

'The Face of Evil': The Discourse on ISIS and the Visual Complexities in the ISIS Beheading Videos

*Kanar Patruss**

Introduction

Within recent years, a new and significant actor in the international field of politics has emerged. The militant group ISIS¹⁰ put itself on the map when it in June 2014 took control of Mosul in Iraq and committed gruesome acts of violence against civilians. For the rest of 2014, ISIS continued to invade the international news cycle with the release of videos showing the beheading of American and British hostages. These videos quickly gained iconic status (Friis 2015, 733) and acted as key building blocks for the formation of the Western response to the videos, in which ISIS was dubbed 'the face of evil' (Kerry 2014). An American-led coalition was shortly after formed to carry out air strikes against ISIS in Iraq and Syria (McInnis 2016, 1–2).

Given the central role played by the ISIS beheading videos of Western hostages from the fall of 2014 in constructing ISIS as an international phenomenon, the *visuality* of ISIS is arguably an indispensable element of analysis, if ISIS is to be understood in a comprehensive manner. Apart from very few studies, however (see for example Friis 2015), the visual dimension has been largely overlooked in academic analyses of beheading videos, which have tended to focus on the tactical or symbolic-religious aspects

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¹⁰ The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is also known as The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), The Islamic State (IS) and as Daesh in Arabic.

of beheadings (See for example Andre 2015; Lentini and Bakashmar 2007; L. J. Campbell 2006; Furnish 2005; Jones 2005). While these are important contributions, they fail to thoroughly and in a theoretically informed way deal with the distinct *visual* aspect of beheading videos. Responding to this gap in the literature, this article explores ISIS from a 'visual angle' and in this endeavour draws upon theories that presents the visual as a 'political-ontological condition' for international politics (Hansen 2011, 52; See also D. Campbell 2007; Bleiker 2014).

Through its exploration of the visibility of the ISIS beheadings, the article delves into an examination of the Western political discourse surrounding ISIS and its relation to the image of ISIS beheadings. While drawing upon insights from Friis, who has demonstrated how the icon of the ISIS beheadings is mobilized in a securitizing political discourse (Friis 2015, 735–36), the article at hand focuses specifically on how the image of ISIS beheadings gives rise to a discourse, in which the *value judgment of evil* takes up a prominent space and discusses the *function* of such a value judgment. Inspired by Nietzsche's work on the concept of evil, I argue that the political discourse – referred to throughout as 'the rhetoric of evil' – misrepresents the struggle between ISIS and Western powers as a moral one, thus inhibiting a necessary critique of the violence generated and perpetuated by the West in the context of the war against ISIS.

On the backdrop of this assessment of the rhetoric of evil, the article further engages in an attempt to show how the foundation of the rhetoric of evil can be dissolved through a 're-reading' of the ISIS beheading image. Such a re-reading is made possible by expanding Lene Hansen's concept of inter-iconicity (Hansen 2015, 269) to reflect how not only the *status* of an icon but also its *meaning* is produced through its linkages to other icons. This expanded version of inter-iconicity is then applied to the image of ISIS beheadings and two other icons, namely, the guillotine beheadings of the French Revolution and the icon of the 'body politic' from the famous cover of Hobbes' *Leviathan*. Re-reading the ISIS beheading image in relation to those two other icons brings forth alternative meanings from the image that are lost in the account of ISIS as evil. These alternative meanings work towards unravelling the foundation for the rhetoric of evil and open up space for a broader critique of political violence to emerge.

The article thus makes a contribution to existing literature on three levels. Firstly, the paper brings to light an understudied case in visual International Relations (IR) liter-

ature and contributes to the knowledge and understanding of ISIS as a self-standing phenomenon. As an implication hereof, the article is able to situate itself within the political discussion on ISIS and offer a critical view on the war on ISIS, which includes a call for a broad critique of political violence. Secondly, by exploring the distinct visual aspect of the ISIS beheadings, the study brings forth a perspective on beheading videos that has, so far, been largely overlooked in the literature. Thirdly, the article inscribes itself into a stream of literature that brings images and visibility to the forefront of IR analyses and *adds* to this body of literature by introducing a new take on Hansen's concept of inter-iconicity. Given the relatively recent academic interest in imagery and international politics, a gap still exists when it comes to case studies within the field. In this regard, the article contributes to the literature on images and visibility in IR by *engaging empirically* with the theory and through this exercise advancing the analytical 'tool kit' available to visual IR scholars. The concept of inter-iconicity is thus refined and applied as an analytical tool that helps us better understand the complex constellation of meaning in the ISIS beheading videos.

I start out in the next section by outlining how the image acts as a political condition in connection to the surrounding political discourse. Subsequently, I present a Nietzsche-inspired critique of the rhetoric of evil, before engaging in a 're-reading' of the image of ISIS beheadings in light of its inter-iconic relation to the guillotine beheadings and the body politic.

