the choice of crude and symbolic weapons which "serve as a visible sign of threat" (Vinci 2005, 370). It is important to note that direct attacks against the enemy are not even necessary to induce fear. Informed by studies conducted on combat in World War II, Vinci states that "beyond actually attacking your adversary, the best way to frighten him is to commit an atrocity that he observes" (Vinci 2005, 370). In asymmetric conflicts, atrocities are used consciously and instrumentally, with their conspicuousness being intentional. Their visibility also maximises the level of threat perceived by the audience. As such, their purpose is to undermine security in the enemy (Vinci 2005, 375). Interestingly, Vinci points out that the construction of fear and insecurity can even occur without the actor consciously intending this effect (2005, 361). Thus, the creation of fear can also be a meaningful by-product of expressive violence.

To recapitulate, the use of fear has strategic value, and serves the purpose of maximising the actor's perceived threat as well as creating an atmosphere of unpredictability and insecurity (Vinci 2005, 376); but fear can also arise organically from certain types of violence. Vinci discussed fear as a strategy in reference to a warlord organisation that neither wishes to replace the government nor to govern a population (Vinci 2005, 362). Although ISIS is different in that regard, the findings about the use of fear as a tool in asymmetric conflict still apply. By looking at reactions from the Western audience, it is possible to infer the impact ISIS' public executions have made with regards to the creation of fear and an atmosphere of insecurity. The performative side of violence is pivotal in the creation of fear through the visualisation of death, pain, and cruelty. Here, the ways of killing are as important as the depiction and the weapons used.

Summing up, another instrumental aspect of this research is illuminated by the sensitising concept of fear, in particular in relation to violence and its component referring to a definite object. Thus, the concept of fear as discussed above is applicable to this research's sub-questions relating to:

1) the strengthening of fear through ideological-performative aspects ("How are fear-instilling aspects strengthened by the violent ideological performances?"),
2) ISIS' public executions influence on and over the audience ("What aspects of the performances in ISIS' public executions for foreign audiences are meant to stir fright, fear, and/or anxiety in the audience?"),
3) and the synergy of fear and ideological performances in relation to power ("How does this interplay of fear-instilling aspects and ideological-performative aspects maintain an image of power?").

2.3. Performances

Overview of the social performances

In order to study the meaning of ISIS' public executions for foreign audiences, the theoretical lens of social performances is employed. Besides inflicting immediate physical harm, these publicised acts of violence are also a form of symbolic action. Borrowing from Jeffrey Alexander's wording in his discussion on terrorism, ISIS' public executions, too, draw "blood literally and figuratively – making use of its victims' vital fluids to throw a striking and awful painting upon the canvas of social life" (2004b, 90). This is where social performance theory makes a useful tool of analysis.

We constantly generate meaning, which can be transformed into performances and interpreted by others through the use of cultural knowledge (Fuist 2014, 429). In other words, performative actions hold manifest as well as latent symbolic reference, and their messages are embedded in a present web of meaning. Thus, social performances are only able to convey specific messages because they are acted out against a background of known meaning structures (Alexander 2004b, 91). The required web of knowledge for this is "learned, social, contextual, dynamic, and contested", both using and modifying existing repertoires (Fuist 2014, 429). Performances, then, utilise and re-shape pre-existing themes from social life

(Alexander 2004b, 91), and they always require and audience – present as well as imagined (Fuist 2014, 429).

Central to Alexander's understanding of social performance is the concept of "fusion", which he defines as the coming together of the different elements of social performances, in such a way that the performance is perceived as convincing and authentic (2004b, 92). This is very much in line with the fact that Alexander thinks of social performances in terms of success and failure. His application of social performance theory has an instrumental characteristic, in the sense that he evaluates a performance according to its ability to convince the audience of its narrative. This results in a macro-level approach to social performance, which requires the investigation of the respective meaning structures of the audiences under scrutiny.

More importantly, however, this approach reduces social performances to pragmatic tools which actors use to achieve specific goals. Indeed, a vast number of works on social performance similarly examines them solely in light of their tactical or strategic usefulness to claim-making and the convincing of audiences (Fuist 2014, 429). However, by arguing that a performance failed if it was unable to convince a given audience of its narrative, it is presupposed that convincing the audience was the (only) aim of the performance. Surely, a performance might also be successful if it simply manages to convey a certain message or idea, even if the audience does not agree with it. Other possible scenarios come to mind, such as the simple increase of a group's visibility through a performance or the proclamation of a statement. Additionally, the instrumental approach to social performances, which examines them in terms of success and failure, requires knowledge of the performing actor's goals – which can be difficult to determine with certainty. However, arising from similar criticisms, there is an alternative to the strategic approach which alleviates these problems, namely Todd Fuist's ideological performance approach.

Ideological performances

Fuist's concept of ideological performances refines the previous work on social performance, which focused almost entirely on three things: highly *conscious* performances, which occurred in *public*, and were seen as *strategic means of convincing the audience through authenticity* (2014, 428). If it is assumed that audiences are usually not homogenous bodies but rather fragmented groups, and if the perception of authenticity hinges on the specific meaning systems of a given audience, then it follows that different audiences (or parts thereof) will have diverging opinions about the authenticity of a performance. Therefore, the success of a

performance cannot solely depend on convincing the audience of authenticity (Fuist 2014, 429). It seems reasonable, then, to leave behind the notion of performances as purely tactical, conscious behaviour. As an alternative, Fuist proposes that performance should be understood as an enactment of identity within a meaning system – in other words, as a mode of conduct and being (2014, 429-30). In order to understand ideological performances, we must first discuss the connection between collective identity, social movements, and social performers.

Collective identity is the cognitive, moral, and emotional connection of an individual with a broader community, category, practice, or institution (Polletta and Jasper 2001 in Fuist 2014, 430). One such broader community are social movements. In order to express identification with a social movement, the individual must tap into the meaning system of that group. The meaning systems held by a social movement consist of interconnected cultural elements (Fuist 2014, 428). In order to elaborate their identities and connect them to the social movement, groups and individuals can interact and situate themselves within these meaning systems. This is done – consciously or unconsciously – through translating of ideology into ideological performances. These performances can then be perceived and interpreted by audiences (Fuist 2014, 428). According to this, the concept of ideological performance is a tool with which one can examine how performers establish similarity and difference in interaction with others (Fuist 2014, 430).

More specifically, Fuist calls ideological performances the display of a performer's beliefs, values, and allegiances for an audience, through behaviour, language, use of props, and aesthetics. By doing so, performers and audiences alike are placed within meaning systems (Fuist 2014, 428). In other words, with the lens of ideological performances, one is able to examine identity formation within social movements by locating the performers in meaning systems (Fuist 2014, 428).

According to Fuist, there are three key components of ideological performances: First, beliefs, values, and alliances are performed, and performances of others are evaluated. Thus, performers and audiences situate each other in meaning systems through interaction. Second, due to their interactional character, performances can be public or private, and conscious or unconscious. Third, ideological performances are multivocal. Therefore, a single performance can communicate different things to different audiences, but also communicate different things to the same audience. (Fuist 2014, 431).

Fuist himself is most interested in the unconscious and conscious performances at the private level of interaction (Fuist 2014, 429). Ideological performances enable such an investigation, because of their emphasis on the interactional aspect of performances. More

importantly to this paper, however, the concept of ideological performances also allows for a more nuanced view of how audiences perceive performances. As discussed above, performances can have various meanings and audiences can be diverse, which means that the previous works on performances, focussing on convincing audiences of one's viewpoint, are restricting. For instance, some audiences might be persuaded by certain opinions underlying a performance, while other audiences might not be convinced. Ideological performance breaks from this strict and narrow focus of success and failure. Instead, it offers a theoretical framework which enables the discussion of "performances in terms of the enactment of meaning and identity within meanings systems" alone (Fuist 2014, 432).

What will be taken from this alternative approach is the inclusion of performances' identity formation and maintenance, as well as the considerations of performances' multivocality and the diversity of audiences. Furthermore, despite Fuist's personal focus on the unconscious and the private, his approach still allows for the incorporation of *public* performative action and *conscious* dramatization of identity. Since this paper tries to present a multifaceted account of ISIS' public executions, the ideological performance approach presents itself as a useful theoretical lens. With this, it will be possible to highlight the narratives (of power), as well as the various meanings of material artefacts and behaviour which are present in ISIS' public executions; but it will also be possible to uncover how ISIS executioners form and maintain their identity in interaction with their victims, consciously or unconsciously. With this refined approach to performances, the discussion now turns to performative violence, in order to link performative acts with violent ones.

Performative violence

The aim of this research is to go beyond the pornography of violence of, the mere, undifferentiated consumption of it, which hinders the understanding of certain violent acts as potentially being rich in meaning, holding a multiplicity of possible purposes. This study holds that ISIS' public executions for foreign audiences are not simply acts of barbarity void of any reason. As anthropologist Anton Blok suggests, "[r]ather than defining violence *a priori* as senseless and irrational, we should consider it as a changing form of interaction and communication, as a historically developed cultural form of *meaningful* action" (Blok 2000, 24 emphasis in original, in Juris 2005, 415). When linking the theory of performance to violent acts, one can define performative violence as "a form of meaningful interaction through which actors construct social reality based on available cultural templates" (Juris 2005, 415).

