

## **Islamic State and *Game of Thrones*: The Global Among Tradition, Identity, and the Politics of Spectacle**

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The gruesome videos circulated on most media platforms by the organization that calls itself the Islamic State (IS) have prompted a heated debate about the “Islamicity” of the organization that centered on how serious IS actors were regarding getting their “interpretations” right. If any act of interpretation or of understanding of “religion” has been transformed by the various technological and ideological developments of the last two centuries, I will argue here that Salafi thinking (of which IS articulations are but one aspect), understanding of a mythical past, and imagining of history outside a “lived” tradition, marries itself conveniently with the way the latest audiovisual technology manifests itself to an audience, especially in consecrating a culture of speed and “eventual” rupture. This relationship leads to a “collapse of meaning” while leaving room for an overflow of “graphicness.” The article will draw parallels between these practices and those of recent TV shows such as *Game of Thrones*, especially in reimagining a “medieval era” that serves as a schema for addressing contemporary concerns.

*Keywords: IS, GoT, media, modernity, medievalism, graphicness, simulation, real*

“Through it all, the wild jihad still loomed ahead of him, the violence and the slaughter. It was like a promontory above the surf.” (Herbert, Dune 1965, p. 369)

“The state of the ignorant, a lesson for the wise.” (Al-Mawardi (10<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.), 1985, p. 21)

دولة الجاهل، عبرة العاقل (ادب الدنيا والدين، الماوردي)

In early 2017, rock singer Sir Rod Stewart was the subject of a controversy when a video filmed on sand dunes in Abu Dhabi and posted on his wife’s Instagram account showed the actor mimicking cutting the throat of a companion (Figure 1). Accusations soon proliferated on social media, stating that the actor imitated a scene from the Islamic State’s (IS) gruesome beheading videos. Particularly, the relatives of British aid worker David Haines, who was executed by the organization in September 2014, were appalled by the video. Haines’s daughter told the *Daily Mail*, “This actually happened to my dad and it’s not something to joke about . . . I think it’s disgraceful that a celebrity who is thought of as a role model would do this sort

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of thing” (Grierson, 2017, para. 7) At the time, Stewart defended himself by saying that he was merely reenacting a scene from the television series *Game of Thrones* (*GoT*), famous for its beheadings.



**Figure 1. Stewart mimicking a beheading.**

Stewart may have lied when he used *GoT* as an analogy, but whatever his true intentions, he must have thought that a beheading in the context of *GoT* was much more acceptable than one taking place in an IS-related propaganda video, even though, as far as Stewart is concerned, his video was clearly a simulation of the act. But weren't *GoT* episodes also repetitively simulating gruesome beheadings and stoning? Why weren't they accused of being offensive and of mimicking IS propaganda videos? The real question is not why Stewart could make the argument that he was only replicating *GoT* types of scenes, because one would say that *GoT* is “fiction” (as opposed to IS videos, which are more “real”). Rather, the question should be: Why could *GoT* “get away with it” in the age of IS? Even more important, how could *GoT*, given its content, become a legitimate landmark of audiovisual production by turning into the first national TV show to be the most viewed globally (Lotz, 2017),<sup>1</sup> while IS was broadcasting globally its gruesome videos? *GoT* was so famous that a disgruntled U.S. Air Force member who was forced to miss an episode to be on “airstrike” duty that day wrote on a bomb to be dropped on IS-controlled territory (see Figure 2), “This is for making me miss Game of Thrones” (Trevithick, 2017, p. 2). While writing messages on bombs to one’s enemies is almost as old as their invention, missing a TV show as a motive for doing so sounds more unusual.

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<sup>1</sup> As an example, *GoT*'s series finale was HBO's most watched episode of all time, with a total of 12.1 million viewers watching live (16.5 million with replays) across the globe (Hibberd, 2017).



**Figure 2. U.S. Air Force member writing on a missile.**

My answer to this is simple. The reason that *GoT* was irreproachable was not just that it was fiction or a “show,” a mere copy or image of what could happen in reality, but the “reference” through which one could come to understand reality. French sociologist Jean Baudrillard famously argued three decades ago that our global condition in the age of audiovisual culture (especially TV as a medium) has led to an oversaturation of meaning, where the image, far from being a mere model of reality, has been “telescoped into reality” (Baudrillard, 2000, p. 449). My aim in this article is to show that *GoT*, as an instance of recent audiovisual culture, explains at least an aspect of IS’s cultural production, what in Baudrillard’s words is the “hyperreal,” the “simulation of a simulacrum” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 6). One way this happened was through the imagining of a medieval universe as a historical juncture that is “secularized” and to which image and the cinema have contributed to the “fixating of the form, objectively, at the expense of the myths that were traversing it” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 75).

I do argue, though, that this is definitely in continuity with a general modern trend of overtaxation that has plagued understanding of “tradition” or “time-era,” oversaturated with meaning through the use of all sorts of rhetorical techniques, such as analogical reasoning (Salazar, 2012), only to end up emptying it of the possibility of producing meaning. The same “cold energy of the simulacrum” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 85) is at work in *GoT* and in IS’s cultural production. The quest for the real (which is a made-up model in the first place—in *GoT*, a caricature of the medieval worldview, and in IS a time-laden Islamic life of the first three generations after the Prophet) has opened the way for meaningless graphic images to take most of the space of cultural production.