The ISIS Beheading Videos and the Rhetoric of Evil

The Image as a Political Condition

Within recent years there has been a rising interest in imagery and 'the visual' within IR and security studies (See for example Williams 2003; D. Campbell 2003; Möller 2007; Vuori 2010; Hansen 2011; O'Loughlin 2011; Friis 2015). New technologies, including modern recording devices, extensive media coverage, the Internet and the growth of social media sites, have enabled the production and spread of images (both still and in the form of videos) to an extent not witnessed before. They have also facilitated the rise of events within the domain of international politics in which images appear to play a

significant role (Hansen 2011, 52). The dissemination of the ISIS beheading videos and the political reactions following them are a recent example of such events.

This article takes its cue from a constitutive branch of theory put forth by Hansen, Bleiker, and Campbell (D. Campbell 2007; Hansen 2011; Bleiker 2014), which approaches images as both products and producers of international politics. In this sense, images reflect as well as construct the conditions under which international politics unfold and as such the approach differs from causal studies of images in IR where images are analysed as independent variables directly affecting foreign policy responses (See for example McNulty 1993). From the perspective of this article, the visual is rather seen as a ‘political-ontological condition’ (Hansen 2011, 52) delimiting a frame within which politics can be understood. In other words, the visual facilitates the ‘conditions of possibility’ for politics, which is to say they form what can be thought, said and done (Bleiker 2014, 75). Visual images – especially iconic images, which form the unit of analysis in this article – function as tools working towards the discursive constitution of international identities (Hansen 2015, 267) making them interesting objects of study for international relations scholars. Given that iconic images are characterized by being widely circulated, recognized and remembered (Hansen 2015, 267–268) this category of images, in particular, can act as powerful ‘visual nodal points’ (Hansen 2015, 265) that actively shape and enable understandings of ‘the international’. Through their ability to circulate extensively across borders as well as communicate across languages, iconic images crystallize as part of a cross-national public memory and consequently, colour the lens through which we understand international events and, perhaps more importantly, construct international Self/Other-constellations. From such a point of view, the icons are therefore active in defining meanings and identities.

The iconic images do not ‘act’ independently, however; they are established in relation to the linguistic discourses surrounding international politics. As Hansen has pointed out, “the visual does not enter the political without being the subject of debate or engaging in discourses already in place” (Hansen 2011, 53), which makes it relevant to gain an understanding of how the visual interacts with texts (Hansen 2011, 53). The same is true for the ISIS beheading image; as an icon it interacts with the international public discourse in a dialectic way that constitutes both the discourse and the meaning of the beheading image. Thus the ISIS videos penetrate the public political discourse

and become a strong reference point for a discursive identity constellation of the West and ISIS, while this identity constellation in turn consolidates the meaning ascribed to the image of ISIS beheadings contained in the videos.

The Value Judgment of Evil and the ISIS beheadings

Through the conduct of a thorough discourse analysis, Friis has shown within an American-British context, how the ISIS videos are constituted as ‘visual facts’ in a securitizing political discourse, which presents “ISIS as an imminent, exceptional threat to the West” (Friis 2015, 739). Viewing the Western discourse on ISIS through the lens of securitization adds an important layer to our understanding of how international politics around ISIS and the West are shaped. While drawing upon key insights from such an approach, the article at hand, however, concentrates on the role and function of the *value judgment of evil* in particular.

When the video of American journalist James Foley was released in August 2014, US Secretary of State, John Kerry responded by calling ISIS the ‘face of evil’:

“There is evil in this world, and we all have come face to face with it once again. Ugly, savage, inexplicable, nihilistic, and valueless evil. ISIL is the face of that evil (...)” (Kerry 2014)

Similarly President Obama called the filmed decapitation of American aid worker Abdul-Rahman Peter Kassig ‘an act of pure evil’ (The White House 2014) and British Prime Minister David Cameron used the same expression after the video depicting the beheading of British aid worker David Haines surfaced online (LoGiurato 2014). I argue that ‘evil’ comprises a central concept in the discourse on ISIS (See also Friis 2015, 735–36), here referred to as the rhetoric of evil. I further argue that the image of beheading contained in the ISIS videos from 2014 acts as a strong visual reference point for the characterization of ISIS as evil – a point, I elaborate on in the following.

