

Self-representation of Islamic State

How to understand it by means of the orientalist and occidentalist discourse

BA Final Paper

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Abstract

In this essay I have analyzed an Islamic State beheading video in order to find an answer to the following research question: *To what extent do 'orientalism' and 'occidentalism' help us to understand the self-representation of the Islamic State in their beheading videos?*

The topicality of Islamic State's media appearances and people's responses to it, have led me to research the meaning behind their representation. I have found the most helpful theories in Edward Said's book *Orientalism* and Buruma & Margalit's book *Occidentalism: the West in the Eyes of its Enemies*. In the theoretical framework I have discussed, analyzed and compared these two theories, in order to find out what they had to say about representation. Some very stereotypical formulations came out of this analysis and led me to also make use of Homi K. Bhabha's works on stereotyping, mimicry and the Other. His work has helped me to deepen my Islamic State video analysis.

Eventually I have analyzed the beheading video of British aid worker David Haines on aspects such as: speech, clothing, scenery, positioning and message/act. I have put these concepts in the light of my theoretical framework, to find out what the occidentalist and/or orientalist discourse could say about them, in order for us to understand Islamic State's choice for the way it represents itself.

Ultimately, I have found that by appropriating the orientalist discourse and its representations, Islamic State has expressed its occidentalist body of thought in an aggressive manner that has clearly affected its audience.

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1. Introduction

Today, bookstores in the United States are filled with shabby screeds bearing screaming headlines about Islam and terror, Islam exposed, the Arab threat, and the Muslim menace [...] all of them recycling the same unverifiable fictions and vast generalizations so as to stir up 'America' against the foreign devil.¹

The way Islamic militants have been represented in Western media has been a strictly negative one. If we think about the depictions of Osama Bin Laden in the aftermath of '9/11', we can see how repetition and the use of one image only, could lead to the representation of a scary, barbarous terrorist that was to be feared.

This occurrence fits the orientalist discourse perfectly. Orientalism, elaborately described by Edward Said in his book of the same name, is the idea that the West, Europe and the United States look at the Middle East through a particular lens. This lens is called orientalism, which we use to comprehend the unknown and unfamiliar. But what this lens does, is that it makes the Middle Eastern people appear different; even threatening. The problem with this is that we find the acquired knowledge through this lens, objective and real. However, it really distorts the reality of the Middle East. The opening quotation describes this orientalizing process.²

Nowadays, this 'scary, barbarous terrorist' has the ability to represent itself more than beforehand, through the accessibility to the World Wide Web. If one owns a cell phone with a camera function, a video is easy to be made and sent into the digital space, after which most people in the world are able download and see it. Instead of being represented through Western media, the 'Orient' now wants to represent itself through digital media, and he wants it to go viral and *be* repetitive.

This is the case with the Islamic State. Their beheading videos and other media in which they torture people are very topical these days. It seems like their expressions are fuelled with a certain anger towards the West, for whom the videos are atrocious to watch. This event could be explained by means of the occidentalist discourse. Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit write about this discourse in their book *Occidentalism: the West in the Eyes of its Enemies*. The theory is founded on dehumanizing and stereotyping representations of the West in the Eastern world. As well as orientalism, it is often based on prejudices.

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), xx.

² Said, *Orientalism*, 67.

Through former imperialistic presence of the Western world in the East, dissatisfaction and fury have developed towards the occident. Torturing Western inhabitants could be an outcome of this fury.

Insofar as occidentalism could be a cause for the Islamic State media acts, the orientalist discourse can be read as a cause as well as being affected by it. In the first place the distinction between 'the orient' and 'the occident' that Said acknowledges in his book, is also acknowledged by these media expressions. They do say: 'We are different than the West.' However, the reasons for this distinction are different than before. They clearly want to be different, as where beforehand the orient was *made* different from the occident, since they were acknowledged as being less civilized than the West. Instead of the West civilizing the East in imperialistic times, there is a possibility that the West could learn something from the East now.

I would like to find out how the Islamic State's self-representation is influenced by both these discourses, orientalist as well as occidentalist, that leads to this message. Therefore my research question will be:

To what extent do 'orientalism' and 'occidentalism' help us to understand the self-representation of the Islamic State in their beheading videos?

1.1 Social and scientific relevance

Not only are the Islamic State torture media acts greatly topical at the moment, they also stir up feelings in many fields and disciplines. People are affected by it at home, since IS is recruiting militants from all over the world. The media is hesitant about how to handle these incoming torture videos; do we show everything to our audience, or is it wiser to not give IS that much of attention? On top of that, everyone has heard or even watched one of these atrocious images.

Because of this topicality, it seemed important to me to find out how these acts have come to existence. Many Western people have their minds made up about these acts very quickly and easily, without really over thinking their thoughts. What is shown to us in Western media are brutal killings by brutal terrorists who do not show any regret. But what if this brutality is stirred up by Western acts? What if the Islamic State wants to show a dissenting opinion towards the brutal killings and tortures executed by American soldiers during the 'War on Terror' in Iraq?