The show started broadcasting in April 2011, right after the first protests in Syria in March 2011, while IS gained media prominence in August 2014, when it declared its caliphate over large chunks of territory of Iraq and Syria. *GoT* depicted something indispensable to our contemporary condition in the form

of what is dubbed entertainment (fiction-simulation-reality). What appeared as fiction led to a quest in the real that is in itself shaped by the fictive model. Indeed, *GoT* is even changing the way scholars study the "real Middle Ages." A Harvard course on *GoT*'s universe lures students into "Medieval Studies" (Waxman, 2017). At UC Berkeley, one can study Dothraki, the invented language that is heard in some *GoT* episodes (Gettell, 2017).

In the last episode of Season 5, the main hero of the show, Jon Snow, is stabbed and killed by a little boy called Olly in an act of vengeance (Figure 3). This scene was so memorable that actor Brenock O'Connor, who plays the little boy, received death threats after the scene was aired. "I'm not Olly and I did not decide to stab Jon Snow!" O'Connor told *The Argus*, a local newspaper in East Sussex, England (Aoife, 2016), trying to disentangle fiction from real. This is an instance of *GoT* as real, as in producing a real experience for its audience and those partaking in producing the show, but also in those using it as a model for understanding actual realities of people and territory. As it happens, IS staged executions on screen performed by children (Figure 4). What is the relation between this Real and the one where IS saturates media platforms with pictures of military training or executing prisoners? Is there a difference between what is staged and what is real? In the following, I will outline some aspects of IS and *GoT* audiovisual production by first tracking their rise as media phenomena. Then I will move to reflect on the relation between the imagined notion of "medieval era" and a contemporary period that is at work in both IS and *GoT* conceptions of time. Finally, I will propose an explanation of the extent to which IS is subservient to a global audiovisual culture that has helped the collapse of meaning of IS's notion of "Islam."



**Figure 3. Olly killing Snow.**



**Figure 4. IS video of child allegedly killing two Russian spies.**

#### **IS's Media Appearance**

Since mid-2014, and in less than two years, IS managed to attract much attention thanks to its gruesome videos and violent practices of death and destruction. One could argue that the amount of destruction perpetrated by IS pales in comparison to those deployed by different state and nonstate actors in the Middle East and elsewhere, yet IS does manage to repulse and shock different audiences around the world and trigger a flurry of writings analyzing the meaning and rationale of their actions. In this global culture of speed (Tomlinson, 2007), an organization that has barely three years of life can saturate media, intellectual, and other cultural production. Let us look at how IS was approached in the media.

One such debate revolved around the issue of the "Islamicity" of IS. An article by Graeme Wood titled "What IS Really Wants" was published in *The Atlantic* in March 2015, only a year after the appearance of the movement. The article proposed that we take seriously the theological and juristic literary production of key IS inspiring intellectuals and active members. According to this article, "religious vigor" can be easily traced through an outflow of "Koranic quotations" (Wood, 2015). Radical Islamic groups simply interpret texts, after all, and this leads to informed viewpoints about religion, doctrines, and so on. Therefore, delving into legal discussions and drawing from textual material of the "Islamic tradition" is a sign of the movement's "authenticity," which applies more generally to radical and violent organizations that claim Islamic affiliation and deploy similar textual techniques.

A heated discussion quickly developed around Wood's article that involved bitterly opposed camps across media outlets and social media. In light of IS's actions in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere, some questioned claims of Islamic authenticity, as well as the credentials of the various spokespersons and ideologues in and around the organization. Some argued vehemently that IS had nothing to do with Islam and that its actions were, if anything, a travesty of any religion. These included not only journalists or academics, but also

Muslim clerics around the world who wrote books, pamphlets, and open letters.<sup>2</sup> To make these claims, several intellectual tools were deployed, one of which involved revisiting the texts that those sympathetic to IS were manipulating and interpreting in a different way, or referring to passages that had been ignored by certain more radical Salafi currents. The main argument seemed to hover around the question of who decides who has the authority to take "the texts" seriously (Dagli, 2015).

Another related argument is that the IS phenomenon was a mere product of ultramodernity. Ex-convicts, prisoners, bouncers, private security employees, petty thieves, and criminals of all kinds, virtually none of whom showed any sign of pious practices, seemed to be the organization's recruits of choice. The attackers of Paris and Belgium were a case in point. One Belgian "jihadi" returning from Syria "mostly avoided discussing his experience in Syria, preferring to play Counter-Strike on a laptop" (Taub, 2015, para. 6). The marginalization and social exclusion of minorities and immigrants, as well as the search for different types of identities among recent converts, are often seen and noted as factors that could explain forms of radicalization. Yet other scholars find the term *radicalizing* problematic and work to dismantle the myth of "a shift" in behavior, whether gradual or sudden. More important, they argue that there is never one set of generalizable social phenomena that could explain why people decide one beautiful morning to engage in violent or armed action or travel to Syria (Malik, 2015).