The first video of a beheading to spark overwhelming media attention was the video of American journalist James Foley who was killed in August 2014. The famous screen grab of the video shows Foley in an orange jumpsuit on his knees, next to a masked British-speaking ISIS fighter, identified in Western media as ‘Jihadi John’. More videos of the beheading of American and British hostages followed in the fall of 2014 and the

screen grabs from the videos were widely circulated earning them the status of ‘instant icons’ (Friis 2015, 733; Hansen 2015, 10). Despite the large number of beheading videos produced by ISIS that exist on the internet – many with non-Western victims – only a few gained the public visibility that makes them iconic (Friis 2015, 743). These iconic videos were mobilized as visual pillars supporting the structure of the rhetoric of evil. An oversight of the videos can be seen below:

Videos of ISIS beheadings

August 19, 2014: James Foley, American journalist

September 2, 2014: Steve Sotloff, American journalist

September 13, 2014: David Haines, British aid worker

October 3, 2014: Alan Henning, British aid worker

November 16, 2014: 18 Syrian Army prisoners and Abdul-Rahman Peter Kassig, American aid worker

Apart from the last video with Abdul-Rahman Peter Kassig, where events might not have played out the way ISIS had wanted them to (Freeman 2014), the videos show striking similarities. They display the victim in an orange jumpsuit on his knees, while ‘Jihadi John’, later identified as Mohammed Enwazi (Akkoc and Henderson 2015), appears masked and dressed in all black, laying out which acts are being retaliated and threatening Western political leaders (Friis 2015, 740). The videos do not contain the actual beheading, but show the disfigured body in the end (Friis 2015, 743). It has been noted that the videos are of high quality and showcase media savvy and knowledge about film techniques (Friis 2015, 742). It seems evident, therefore, that a significant amount of effort has been put into making the videos – not only through the use of high quality technology, but also with regards to the method of killing.

As Regina Jane highlights, beheadings are not a naturally occurring practice; they are performed with difficulty and will (Jane 2005, xii). The insistence on using a method of execution that entails significant pain and disfiguration of the body despite the inconvenience it presents, intensifies the level of violence visually transmitted through the videos, which in turn forms a strong basis for the value judgment of evil contained in the rhetoric of evil. In ordinary uses of the word, ‘evil’ often designates actions that differ in degree from commonplace wrongdoing. In other words, we intuitively regard

that, which to an extreme degree appear wrong, as evil (Garcia 2002, 194)¹¹. Ascribing evilness to ISIS on the grounds of the group's method of execution therefore seems to resonate with quite a few people and makes the image of beheading a viable visual reference point for the rhetoric of evil. Interestingly, the videos are usually not published on major news sites in their full length and consequently it is safe to assume that most people (this author included)¹² have not seen the actual videos. Rather it is the screen grabs of the videos that have been widely circulated, while the images of the beheaded bodies are left out. The intense circulability of the icons might be attributed to this absence of graphic content, which allows news media to spread the icons without worrying about viewer discomfort or ethical concerns (Zelizer 2010, 280). One might also argue that the 'unseeability' of the videos works to further intensify the brutality of the beheadings; the (self)censorship places the beheaded bodies in a category of images that are simply too awful to be seen at all. The very recording and spreading of these images by ISIS, that is, the act of *creating* the visuality of the beheading in the first place, therefore seems to emphasize the moral depravity of the organization. In this sense, the beheadings do not stand on their own as atrocious acts; they are perceived as evil partly *because* they are captured on tape. This affirms the fact that we cannot understand the ISIS beheadings or the reaction to them without incorporating the visual element of the executions.

Despite the 'unseeability' of the videos, the beheading itself does function as the visual reference point for the classification of ISIS as evil. How can this be? I suggest that we here think the 'visual' in broad terms such that it encompasses the imaginary visual of what is to come next. The imagined visual of a beheading is thus inherently present in the icons because the icons have an anticipatory character: They are a display of something-about-to-happen, and 'imbued with all the right clues for the viewer to imagine the end' (Friis, 2015: 734). The screen grabs of the videos are almost always accompanied by explanatory text and headlines that describe to a more or less detailed degree what happens in the videos. Moreover, after the screen grabs of the Foley-video

¹¹ The concept of evil has been defined in many ways and is still a contested concept (See for example Singer 2004; Garcia 2002; Cole 2006). It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss the exact conceptual meaning of evil; rather the paper has sought to understand what the *use* of the concept does.

¹² Watching the videos in their full length has not been necessary for making the arguments and analysis of this paper, and I have therefore chosen not to do so due to ethical concerns about reproducing the humiliation of the decapitated person (Dauphinée 2007, 145).

gained iconic status, the following screen grabs displaying the same set-up with a kneeling, orange-clad Western victim and a masked ‘Jihadi John’ automatically held the promise of a beheading. In this way, the visual of the beheading is present in the imaginary sense even if only the screen grabs are physically *seen*, and the image of beheading is thus able to inform the labelling of ISIS as evil.