Therefore I want to research this orientalist and occidentalist influence, in order to

expand the Western-based body of thought that is prevalent in the Western world, as I have observed it. I would also like to try and break the East-West bias, in which many people think, as well as in is being written. The works I will use are a clear example of this bias-thinking. The 'they' and 'us'-mentality needs to be blurred, before the dividing line is definitely being hardened.

1.2 Structure of essay

After having introduced the research question and its social and scientific relevance in the introduction, I will continue with the theoretical framework. Here both most important books for my essay will be summarized, described and compared by means of their view on representation. Hereafter the case study will be introduced including a short description of the Islamic State. Then, the relevant concepts of representation and ideology will be explained and connected, in order to move on to the actual analysis of the case study. This will be described, analyzed on representative aspects and deepened out by means of both the orientalist and occidentalist discourse. Where after Homi K. Bhabha's theory on 'mimicry' and 'the Other question' will give an extra layer to this analysis. Eventually, I will answer my research question in the conclusion.

2. Theoretical Framework

In order to answer the research question, I have developed a theoretical framework that will give the main theoretical principles to start my investigation with. This framework depends mostly on two books. These books are *Orientalism*, written by Edward Said in 1979 and *Occidentalism: the West in the Eyes of its Enemies*, written by Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit in 2004. During the next chapters I will use some other sources that will profound my analysis, but will not be part of the main principles of my theoretical framework. These are texts by Homi K. Bhabha on 'the Other question' and 'mimicry'.

I have chosen the two books, since they elaborately describe both conflicting concepts that show how parts of the world think of one another. Although this seems like a very general description, in which people might be put in the same category, it does sketch a picture of how general relations between East and West are settled in people's minds. Moreover, the result of firstly the orientalist discourse, led to an occidentalist reaction. To think about a foreigner in an orientalist manner, is to channel thought into an East or a West section. The distinction is in this sense kept polarized.³ This polarization has led to an occidentalist reaction and is what keeps the tension between the Islamic State and the Western powers in tact. My main focus in both theories will be on how representation contributes to this polarization, in order to develop an answer on how both orientalism and occidentalism might have influenced the Islamic State in its self-representation and representation of its ideology.

Now I will firstly turn to Said's description of orientalism.

2.1 Orientalist discourse

In his book Said gives three descriptions of the concept 'orientalism'. The first one is the academic one: "Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient [...] either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism."⁴ A more general description, which I will use as my definition in this thesis, is the following: "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'."⁵ His last description is more historically and materially defined than the first ones. Here he takes the late

³ Said, *Orientalism*, 46.

⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 2.

⁵ Ibid.

eighteenth century as a starting point for orientalism, where it “can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient [...]: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”⁶

For this essay I would thus like to use the second description “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’”, because it shows the base of the orientalist discourse. Through this way of thinking, people (read: European culture) could manage and produce the orient in a “political, sociological, military, scientific, imaginative and ideological way.”⁷ In this sense, the third definition of orientalism is also working for my thesis, since the West keeps dominating and restructuring the East, by means of involvement.

Even though Said here speaks of the post- Enlightenment period, I think his findings are still relevant. His focal point in his work is the representation of the orient. These representations are still being made; only the media has got a bigger influence nowadays. So, where Said mostly discusses literature on the orient, now photos, videos and films are available for discussion. This has led to more people being able to represent themselves and spread it throughout the World Wide Web. This is exactly how IS expresses their ideology through these media utterances.

So, what does Said say on representations of the orient that might help us to understand the self-representation of the Islamic State? What is important to keep in mind is the idea of representing the orient was born out of Western domination. In order to dominate, the subject races had to be ‘known’. It was acknowledged a triumph when oriental backwardness was to be overcome through domination of a race that ‘knows’ what is good for the subject race, better than they could know themselves.⁸ Knowledge, in short, gave power.⁹ Knowledge was to be understood as the capacity of the imperialist to know how ‘they’ feel by knowing their history, their expectations and their reliance upon the imperialist.¹⁰ As you can tell, this ‘knowing’ was thus based on a blunt colonial arrogance.

Let us turn to the content of orientalist representation. Said starts of his research by stating some depictions of Westerners. They are: “rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion.”¹¹ He concludes by saying that the ‘Arab-Orientals’ are none of these things. To amplify on this: it is not Said who thinks this way, it is

⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, 3.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 35.

⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, 36.

¹⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 34.

¹¹ Said, *Orientalism*, 49.

he who wants to find out what cultural forces, institutions and traditions have produced this particular view.