I want to set aside this debate for a moment and propose that, rather than focus on IS or Islamic currents as such, we broaden our field of observation to look at the more general political and cultural condition that has prevailed in the last two decades. As we will see next, the focus of this article is to show that understanding certain facets of the phenomenon of IS cannot be dissociated from a more general globalized textual practice and audiovisual phenomenon. So, instead of asking if IS is Islamic or not, I would propose a critical assessment of the various types of authoritative "discursive practices" that lie behind the label "Islamic" and how it is at least partly shaped by a specific use of media technology.

Freed French IS hostage Nicolas Henin revealed in an interview that Kuwaiti-born Briton Mohammed Emwazi, known for his infamous execution video clips as "Jihadi John," along with other "jihadis," would spend hours watching "everything, from Teletubbies to Game of Thrones" (Mackay & Hall, 2015, para. 3). To be sure, the influence of the *GoT* imagery is not limited to IS's fighters. In fact, a captured IS chief in Libya, Abu Ali al-Anbari, was reportedly executed after being shamed by the town of Derna, "Cersei Lannister-Style" (Youssef, 2015); this refers to the final episode of Season 5 of the TV series, in which the queen mother Cersei Lannister is dragged naked across the town while spectators throw food, trash, and all sorts of objects at her body (although in her case, she survives the walk).<sup>3</sup> Even Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in his speech to the U.S. Congress on March 3, 2015, said that the Middle

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com/>.

<sup>3</sup> Revealing this quest for the real and the intense experiential process at stake in *GoT*, actress Lena Headey faced a lot of criticism for opting out of showing herself naked in this scene, instead using a double (Gonzales, 2016). More important, *GoT*'s writer George Martin admitted that he was inspired from "real history": Jane Shore, the mistress of King Edward IV of England, who was forced to walk the streets as a harlot after Richard III took power (Alter, 2015, para. 9).

East was locked in a “deadly game of thrones” between Iran and IS, who are “competing for the crown of militant Islam” (Netanyahu, 2015).

An insightful study by Javier Lesaca, who scanned an impressive 845 audiovisual productions of IS released between the brief period of January 2014 to September 2015, has shown that

more than 15 percent are directly inspired by real films, videogames and music video clips of contemporary popular culture, such as the films *Saw*, *The Matrix*, *American Sniper*, and *V for Vendetta*; or videogames like *Call of Duty*, *Mortal Combat X* and *Grand Theft Auto*. (Lesaca, 2015, para. 7)

Lesaca calls this “marketing terrorism” and argues that it promotes “a political project based on anti-modern values” (Lesaca, 2015, paras. 2, 6). And yet, is it really that IS promotes antimodern values, or is it just another product of modernity, or at least the modern methodologies, that leads to these values?

### **IS, Political Islam, Tradition, and Modernity**

“Being Islamic” is definitely at the center of publications’ concerns related to radical Islamic movements of the IS type that are riddled with questions of authoritative practices. IS’s main English-language newspaper, *Dabiq*, constantly attempts to make legitimating claims. The magazine relentlessly reiterates through different angles how “ignorant” Muslim communities around the world are (Dabiq, 2014a). Ultimately, from looking at *Dabiq*, the main claims made are nothing new; they are at the heart of the literary production of Salafi movements that appeared across the Islamic world from the beginning of the 20th century. For Salafis, Islamic practices have been distorted by different kinds of *bid’a* (innovations). The only way to come back to what they consider the “correct” practices is to follow the teaching of the “Salaf,” the righteous companions of the Prophet, especially the first two generations. Yet the only way to “know” these teachings is to look at textual traces of it, given that the reliability of the “lived” tradition of jurisprudence and other cultural practices, as well as the passing down of this sort of socially embodied knowledge from one generation to the other, is being put into question.

There is a rich body of literature on the legal literary inspirations of modern Salafi movements. The towering figure from premodern times, who has been the main reference of reformist intellectual production, is Ibn Taymiyya, a 14th-century Muslim scholar who wrote encyclopedically and died in prison at the Citadel of Damascus during the troubled times of the Mongol invasions. Ibn Taymiyya was instrumental in developing a theory of *takfir*, or “declaring someone to be heretical,” targeting Muslim jurists and Muslim communities from within; this theory would be instrumental to the later modern Salafi movements (Lav, 2012), especially the Wahhabi movement (named after its founder Ibn Abd al Wahhab). The Wahhabi movement, a once marginal puritan movement of the 18th century, only gained saliency thanks to its agreement with the powerful Ibn Saud tribe, which went on to conquer most of the Arabian Peninsula. Although these types of Salafi movements developed all over the Muslim world and are rich in ideological variations, Wahhabism is the only one that has found strong political backing (with the consolidation of the modern state of Saudi Arabia in the 20th century), becoming a global network of Muslim organizations feeding off Gulf oil money (Farquhar, 2016).