Still in line with the refined framework of ideological performances, which not only examines performative acts in light of their conscious and tactical use, but also in terms of the enactment of identity, *meaningful* violence is thus viewed as possessing both "practical-instrumental" and "symbolic-expressive" aspects (Riches 1986, 11, in Juris 2005, 415). While the practical-instrumental element involves effort to bring about immediate change of the social environment, the symbolic-expressive feature refers to the dramatization but also communication of certain social ideas and values (Juris 2005, 415). Therefore, performative violence differs from other violent acts in that does more than solely causing physical harm or death. However, the infliction of injury or the killing are, of course, an integral part of violent performance as well – it is simply a matter of degree. In sum, performative violence, as understood by Jeffrey Juris, refers to "symbolic ritual enactments of violent interaction with a predominant emphasis on communication and cultural expression" (2005, 415).

Performative violence operates primarily through non-verbal forms of iconic display in a sensational manner (Juris 2005, 415). This illustrates once more that ideological performances involving acts of violence produce communication – in addition to featuring various meanings, as well as forming and maintaining the performers' identities. In terms of generating identities, while violence is able to define group boundaries, particular acts of performative violence are also often associated with powerful oppositional identities. If the display of such opposition is sensational and made public, it can produce a high level of visibility for the performing group and their messages (Juris 2005, 427). In sum, performative enactment of violence can generate identities in opposition to something, while creating tangible messages which can challenge other groups or systems (Juris 2005, 414).

Connecting ideological violent performances to the case of ISIS

Performances – theatrical and social/ideological ones alike – take themes from social life, and reconfigure and substantiate them (Alexander 2004b, 91). To elaborate, a performers' presentation is defined by patterns of signifiers (*id est* the physical form of symbols). The referents (or signifieds) of these signifiers are the social and physical worlds which surround the performers and audiences (Alexander 2004a, 530). Here, two parts of this symbolic reference are at play: On the one hand, the signifieds offer the deep *background* of meaning, which makes performances possible in the first place; and on the other hand, the signifiers comprise the "script" of performances – in other words, the *foreground* – which can be seen as an action plan for the performative act (Alexander 2004a, 530). In other words, while scripts

are dependent on background cultures, the two are not the same. Background cultures don't create scripts organically and on their own, but efforts by performers are needed "to project particular cultural meanings in pursuit of practical goals" (Alexander 2004b, 91). As Fuist has shown with his account of ideological performance, this can be done consciously or unconsciously, in order to convey a message or to form and maintain identity.

There are a number of elements that one must identify in social-ideological performances, in order to analyse the performers' display of beliefs, values and allegiances. Firstly and most obviously, one must identify the *performers* (or actors) as well as their present or imagined *audiences*; but also the *relationship between performers and audiences* is crucial (Fuist 2014, 439). The means of symbolic productions, such as a *stage*, a *setting*, theatrical *props*, and *aesthetics*, are crucial to the analysis, too. Additionally, attention should be given to the non-verbal communication, meaning *behaviour*/acting, and to the verbal communication, meaning *language* (Alexander 2004b, 91; Fuist 2014, 428). Moreover, social/ideological performances require the access to *media of transmission*, which include but are not limited to television, newspapers, or the internet (Alexander 2004b, 91). All of these elements can be found in ISIS performative execution acts.

Once these elements are scrutinised, it is possible to locate the ISIS performers in meaning systems, thus enabling the investigation of identity formation within the context of ISIS' social movement. Furthermore, since the ideological performance approach enables the investigation of how performers establish similarity and difference in interaction with others, special attention must be given to the *interaction* between ISIS executioners and their victims (as proxies for oppositional identities). As pointed out in the discussion of performative violence above, violent interaction can be both communicative as well as culturally expressive, and it can help define boundaries between groups. Thus, this theoretical framework makes it possible to study the way in which violent interaction between ISIS executioners and their victims helps form, maintain, and delineate identities in opposition to one another.

To summarise, this framework highlights how social performers place themselves in socio-political meaning systems, and it facilitates the understanding of speech acts, conceptual categories, and collective identities of social/ideological performers. Hence, this theoretical lens is applicable to this research's sub-questions relating to:

1) the use of specific manifest symbols ("What are the behaviours, languages, use of props, and aesthetics utilised by ISIS in their public executions for foreign audiences?"),

2) the communication of meanings and oppositional, challenging identities ("What communication, power relations, and contestations can be found in ISIS' public executions for foreign audiences?"),
3) and the formation and maintenance of identity ("How do the performances construct & maintain ISIS' collective social identity?").

2.4. Summary of the theoretical framework

All of the above discussion – with its concepts, theoretical debates and sub-questions serves the purpose of answering the main research question:

> How are ideological-performative acts of violence carried out in ISIS' hostage executions made public for Western audiences in order to maintain an image of power in execution videos from 2014-2015?

As seen in this chapter, the performance section paved the way for the analysis of ISIS execution videos as theatrical enactments. Not only is the adopted performance theory well-suited to highlight the expression of collective identity, but considerations about the performativity of violent acts are taken into consideration as well. Additionally, the elaborations on both power and fear cover the main research question's component relating to the maintenance of power images. However, there is still the need for a coherent assembly of these parts.

After the data is collected, ideological performance theory constitutes the lens through which the data is analysed at first. The different theatrical elements of ISIS' execution performances are identified and then structured in an orderly fashion. Once this is done, the analysis continues with the examination of performative enactments of collective identity. Thereafter, the analysis continues with the identification of fear-instilling elements to be found in ISIS' execution performances by drawing on the findings from the performance analysis. Once these components are identified, the analysis focuses on the interplay between theatrical elements and fear-instilling aspects. Subsequently, the investigation turns to the potential displays of power and the possibly contestations thereof. Finally, the main research question can be answered in full through the accumulative findings from the entire analysis by exploring the maintenance of power through performativity and fear. The following section will now turn to the open source data research method applied for this research.

3. Method: Open Source Data Research

Since the research puzzle deals with a region and a group which would place researchers conducting fieldwork in considerable danger, different data collection methods must be applied. As such, this paper will not adopt ethnographic research – such as participant observation – nor other on-site interactive approaches. Additionally, qualitative methods such as interviews or surveys are inappropriate in light of the nature of the puzzle and the chosen theoretical framework. Instead, the methods used here are comprised of a mix of the following three qualitative methods (as outlined by Curtis and Curtis): unobtrusive research, content research, and semiotic analysis.

When combined, these approaches will form a method of open source data analysis, which aims at analysing the occurrences "from a distance" with data obtainable from the internet, freely and unobtrusively. The following section goes into more detail of the separate constituents and eventually explains how these will be brought together into one coherent methodological framework. Here it should be noted that discussion of the different research methods does not only serve as inspiration for the creation of an original method, but also as a means of placing the novel approach in the context of existing ones. Thus, the examination of other research methods is useful in delineating the new approach.

Unobtrusive research

Due to the difficulties of conducting research in ISIS territory, non-interactive methods for data collection are needed. All of the following methods discussed in this chapter fit this profile of non-interactive – or "non-reactive" – approaches. An obvious choice out of the existing non-reactive approaches in social research is the unobtrusive method. As described by Curtis & Curtis, this approach draws its data from actual behaviour rather than self-reported behaviour. More specifically, data is collected from material (*id est* physical) traces, existing records, or non-participant observation (Curtis and Curtis 2011, 171). This, too, is shared by the other three approaches covered in this chapter.

Curtis & Curtis also stress that unobtrusive research exists somewhat outside of the binary between variable-centric approaches and case-centric approaches. While variable-centric approaches begin with a theory about variables for which the researchers must then find the appropriate cases to test their hypotheses, case-centric approaches start from a case for which the researchers then try to find variables and eventually arrive at a theory. Unobtrusive research, however, does not fit perfectly into either category. This is due to the fact that data

sets found coincidentally are an obvious component of a method which is non-interactive and disregards self-reported behaviour. This serendipity (*id est* chance discovery) of acquiring data means that unobtrusive research is only weakly variable-centric. Moreover, the unobtrusive method is often used in combination of and as a supplement to existing research. Thus, even though unobtrusive research can be used in both variable and case-centric approaches, it is further moved away from a purely variable-centric method (Curtis and Curtis 2011, 172).

While unobtrusive research may involve contrived experiments (orchestrated situations which the researcher then observes as a bystander), this paper will only make use of non-participant observation. Its advantage is that it allows for a study of what ISIS actually does, instead of analysing what they say they are doing – although this is taken into consideration as well. As such, images and especially videos that were publicised on the internet and further distributed by the media in the West will be collected and studied. Both the videos and their excerpts distributed in Western media will be the main source of observing behaviour of ISIS member in order to study ISIS' social performances.

It should be noted that there are some ethical concerns regarding unobtrusive research. For instance, it is questionable whether the study and analysis of people's behaviour without their knowledge is completely ethically sound. However, since this paper focuses on material traces and existing records, and the observation is only undertaken on videos and images, these ethical concerns do not pose a problem. After all, the data collected is taken from open sources and thus made readily available for the public to see. Therefore, concerns about informed consent do not apply to this paper, since data "that is publicly available may generally be considered appropriate for research use" (Curtis and Curtis 2011, 189).