These indications are a starting point for the further descriptions of the orient that I will discuss. In the nineteenth century, it was noted that there was a “virtual epidemic of Orientalia affecting every major poet, essayist, and philosopher of the period.”¹² In this time, the orient identified with “everything Asiatic, exotic, mysterious, profound and seminal.”¹³

When focussing on Islam, a kind of fear towards it was born out of European Christianity. Ever since the prophet Mohammed’s death in 632, the Islamic religious and cultural hegemony grew vastly.¹⁴ Islam came to symbolize “terror, devastation, the demonic, hordes of hated barbarians.”¹⁵ Therefore, when representing the Muslim, it was a way of controlling him. By stating the subject as ‘the orient made known’, instead of the East itself, it was made less fearsome to the Western public.¹⁶ As a consequence, the orient was being suppressed, because in imperialist Western eyes the orient could not behave differently than the image and behaviour the West had passed on them.

In this way, the idea of representation had become a theatrical idea. The orient had become a stage on which the whole East was represented and enclosed at the same time. It thus had become a closed field, or a “theatrical stage affixed to Europe”.¹⁷ What comes from this is that the orient is being *orientalized*: it finds oneself outside the borders of European society and the European comes to accept certain orientalist codifications as the ‘true’ orient.¹⁸ The pitfall with ‘orientalizing’ was that the orientalist academic found the representation a hermeneutical one, which could help him understand everything about the orient, such as his character and mind.¹⁹ The word ‘oriental’ became a reference to identify with a particular body of information about the orient. Essential ideas, such as the orient’s “sensuality, its tendency to despotism, its aberrant mentality, its habits of inaccuracy, its backwardness” now possessed an epistemological status and seemed morally neutral.²⁰

The danger of this existing epistemological status is orientalism being a form of radical realism.²¹ When thinking about and dealing with the orient, the dialogue has become

¹² Said, *Orientalism*, 51.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 59.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, 60.

¹⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, 63.

¹⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 67.

¹⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, 255.

²⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 205.

²¹ Said, *Orientalism*, 72.

a reality.

The occidentalist discourse could be seen as a way to get out of this orientalist way of thinking. It could shed light on why the Islamic State propagates its ideology and represents itself in the way it does.

2.2 Occidentalist discourse

In contrast to orientalism, occidentalism never made it as an academic discipline. It is more of an observation that certain 'enemies' of the West are painting a dehumanizing picture of this West.²² As well as in orientalism, this picture of 'the Other' is based upon prejudices. A big difference is that the origins of this body of thought are somewhat a reaction to the imperialist Western/European worldview that was nourished by the orientalist discourse. This is exactly what makes this discourse interesting and applicable to the case study, since it has a lot to do with reacting to a certain worldview in which the orient is set in certain daylight.

The situation in the world, as the occidentalist discourse describes it, is as a great worldwide clash between the culture of Islam and the 'Westoxification' or 'jahiliyya'. 'Jahiliyya' literally means 'the age of ignorance', the time before the revelations of Muhammad, when people were idolatrous and believed in more gods than Allah exclusively.²³ Nowadays, 'jahiliyya' is linked with the effects of 'Westoxification', which entails the Western worship of material life as a far more dangerous form of idolatry, because of its devotion to a strange God.²⁴

Islamists have different reactions to this. In *Occidentalism* there is made a distinction between political Islamists and puritanical fundamentalists. The former thinks of the West as standing in the way of the creation of Islamic states and supporting 'idolatrous' regimes; it makes the West its main enemy. Puritanical fundamentalists just despise the Western way of life, since it offends their moral sensibilities.²⁵ They even go so far as to say that the Western civilization is a form of idolatrous barbarism, where people degrade themselves to the level of beasts to fulfil their bodily needs.²⁶

In short, the dissension between West and East entails the struggle between "the

²² Ian Buruma & Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of its Enemies* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 5.

²³ Buruma & Margalit, *Occidentalism*, 115.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Buruma & Margalit, *Occidentalism*, 129.

²⁶ Buruma & Margalit, *Occidentalism*, 120.

idolatrous worshipers of earthly matter and true worshipers of the godly spirit.”²⁷ This also shows in the separation of church and state in the West. In the Islam, the church could not be a separate institution: politics, economics, science and religion are not to be divided into different categories.²⁸

Not only the West itself, as well as the Westernizers in their own societies are being seen as the enemy. They contributed to the Western imperialism of the mind, by spreading the belief in scientism: the faith in science as the only way to gain knowledge.²⁹ Rationalism is tied to this faith, since it is the belief that only reason can figure out the world, with science being capable of understanding natural phenomena.³⁰ Concerning occidentalists, the West is arrogant enough to think that reason is sufficient to know what there is to be known.³¹ Ideas such as constitutional government and secular law, eventually led to the West being associated with the worship of money.³² These ideas were already a threat to the unified spiritual culture of medieval Europe and later thus to the Islamic world as well. When in Europe the “religious Reformation, the Renaissance, and the emergence of natural science” were ‘to blame’ for destructing the unified spiritual order, the adoption of these ideas were threatening the East as well.³³ The occident was propagating its own ideology through their values into their colonized Islamic countries, such as Iraq and Syria. Values such as freedom, peace and civilization were thought of by the Islamic world as undermining a potential grandeur of a nation or religion. And as we see in the Islamic State, war could be the only way to forge a purer and vigorous community, in order to overcome the occidental power relations.³⁴

From a radical Islamist perspective, as applicable to the Islamic State, anyone outside the religious community is an enemy. By waging a holy war (‘jihad’), one can “confer authority upon divine law alone and eliminate the laws created by man.”³⁵

When occidentalists represent the West, they use words such as barbarous idolatry, faith in science to gain knowledge, rationalism, worship of material life, offending Islamic moral sensibilities and Westerners being beasts with bodily needs. Islamist political activism is most often directed at their own regimes in countries of the Islamic world. However, the

²⁷ Buruma & Margalit, *Occidentalism*, 109.