The selective reading of Ibn Taymiyya by Salafis in modern times has ushered in an era of “protestantization” of Islam, especially through a borrowing of his theology of faith, a distrust of settled authorities, and a profound distrust of intermediaries in the worshipping of God, such as having relationships with saints or visiting tombs (Goldberg, 1991). But whereas Protestantism initiated a hunt against what was perceived as a “ritualization” of religious practices, Salafists obsessed over the external manifestation of rituals as a sign of sincerity of faith. The modern age does involve an obsession with sincerity and authenticity in the formation of self (L. Trilling, 2009). But, as Talal Asad argues, sincerity or “subjective interiority” has always been part of Islamic practices (and in that sense, Ibn Taymiyya was not inventing gunpowder), and modernity has mainly introduced “a new kind of subjectivity, one that is appropriate to ethical autonomy and aesthetic self-invention” (Asad, 2003, p. 225).

The Ibn Taymiyya moment—how it has been invented in modern times through, among others, early Wahhabi scholars such as Ibn ‘Atiq, one of the earliest “takfiris” (Maher, 2017)—triggered an assessment process, a scrupulous judgment of what counts as “Islamic” and what is deemed heretical. By developing a theory that links interior life to proper line of conduct—until then a highly guarded realm from outside scrutiny in Islamic traditions (Khan, 2008) to public practices—the Salafi movement allows for a constant assessment of (or inherent animosity toward) a settled authority. Similarly, the intellectual movements in the West that were linked to what was dubbed the Age of Enlightenment, in the advent of the rise of the modern, have been precisely concerned with a reappraisal of traditional sources of authority. Shiraz Maher’s book *Salafi-Jihadism* is a monumental survey of the overtaxation deployed by more militant brands of Salafis that are mostly disjointed from the lived tradition or historical contexts or settled authority (Maher, 2017). It is not strange, then, that this strategy was a legacy of orientalist literature of the 19th century—one that extends to the present day in a scholarly literature that overly focuses on philological (at times poorly trained) linguistic analyses outstripped from the metatheoretical concerns that are at play with the quest of an “Islam-proper” (Ahmed, 2015) equated with an “Islam-as-law” (Ahmed, 2015).

This obsession with theorization and the construction of systems seems to be at the heart of contemporary concerns. According to Mitchell (1999), the modern age is witnessing the deployment of various cultural practices that split our understanding of the world into a binary of “structure” and “reality.” The modern seems to be “staged as representation” in which a constant impetus to render it real involves “organizing the world endlessly to represent it” (p. 19). Whereas Mitchell locates this practice at the heart of the colonial process of the 19th and early 20th centuries, I think this observation could be extended to the social and political movements that developed in the last century or so. This process describes well the modernization impulses in reaction to such knowledge production developed by various types of “Islamisms.”<sup>4</sup>

Audiovisual production, as an extension of textuality, provides useful evidence of the symptoms at play in this contemporary condition. Stories of human life that are plotted through the succession of fixed images pale in comparison with the complex nature of social and political systems, traditional loyalties and

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Brown (2014) has a detailed account of the epistemic crisis faced by turn-of-the-century Muslim jurists in Egypt in their espousal of Western representation of the social and the political.

solidarities. Let's take the examples of vows of allegiance that are very present in IS videos and textual publications, but also in many *GoT* episodes. A scene in Season 6, Episode 5 of *GoT*, for example, shows the Ianborn community/clan struggling to decide who, from the various family members of the king's family, will sit on the throne. The vow of allegiance is supposed to consecrate the new leader in his new authoritative position. However, the scene depicts a strange mix of people's deliberating in order to choose from a few family members, appearing as some kind of "democratic" process that involves discussions and weighing the arguments of this or that actor. In a sense, vows of allegiance cannot appear to be made blindly or in a conformist way to preserve some settled order; instead, they must *make sense* in the eyes of the modern—again here according to a model that refers to modern practices by involving something akin to a parliamentary discussion in which people take turns to present their arguments. This assumes that premodern understanding of vows of allegiance is irrational, in turn simplifying the complex social relations inherent in an act that may not need overt argumentative effort.

In contrast to "modern" societies, in which human action is seemingly dictated by rational choice and utility maximization, for example, IS stresses this point in its publication time and time again: "Freedom of choice" is a Western myth. Instead, IS calls for loyalty to the caliph, the duty of "hijra" to Syria and "jihad" against the enemy (Dabiq, 2014a). Performing the pledge and moving to Islamic state areas "from wherever you are" (Dabiq, 2014a, p. 3) is an urgent duty and is best performed when the individual actor who has lived all his or her life in the West understands that he or she has "to break away from your tribe" (Dabiq, 2014b, p. 6). Here we see an explicit instance of a call to detach from settled social relations and perform some kind of tabula rasa in order to embrace the new community. This call is facilitated by the production and consumption of audiovisual and visual material, a phenomenon very reminiscent of Baudrillard's statement, "Information devours its own content. It devours communication and the social" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 121).