In the following I lay out a critique of such a labelling inspired by Nietzsche’s questioning of the value judgment of evil. It is important to underline at this stage, that the critique of the rhetoric of evil presented below should not, in any way, be understood as a defence of the practices of ISIS or an attempt to inhibit highly valid criticism of ISIS. Although the rhetoric of evil might at first glance read as a *condemnation* of political violence, the critique seeks to show how it rather enables an *acceleration* of violence and as such the critique acts as rejection of violence in general. While it has been argued elsewhere that moralistic language could enable ISIS’s use of force by lending credibility to its narrative (Boyle 2014; see also Winter et al. 2015), this article focuses on the rhetoric of evil’s problematic implications with regards to enabling *Western* use of force. This is due to the fact, that ISIS’s use of violence has – justifiably so – been the object of widespread outrage in mainstream media and the international public conversation, while voices with a critical outlook on the war on ISIS have been much more absent.

Nietzsche and the Critique of the Rhetoric of Evil

As has been argued, the political discourse crystallizes around the notion of evil through a linkage between the ISIS beheading videos and evilness. A critical assessment of the use of the beheading videos would therefore need to ask how the judgment of evil works and what it is able to do. For this purpose, I draw inspiration from Nietzsche, whose work has made him “the central figure in exposing and dismantling the idea of evil” (Cole 2006, 66). Nietzsche’s ground-breaking essay *On the Genealogy of Morality* and its unique investigation of the judgment of evil thus helped induce a shift in academic discussions towards a questioning of the notion of evil itself (Cole 2006, 65–66). In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche argues that the value of values has been taken for granted and should be called into question (Nietzsche 1998, 6). In Nietzsche’s

view, moral value judgments of good and evil are not absolute and given, but invented by man himself (Nietzsche 1998, 2) and therefore historically contingent. Based on this realization, he traces the origins of the judgments of good and evil and asserts that the notion of good has been *reformulated* by what he calls ‘the slave morality’ to signal ‘low-mindedness’ and ‘weakness,’ while ‘strength’ and ‘nobility’ are deemed ‘evil’ (Nietzsche 1998, 16-17). In Nietzsche’s understanding therefore, what we call evil *is* not inherently evil, but rather *labelled* as such. This realization is fundamental in the context of ISIS, because it challenges the objectivity of the claims presented by the rhetoric of evil. Further, the judgment of evil has a certain *function*, which Nietzsche attempts to uncover (Nietzsche 1998, 3). This indicates that the judgment of evil does not act as a neutral classification, but carries with it an *effect*. Such an insight grants us the opportunity to understand the rhetoric of evil as active in the sense that it ‘does something’ and to further explore what that ‘something’ consists in.

Evil as Absolute

In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche draws a line between the slave morality setting up an opposition between good and evil, on the one hand, and the master morality organized around the judgments of good and bad, on the other (Nietzsche 1998, 30). The difference between the two pairs of opposition, good/bad and good/evil, is an important one.

The good/bad distinction can be seen as a difference in degrees of nobleness. There is a hierarchy between the two, but not necessarily an opposition that renders the two mutually exclusive:

“As was stated, the pathos of nobility and distance, this lasting and dominant collective and basic feeling of a higher ruling nature in relation to a lower nature, to a ‘below’ – *that* is the origin of the opposition ‘good’ and ‘bad’”(Nietzsche 1998, 11).

The bad occupy one place in a spectrum and the good another, which is perfectly natural in Nietzsche’s view (Nietzsche 1998, 25). When the opposition changes to one that is good/evil, however, it takes on a new form. The evil is not merely a ‘lower degree of goodness’, so to speak, but a *dichotomist* opposite. Since the good is defined negatively

in relation to the evil (Nietzsche 1998, 19), evil signifies something that needs to be eliminated completely for the good to persevere; the two cannot simultaneously exist in the same space.

This is an important point to derive from Nietzsche when looking at the rhetoric of evil regarding ISIS. The finishing words of John Kerry's statement on the beheading of James Foley demonstrate this:

“And make no mistake: We will continue to confront ISIL wherever it tries to spread its despicable hatred. The world must know that the United States of America will never back down in the face of such evil. ISIL and the wickedness it represents must be destroyed, and those responsible for this heinous, vicious atrocity will be held accountable.” (Kerry 2014).

The concept of evil – whatever the specific content ascribed to it – bears with it a radicalism that makes destruction the only possible solution. As Friis also points out, the focus of the US foreign policy ‘shifted from ‘containment’ to ‘degrading and destroying’ as the beheading videos emerged (Friis 2015, 734). Politically, the rhetoric of evil thus closes off a range of possibilities for addressing the problem posed by the existence of ISIS and privileges the use of violence as it calls for the elimination of ISIS as the only viable political option.