²⁸ Buruma & Margalit, *Occidentalism*, 6-7.

²⁹ Buruma & Margalit, *Occidentalism*, 95.

³⁰ Buruma & Margalit, *Occidentalism*, 94.

³¹ Buruma & Margalit, *Occidentalism*, 95.

³² Buruma & Margalit, *Occidentalism*, 70.

³³ Buruma & Margalit, *Occidentalism*, 6.

³⁴ Buruma & Margalit, *Occidentalism*, 58.

³⁵ Buruma & Margalit, *Occidentalism*, 126.

West is kept being seen as the prime source of idolatry, since it functions on pride and promiscuity: two corrupting forces in duty of human degradation.³⁶

2.3 Connection between the two discourses

First of all, both books are looking for answers to the question of how the image and representation of 'the Other' has been created throughout the years. Said finds these answer in imperialistic literature, written by the West about the East. Buruma and Margalit find their answers in the outcomes of imperialism and religious principles. However, what mattered to me the most was *how* both discourses *represented* 'the Other'. This led to some interesting outcomes.

Orientalists use 'the Orient' as a stage on which the whole East is represented and enclosed at the same time. It refers to a body of information about the Orient. Backward, barbarian, exotic, mysterious, irrational, suspicious, not capable of holding real values: these are some of the prejudices in describing the orient by an orientalist.

It seems as if occidentalists are using some of these prejudices in order to turn them around. The West is barbarous, since it degrades itself to the level of beasts to fulfil its bodily needs. The West is rational, which is a bad thing since they are not capable of holding important spiritual values. Westerners are led by pride and promiscuity that makes them worship money, instead of a God. The distinction between private and public, state and church has led to individual consciousness; where there needs to be a collective morality in order to create a grand nation or religion. Western values as peace, freedom and civilization are subordinate to what one owes to God.

These representations and ideas about one another are of great importance to find out how they added to the self-representation of the Islamic State and its ideology.

³⁶ Buruma & Margalit, *Occidentalism*, 127.

3. Analysis

3.1 Case study

Which video will I use to analyze? I have written down a list of the so-called 'beheading videos' in order to pick the most interesting one for my research. It turned out that there was more to find than solely beheading videos. There were videos in which prisoners enunciated a threat towards the homeland's government, there were propaganda videos to call on foreign Muslims to join the Islamic State, and there were all kinds of different torturing videos, aside from the beheadings.

In order to narrow the number of videos down for my research, I wanted the video to possess both occidentalist as orientalist aspects. By this I mean the descriptions given by both theories on 'the Other', which might even be stereotyping. Moreover, I looked for representations of clear orientalist or occidentalist values and views. These criteria I found in the following media act.

I chose to analyze a 'classic' beheading clip of a British man. There are many of these videos, since a lot of Western journalists have been taken captive. This video thus represents many, since all beheading videos I have seen are alike in representation. Therefore I hope my profound analysis could speak for more and is able to give a general description of how the self-representation of the Islamic State is being influenced by the orientalist and occidentalist discourse. The one I chose is called "A Message to the Allies of America" and shows the beheading of British aid worker David Cawthorne Haines and was released on September 13, 2014.³⁷ It is a direct threat to the Western world, since a clear message against the West is made graphic by the execution of the aid worker.

Before I turn to the analysis, I would like to introduce some other texts that I will use. These are the texts 'Of Mimicry and Man' and 'The Other Question' written by Homi K. Bhabha, as a tool to deepen my analysis.³⁸ Bhabha is a very important figure in post-colonial studies. He has deconstructed the colonial discourse and developed and elaborated on some relevant concepts that will help my research, such as stereotyping, (colonial) mimicry and the construction of 'the Other'.

³⁷ "Islamic State Beheads British Aid Worker David Haines," Leaksources, accessed May 27, 2015, <http://leaksources.info/2014/09/13/graphic-video-islamic-state-beheads-british-aid-worker-david-haines/>.

³⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," in *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), and Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism," in *The Location of Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 1994).