There are striking similarities with the incessant vows of allegiances taking place on the *GoT* TV show. Among its strong points, according to observers, is the extent to which its universe is riddled with rules, but they are breakable for ad hoc reasons of human selfishness or greed. Interestingly, the vows made by specific characters to other single individuals are well kept even though they make no social or political sense—for example, that of Brienne of Tarth to Catelyn Stark (Roschke, 2017). In contrast, those vows made for throne-related reasons are constantly broken, illustrating the kind of realpolitik that modern international relations have helped prevail since the rise of the nation-state model. The worldview is definitely modern: on the one hand, a Hollywoodian individual-centered, sincerity-driven love model disjointed from more complex social bonds, and on the other, a nihilistic world where thirst for power can never rest on stable principles. But medieval Europe's vows of allegiance that *GoT* seems to caricaturize in the most imaginative ways (Purtill, 2017) were just a symptom of more complex social and political structures that scholars have well analyzed (Wickham, 2017).

Part of our contemporary condition involves experiencing the unsettling of social structures and becoming precisely that individual actor that is globally connected and easily moved to different geographic flows (Appadurai, 1990). In the third issue of *Dabiq*, two articles succeeding each other seem to be making opposite arguments. One titled "Those Who Break Off From Their Tribes" stresses the "Islamic"-as-textual importance of being able to leave one's community and join those who find the right path (Dabiq, 2014b,

pp. 6–8). The other article deplores the death of tribal life in highly modern society, while at the same time condemning a form of tribalism that acts as an impediment to state-building in conquered territories in order to justify a mass execution (Dabiq, 2014b). The author then states,

When one experiences tribes of this nature after living years in the city, he realizes the wisdom in the words of Shaykh Abū Mus‘ab az-Zarqāwī<sup>5</sup> (*rahimahullāh*). It also becomes easier for him to tie events narrated in the Sunnah and Sirah of the Prophet (*sallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) with events today. (Dabiq, 2014b, p. 13)

Thus, experiencing modern life seems to be a prerequisite to understanding a more essential notion of the tribe-as-community whose sole foundation is textual. The tribes fantasized here are the hypermodern ones, those built in images and texts, that escape the time continuum of “lived” history, but can be a mere ideological construction.

The medium of the magazine (here, *Dabiq*), coupled with the flurry of images of militants making vows of allegiances, military parades and successes, and images of life “over there,” helps visualize the textual community. This is another way of understanding IS as a Digital State (Atwan, 2015). It is in this vein that IS capitalizes on a “global culture of Islam,” for lack of a better term, that can attract sympathizers across countries by appealing to a reimagined sense of community life. According to Olivier Roy (2002), a global Islam, growing over the past three decades, has witnessed a deterritorialization of religious affiliation and an atomization of the individual in his relation to religious practices. Roy (2002) proposes the “secularization” of religion in the sense that “the divine is the affair of every other person rather than a body of professionals” (p. 91).

In some cases, as Roy (2017) suggests, social actors who engage in such acts can affiliate to some form of Muslim “identity”—a term that needs unpacking—without being specifically pious. Roy also stresses the poverty of religious knowledge that plagues IS recruits (Roy, 2017). Roy makes an interesting association, which is that these actors present an unprecedented willingness to engage in suicide attacks and narcissism or concern with self-image rather than with long-term political party building (Roy, 2017). In a book that builds on the 2011 murderous rampage that took place in Norway, Anne Manne (2014) makes a compelling case in proving that from one decade to the next, societal generations suffering from different degrees of narcissism are emerging as a result of, among other factors, changing media technology and our relationship to it.

Over the last few decades and in various parts of the world, a few things have gone hand in hand: a dismantling of settled or (geographically immediate) community life; an obsession with self-image; lack of parental love or attention, coupled with laxity toward discipline and ethics of life (most of the time out of guilt); and increased use of social media and the gradual digitalization of most social interactions. For

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<sup>5</sup> Zarqawi is the founder of Al Qaeda in Iraq, although not directly linked to Bin Laden’s group and radically more violent and perverse in military tactics, making a priority the fomenting of sectarian war, especially against Shi’i populations. These tactics have ideological precedents; the Wahhabi (Salafi) movement is virulently anti-Shi’i sect, whose members it regards as “heretics” (*kāfir*).

example, it is not just that porn addiction rates have consistently increased over time, it is that what was once on the fringe of porn users' interest has become more and more the norm.<sup>6</sup> This content includes increasingly violent types of interactions, insertions, and manipulations of the body (Lhooq, 2014; Shrayber, 2014), reflecting an alarming isolation of individuals across societies plagued by neoliberal lifestyles. These individuals may have lost touch with what we proposed to call in the beginning a "lived-tradition"; instead, they live through an interaction with images. To this subject, graphicness, I now turn.