Semiotic analysis

While the type of open source data research employed in this paper is comprised of a combination of all three methods discussed in this chapter, semiotic analysis is the one which this research draws from the most. Investigating ISIS atrocities through the theoretical lens of social performances requires not only the mere observation of behaviour. In order to analyse these performances, their meanings, interpretations, and use must be scrutinised. Semiotic analysis is a research approach which enables exactly this type of study. While some argue that semiotics concerns itself with everything that can be considered as a symbol, Bob Hodge presents a type of "social semiotics" and defines it as follows:

> A broad, heterogeneous orientation within semiotics, straddling many other areas of inquiry concerned, in some way, with the social dimensions of meaning in any media

> of communication, its production, interpretation and circulation, and its implications in social processes, as cause or effect (Hodge 2008 in Curtis and Curtis 2011, 244).

Here, it is important to stress that the social dimensions of meaning with its production, interpretation and distribution will be analysed in signs as well as *behaviour*. The ISIS atrocities examined in this paper are viewed as staged displays which include symbolic objects ("props") but also symbolic acts. In order to understand the meaning of ISIS' performances, it is pivotal to study the "costumes" and "props", the "actors" and "stage", the choice of "audience" as well as its reaction, and necessarily also the "acting" itself – in other words, the behaviour. All of these are addressed by the tools of semiotic analysis.

As Curtis & Curtis point out, semiotics does not have a unique way of *collecting* data but presents a form of *analysis* (2011, 243-244). Data collection is often presumed, and techniques from other social research approaches are used. This paper follows that tradition and, as discussed above, the data is collected through the approaches of unobtrusive research. Since the kind of symbolic artefacts that this paper investigates are found in the media and, thus, in the public domain, non-reactive data collection methods are suitable. Unobtrusive methods are, in fact, used by many semioticians conducting media research (Curtis and Curtis 2011, 244).

Semiotic analysis starts with a case – here, publicised atrocities by ISIS – and it aims at creating a "thick description", in other words generating a rich account of the case. Crucial to the study of semiotics are the two elements that a sign consists of, namely the signifier and the signified. While the signifier is the manifest form of the sign, the signified is the concept to which the signifier refers. A signifier can be, for example, the word 'cat' (written or spoken), the picture of a cat, or a cat figurine. In those cases, the signifiers trigger recognition and projection in the person perceiving the signifier. This, in turn, leads to the concept of 'cat' – the signified.

Pure semiotic analysis looks into the various possibilities in which the signifier and the signified interplay. For instance, in cases in which one signifier can stand for several signifieds, one speaks of polysemy. Thus, polysemy is in a way the opposite of a synonym, since a synonym has one signified but several signifiers which refer to it. However, this paper will not deal with antonyms, metaphors, metonymy, and the like. After all, the method of this thesis is open source data research and not pure social semiotic analysis. Still, the focus on the production, interpretation, and distribution of meaning is a useful contribution to the study of ISIS' atrocities.

Content research

The research method employed in this paper also draws some elements from content research. Created by journalists critical of newspaper oligarchs around the beginning of the twentieth century, content research is a technique which examines messages of various forms. By highlighting patterns and interpreting their meaning, content researchers investigate what authors communicate to their audiences. Originally, the approach concerned itself mainly with newspapers and other print media, but unsurprisingly digital forms of communication are gaining more and more attention within the approach (Curtis and Curtis 2011, 195).

The focus on drawing inferences from communication to the contexts of its use is what is needed for the study of ISIS performances, too. However, as Curtis & Curtis point out, content research is ill-suited for the study of covert elements of messages, since its method of coding works best with manifest elements (2011, 196). Some elements of ISIS' publicised atrocities might be overt, but the main aim of this paper is to highlight underlying meanings. Additionally, content research is a variable-centric approach with few variables and numerous cases, thus giving it a different starting point than the one found in the research at hand. Lastly, content researchers primarily concentrate on the encoding of messages or patterns across a great number of messages. This type of comparative or trend analysis between texts or over time is not pertinent in this case, despite the potentially interesting results it might uncover.

A combined approach: Open source data research

In order to construct an original approach for studying open source data, tailored specifically to this case, various elements of the aforementioned research methods are combined in this section. However, this paper's method naturally shares similarities with more approaches than the ones discussed above. While it is not practical to list all research methods which share elements with the approach used here, one final reference to another method should be made, namely ethnographic research. Although its key component, on-the-ground participant observation, is not applicable to this paper's case, ethnographic research and this paper share that they are case-centric and single-case approaches, in which one "group bounded by time, geographical location and/or cultural practices, is explored through many variables and values" (Curtis and Curtis 2011, 80).

Since this open source data research is non-interactive, the types of data used here are *naturally occurring* and not generative. In other words, data is not created (for example through interviews, surveys, etc.) but drawn from behaviour and interactions, existing documents, or verbal accounts. The "open source" feature of this paper's method refers to exactly this: data

on platforms readily available to everybody. Basically all of the data collected stems from the internet, predominantly information published directly by ISIS, but also Western news reactions and commentary. In light of the fact that ISIS operates for the most part in a Middle Eastern context, this might lead to criticism about the lack of local Iraqi or Syrian sources for this research. However, since this paper specifically deals with ISIS' social performances in relation to the West, the use of English sources is deemed appropriate and sufficient. In the end, what matters to this research is how the group portrays itself towards the West and what information reaches the Western media.

As discussed above, non-interactive approaches and serendipity often go hand in hand, which is also the case here. As such, data is collected from symbolic artefacts found in online media, including material traces, existing records, and non-participant observation of behaviour found in images and videos. As mentioned already, the advantage of non-participant observation is that it studies what ISIS does instead of what they claim to do. There is a reasonable argument to be made about the fact that many of the videos and images examined are published by ISIS and, thus, only convey messages that ISIS wants to convey. However, this research looks into the meaning in action and attempts to interpret also the underlying meanings. Admittedly, execution videos and the like portray orchestrated behaviour, but the meaning behind it is still covert (to varying degrees) and needs interpretation. In other words, this research does not simply investigate written and spoken statements by ISIS and takes them at face value, but instead examines what meaning ISIS atrocities hold and how they convey it. In addition, what ISIS says they are doing is taken into consideration as well.

In terms of the sequence, this research is similar to semiotic analysis, in the sense that both are highly iterative processes. Due to the fact that data is collected non-interactively, raw data can be reviewed over and over again. This allows for the freedom to repeatedly move between data and analysis and, thus, has the tremendous advantage of reducing the risk of guesses or partial answers in the analysis (Curtis and Curtis 2011, 257). Data is analysed in direct reference to the sensitising concepts and the consequent sub-questions, as outlined in the theoretical framework.

To be specific, the social dimensions of meaning in performances will be analysed, including the production and interpretation of meaning as well as its distribution. Just as in semiotic analysis, symbols and signs are closely examined. However, these symbolic artefacts only make up the "props" of social performances, and more aspects, such as the behaviour, the actors, the stage, the distribution, and the audience are taken into consideration, too. Here, inspiration is taken from content research by inferring meaning from communications between

the actor and the audience and relating it to the larger context. With this outline of the open source data research method, the discussion of the collected data can now begin.

4. Synopsis of ISIS’ public execution videos

This chapter is only presenting a brief overview of the data, in order to allow the analysis to start with the examination of it straightaway. All of the execution videos scrutinised for this research are about hostages taken by ISIS. As the context chapter establishes, this practice dates back within the organisation as far as to one of its very first operations. In addition to the capture of Iraqi and Syrian regime soldiers, ISIS has kidnapped foreigners from Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Peru, Russia, Spain, Switzerland, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America since 2014 (Yourish 2015). Usually, the group demands ransom and a number of European counties complied with ISIS’ demands for the release of their citizens. However, in a number of cases ISIS executes its hostage – not only, but especially foreign ones – with great dramaturgy.

Yet, this paper does not include all of ISIS publicised executions. Part of it is the limited scope of a master’s thesis, but this paper also specifically focuses on execution videos which are directed especially at a Western audience. In addition, videos are selected according to their attention in the Western media. The audience is a crucial factor in this study and the lack of media coverage means that the average audience member is likely to not be aware of less-publicised violent performances. In sum, this paper does not apply a distinction between local victims from Iraq or Syria and foreign victims, but rather chooses cases which exhibit a strong connection to the struggle between ISIS and the West and its allies, particularly in the context of the U.S.-led military effort against the militant group.

Following a chronological structure, the first ISIS execution video depicts the beheading of James Wright Foley, a U.S. American journalist. The video titled “A Message to America” was released on 19 August 2014 and displays both Foley and his executioner, a man named “Jihadi John” by the global media (BBC 2014a; CNN 2014a; ISIS 2014a). The second video shows the beheading of U.S. hostage Steven Sotloff. It was released on 2 September under the title “A Second Message to America” (BBC 2014b; CNN 2014b; ISIS 2014b). On 13 September 2014, ISIS released its first execution video of a British person. David Haines, an aid worker, was beheaded on camera by “Jihadi John” just like the first two U.S. citizens in the video titled “A Message to the Allies of America” (BBC 2014c; CNN 2014c; ISIS 2014c). The last of these first four beheading videos which show a strong resemblance to one another is the video “Another Message to America and Its Allies”, which shows the killings of second British hostage Alan Henning and was released on 3 October 2014 (BBC 2014d; CNN 2014d; ISIS 2014d).

The next video with the title “Although the Disbelievers Dislike It” from 16 November 2014 includes two executions: First, the simultaneous mass beheading of fifteen Syrian soldiers, and the display of U.S. hostage Peter Kassig’s decapitated body and severed head (BBC 2014e; CNN 2014e; ISIS 2014e). On 20 and 31 January 2015, ISIS released videos titled “A Message to the Government and People of Japan” and “A Message to the Government of Japan” respectively. The former shows Japanese hostages Haruna Yukawa and Kenji Goto next to “Jihadi John” who demands ransom for them; the latter takes place after Yukawa’s off-screen execution and depicts the on-screen beheading of Goto (BBC 2015a; CNN 2015a; ISIS 2015a; ISIS 2015b).