Further, the dichotomist relation between good and evil, revealed in Nietzsche's assessment, necessarily polarizes the two identities, collapsing any complexities in either of the positions. The same logic that calls for an elimination of all things evil implies that the good is only good in the absolute absence of evil. Whoever holds the identity of the good – in this instance the West – is therefore *purely* good; there is no in-between. This is problematic since it inhibits an understanding of the West as well as of ISIS as complex actors defined by a range of different aspects and characteristics. Viewing the West through the lens of the rhetoric of evil thus curtails the possibility of a critical assessment of the Western use of violence. I further unpack this point in the next section.

Legitimization of Power Structures

According to Nietzsche, the slave morality, which is fundamentally based on the concept of evil (Nietzsche 1998, 21), is characterized by a “will to lowering, to debasement,

to levelling, to the downward and evening-ward of man” (Nietzsche 1998, 32). The slave morality thus contains an element of repression, which for Nietzsche consists in pulling the strong down to the level of the weak. Nietzsche believes this to be in the interest of the priests who manipulate moral values to benefit themselves (Nietzsche 1998, 16). Without necessarily reproducing Nietzsche’s general stance against equality (Nietzsche 1998, 24), it is useful to look at how the classification of evil creates a power position between those *classifying* those who are evil and those being *classified* as evil (See also Cole 2006, 74). In this light, we can understand the characterization of evil as an oppressive tool that works to keep a certain power structure in place. When categorizing whoever is against the current structure as evil, it delegitimizes their rebellion against their place in the established order and in turn legitimizes the repression of that rebellion (Cole 2006, 212).

The ISIS phenomenon can be seen as a rebellion against the power held by the West over the Muslim world and a threat to the dominance of Western values. A way for the West to withstand such a rebellion is to discursively delegitimize ISIS’s uprising by presenting ISIS as pure evil and in the same instance casting the West as ‘good’ without further nuances. The rhetoric of evil in this way works towards whitewashing and glorifying the role played by the West in the war on ISIS. This is problematic, because by insisting on a black-and-white take on ISIS and the West, we overhear potentially valid points of critique waged against the Western political leaders and, by the same token, risk overlooking important push-factors that compel young Muslims to join ISIS. The rhetoric of evil renders every grievance put forth by ISIS – such as for example Western warfare in the Middle East – illegitimate altogether and erodes the possibility of holding Western actors accountable for the acts of violence they commit.

Bringing more nuances into play than the rhetoric of evil affords us, can widen the foundation upon which we are able to counter political violence from a range of actors, including *both* ISIS and the West. In recognition hereof, the next section seeks to provide an alternative inter-iconic reading of the ISIS beheading image aimed at subverting the foundation for the rhetoric of evil.

Re-reading the Image of ISIS Beheadings

It has been shown how the particular use that the rhetoric of evil makes of the iconic

ISIS beheading videos provides a legitimatization of violence. As Hansen has pointed out, however, icons should be viewed as ‘inherently contested’ (Hansen 2015, 267) and in this sense they contain within them the potential for conveying a number of different meanings. The subsequent discussions will explore further how these potential meanings can be drawn out through a reading of the beheading image that counters the rhetoric of evil. Such a reading works towards blurring the simplifying narrative of the good vs. the evil and increases the conditions of possibility with regards to a broad critique of political violence.

Inter-iconicity and Potentialities for ‘Breaking Out’

Images work as important points within political discursive regimes that articulate collective identities. The image is not, however, the bearer of a fixed meaning. The meaning of the image is constantly constituted and re-constituted by effect of its circulation across contexts (Butler 2010, 9) and as such in relation to the discursive formations that adopt the image into their context. The instability, or ambiguity, of the image (Hansen 2011, 58) opens up an important potential for changing the conditions of possibility set up by a particular reading of the image. As Butler has pointed out the (visual) frame constantly breaks from its context and thus becomes exposed to subversion. She argues that this ‘breaking out’ might work as a critical potential for the emergence of a call to reject war and end violence (Butler 2010, 10-11). By this reasoning, the image then contains within itself potential ruptures to the very identity-constellations it has been used to support and can, in this sense, ‘undo’ and ‘redo’ itself. As has been argued so far, the rhetoric of evil calls for such an undoing.

In the following, I offer an analysis of the iconic image of the ISIS beheadings, aimed at ‘breaking the image out’ from the context of the rhetoric of evil. The analysis draws upon and further develops the concept of inter-iconicity presented by Hansen in her framework for icon analysis within IR (Hansen 2015, 277). While offering a good methodological basis for analysis, Hansen’s three-tiered framework is not, in this context, relevant in its entirety. For this reason, I here only make use of tools in the framework that I deem beneficial for the purposes of the paper, while leaving out other elements that would not add value to the analysis, such as examining appropriations of the icon. In relation hereto, it is important to acknowledge that despite decent attempts at

setting up frameworks for the analysis of images within IR (See for example Hansen 2011; Hansen 2015), the academic field is still methodologically underdeveloped in this regard (Friis 2015, 732). The limited number of frameworks and corresponding analytical tools that are available cannot be seen as ‘ready-to-use’, comprehensive methodologies that are equally applicable across a range of cases. They have yet to be sufficiently empirically applied, challenged and refined within the literature. Therefore, they should rather be considered a good *starting point* for approaching images within IR (Hansen 2011, 69), making it sensible to apply them in a flexible and case-specific way. The subsequent analysis thus makes use of Hansen’s work on images and icon analysis in IR in a fashion that is tailored to the case of ISIS beheading videos and the objects of the analysis at hand. In this way, the article is able to contribute to the further development of available analytical tools, in particular the concept of inter-iconicity (Hansen, 2015: 269).