### ***Medievalism: Rupture and Violence***

In his memorable film *Pulp Fiction*, Quentin Tarantino delivered a scene in which one of the main characters, Marcellius, after shooting his torturer in the genitals, declares that it is far from over and that he's going "to get medieval on your ass," explaining that he will bring a bunch of tools (a pair of pliers and a blow torch) to torture him. The scene ends there, but we are left with a gloomy scenario and the seemingly self-explanatory term *medieval* hovering around the potential horrors committed.<sup>7</sup> The last decade or so of cinema and TV production has very much associated "medieval" plots with an overflow of cruelty and gruesome violence—not the least being the recent and ongoing TV series *GoT*.

The first thing that strikes our attention is not just the extent to which *GoT* and IS produce very similar media materials, but also that imaginings of a medieval era irremediably involve an overflow of graphic violence: beheadings, vows of allegiance, controversial depictions of women, blood gushing out, sound effects of bones breaking, throats being slit, intestines gushing, children killing or being tortured. While the drama unfolds highly modern concerns and articulates the dominant values that matter to different communities, depending on the audience, the graphicness of the image displays the exact opposite of those concerns—but only because it takes place in this seemingly parallel time era called "medieval," what Renée Trilling (2011) called "a place safely distant" (p. 219). This is strikingly similar to the Salafi argument, which fantasizes an idyllic period from the Prophet's time, to the first three generations, to a historical black hole until today.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, in *Dabiq* and in the various IS videos, why is it that the majority of textual references being used from an "Islamic" repertoire have forms of graphic violence in them? For example, a hadith narrating the story of a man who fell sick: "took hold of a wide arrowhead and cut off his finger-joints. The blood gushed forth from his hands, until he died" (Dabiq, 2014b, p. 24). Why do IS's videos have graphic images of executions? Why is there this stress on a specific treatment of women, homosexuals, and a social order that dictates complete obedience and, for lack of a better term, fascistic discipline? A much-circulated article in *The New York Times* recounted the story of a woman who was taken as a slave by IS fighters; she was repeatedly raped and beaten by her husband, who systematically prayed before committing his acts (Callimachi, 2015).

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<sup>6</sup> There are rebuttals to this claim (Shor & Seida, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> I have borrowed this reference from Norman Housley's article that appeared in *The Conversation* on September 8, 2014 (Housley, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> In the case of European historiography, the rupture is more subtle; it is thought to be embedded with clearly distinct epistemological and value-ridden eras, such as the renaissance as a clear separator between a dark age and an enlightened one.

Several articles have argued that *GoT* addresses very contemporary concerns and has little to do with replicating a medievalism worldview, except through the projection of a certain “décor” or aesthetics (Breen, 2014; Livingston, 2017). John Gray’s argument about IS (and before it Al-Qaeda) “re-enacting a medieval worldview” that has never existed in history and that is more akin to contemporary revolutionary movement may have a ring of truth, except that revolutionary movements are not what they used to be (Gray, 2014) and have been transformed by an industry of imagining in texts and images the politically possible. Here, the aim is not to question the use of the term *medieval* and the simplification of history that results from its use, or the extent to which radical Islamic movements inspired by Salafi currents have been efficient at reclaiming a particular “Islamic” tradition or replicating specific practices that were prevalent at a particular point in time in Muslim history. Rather, the aim would be to understand why the medieval/modern rupture is one mirroring another binary: graphicness/values. As IS aims to showcase certain values or a line of conduct, the graphicness used to transmit the message facilitates this collapse of meaning, and thus of values.

The video of the killing of the Jordanian pilot Muath Al-Kasasbeh illustrates the depth of violence and how an obsession with strong referents leads to a collapse of meaning in IS’s media production. Burning victims to death has been a consistent war practice, especially in the last and current century, when it is an inevitable horrifying by-product of airstrikes (Greenwald, 2015). IS has not forgotten to showcase this phenomenon in its video in order to show that the practice of killing draws from some “Islamic” practice. In effect, toward the end of the film of the pilot burning to death in a cage, there is a camera zoom on drops of blood pouring down his calcified face, followed by a saying from Ibn Taymiyya: “if horror of commonly desecrating the body is a call for them [the infidels] to believe [in Islam], or to stop their aggression, it is from here that we carry out the punishment and the allowance for legal Jihad” (Shoebat, 2015, para. 4). The textual and political context in which Ibn Taymiyya may have said these claims matters very little.<sup>9</sup> But the way the shot is filmed, the dripping of the blood, the introduction of the statement as a banner hovering above the burned body of the pilot—all of this is crucial in producing forms of meaning and sensitivities that can replace “context” in the moment or in the act of viewing. This is one example of how the lived tradition is brushed aside by the graphic effect of audiovisual production.

Guy Debord (2002) said a few decades ago that “spectacle is not a set of images, but a social relation between people, mediatized by images” (p. 10). It seems also that increased graphicness is a symptom of a new type of image that reflects on gradually vanishing social relations as people are only left with the urge to fantasize about them.