3.1.1 Islamic State

This video and these photos I am about to analyze, are produced by the Islamic State. I would like to give some more background information of this self-proclaimed state and jihadist militia. The official name of Islamic State is ISIL: Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (the Levant being a part of Syria). The militia is known for their absolute way of governing and its reckless murdering. The fact that it is a jihadist militia, means that they strive after an armed struggle against those who threaten the unity of Islam or Islamic rule.³⁹

In October 2014, the Islamic State came to existence after its self-proclamation. Around six million people live under the rule of caliph Abu Bakr al Baghdadi – a successor to the Islamic prophet Muhammad.⁴⁰ Its aim is to let the Islamic world return to the early years of Islam, wherein simplicity and unity were rampant. The state therefore is focused on a (violent) revolution in Muslim countries, rather than putting the focus on global terrorism, as fundamentalist movement ‘Al Qaeda’ (meaning: ‘the base’) did.⁴¹

ISIL is controlling territories in the north of Syria and Iraq, which means we can explain the state as being a colonizer. Unequal power relations are used in order to colonize ‘weaker adversaries’ and let them join the Islamic State, which offers these colonized people direction, purpose, identity and belonging.⁴² Amnesty International says that the Islamic State has carried out an ethnic cleansing on a historic scale in the North of Iraq. It would have systematically targeted non-Arab and non-Sunni Muslim communities and made more than 830,000 others flee their captured areas.⁴³

In order to wage the holy war of ‘jihad’, ISIL practices among other things guerrilla warfare and terrorism. The latter is being used to demoralize people, achieve a political goal by means of committing acts of violence. What gives these acts of violence a deeper layer is its publication online, and subsequently its dissemination through (social) media.

³⁹ Diane Morgan, *Essential Islam: A Comprehensive Guide to Belief and Practice* (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger Publishers, 2009), 87-88.

⁴⁰ Richard Barrett et al., “The Islamic State,” *The Soufan Group*, report, November, 2014, accessed May 20, 2015, <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/TSG-The-Islamic-State-Nov14.pdf>, 8.

⁴¹ Barret, “The Islamic State,” 9.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Amnesty International, “Iraq: Ethnic cleansing on historic scale: the Islamic State’s systematic targeting of minorities in northern Iraq,” *Amnesty International Ltd* (September 2 2014): 4.

3.2 Representation and ideology

The Islamic State is thus propagating a certain ideology – how the Muslim world should go back to its roots of being unified under Islamic rule without Western interference – through its media expressions. In the theoretical framework I have described how both theories, orientalism and occidentalism, give meaning to certain representations. How then, do they influence or have influenced the ideology-constructed representations of ISIL? Therefore I firstly need to know how representation and ideology are connected and what both concepts mean.

When a society is driven by an ideology, as is the case in the Islamic State, the ideology gives meaning to the subjectivity construction. How one represents itself shows how subjects are constructed within the Islamic State. This is because image making and subject forming are dependent on the dynamics of social power and ideology. In order to make this construction more clear, I have used the following quote by Sturken and Cartwright in their chapter “Images, Power and Politics”, part of the book *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*:

[...] We define ideologies as the broad but indispensable shared sets of values and beliefs through which individuals live out their complex relations in a range of social networks. Ideologies are widely varied and intersect at all levels of all cultures, from religions to politics to choices in fashion. Images and media representations are some of the forms through which we engage or enlist others to share certain views or not, to hold certain values or not. [...] Film and television are media through which we see reinforced certain familiar ideological constructions such as the value of romantic love, the norm of heterosexuality, nationalism, or traditional concepts of good and evil. ⁴⁴

It follows from this that I will focus on ideological constructions that are propagated in the video, which tell us about certain views and values. These views and values are represented in the videos through exterior modelling as well as the literal expressed message. In a concrete manner this means that I will focus on aspects as speech, clothing, scenery, act/message and filming techniques/positioning in the case study.

⁴⁴ Marita Sturken & Lisa Cartwright, “Images, Power, and Politics,” in *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 23.

3.3 Analysis case study

3.3.1 short description

This video is called “A Message to the Allies of America”, and shows the beheading of British aid worker David Cawthorne Haines.⁴⁵ The video was released on the 13th of September 2014. I will give a quick description of what happens in the video.

The clip lasts for 2 minutes and 27 seconds and roughly consists of three parts. First we see British Prime Minister David Cameron explain how he is willing to fight off ‘these brutal extremist militants’, by which he means the Islamic State fighters. He makes clear that he will work together with his allies in order to reach this goal. After this part, we see the British aid worker Haines on his knees in the desert, with a man all covered in black cloths, standing next to him whilst holding a knife. Haines is the first to speak, and tells us, the viewers, how he holds his country’s leaders responsible for his death. Hereafter, the masked Islamic State militant criticizes the United Kingdom’s “evil alliance with America” and threatens Cameron with becoming part of “another bloody and unwinnable war”. Then the militant slits Haines’ throat, where after we see a still image of Haines’ head lying decapitated on his back. At the end of the video we see another hostage on his knees with an Islamic State militant standing next to him. The same threat is uttered towards David Cameron if he would persist in fighting the Islamic State.