The only non-beheading video which this paper discusses is the immolation video of Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh, which was released on 3 February 2015 under the name “Healing the Believers’ Chest” (BBC 2015b; CNN 2015b; ISIS 2015c). Lastly, this paper discusses a second mass beheading video, namely “A Message Signed with Blood to the Nation of the Cross” which was released on 15 February 2015 and portrays the concurrent killing of twenty-one Egyptian Copitc Christians by ISIS members (BBC 2015c; CNN 2015c; ISIS 2015d). Although there are more recent execution videos which would also be relevant to this research, such as the 23 June 2015 execution of 15 Iraqi men or the 5 July 2015 shoothing of Syria army soliders in Palmyra’s Roman amphitheatre, the time contraints of this paper did not allow for an inclusion of these videos.

5. Analysis

The theoretical lens of ideological performance is applied to the case of ISIS public execution videos, in order to reveal their aspects of identity, fear, and power. In general, the analysis will answer the research question by first addressing the sub-questions through the application of the theoretical frame to the data. Naturally, the first sub-chapter (5.1) will thus first point out the performative aspects of the data. By identifying the theatrical elements of the violent performances, this section answers the first research sub-question "*What are the behaviours, languages, use of props, and aesthetics utilised by ISIS in their public executions for foreign audiences?*" (5.1.1). From the examination of these elements, the entire remaining analysis unfolds.

Accordingly, it is first shown that the victim serves as a representation of the audience, which answers the research sub-question "*How do ISIS' public executions for foreign audiences transform the executed victims into symbols for their whole respective societies?*" (5.1.2). The subsequent section illustrates how the performances construct and maintain a collective social identity for the performers, addressing the research sub-questions "*How do the performances construct & maintain ISIS' collective social identity?*" in the process (5.1.3).

After that, the analysis turns its attention to the aspect of fear in ISIS performative executions in section 5.2. Logically, the first thing to be demonstrated are the fear-instilling elements of the performances; this answers the research sub-question "*What aspects of the performances in ISIS' public executions for foreign audiences are meant to stir fright, fear, and/or anxiety in the audience?*" (5.2.1). The discussion on fear is then even further linked to the performative side of the execution videos by thematising the intensification of fear through performative elements, which addresses the research sub-question "*How are fear-instilling aspects strengthened by the violent ideological performances?*" (5.2.2).

Attention is then directed towards the violent performances' relation to power (5.3). To cover this issue, it is first shown how the performances display control over the body and life in general; this addresses the research sub-question "*In what ways is control over bodies and life present in ISIS' public executions for foreign audiences?*" (5.3.1). Furthermore, in order to tackle the research sub-questions "*In what ways does the population (of foreign audiences) represent a problem of power to ISIS?*" and "*What communication, power relations, and contestations can be found in ISIS' public executions for foreign audiences?*", the ways in which the audience presents problem of power for ISIS is demonstrated by reviewing the different oppositional identity images (5.3.2). Finally, insights from the analysis of

performative and fear-instilling aspects are taken into consideration for the illustration of how power is maintained through fear and performativity, which answers the last research sub-question "*How does this interplay of fear-instilling aspects and ideological-performative aspects maintain an image of power?*" (5.3.3). This section also combines all of the above in order to answer the main research question as a whole, thus concluding the analysis.

5.1. Public execution videos as ideological performances

5.1.1. Theatrical elements of the performances

Media of transmission

The medium of transmission of all ISIS videos is the internet. From this metaphorical stage, news media pick up the performances and disseminate them through newspapers, radio, or television. Because performative violence only becomes expressive and meaningful with an audience, the analysis of the performativity of the ISIS execution videos must take into consideration not only the original, unabridged videos but also the excerpt or images made available to the general public. For this purpose, the originals as well as news reporting the videos will be studied. It is, however, unfeasible and redundant to sift all news reports in the West. This paper is neither a discourse analysis of the news media nor is the audience's reaction to the execution videos the focus of this paper. Therefore, news reports from two major television programmes are taken as typical examples. Due to their wide reach in the West, the chosen news sources are news reports from the U.S. American Cable News Network (CNN) and the U.K.-based British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). For the sake of clarity, the highlighting of each of the other performative elements is discussed case by case and in chronological order.

Audiences

In the majority of the execution videos, the audience is only imagined as there is no crowd present. It is understood that the internet videos target a variety of audiences, such as locals, ISIS members, ISIS sympathisers, and the global public. As discussed above, however, the analysis focuses on the Western audience. The first couple of released execution internet videos use the English language (with Arabic subtitles) and they are titled "A Message to America" (Foley's beheading), "A Second Message to America" (Sotloff's beheading), "A Message to

the Allies of America" (Haines' beheading), "Another Message to America and Its Allies" (Henning's beheading) respectively. Thus, they clearly address primarily audiences from the USA and the U.K. In the 15-minute-long video "Although the Disbelievers Dislike It" (including the beheading of 15 Syrian army soldiers and the displaying of Kassig's severed head), the voice-over through the video is in Arabic with English subtitles, but the executioner does the reverse: speaking in English with Arabic subtitles. The use of English in text and speech, as well as the inclusion of another U.S. American victim, indicates that this video, too, was addressed – at least in part – to a Western audience.

The executioner from the two videos of the Japanese victims, titled "A Message to the Government and People of Japan" and "A Message to the Government of Japan" respectively, uses English in these videos as well. Considering that the videos deal with Japanese hostages and that the titles directly address the Japanese public and government, these two video have Japan as their primary target audience. However, the similarities in style and the continued use of English suggest that the imagined audience also included the Western public.

Diverging slightly from this English trend is the video "Healing the Believers' Chest" which depicts the immolation of Kasasbeh. Until the final part of the video, the voice-over and talking is in Arabic with no English subtitles. Only the part in which ISIS offers a monetary reward to the killing of any enemy pilot is subtitled in English. From this, it is evident that the audience was mainly expected to be from the Arabic speakers. This makes sense, considering that victim Kasasbeh was a Jordanian fighter pilot. Thus, the likely audience of this video are the government and public of Jordan. However, the Western public had already become sensitised to execution videos published online by ISIS and therefore it is not surprising that the Western media picked up this execution video as well. Besides, at that time, Jordan had already been a coalition partner of the U.S.-led intervention in Syria and was therefore considered an ally to the Western forces (Raddatz, Martinez and Ferran 2014). Such being the case, the Western news coverage of the immolation video is understandable.

Finally, the video "A Message Signed with Blood to the Nation of the Cross" depicting the mass beheading of Egyptian Coptic Christians makes use of both Arabic and English captions. The ISIS member speaking does so in English while Arabic subtitles are superimposed. Although the video mentions the Egyptian Coptic Church in specific, the use of English as well as the title referring to the "nation of the Cross" in general suggest that all of Christianity is the target audience. Additionally, since Christianity still plays a considerable role in the West, the Western news media are also part of this video's imagined audience. To

summarise, the Western public belongs – primarily and tangentially – to the imagined audience of all of the ISIS execution videos mentioned her.

Performers

It is argued that not every person appearing in the ISIS execution videos is an ideological performer. The first four videos depicting Foley's, Sotloff's, Haines', and Henning's executions respectively all show a number of people, but only the ISIS members can be considered the performers of these theatrically staged violent acts. These initial videos have the same pattern: First, a video statement excerpt from a head of state or a news reporter is shown, which is followed by a monologue of the victim-to-be as well as a brief address by the executioner, and concluded by the presentation of the future victim alongside the executioner. While Foley's and Sotloff's execution videos start with excerpts from a speech by U.S. President Barack Obama, the execution video of Haines starts with British Prime Minister David Cameron, and Henning's execution video begins with a British TV news presenter reporting the approval of the British parliament to strike at ISIS positions in Iraq.

Even though the hostages are giving brief statements addressed at their family, friends, and the general public at home, there is reason to believe that they were coerced to give the speeches. Being subject to an execution and not an act of euthanasia or sacrifice, the victims clearly did not wish to be killed. Consequently, it can be inferred that they had little to no agency in the context of the performance. As such, their assigned role in the video is not that of a performer but that of a "prop". The victims are used as tools, arguably being forced to speak and to behave according to the vision of the directors. The same holds true for the next victims who only appear briefly at the end of the videos as a captive of executioner.

Additionally, while the statement excerpts by Mr Obama, Mr Cameron, and the British TV presenter are meaningful additions to the videos, they are added as a theatrical and communicative tool. None of the people are performers since they, too, had no agency in regards to being a part of the performance. This is clear from the fact that the excerpts were never intended to be used by ISIS in this manner. Thus, the only performer in these videos is the executioner, the man dubbed "Jihadi John" by the global media.

The above argumentation also applies to the first video of the Japanese victims Yukawa and Goto from 20 January 2015, which also begins with excerpts from a Japanese presenter and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe, and shows the hostages as well as "Jihadi John". In this video, "Jihadi John" is again the only performer, and his captives are not even given the

option to give a monologue. In the follow-up video which depicts the beheading of Mr Goto, only his executioner "Jihadi John" speaks before carrying out the killing. Here, too, the Japanese hostages are not performer but only tools through which ISIS communicates meaning.