### ***Interlude 1: The State, a Four-Hour British Drama***

In August 2017, a new “drama” titled *The State*, a four-hour coproduction among Channel 4, National Geographic, and Fox Network, set to stage a group of British travelers going to live in IS territory (Figure 5 and 6). French channel Canal+ was an early buyer, predictably enough, in the country where most of the violent murderous attacks of the last few years have taken place. The show quickly faced criticism

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<sup>9</sup> See here elaborate debates over the Internet, even within the Salafi literature, disagreeing with IS’s interpretation of Ibn Taymiyya’s quote.

from the media at large. *The Guardian* revealingly titled a piece “Peter Kosminsky’s Disillusionment Dramas Fail to Satisfy” (Jeffries, 2017). British writer, director, and producer Kosminsky commented, “It would have been a lot easier to make episodes of *Game of Thrones*.” Kosminsky boasted that his show depicted something “real,” as opposed to what he characterized as “escapist programming,” referring to *GoT* (Clarke, 2017).



**Figure 5.** *The State* depicting here Sam Otto as Jalal and Ryan McKen as Ziyaad.  
Photo Credit: Channel 4.



**Figure 6.** *The State* depicting here Ony Uhiara as Shakira and Shavani Caermon as Ushna.  
Photo Credit: Channel 4.

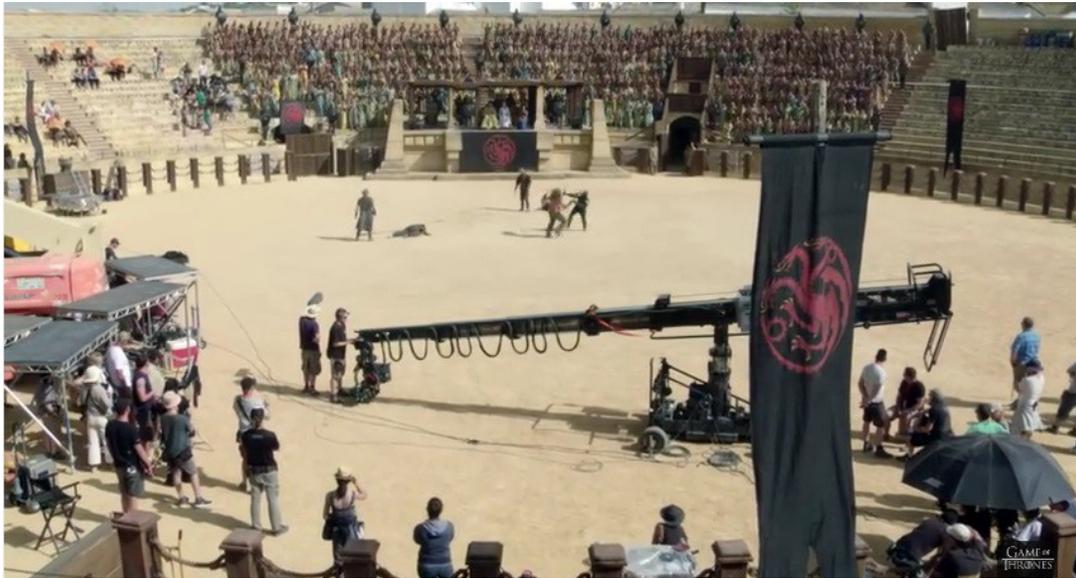
But another review was very positive, finding the show clever and its director skillful: "This has been Kosminsky's biggest challenge—how to make an audience invest in these people, even care about them to some degree, without being an apologist" (Saner, 2017, para. 7). So, yes, let's empathize with these characters just as we do with *GoT* characters, but only as long as it is a fine line to convey the "brutality of the caliphate." This is why Kosminsky "decided right from the beginning we would not see any heads coming off" (Conlan, 2017, paras. 6, 13). The missed irony here is that doing a show on IS-related stories seemed to conjure back the model first produced by *GoT* (and its precedents) and plugged back into a TV fiction. The criticism or dissatisfaction voiced about the show illustrate well this tension between the reality of living the fiction of *GoT* and the duller reality of doing a fiction about the reality of IS.

### ***Interlude 2: The Hyperreal, the Pit of Meereen, and Palmyra's Ruins***

Type "Game of Thrones" and "medieval" on Google, and the first hit shown is an answer to what appears to be one of the most often posed questions on the Internet: "Where does Game of Thrones take place in real life?" And the most voted answer is:

Westeros may be a fictional world, but you can actually visit many of the famous locations from the series in the real world. For example, King's Landing sits on the coast of the Adriatic Sea in Croatia, and Winterfell is an 18th-century castle in Northern Ireland. (Snyder, 2017, para. 1)

Figure 7 depicts "The fighting pit of Meereen," which appears in *GoT* Seasons 4 and 5. It is where a famous gladiator scene is shot (which ends in a bloodbath), and where the queen succeeds in escaping with the help of one of her dragons. A simple browse of the Internet shows how famous the actual place where the scene was shot has become: Osuna, in Spain, has countless fan websites and blogs commenting on the scene and the site (Watson, 2015). From one article to the other, one can find links to documentaries and interviews with *GoT* writers and producers, who proudly explain how *GoT* is the only TV show that is simultaneously shooting in Croatia, Spain, and Northern Ireland. As a consequence, Osuna has become a tourist attraction, not as a "historical" place of Spain's past (even if this can also be imagined through similar media techniques), but as the place where the Queen of Dragon carried this or that action. Osuna serves as a model where one can stage the more "real" experience brought by *GoT* audiovisual production. This is reminiscent of Baudrillard's (1994) analysis of Disneyland as a replica of the cartoon world in a given "real" territorial space, which acts as simulation that destroys the real and acts as the hyperreal (Baudrillard, 1994).