3.3.2 Self-representation: speech

Firstly, I will discuss ‘speech’ in this video. What stands out is that the IS-militant is speaking English – with a British accent – which is subtitled in Arabic. Also, the person held hostage gets quite a lot of speaking time, compared to the total length of the clip. Furthermore, the texts the hostage and the militant are enunciating, are a reaction to the first text outspoken by David Cameron.

So, how can we interpret this by means of the orientalist and occidentalist discourse? It certainly breaks with the oriental notion of a clear distinction between the West and the East, or the orient as the ontological and epistemological Other. A Muslim fundamentalist, standing on Islamic grounds and speaking British is just conspicuous. This given creates an interesting cause and effect. First of all, the fundamentalist might have

⁴⁵ “Islamic State Beheads British Aid Worker David Haines,” Leaksources, accessed May 27, 2015, <http://leaksources.info/2014/09/13/graphic-video-islamic-state-beheads-british-aid-worker-david-haines/>.

come from Great Britain, and thus literally has crossed the demarcation line between the Western and Eastern world. Hereafter, he reaches a far wider public by speaking English than by just speaking Arabic. By reaching a wider public, the threat towards the West is also intensified. This is a clear outcome of occidentalism, wherein the West is seen as the enemy. The order of persons speaking also intensifies the threat: both the hostage and the fundamentalist react to Cameron's threat of "fighting off these brutal extremist militants."⁴⁶ Cameron's expressions do not tie with Said's first description of the Western people, who are "rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion."⁴⁷ A first crack in the orientalist discourse: peacefulness and rationality are miles away when one is reacting to killing with killing.

Moreover, by the English speech it seems as if the militant and with him the Islamic State know the Western world, and know what its goal is. The orientalist and imperialist thought process that 'knowledge gives power' is at work here, for those who are watching the clip and might feel threatened by it. On the other hand, by speaking English, the fundamentalist acknowledges the Western discourse as being the norm. It creates an intensification of power and knowledge for the Western culture. If he were to give power to the Muslim world, he would have spoken in Arabic.

It is obvious that the Western involvement in the Islamic world is and has been unwanted, and therefore must be forced back. The occidentalist reaction to Western imperialism is at work here, wherein the former representation of the orient needs a change. Or does it not?

3.3.3 Self-representation: clothing

I question this wanted change of representation, since the clothing of the participants in the video is quite stereotyping. On the one hand, we have the hostage wearing an orange suit. He is kneeling with his face being visible and his hands tied to his back. On the other hand, we have the militant wearing black cloths, his hands are bare and so are his eyes; the only two things uncovered. Furthermore, he holds a knife in his left hand with which he points to the hostage and eventually kills him with.

The clothing of the hostage, David Haines, is relatable to the Western way of clothing prisoners. Every prisoner looks the same and therefore they are clearly

⁴⁶ "Islamic State Beheads British Aid Worker David Haines," Leaksources, accessed May 27, 2015, <http://leaksources.info/2014/09/13/graphic-video-islamic-state-beheads-british-aid-worker-david-haines/>.

⁴⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, 49.

distinguishable as being inmates. This identification leads to more power for the Islamic State, since knowledge gives power. Taking Haines out of the context as an aid worker and turning him into a recognizable prisoner makes him made known as a captive. Moreover, kneeling next to the militant, the difference between them becomes evident. The militant wearing black cloths, comes across for us Westerners as being evil, mean and dangerous. By not being able to see his eyes, he keeps his anonymity and intensifies his dark character. Note, that this is remarkably an orientalist description, based on representative prejudices. However, the orientalist stereotype representation, in my opinion, bears a reason. And to analyze this reason, we can make good use of Bhabha's concepts.

Stereotyping is a discursive strategy that constructs 'the Other'. It creates an image that is essentially other and is hardly changeable.⁴⁸ This is exactly what happens in the orientalist discourse, where the orient is being the ontological Other. So, when we apply this to the clothing of the representatives, the orientalist discourse is used as well as turned around. For Haines is made recognizable in a stereotypical way. The Western prisoner looks like this, so we recognize Haines as being the prisoner. This also comes to existence through 'colonial mimicry', which is "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite."⁴⁹ These processes lead to a 'recognition of differences', in which the unknown is fixed in something established and repetitious. In this way, we can read the Western convict as a fixed unknown for the East, that is made recognizable as Other through its orange clothing that refers to Western repetition in clothing prisoners. This might have a purpose. Therefore I would like to turn again to Bhabha. With mimicry, you can appropriate the Other by visualizing power.⁵⁰ Haines is thus appropriated by the Islamic State and put under its control. When we regard this clothing as part of a discourse, we can put it in the light of a colonial discourse, of which its purpose is: "to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction."⁵¹ In other words, the Western prisoner is construed as a clear Western prisoner, in order to create a power difference that justifies the eventual beheading, in the eyes of Islamic State. Including the outspoken message, the Western prisoner is being saddled with the Western involvement in the Islamic world.

⁴⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism," in *The Location of Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 1994), 94-95.