The remaining videos exhibit significant variation in terms of the performers present. "Although the Disbelievers Dislike It" and "Healing the Believers' Chest" both start with video footage of combat which is narrated by a member of ISIS. In addition, "Although the Disbelievers Dislike It" features a voice-over by a second narrator; another performer of this video. While these ISIS narrators can be considered performers of the videos in general, they are not part of the actual violent performance and therefore are not considered further. However, all of the ISIS executioners beheading the fifteen Syrian soldiers, as well as "Jihadi John" who presents Kassig's head, are performers in "Although the Disbelievers Dislike It". The same holds for all ISIS members present in the immolation of Kasasbeh, including onlookers and the executioner, in the video "Healing the Believers' Chest". Lastly, in the video "A Message Signed with Blood to the Nation of the Cross", all ISIS executioners of the twenty-one Egyptian Coptic Christians are the actors in this violent performance.

In short, only the ISIS onlookers and executioners are the performers discussed in this analysis. The victims are simply the means by which the performers can communicate power, fear, and identity (see below) and, thus, fulfil the role of "props" rather than of performers. The performers themselves stand for ISIS as a whole and represent the organisation in these performative violent acts.

The relationship between performers and audiences

The relationship between the ISIS performers and the audience can be summed up as hostile. Several of the execution videos' titles address the USA and its allies directly. As elaborated below, within the context of the performances, the victims are representative of their respective countries or religions – arguably, the victims can be seen as proxies for the Western world; or at least as proxies for allies of the Western world. The killings are either coupled with threat or with conditions for the sparing of future victims. From this it is evident that the performers portray an image of contempt for the audiences.

The audiences for their part, react with shock and disgust towards the performances. In the examples of reports from CNN and BBC on the videos, the killings are characterised as "too horrific to show" (CNN 2014a) and "depraved" (CNN 2015c), quoting Mr Cameron's office which refers to ISIS as "barbaric and repulsive" (CNN 2014d), and citing a statement by

Mr Obama which calls ISIS a “coward terrorist group” (CNN 2015b). Since ISIS threatened the Western audience directly through verbal threat and indirectly through the performative killing of victims representing the general Western public, this sort of hostility is hardly surprising. Besides, the countries which the audience refers to and the group which the performers embody had been at odds even before the execution videos, namely in the form of U.S.-led intervention in Syria which was directed at ISIS.

Means of symbolic productions: Setting

With the exception of the mass executions of the fifteen Syrian soldiers, the twenty-one Egyptian Coptic Christians, and the immolation of Kasasbeh, the setting is the Syrian Desert for all of the execution performances. In the mass beheading of the fifteen Syrian soldiers are set in barren plains, while the mass beheading of the Coptic Christians takes place at a beach, right by the shoreline. The only video discussed here which is not set “in nature” is the immolation of Kasasbeh; the execution of the Jordanian pilot takes place in the courtyard of destroyed building.

The settings of the barren plains and desert show the land which ISIS calls its own and from which they want to expand their caliphate. It can be argued that they even invoke an almost orientalist sense in the Western audience. The seashore setting is in contrast with the dry landscape of the other videos but also serves the purpose of metaphorical fluids and the mingling of blood (which is discussed further below). Finally, the setting of the ruins for Kasasbeh’s immolation is also chosen thematically, as his killing is in part done as a punishment for his involvement in the bombing of ISIS sites (ISIS 2015c).

Means of symbolic productions: Stage

While the setting is the general environment in which performances are set, the stage is the specific location in which performances are held. Arguably, the internet is the stage on which the performances are presented, but one can also identify the physical “stage” of each performance. For each execution video, a different stage was chosen. In the execution videos of Foley, Sotloff, Haines, Henning, Kassig, and Goto, the stage is a desert area with slight slopes in the background. Only sand and rocks are visible. Similarly, the stage of the mass execution of the fifteen Syrian soldiers is also a sandy area, but with a number of shrubs and trees visible on each side. The sky is overcast and darker in the mass beheading as opposed to the bright-blue sky from the first six executions; this adds a sense of gloominess to the scene.

Although the performers surely had no control over the weather, the shooting of the video arguably took the weather conditions into consideration. The sky is also overcast and quite dark in the mass beheading of the twenty-one Egyptian Coptic Christians. The stage in this video is a spot at the beach, with the waves breaking right behind the executioners. Finally, the stage of Kasasbeh's immolation is a rocky courtyard surrounded by ruins. Next to the cage, in which Kasasbeh is burned to death, stands an excavator that already has the stones loaded under which Kasasbeh's scorched body is eventually buried. All of the stages share an ochre colour palette, contrasted either by a bright-blue or greyish-blue sky.

Means of symbolic productions: Props

The props in the beheading videos of Foley, Sotloff, Haines, and Henning are the same: the victims wear orange jumpsuits reminiscent of the ones worn by the inmates at the U.S.-run Guantanamo Bay detention camp; executioner "Jihadi John" is clad in black clothes which expose only his hands and eyes; lavalier microphones are visible on the victim's collars (and it can be assumed that "Jihadi John" also wears such a microphone which is simply not visible against his dark clothing); "Jihadi John" holds his execution knife exclusively in his left hand and also uses it for pointing at the audience or the victims; and finally – as mentioned above already – the victims themselves can be viewed as "props" in these performances because they have little to no agency, and are mere tools used by the ISIS performers. Obviously, there could be no act of performative violence without the victims and, thus, none of the meanings discussed below could be expressed and communicated. Not just the victims but also the hostages and future victims shown at the end of the first four videos are just tools of applying pressure and additional gravity to the message that the performers try to communicate.

Most of the above props also appear in the videos of Yukawa and Goto, with the exception of the lavalier microphones since neither victim was given any lines. The video about Kassig's death only shows his severed head, "Jihadi John" in his usual attire, and a large ISIS flag carried by a member, possibly "Jihadi John". In the mass beheadings of both the Syrian soldiers and the Coptic Christians, all of the executioners use the same dark knives. While the Syrian soldiers are wearing black jumpsuits and their executioners are clothed in khaki military uniforms (which do not cover their faces!), the Coptic Christians are wearing the orange prisoner jumpsuits again and their executioners are clad entirely in black clothes which are reminiscent of "Jihadi Johns" costume – only the speaking executioner wears a khaki military uniform which distinguishes him from the other ISIS members.

In terms of the use of props, the immolation video of Kasasbeh is most elaborate. Several ISIS performers are onlookers to the spectacle, all of them mummed with khaki military uniforms and carrying assault rifles, seemingly standing guard. While the cage and the excavator are part of the surroundings, the also serve specific purposes. Thus, they are both part of the stage as well as props. Finally, the line of gasoline leading to the cage as well as the oversized torch used to ignite it are the last props.

Means of symbolic productions: Aesthetics

In terms of dramaturgical presentation, the mass beheadings and the immolation utilise more aesthetical effects. The individual execution videos, on the other hand, are distinguished by their simplicity. They only make use of two or three different camera angles: a frontal full shot, a medium shot from the side, or a medium close shot of the victim. They are filmed using stationary cameras and the objects are always in the centre of the frame. The same holds true for the horizon, so that the lower half is predominantly ochre while the upper half is a light blue. Against these plain contrasting backgrounds, the victim and performer and clearly visible. The clothing of the people depicted is also highly contrastive, with the bright orange jumpsuits standing out against the black costume. At a glance, the viewer is able to distinguish between the two. No music or voice-overs is added to the recordings of the individual beheadings, which adds to the simplicity of the videos.

In comparison, the mass beheadings and immolation are depicted much more extravagantly. For instance, the execution video of Henning only has five different cuts, while the mass beheading of the Syrian soldiers and the Egyptian Coptic Christians, and the immolation of Kasasbeh have well over fifty. The mass beheadings start with the procession of the executioners and victims to the execution site. Sounds of the people walking are either heightened or recreated walking noises are added to the video – either way, environmental sounds are unusually loud. In the execution video of the Syrian soldiers, the executioners eventually walk past a box from which they pick their knives. As soon as the first executioner picks up his weapon, Arabic chant-like singing starts playing as background music and slow motion is used. Additionally, there are deliberate cuts to black added, which further contribute to the dramaturgical effect. Moreover, metallic sounds are added whenever an executioner picks up a knife which emphasis this action further. Besides, the addition of such metallic sounds when blades are drawn is a recurrent motif in popular action films. Arguably, the directors tried to mimic this technique in order to make the scene more relatable for the

audience, possibly even hoping to invoke a sense of “coolness”; the use of slow motion – another common trope found in action movies – supports this suspicion. However, whether or not it is about coolness is an irrelevant argument, since it all comes down to the creation of drama.

Once the actual execution is about to start, the leading executioner gives a command to his fellow executioners and the video increasing the cutting pace instantly. The image flickers and there is cross-cutting between cuts to black and different angles showing the executioners shoving their victims to the ground. This creates a disorienting stroboscopic effect which results in a frantic and thrilling atmosphere. This dramatic build-up then generates a stronger impact on the ensuing violence.

Music is only utilised at the end of the video of the Coptic Christian’s mass beheading. However, the sounds of waves breaking on the shore are amplified which highlights this element of the stage. Overall, this video is toned down in comparison to the other mass beheading video, dramaturgical cuts to black and slow motion (when the victims are pushed to the ground) are also added here. The final shot, after the killing of the victims and a last threat by the leading executioner, depicts red waves breaking on the shore – symbolising the blood of the Christian victims spent in the sea water. The ocean is an important motif in this video. This is stressed by the leading executioner who states earlier in the video that “[…] the sea you have hidden [Osama bin Laden’s] body in, we swear to Allah will mix it with your blood” (ISIS 2015d).