Hansen describes inter-iconicity as the way in which an image claims its status *as an icon* by referencing other icons. In this article, I propose to go beyond this rather limited usage of the concept, as the focus on iconic *status* does not fully capture the complex ways icons are able to interact with each other. I argue here that the concept of inter-iconicity can further be used to shed light on how the *content* of the icons referred to is able to restructure and reconfigure the meaning of the icon under scrutiny – in this case, the image of ISIS beheadings. Analogous to inter-textuality (Alfaro 1996, 268), the icon is in this sense not understood as a self-sufficient or self-contained image but produced and transformed in relation to other icons. The meaning of an icon is thus not independent from the discursive field of imagery that surrounds it; it’s meaning is dynamic in the sense that it is created and constantly recreated with reference to other icons.

Inter-iconicity is understood here first and foremost as an analytical tool that can help us draw out and understand meanings related to a given icon. It should not however, be seen as neutral or detached from the icon it is meant to explore; the tool of inter-iconicity is also active in *producing* the meaning of the icon by placing it within a particular context. In this article, inter-iconicity is therefore able to function as a critical intervention by situating the icon outside the *dominant* discourse on ISIS and within a certain web of iconic references that reconfigure the meaning of the icon, thereby wid-

ening the conditions of possibility for addressing ISIS in a new way that does not fall prey to the value judgment of evil. The inter-iconic analysis is thus able to extract *alternative* meanings to the hegemonic interpretation of the icon but should not be mistaken for an attempt to identify the icon's 'true' meaning; the meaning we attribute to the icon will always be partial, contingent and contextual. This is a condition for the following analysis as well; it does not claim to present an exhaustive reading of the icon but rather lays out an analysis limited to *certain* inter-iconic references.

There are a myriad of examples of iconic imagery that could make up the inter-iconic context in which the beheadings of ISIS inscribe themselves, both within a Western and a non-Western context. Since the rhetoric of evil presents an understanding of the ISIS beheadings within a distinctly Western context, I focus here on iconic references that are part of a Western collective memory and are thus able to contribute to an unravelling of the Self/Other-constellations inherent in the Western understanding of ISIS. The first inter-iconic reference is the beheadings of the French Revolution, which brings an element of liberation into the violence of the practice. The second refers to the 'body politic', which helps us understand ISIS's acts as part of a political, rather than a moral, struggle.

The Guillotine and the Narrative of Liberation

There are numerous examples of the practice of beheadings throughout the history of Europe, most widely used as a method of capital punishment. However, one image of beheadings stands out in the European mentality: the decapitations that took place during the French Revolution, of which the guillotine became a key image (Arasse 1989, 4). It can be argued that the visual of the guillotine execution became an icon given its high rate of visual reproduction both in a myriad of paintings and drawings and as various objects – for example, earrings and popular toys for kids (Friedland 2012, 252–253).

As with the filmed beheadings of ISIS, the decapitations of the French Revolution were highly theatrical (Arasse 1989, 88); the scaffold formed a stage making the operation more visibly accessible to the crowd. The beheadings functioned as public specta-

cles (Foucault 1995, 15), and, as a result, the guillotine was more a bearer of meaning than a machine.

The guillotine – used for the first time in France in April 1792 – became the official method for capital punishment in France (Friedland 2012, 246–47). Its use accelerated dramatically during the Reign of Terror from 1793-1794 where it beheaded as many as 40,000 people (Sage 2004, 21). Dr. Guillotin, whom the device is named after, originally proposed to make death by decapitation the official method of capital punishment in the spirit of equality – a principle considered one of the cornerstones of the French Revolution. He argued against the discrepancy in methods of capital punishment used on people from different social standings and the torture that came with many of the executions of common people, such as breaking on the wheel, hanging, and burning. The guillotine was a way of eradicating the torment connected to capital punishment and turning it into strictly the taking of life (Arasse 1989, 4). In this way, the decapitations of the French Revolution marked a transition into a modern period of humanitarian and democratic values; the executions were quick, merciful and equal for everyone.