⁴⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," in *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), 122.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Bhabha, "The Other Question," 101.

However, not only in traditional clothing, but also in the 'bloodthirsty' deed, the executioner re-enacts the stereotype of the barbaric orient. The executioner represents himself as fitting the elder oriental discourse, in which the Islam was seen as a threat in its hegemonic cultural and religious growth after Mohammed's death in 632. It came to symbolize "terror, devastation, the demonic, hordes of hated barbarians," of which some terms are applicable on the executioner's outfit.⁵² But this image suits a purpose, namely one of intimidation. It shows the barbaric, antiquated fear that the orientalist used to have in the age as described above. Also, this image has become a stereotype over the years, after the first media coverage of the 1979 Iranian revolution. In this period, Ayatollah Khomeini, leader of the revolution, was represented in the media frequently, as well as caricatures of Muslims as "bloodthirsty mobs."⁵³ This image eventually led to the "suddenly self-evident image of Islam" for the US public.⁵⁴ Islamic State thus copied this image in order to create a somewhat same sphere as when Muslims were thought of as being dangerous.

The clothing also shows the difference between the East and West in the clip. But instead of an enforced notion of difference out of occidental imperialist reasons, this difference should give the Islamic State more power and thus is showing a shift and difference in power relations. The Islamic State imposes power upon the Western captive, and with it an occidentalist threat to the United States and Europe. I would like to stress the importance of clothing, since it works as a signifier of cultural and racial difference in the stereotype.⁵⁵ The stereotype, in his turn, can be seen as a facilitator for colonial relations; power relations. Concerning Bhabha, a stereotype "sets up a discursive form of racial and cultural opposition in terms of which colonial power is exercised."⁵⁶ Although we are not specifically talking about colonial discourse, difference in power relations is an important matter. And by using clothing in accordance with a certain stereotype, the impotence of Haines might be vindicated.

3.3.4 Self-representation: scenery

When we look at the scenery in which the act takes place, we notice a dessert is used as background. This background implies certain things. First of all, it keeps the place where the brutality happens anonymous. Moreover, Islamic State again uses a stereotype in their

⁵² Said, *Orientalism*, 59.

⁵³ Said cited in Tiziana Terranova, "Futurepublic: On Information Warfare, Bio-racism and Hegemony as Noopolitics," *Theory, Culture & Society* 24:3 (2007): 129.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Bhabha, "The Other Question," 112.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

favour. The desert, where orientals live as wandering nomads, is now turned into a scene where the occident is being killed. The stereotype image is being contaminated and reaches Western frontiers. By 'contaminating' the stereotypical scenery, the fixity of this stereotype is being blurred. With it, the fixity of the oriental stereotype can be questioned as well. However, as we read in the previous paragraph, the oriental stereotype is precisely being used and exaggerated to better convey its message.

The emptiness of the surrounding also keeps the focus on the two men; other things entering the 'set' are not distracting you. The setting also implies the occidentalist hatred towards 'Westoxification', wherein the West would worship material life more than a God.⁵⁷ There is no distraction to be found, except for the bungling knife of which you hope it will not be used, by which you focus only on the men. It thus could be a – rough - metaphor for the Islamic value of distancing yourself from the material world.

The setting of the event plays with the orientalist idea of "the Orient representing a stage on which the whole East is confined."⁵⁸ In orientalism the orient is described as being a 'closed field', a "theatrical stage affixed to Europe."⁵⁹ By literally showing an unlimited background with no borders, Islamic State is trying to open this theatrical field and show their reach. The message they enunciate also shows their ability to reach further than this 'theatrical stage affixed to Europe': their idea of Islam can be represented anywhere. Instead of what normally happens when an orient finds oneself outside the borders of European society and he is being orientalized, now, the occident is being occidentalized within the borders of Islamic society.⁶⁰ This means that occidentalist codifications are being accepted as the true occident in the eyes of the Islamic State, or how they want them to see: 'just' one Western prisoner amongst others, white, submissive and scared.

3.3.5 Self-representation: filming techniques/positioning

The event is filmed from two angles: one straight upfront and one from the right corner. However, there is no new sight to see concerning the background, it just stays the same: blue sky and desert. Haines is kneeling next to the executioner, which gives the latter a form of power because of his higher position. The knife the executioner is holding intensifies this power relation as well as the convict not being able to use his arms or his hands. In this video Islamic State is literally painting a dehumanizing picture of the West, as it pertains

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 63.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 67.

within the occidentalist body of thought.

3.3.6 Self-representation: act/message

Concerning the message, both Haines and the militant are speaking towards the United Kingdom and America in a negative sense. Haines holds his British government and David Cameron responsible for his death and the executioner accuses England of being an 'obedient lapdog' of America. The message towards 'the allies of America' is that if they continue to involve with the Islamic State and trying to destroy what is created, Islamic State will strike back even harder. A clear ideology is propagated here, which is that they will not let a nation or its allies mess with the way one is ruling a new state based on Islamic principles.