Lastly, the production value for the immolation video of Kasasbeh appears to be even higher than for the mass beheading videos. The execution scene starts with a number of establishing shots portraying the on-looking ISIS members and the victim in his cage. Right before the immolation, the executioner is introduced by cross-cutting panning shots of Kasasbeh in his cage with shots slowly panning up the executioner. This results in a slow but highly dramaturgical reveal of the executioner; it also serves as a slow build-up to the execution itself, which increases the anticipation and therefore the impact of the killing. Again, certain sounds are exaggerated to highlight particular elements, in this case the fire. As the torch is lit and lights the line of gasoline leading to the cage, crackling sounds are made clearly audible and flames are superimposed on the image.

Behaviour and language

The most obvious performative behaviour is exhibited in the execution acts themselves. Apart from those, the body language of the executioner is in stark contrast to the submissively kneeling hostages. The executioners stand upright, towering over their victims, and when addressing the audience, they threateningly point their knives at the camera or their victims. The language used when addressing the audience is English and the two different speakers both have a British accent. Their tone is definitely hostile, too, and Westerners and/or Christians are referred to as "crusaders" (ISIS 2014e) and "swines" (ISIS 2015d), and the coalition against ISIS is called an "evil alliance" (ISIS 2014c). Generally, the executions are preceded by a condition to the respective audience to stop their military efforts against ISIS lest another hostage will be killed. Thus, the performers very overtly communicate this conditional, instrumental dimension of the videos.

Interestingly, the videos do not exhibit too many symbols which specifically refer ISIS Islamist character. Although the performers refer to Allah and their Muslim faith in general when addressing the audience, no props or stage elements create a link to ISIS' religious ideology in the execution videos – with the notable exceptions of the ISIS flag and the setting by the sea. Indeed, the only other indication of their Islamic ideology found in any of the videos are maybe the long beards visible on the faces of the executioners in the mass beheading of the Syrian soldiers.

Content available to the audience's general public

Out of all the elements discussed above, only a few of them were easily accessible to the general public of the audience. To be clear, all videos can be found on the internet to which most people in the West have access. However, the average media consumer does not make the effort to find these kinds of video, especially when warned about their disturbing content in advance. Admittedly, some media outlets – especially tabloids and their respective websites – were more detailed in their description of ISIS' violent performances, but they were still just that: descriptions. Again, it is not possible to cover all news media in the West and therefore a selection had to be made. Due to their wide reach and their perception of being relatively reputable, news reports of CNN and BBC are chosen as examples of news coverage on the ISIS execution videos. Specifically, news report *videos* are picked because they share the same medium as the original ISIS performances.

As it turns out, however, neither CNN nor BBC made use of moving images and sound to depict and discuss ISIS' execution videos. Instead, only still pictures are shown and the content is vaguely summarised. For instance, in the coverage of Foley's execution video, while showing still pictures of Foley kneeling next to his executioner, the CNN report states that "Foley […] reads a message denouncing the U.S. presumably written by his captors. He says America is his real killer and then Foley is murdered" (2014a). Similarly, the BBC report also does not show any video excerpts, but it does present an audio excerpt of "Jihadi John's" speech, in combination with a picture of his hooded face, in order to present his British accent. However, the BBC's overall account of the video is even vaguer than CNN's. The coverage reports: "Last night, the Islamic State group released a horrific video, appearing to show James Foley being beheaded. It's too graphic for us to show, but the killer appears to have a British accent. [Brief audio excerpt of "Jihadi John" speaking]. The film is addressed to President Obama, with a threat that a second American captive will be killed if U.S. airstrikes against the group continue" (BBC 2014a).

However, CNN's video reports on Sotloff's and Haines' execution videos do include brief, non-violent video excerpts in which "Jihadi John" addresses the audience in the USA. Nevertheless, the remaining cases are portrayed only in vague descriptions, still pictures and – in the case of BBC coverage of "Jihadi John's" videos – short audio excerpts. As such, the only pieces of information from ISIS' execution videos that the majority of the audience experiences are the victim, the executioner, their respective clothing, the weapon, the stage, and the setting. Thus, music, cuts, zooms and pans, sounds, and various dramaturgical effects do not reach the average media consumer (BBC 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d, 2014e, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c; CNN 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d, 2014e, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). This is relevant information for the discussion on power and especially fear. For the analysis of the ideological performativity of ISIS' execution videos, however, the original performances matter more than the perceptions of the audience.

5.1.2. The victim as representative of the audience

The discussion of the theoretical framework argues that violent acts are an expression of the relationship between the parties and that the victim is often chosen as representing a larger group. In other words, there is an interpersonal and interactional dimension to be found in violence (an individual harming another individual), but through these individual proxies, their respective groups are also set against each other. Here, the expressive level of violence is key:

Although the larger groups are not actually involved in physical confrontation, performative violence communicates the symbolic harm through the physical harm of a "scapegoat". Thus, it is argued that by beheading or immolating an individual or a group of people from one category, ISIS threatens the audiences to which they assign their victims. In other words, the execution videos depict a confrontation between ISIS and Western audiences as whole (and/or audiences which are allied with the West in the military effort against ISIS).

This argumentation is supported by the data, both in latent and manifest (verbal) form. Most obviously, the killing of a member from on specific group addresses that group. Of course, this is primarily done because governments can be pressured to do certain things with hostages from their population. U.S. or U.K. citizens are thus used by ISIS as leverage to obtain certain goals. However, the audience is also connected to victims from their group at least through a shared group identity. This attachment arguably invokes the sense that the whole community is attacked through the harming of the victim. In the execution videos of Foley, Sotloff, Haines, Henning, Kassig, the fifteen Syrian soldiers, Yukawa, Goto, and Kasasbeh the connecting elements are nationality and the partaking in the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS. In addition to these two elements, the mass beheading of the twenty-one Egyptian Coptic Christians further exhibits the element of Christian religious identity.

The performances do not make use of props in order to mark the victim as the member of a specific group. All victims either wear orange or black jumpsuits, which make them all look like prisoners but do not distinguish them as members of their respective communities. For instance, the murdered Christians do not wear any Christian symbols and the Jordanian pilot is not immolated in his Jordan air force pilot uniform. However, ISIS performances unambiguously indicate through verbal communication that the victims are proxies for their respective countries and/or cultures.

For example, the speaking executioners always stress the nationality or religious affiliation of their victims. In the monologue that Sotloff was probably forced to give, he states that "Here you are now, Obama, nearing the end of your term […] deceivingly marching us, the American people, into a blazing fire" (ISIS 2014b). The "us, the American people" is enunciated by Sotloff, which further emphasises that the execution performance is part of a counter-attack of ISIS against the USA. More clearly, Haines' speech in his execution video declares that "[u]nfortunately, it is we, the British public, that in the end will pay the price for our parliament's selfish decisions [to join the coalition against ISIS]" (ISIS, A Message to the Allies of America 2014c). Similarly, Henning says that "[b]ecause of our parliament's decision to attack the Islamic State, I, as a member of the British public, will now pay the price for that

decision" (ISIS 2014d). These two statements stress that it is the British public that ISIS attacks through the proxies Haines and Henning.

This reasoning is further supported by the monologue of the leading executioner of the Syrian soldiers' mass beheading, which states: "To Obama, the dog of Rome. Today we are slaughtering the soldiers of Bashar and tomorrow we will be slaughtering your soldiers and […] and the Islamic State will soon […] begin to slaughter your people on your streets" (ISIS 2014e). In other words, the killing of these individuals is only the start in a long-term campaign to attack the audience domestically. Similarly, "Jihadi John" addresses the audience in Japan directly in the video depicting Yukawa and Goto: "And to the Japanese public: […] you now have seventy-two hours to pressure your government in making a wise decision, by paying the $200 million to save the lives of your citizens. Otherwise, this knife will become your nightmare" (ISIS 2015a). This quote establishes most clearly that the harming of the hostages is perceived by ISIS as an attack against the audience. This is further stressed in the following video of Goto's execution in which "Jihadi John" declares: "[…] let the nightmare for Japan begin" (ISIS 2015b). In sum, while the performances mostly do so through verbal communication, the victims are still placeholders for their respective groups and, thus the audience.

5.1.3. The formation and maintenance of ISIS' collective identity

According to the theoretical discussion of ideological performances, similarity and difference are established in interaction with others. Furthermore, violence is capable of defining group boundaries and performative violence in particular can generate oppositional identities. Thus, performative violent acts such as ISIS' public executions for the Western audience can be expected to exhibit the formation of differences between ISIS and their oppositional group through interaction between the performers and victims, creating and maintaining a collective identity for ISIS in the process.

In order to discuss this issue, the context of the conflict is crucial. ISIS does not have the level of military resources and advancement upon which the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS can draw. The first execution video (Foley) addresses this directly by showing footage of an aerial attack against an ISIS site and calling it an "American [a]ggression against the Islamic State" (ISIS 2014a). Whether done consciously or unconsciously – which, as was established in the theoretical debate, is not an influencing factor – ISIS invokes the image of Western modernity being at odds with their traditionality. While the Western-led alliance has access to

fighter jets and aerial bombardments, ISIS simply uses a knife to harm the Western public – as represented by the foreign execution victims. The message this sends is that ISIS does not need hyper-technological tools to inflict harm on their enemy, but that they can do so with very basic means and yet make a spectacle of it.