The beheadings performed during the revolution gained a central visual-political position since the guillotine came to be an important representation of revolutionary justice; the execution of people was also the execution of the law of the people and thus of justice (Arasse 1989, 75). Further, the guillotine's geometrical elegance purported a celebration of mechanical, technical pureness and progress, which ensured the visual victory of reason (Arasse 1989, 55). In this way, the guillotine captured the central elements of modern thinking and the Enlightenment: Humanity, equality, and rationality.

One beheading stands out from the thousands of beheadings borne out by the Revolution and bears a principal status in the image of the Revolution: the beheading of King Louis XVI (Jane 2005, 72). Louis XVI was beheaded on January 21, 1793 and thousands had gathered to witness the execution on the Place de la Révolution. He was executed in order to “consolidate liberty and the peace and calm of the public with the punishment of a tyrant” (Arasse 1989, 51). The image of the beheading of the king embodies the inauguration of the modern French democracy. The decapitation of the king's head is at the same time the decapitation of the head of state and thus plays into a narrative of sovereignty loss, which will be discussed in the next section. The beheading acts as the spectacle of the desanctification of the king and his position (Arasse 1989, 53)

marking the transfer of sovereignty from the king to the people (Arasse 1989, 60). In fact, the execution of the king is the exercise of an act – the act of killing – that was previously monopolized by the sovereign (Jane 2005, 70-71; Foucault 1978, 136); by exercising the right to take life the people adopt the status of the sovereign. The scene of the execution thus comes to tell a story of liberation and modernity, on the one hand, entangled into displays of violence, on the other, showing that the two tendencies are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Both can be contained within the image of beheadings thus emphasizing the complexity of such an image. The symbolic co-existence of violence and liberation helps us understand the ISIS beheadings as more than mere acts of evil and as such undoes the underlying logic of the rhetoric of evil by affording complexity to the image of beheadings.

The Body Politic and the Signs of Sovereignty

The body politic – the trope of the social as a body (D. Campbell 1998, 75) – is the oldest political metaphor in history going all the way back to Aesop's fable and Plato's *Republic* (Harvey 1999, 85). It has most famously been visually represented on the iconic cover of Hobbes' famous *Leviathan*, where the body of the sovereign is comprised of the people while the head distinctly belongs to the powerful king, indicated by a crown. As mentioned, this image also informs the meaning ascribed to the beheading of the French king described above.

The image of the body politic places the 'Leviathan' – the sovereign that represents and rules the state – as the head of the body. The head is a site of power (Jane 2005, x); it is the centre that controls the body and the home of the ability to think. The head occupies the position as the highest authority of the body and thus possesses the supremacy that is indicative of sovereignty (Brown 2010, 22). In light of this, decapitation comes to represent a stripping of power.

The inter-iconic relation to the body politic produces the image of ISIS beheadings as symbols of power usurpations. The Western hostages in the ISIS videos function as symbolic stand-ins for their nation-states and the acts perpetrated against them become by proxy acts against the U.S. and the U.K. What is at stake in the beheading image when we take the icon of the body politic into account is a challenge to the sovereignty

of the Western powers. The repeated appearance of ‘Jihadi John’ as the main executioner acts as an additional symbolic layer in this context: The British accent reminds the West and its political leaders of the threats lurking in their own backyards; of the many people living inside the borders of Western states that are supporters of ISIS, which is evident in the large numbers of Westerners – both women and men – joining ISIS (Trofimov 2015). This symbol feeds into the breakdown of the distinction between the inside and the outside of the sovereign nation and represents the *ungovernability* of the power of ISIS operating within the borders of (Western) nation states (Brown 2010, 24-25). The masked appearance of ‘Jihadi John’ further emphasizes the way in which these internal threats to Western states operate, namely as invisible and unidentifiable, making them hard for the state to address.

In addition to threatening Western sovereign state power, the scene of the beheaded body acts as a declaration of ISIS’s sovereignty. As Foucault has shown, the sovereign is defined by the right to kill (Foucault 1978, 136) and the spectacle of public executions are to be understood as political manifestations of power (Foucault 1995, 47). The crime that is being punished (keep in mind, that the victims in the ISIS beheading videos are proxies of their political leaders) is an injury to the sovereign and the public execution acts as a reconstitution of the sovereign and a manifestation of his superior force and strength at its most spectacular (Foucault 1995, 48-49). The visibility of the ISIS beheadings can thus be read as a public declaration of victory:

“(...) the public execution has two aspects: one of victory, the other of struggle. It brought to a solemn end a war, the outcome of which was decided in advance, between the criminal and the sovereign; it had to manifest the disproportion of power of the sovereign over those whom he had reduced to impotence.” (Foucault 1995, 50)

As we can see, the image of the beheadings comes to represent a manifestation of sovereign power for ISIS and is thus used as a narrative of victory in the battle between the West and ISIS. More importantly, the reproduction of the image of ISIS beheadings that takes place in the inter-iconicity with the body politic transforms our understanding of ISIS from evildoers to political actors engaging in a power struggle.