Occidentalists think that Western values such as 'civilization, freedom and peace' will undermine a potential magnificence of a nation or a religion.⁶¹ And this is exactly what the Islamic State is stating after Cameron's expressing he wants "to work with the Iraqi government, [...] with our allies and to use our aid, our diplomacy and our military powers."⁶² Because, after being accused of being an 'obedient lapdog' of America, it seems as if the Islamic State would rather see a nation possible to fight one on one with them, instead of using their 'civilized' manners and contacts. These approaches to each other reflect both cultures' main principles. For the West there is a separation of church and state, whilst in the Islamic culture politics, economics, science and religion are not to be put in different categories.⁶³ Therefore, Islamic State reacts in a kind of 'all or nothing'-way, whereas David Cameron wants to put together all his sources that might lead to an answer to ISIL's brutal message.

Moreover, some of the orientalist's essential ideas about the orient were their 'aberrant mentality' and 'tendency to despotism'.⁶⁴ However, we can easily put these features on the United States and its allies. How they have killed innocent citizens of Muslim countries and have fuelled hatred towards one another in these countries, but did not have the courage to give media coverage of these events. What then is more aberrant: killing in front of the camera and substantiate your actions or killing multiple people more without telling about it? I would like to make clear that I am not talking about the Islamic State's

⁶¹ Said, *Orientalism*, 58.

⁶² "Islamic State Beheads British Aid Worker David Haines," Leaksources, accessed May 27, 2015, <http://leaksources.info/2014/09/13/graphic-video-islamic-state-beheads-british-aid-worker-david-haines/>.

⁶³ Buruma & Margalit, *Occidentalism*, 6-7.

⁶⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 205.

killings of their 'own' people. In addition, America's involvements in the Iraqi war or 'the war on terror' against Osama bin Laden for example; can be named a 'tendency to despotism', in which America thinks they could rule the world.

The other way around, Islamic puritanical fundamentalists think of Westerners 'degrading themselves to the level of beasts to fulfil their bodily needs'; however killing someone with your bare hands can also be labelled beastlike.⁶⁵ But then again, it is Islamic State's aim to eventually "eliminate the laws created by man and confer authority upon divine law."⁶⁶ By killing someone in this explicit manner, the message towards the Western aberrant mentality comes across even more clearly.

⁶⁵ Buruma & Margalit, *Occidentalism*, 120.

⁶⁶ Buruma & Margalit, *Occidentalism*, 126.

4. Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to find answer on my research question: *To what extent do 'orientalism' and 'occidentalism' help us to understand the self-representation of the Islamic State in their beheading videos?*

My answer consists of two findings that might conflict a bit with each other. First of all, Islamic State uses the occidentalist discourse in order to change the still ruling orientalist discourse. However, ISIL has done it in such a way that it has appropriated oriental representations to make its message even clearer. ISIL has chosen to propagate its message within the framework of orientalist discourse - which is still existent concerning the introduction of this essay - in order to create the biggest effect. I will elaborate on this.

Former imperialistic presence of the Western world in the East, has created dissatisfaction and fury towards the occident. From this, the occidentalist discourse has evolved. 'Painting a dehumanizing picture of the West', has been appropriated by the Islamic State through killing a Westerner in a dehumanizing way, videotape it and distribute it online. ISIL's message was to destroy anyone who threatens the unity of Islam or Islamic rule. Acknowledging that an ideology is propagated through representation, the different kinds of representation have enhanced this message.

By speaking in English, Islamic State spoke within the orientalist discourse, in order to enhance the message and widen the hearing public. However it also broke with the oriental notion of a distinction between East and West. Cameron's threat at the beginning of the video showed how he did not fit the oriental notion of the West being peaceful and rational.

Clothing as representation shows the appropriation of the orientalist stereotype. It created a shift in oriental power relations. (Colonial) mimicry visualized the Islamic State's control and power over Haines. This creation of power difference, in a sense justified the beheading. The stereotypical appearance of the executioner was used in order to intimidate more, as the West would be reminded of earlier fearful representations.

Concerning the scenery, a break with the orientalist's notion of a "theatrical stage affixed to Europe", was shown. Frontiers were literally gone and the anonymity of the area demonstrated how Islamic State's reach could be endless.

The most important outcome concerning representation through 'positioning' was the literal dehumanizing position of the West. Haines stood under direct control of the executioner: a metaphor for Islamic State's occidentalist body of thought.

Last but not least, I have analyzed the act/message. By the use of certain terms such as 'obedient lapdog', Islamic State's true views and values come across. Its 'all or nothing/one on one'-mentality does not suit the West's idea of gathering their allies and use their different tools to fight back. Moreover, it seemed that certain stereotypical orientalist as well as occidentalist essential ideas about the Other, were applicable on both leading figures.

In conclusion we can say that by appropriating the orientalist discourse and its representations, Islamic State has expressed its occidentalist body of thought in an aggressive manner that has clearly affected its audience.

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