This sensationalism adds another layer of oppositional identity to the performances. As discussed by Foucault, the infliction of pain and the killing as a public spectacle (and even in general) had become shameful and despicable in the West decades ago. ISIS, however, turns this progress on its head by adding drama to the already startling act of killing. The victims are not shot, which would offer them a quick death, but they are beheaded – another technique which had disappeared in the West. The blood-stained bodies and severed heads are displayed after the beheading act. The same holds for the showing of demonstration of Kasasbeh's scorched body after he was immolated, another element which is distinctly archaic. In addition to the ways of killing and the publicness of it being archaisms, the sensationalist way in which ISIS presents these acts is also in opposition to the contemporary moral standards of the West. As discussed above, dramaturgical effects – such as sounds and slow motion – are added to heighten the impact of the executions.

The way in which in which ISIS forms an identity in opposition to the West is thus twofold: First, violence is turned into a spectacle, complete with dramatization and publicness, which is nowadays rejected in the West; and second, ISIS attacks the audience by proxy with simplistic weapons, in fact so archaic in nature that they are also rejected by the West on moral grounds.

Besides these underlying themes, ISIS performers also use antagonistic language in reference to the victims and audiences. This verbal demarcation between ISIS performers (in their function as representatives of ISIS) and the victims (as representatives of their respective audiences) can be found in every single execution video. To be specific, almost every video exhibits a language of a "you versus us" mentality: "*You* have plotted against *us*. […] Today, *your* military air force is attacking *us* daily in Iraq" (ISIS 2014a, emphasis added), "just as *your* missiles continue to strike *our* people, *our* knife will continue to strike the necks of *your* people" (ISIS 2014b), "[prompting the Japanese public to pressure their government to pay] $200 million to save the lives of *your* citizens. Otherwise, this knife will become *your* nightmare" (ISIS 2015a), "this knife will not only slaughter Kenji, but will also carry on and cause carnage wherever your people are found" (ISIS 2015b).

In addition ISIS combines this to this opposing language with their traditional identity element by using historically-laden terms: "To Obama, the dog of Rome", "[referring to the

U.S.-led military intervention against ISIS] we will break this final and last Crusade", "the Crusader army" and "[referring to the immolation of Kasasbeh, who was part of the military effort against ISIS] burning the first American Crusader" (ISIS 2014e), as well as "[referring to Libya] we are on the south of Rome", "[to] all crusaders: Safety for you will be only wishes" (ISIS 2015d). All these terms refer to century-old hostilities between Muslims and Christians – in oversimplified terms, between the West and the Middle East. Through the use of this language, the performers remind the audience of these old enmities and position themselves in this morally-charged meaning system as the defenders against religious aggressors.

In sum, by performing in opposition to a specific enemy image, ISIS performers are able to delineate their identity and present a specific vision of them as some kind of "underdog" in the asymmetric conflict between them and the coalition forces. They do so by using hostile and traditional language, framing killings of coalition members as a spectacle, and simply through the act of killing itself.

5.2. The fear-instilling elements in ISIS public executions

5.2.1. Identification of fear-instilling elements in ISIS' performances

As discussed in the theory chapter on fear, the concept describes a response to a perceived threat. In this case, only two of the three aspects of fear apply, namely the response to a definite object and the state of mind arising from the anticipation of danger. In other words, ISIS execution videos contain elements which are meant to create fear of being physically harmed and to establish a general sense of insecurity arising from the anticipation of this definite fear. In order to demonstrate the fear-instilling elements of ISIS' execution performance, this section will draw on the above discussion of theatrical elements and the victim as a representation of (parts of) the audience. Moreover, this section will only briefly introduce the elements of fear to be found in the execution videos, while the next section will dissect these elements in detail and in light of their performative character.

The most evident fear-instilling aspect of the execution videos are the violent acts themselves – specifically the brutality of it, with its implied anti-modern (and anti-Western) nuances. Here, the audience being the victim by proxy is likely to induce fear in that audience, too. It is clear to the audience that the harm is done to one of its members precisely because of their belonging to the audience. In other words, although the audience can be expected to care about its members for the sake of the members alone, the audience may also worry about harm

being done to itself. This atmosphere of anxiety is meant to be strengthened by the verbal threats addressed at the audience by the ISIS performers.

While all these points are already mentioned in the above analysis sections, there is a fear-generating element which has not been addressed yet, namely the British and U.S.-American accents of the talking executioners. The majority of Western news outlets continued to point out "Jihadi John's" British accent and the U.S. accent of the leading executioner from the mass beheading of the Egyptian Coptic Christians. The Western media might have pointed out those details with the simple intent to give character to the faceless executioners and thus build a more interesting narrative; ISIS, on their part, might have simply chosen those two individuals as speakers because they were fluent in English. However, whether this was a conscious decision or not, the use of accents which are familiar to the audience evokes the feeling of the act being "close to home". In other words, the audience is given reason to believe that violent members of ISIS are among them, which adds to the atmosphere of anxiety.

5.2.2. Intensification of fear through performative elements

The theoretical discussion argues that fear can also arise from certain types of violence, specifically shocking and highly visible ones. Not only performative aspects of violence heighten the level of fear generated, but ideological-performative elements strengthen fear-instilling elements in general. The idea of someone being killed for simply belonging to one's group is surely frightening, but this fear is intensified through the visualisation of pain and death. Moreover, as discussed above, the manner in which the victims were killed and the tools that were used invoke anti-modern notions, which are especially disturbing to the "civilised" audience. Additionally, the prop of the knife is not only an archaic tool for killing someone, but also a very slow and therefore painful and cruel one. Just as the guillotine in late-eighteenth-century France was meant to make the execution as painless and quick as possible, the choice of a small knife is arguably meant to look more brutal. Moreover, there is a sort of twisted intimacy to a knife-wielding executioner as opposed to one who is merely pulling a lever, or the trigger of a gun. This intimacy also makes the executioner look more determined and threatening.

The black outfit of "Jihadi John" was surely chosen to hide his identity, but it is also reminiscent of recurring Western tropes of personified depictions of death as a black hooded figure. In stark contrast to the executioner's dark attire are the bright-orange jumpsuits worn by the victims. Again, through them, the audience is immediately reminded of images of

prisoners in Guantanamo Bay. In addition to being a criticism of the U.S.-led detention camp, it is argued here that the image of the jumpsuits also borrows from the Guantanamo Bay reference in order to strengthen the notion of the victims' powerlessness and their submission to their captors. Since the audience is represented by the victims, these feelings are meant to be shared by the Western public.

Furthermore, verbal threats directed at the audience are positively fear-enhancing, too. While some threats are implied by addressing the victims (and therefore the audience only by proxy), others are more direct: "[…] the Islamic State will soon […] begin to slaughter your people on your streets" (ISIS 2014e), "[…] this knife will become your nightmare" (ISIS 2015a), "[…] this knife will not only slaughter Kenji, but will also carry on and cause carnage wherever your people are found" (ISIS 2015b), "[a]ll crusaders: safety for you will be only wishes especially if you are fighting us all together" and "The sea you have hidden Sheikh Osama bin Laden's body in, we swear to Allah we will mix it with your blood" (ISIS 2015d). These quotes unmistakably show that ISIS' public executions videos are – at least in part – also meant to convey fear-instilling elements. Other dramaturgical effects amplifying fear aspects in the performances are the aforementioned build-up to the killings – for instance through stroboscopic cuts to black, heightening of certain sounds (such as the picking up of knives), or the use of slow motion.

It must be added that the general public did not perceive the majority of dramaturgical effects that would have strengthened the fear-instilling elements. As mentioned above, the mainstream news media intentionally censored the footage from the videos, often times only showing still pictures. It can be expected that ISIS foresaw that the most widely distributed footage from their videos would be censored, and therefore it is reasonable to assume that the ISIS directors thought the executions and their brutality would speak for themselves.

5.3. Images of power

5.3.1. Control over life and body in ISIS' performances

In order to examine the power-related instrumental aspect of ISIS' performative violent acts – the display of power over the victims and by extension the audience – this section first looks into the ways in which control is manifested. By keeping in mind that violence alone can be a declaration of power as well as an attempt of achieving power, this section examines how ISIS

performers exert control over the victim's body and life through the use of violence. From this straightforward investigation, the more complex inquiries of power ensue in the sections below.

Unsurprisingly, control over life is made most visible right *before* and *during* the acts of killing. In the execution videos of Foley, Sotloff, Haines, Henning, and Goto, executioner "Jihadi John" kills his victims by holding the victims' head by the cheek with one hand and bringing the knife to their throat with his other hand. In combination with the assumption that the victims have their hands tied behind their backs, this gives the victims almost no room to struggle. In other words, the victims' bodies are literally in the hands of the executioner, just as much as their lives are in the metaphorical sense. This effect is amplified in the mass beheadings due to the number of victims at the mercy of numerous ISIS executioners. Although Kassig's execution is not shown on camera, "Jihadi John" towering over his remains is another visualisation of the executioner's power over the hostages' lives.