**Figure 7. The fighting pit of Meereen.**

Likewise, IS claims its operations and spectacular executions to be happening simultaneously, sometimes at the four corners of the world. Figure 8 shows Palmyra, an archeological site that has been a model since the beginning of the 20th century. It has suffered partial destruction of some of its artifacts at the hands of IS militants. The issue of iconoclasm and other destruction of historical sites has been approached from one specific angle: namely, by taking for granted that these are indeed special sites and by looking at a historical continuity of how Muslims related to such practices (Flood, 2002). But Palmyra subsisted all this time amid a Muslim-denominated region not just because Muslims may not have had a problem with such sites that are replete with meaning, but also because those sites symbolized and meant altogether different things at different points in time. In other words, these sites were nothing “out of the ordinary”; people just lived there, and ruins were part of, or a natural extension to, villages and towns.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For example, see *The Nation and Its Ruins* (Hamilakis, 2007), a fascinating study on the rise of Greek nationalism as a postcolonial sequel to European archeological practices, that reimagined the “ruins” and their relationship with the local inhabitants.



**Figure 8. Screenshot of IS Palmyra video.**

The “value” or “significance” of these artifacts in the contemporary imagination changed at least because of how they were appropriated by either nation-state building strategies or international institutions (Flood, 2016). Palmyra became a highly prized site because a history of orientalist expeditions (Ifpo, 2015), and archeological projects have sacralized the space as World Heritage (Flood, 2016). Some argue that the early-20th-century decision to separate Palmyra as an archeological site from the rest of the “lived-in” village may have contributed to the fetishization on which later IS recruits unleashed their destructive impulses. In effect, IS would have never “staged” its execution there (one of the most circulated videos at the time) were it not for the way Palmyra has been fetishized for more than a century. If anything, the dramatic media coverage in the immediate aftermath of the IS takeover of Palmyra may have precipitated IS’s decision to destroy parts of it (Flood, 2016). The actions of IS militants may be linked to the way the model-as-real is available to them in a contemporary condition. In fact, IS seemed to be interested in making a lucrative business out of selling what it was supposed to have demolished (Harmanşah, 2015).

Yet this did not stop IS from using the site as a stage for one of its mass execution videos. The scene looks eerily similar to the pit of Meereen scene described earlier, which preceded the mass execution in its date of broadcast. *GoT* seems to have provided the model from which reality could be produced. The pit of Meereen becomes the model not just for Osuna, but also for other geographic sites where such media productions can take place. But while these sites could be thought of as being replete with meaning, instead it is the crowding out of meaning that is the most flagrant aspect of the audiovisual production. In a sense, IS works in reverse from *GoT*. The space is already marked as a model, and IS conforms to it. *GoT* is the

model setter; the pit of Meereen becomes the reality of Osuna, where people flock and experience Baudrillard's hyperreal, and where the model has been "telescoped into reality" (Baudrillard, 2000, p. 449).

### What Remains to Be Said

This article starts with the similar concerns set out by Timothy Mitchell in his rebuttal to Benjamin Barber's book *Jihad vs. Macworld*. In his book, Barber argues that a seemingly global neoliberal model of life is being resisted by a kind of fundamentalist militant Islam (Mitchell, 2002). Instead, Mitchell argues persuasively for the existence of a McJihad, where the forces of modern economic production work in tandem with the most religious conservative governments such as Saudi Arabia (Mitchell, 2002). It is not just a pact of interest, but a cultural symbiosis that is at stake; the steady flow of oil can only be achieved through a well-kept relation between modern economic modes of production and a Wahhabi puritan lifestyle. What I tried to explain here is that IS cannot exist as it is today without the presence of this media technology, and this media technology is not just "used" by the militant group to achieve specific goals. Indeed, this media technology fundamentally transforms what it is to be an IS militant, recruit, and sympathizer, but also hater, and so on. It does not mean that in the absence of this technology, there would not be militant groups engaging in violent acts. It just means that in the presence of the former, the latter acquires its particular appearance and modus operandi.

In addition to that, if we follow Baudrillard's (1994) argument in *Simulacra and Simulation*, the "telescoping of the real" involves a loss of strong ideological referents. The irony here is that in *GoT* or IS audiovisual production, there is an overflow of ideological referents in appearance, but which then seems to be crowded out by the power of the model, medievalism-as-graphicness. What was once an overflow of meaning has been displaced by a nihilistic meaningless universe, one that depicts "life on the surface" (Devji, 2015). Just as the modern can only be imagined through a fantasy of a medieval era, values broadcast by audiovisual production end up being outstripped from their meaning through the use of graphicness.

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