Visual Complexities in the Image of ISIS Beheadings

As Regina Jane has argued, the operation of decapitation as a symbolic practice precedes the mere violence of the act (Jane 2005, xii; 3) and the previous two sections have been aimed at getting at the symbolic layer underlying the immediate violence and brutality of the ISIS beheadings, which are the elements that inform the rhetoric of evil.

At the level of inter-iconicity, we have seen how the image of the ISIS beheadings can be reproduced in relation to the image of the guillotine beheadings of the French Revolution and the body politic. Exploring these references undoes the reading of the ISIS beheadings as facts of evil and thus presents a disruption to the rhetoric of evil. What they uncover is a complexity of meanings inherent in the image, which can be drawn out to expand the conditions of possibility when it comes to talking about and acting towards ISIS. The inter-iconic reference to the body politic shows a strong element of power struggle at play in the ISIS beheadings, which rewrites the moralizing effects of the rhetoric of evil and recognizes the political character of the ISIS beheadings. The image of guillotine beheadings, in addition, reveals the ability of the image of beheadings to simultaneously contain seemingly paradoxical elements of violence and liberation thus rupturing the dichotomist distinction between evil and good – ISIS and the West – inherent in the rhetoric of evil. The inter-iconic reference to the guillotine beheadings adds an element to the ISIS beheadings that rejects the purity of evilness ascribed to ISIS, while at the same time muddling the moral innocence of the West by demonstrating that beheadings are a historically important part of modern, Western history. This muddling offers an important opportunity for a critical assessment of the West's engagement in acts of violence. Ultimately, this might "provide the conditions for breaking out of the quotidian acceptance of war" (Butler 2010, 11).

Re-reading the image of ISIS beheadings through an inter-iconic lens offers us a way to rethink the roles of ISIS and the West as political and multifaceted, rather than moral and one-dimensional. Transforming the way we see the ISIS beheadings thus enables a widening of the conditions of possibility within the realm of international politics and ultimately permits political actions, which are not necessarily informed by violence and warfare.

Conclusions

The importance of images and visuality for international relations has become more and more apparent in recent years. However, the existing set of analytical tools for studying visual phenomena in international politics are still under-developed, and the number of case studies remains inadequate. This article has contributed to filling these gaps. Firstly, the article has added to the limited ‘tool kit’ available to scholars who wish to analyse images in IR by proposing an expansion of Hansen’s concept of inter-iconicity and demonstrating how the concept can be empirically applied. Secondly, studying the case of ISIS within a visual IR framework has both presented a largely overlooked perspective on beheading videos and generated useful knowledge about an understudied phenomenon – ISIS’s beheading videos – in academia.

The ISIS beheading videos of Western victims published during the fall of 2014 inscribe themselves into a series of events that have demonstrated the importance of visual imagery for international politics. The videos, which quickly spread across Western media and gained iconic status, have helped shape the conditions of possibility for the constellation of international identities and politics surrounding ISIS. The ISIS beheading videos thus functioned as visual building blocks for the rhetoric of evil that informed the subsequent military actions undertaken by Western political leaders, and which continues to condition a simplistic understanding of ISIS that legitimizes Western warfare. While characterizing ISIS as ‘the face of evil’ in reaction to the beheading videos might seem harmless at first glance, a closer examination of the value judgment of evil reveals how such a response reproduces problematic identity constellations between the West and ISIS, blocking a nuanced understanding of the complexities in the ISIS narrative and inhibiting critique of Western warfare. Further, the discourse privileges the use of violence in responding to ISIS and closes off possibilities for political action that could act as an alternative to warfare.

In response to the designation of ISIS as ‘the face of evil’, I have attempted to extrapolate meaning from the ISIS beheading image that runs *counter* to the rhetoric of evil. This was made possible by broadening Hansen’s concept of inter-iconicity and using it as an analytical tool to draw out alternative meanings of the ISIS beheading image. Reading the image in relation to the guillotine beheadings of the French Revolu-

tion erases the sharp dichotomy between ISIS and the West and rejects the moral glorification of the West inherent in the rhetoric of evil, while the reference to the body politic exposes the beheadings as political manifestations of power and sovereignty, rather than expressions of evil. The inter-iconic reading of the ISIS beheading image thus works towards breaking the image out of the context of the rhetoric of evil and rewriting the ISIS beheadings as more than merely depictions of pure evil.

I wish to stress, in conclusion, that challenging the mobilization of the ISIS beheading videos as visual evidence for evildoing should not be read as a defence of ISIS or the violence the group is responsible for. Rather it is an attempt to enable an expansion of the conditions of possibility for political action and foster a *general* critical stance against the acceptance of warfare and the spiral of violence, it feeds.

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