Control over the body is demonstrated in various ways across the different execution videos. For instance, the victims' hands are never visible, always behind their backs, and presumably tied up. This gives the impression that the victims are restricted in their freedom of movement. By contrast, "Jihadi John's" hands are not only uncovered but also visible at all times. This is interpreted here as displaying that he is in control of himself and the situation. The same holds for the other executioners in the mass beheadings. Moreover, the prisoners are always presented in subjugated positions in relation to their respective executioners. In the beheading videos of individuals, the victims are consistently kneeling besides a standing "Jihadi John". Since this kneeling at someone's feet is widely accepted as a demonstration of submission, this literal height imbalance stands as a metaphor for the imbalance of power. The ISIS performers are in control and control the bodies of their victims.

This effect is only strengthened in the ISIS performances of mass beheadings. Both of these performances start with the victims being led side-by-side to the execution site by their individually-assigned killers. In the execution video, the hostages even have to walk while being bent over. Their executioners, however, walk upright and hold their victims by the arm. The whole procession is bizarrely organised, with the pairs of executioners and victims walking side by side, one pair after another. The image of livestock being led to their slaughter comes to mind – an effect that was likely desired by the directors of the performances. Although the Egyptian Coptic Christians are allowed to walk upright next to their respective captors, both they and the group of Syrian soldiers are made to kneel in front of their executioners. Unlike the individual beheadings by "Jihadi John", however, the executioners do not simply hold their victims' head, but shove them to the ground, which increases the notion of dominance over the

victim. Although Kasasbeh is not held by anyone, the cage he is placed in evokes the same image of submissiveness.

Lastly, control over the body is also apparent in the videos display of the spilled blood, severed heads, and decapitated or scorched bodies of the victims. Now completely stripped of any agency, the bodies serve their final purpose in the ISIS performances as gruesome images of ISIS' power over the hostage's lives. In line with the above discussions, the disempowered victims are meant to represent a disempowered audience and highlight the power ISIS declares over it.

5.3.2. Contestations of power in ISIS' performances

The U.S.-led coalition is not only an effort of physical attacks against ISIS, but also constitutes a contestation of ISIS' power in the region. The audience – both the governments and general publics of the coalition partners – thus pose a problem of power to ISIS. From the above discussion of ISIS' verbal threats against the audience it is clear that the execution videos serve to rectify this problem, among other things. This section focuses on precisely those elements which address the power contestations between ISIS and the audience. Therefore, it builds the foundation for the subsequent analysis which combines the discussions of oppositional identities, fear-instilling elements, and ultimately the struggle for power between ISIS and the imagined audience.

Already the titles of the execution videos indicate the power contestations between ISIS and the audience. Titles such as "A Message to America", "A Message to the Allies of America", "A Message to the Government and People of Japan", and "A Message Signed with Blood to the Nation of the Cross" specifically address audiences which are affiliated with the anti-ISIS coalition. However, as mentioned before, there are also several speech acts by the performers that directly refer to the military effort against ISIS. The speakers expressly address the "foolish allies in the Satanic coalition" (ISIS 2015b) of this "final and last Crusade" (ISIS 2014e), criticising their "decision to pay [hundreds of millions of dollars] to fight the Islamic State" (ISIS 2015a) through "aerial bombardments" (ISIS 2014d) "attacking [ISIS] in Iraq" (ISIS 2014a). In the individual beheading videos, ransom money and the cessation of the aerial bombardments are demanded in exchange for the life of the future victims. This indicates that the military efforts against ISIS are a crucial contributing source of contestation to ISIS' hold over their territory.

As seen in the previous section, power relations are also visible in the interaction between the victims and their executioners. To declare power over the audience, the victims are kept on their knees, at the feet of the executioners, and (are probably forced to) give speeches in which they blame their governments and fellow nationals for their situation. In addition to this, ISIS' creation of a group identity in opposition to Western values also marks the contestation of power that these execution performances exhibit. In short, in and through their violent performances ISIS contests the military efforts against them but also Western identity. Thus, these defying elements combine expressive and instrumental aspects of the performances in relation to the audience.

5.3.3. Maintenance of power through fear and performativity

This section will finally combine the instrumental and expressive aspects of ISIS' public executions for foreign audiences by answering the question of how fear and ideological-performative elements support an image of power for ISIS. To begin with, the strategic use of fear is a contributing factor. In the prior chapters on fear it was argued that fear has a strategic value if it maximises the actor's perceived threat and creates an atmosphere of insecurity.

ISIS fear-instilling elements are indeed strengthened through dramaturgical effects, which leads to ISIS appearing as more dangerous – and therefore more powerful. The verbal threats directed at the audience are underlined by spectacular violence against the audience's own members. The "shock" factor of ISIS' violent performances does not solely stem from the brutality of the acts themselves. For the full effect of shock it is important that the audience is not used to the behaviour displayed. Since the public display of pain and death has been condemned in the West for more than a century, the performance is perceived as especially frightening. ISIS is thus exercising control over the audience's emotional state.

Playing into this is also the representation of the audience through the victim. Not only are the images horrifying in themselves and extraordinarily shocking because they are unusual to the audience, they are also directed at a proxy for the audience. As such, the interaction between executioner and victim drags the audience right into the events. Moreover, by exercising control over the life of the victim, the performers parade their domineeringness.

The way in which ISIS forms its identity in opposition to the West is another battleground for power. The use of archaic killing methods and weapons is in stark contrast to the allegedly surgical precision and sanitised image of "modern" warfare. The insistence on using traditional language in modern contexts is additional indication that ISIS presents an

image of itself as rejecting so-called civilised or liberal norms. This rejection of prevalent standards gives the group an aura of independence and resistance. Additionally, the fact that ISIS chooses to make use of simple methods of killings is also suggestive of the role of the "underdog" who has to fend off a much stronger aggressor. While this might seem to make ISIS less powerful at first glance, it is actually quite the opposite: The implication is that despite being in a disadvantageous position, ISIS still chooses to stand tall against a seemingly overwhelming enemy. Therefore, ISIS execution performances evoke the image that the organisation makes up for its lack of resource power by a kind power of conviction.

In addition to these contributing fear-instilling elements and identity-related factors, the execution videos also exhibit performative features which directly relate to ISIS' power. The performers declare both verbally and through their acting that they are in control of both the situation and the audience. The performers exert power over the life (or rather the death) of the hostages and stress that a similar fate can befall the audience, too.

When combined, all these findings contribute to answering the research question of how ideological-performative acts of violence carried out in ISIS' public executions maintain an image of power. Simply put, ideological-performative acts of violence generate a group identity for ISIS in interaction with and in opposition to the victim as representative of an imagined audience; performative elements amplify components which instil fear and anxiety; and together with performative elements, identity and fear contribute to the image of power which is thus projected in ISIS' execution performances. In sum, this research paper demonstrated that there are various dimensions to ISIS' executions which go far beyond the simple dismissal of these acts as senseless barbarity. They have meaningful sides, and practical uses, and they are certainly rich in facets.

Conclusion

Before the findings will be summarised once more and reviewed in light of the initial research puzzle, there are a number of reflections regarding potential future research. For instance, the examination of ISIS' execution videos could benefit from a comparative approach. Additional insights could be gained from comparing the performative differences between single-victim executions and mass killings, and an analysis focusing on the differences between execution videos over time might reveal multiple changes in the performative behaviour. Here, it would be interesting to closely link the comparative analysis of the videos to a historical-political analysis of the regional developments, in order to find out how ISIS' videos shape and are shaped by the larger political context.

Furthermore, it would be incredibly helpful to interview former ISIS executioners in order to find out whether group identity *between* executioners is also formed and strengthened through the shared experience of such potentially traumatic events. Speaking of identity formation, it was peculiar to find that ISIS made very little use of Islamic symbolism. For instance, instead of a small knife, it could have been expected of the Salafi extremist group to use scimitars. Although the use of a small knives as slower and crueller weapons was addressed in the analysis, it almost seems like a missed opportunity for ISIS.

There is a point to be made about ISIS' contestation of Western values. It might be more accurate to state that the group is opposed to the "modern" liberal values that are not exclusively Western. However, this paper did not want to create a false dichotomy between the West with "modern" values and the rest of the world (with consequently less civilised values); as such, ISIS' convoluted approach of specifically addressing Western countries on the one hand, and the group' opposition towards "modern" standards on the other hand, was simply grouped together as ISIS opposing Western standards. On this note, it can be added that ISIS' use of orange jumpsuits for its hostages might have been a way of criticising Western hypocrisy of liberalism. The U.S., self-proclaimed defender of freedom and democracy, presented itself as outraged at the actions of ISIS, but itself used violence in order to keep the ISIS in check while at the same time still running an extrajudicial detention centre where alleged terrorists are being held.

Moreover, further research could look into the advantages of performative enactments of violence in ISIS' recruitment process. This master's thesis focused solely on ISIS' enemies as the imagined audience, but it goes without saying that the execution videos are part of a

larger propaganda effort by ISIS with which the group also calls on sympathisers from all over the world to join them. By scrutinising theatrical tropes in light of their usefulness to ISIS' recruitment of new militants, another instrumental-expressive study of the execution videos could be developed, which might yield important findings for policy makers.

Conclusively, this research started with the criticism of the unreflective consumption – or pornography – of violence with which ISIS' execution videos are commonly absorbed by the average public audience member. Through the analysis of the videos as violent ideological performances which have fear-instilling components, it was shown that there is meaning within these acts. The dimensions of performativity and fear contributed to ISIS' portrayal of itself as powerful in relation to its adversaries, in particular the U.S.-led coalition of airstrikes against ISIS. Thus, the execution videos constitute a meaningful stage for ISIS to express identity, frighten its enemies, and display and exert power in relation to the audience.

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