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Heroization and Allegorization—

The Visual Aesthetics of the Islamic State's
Self-Representational Photographs

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1. Introduction

A thrilling game of cunning and strategy, the rules of paintball are simple and fun to play with friends. Armed with a paintball gun and balls of paint, you win or lose the game, and you give high-fives to your friends. The only difference is the guns, the bullets, and the dead are all real. This is how the Islamic State portrays itself. According to a recent report, 41,490 international citizens became affiliated with the group¹. This number is more than the population of Fribourg city. I speculate that the visual aesthetics constructions of the portraits of the IS² fighters elicit and modulate to aspire its audience's perception and emotions to join the group. This brings attention to rhetoric, "the art of making persuasive speech" with the use of emotion "to pursue its aim of intentional effectiveness".³ In its turn, rhetorical communication is the intentional production of effective impact on the target public.⁴ To have the desired impact, it is crucial that all factors surrounding the final deliverable are taken into consideration.⁵ This means that each element in the visual delivered is intentionally thought of by the designer to affect the viewer. To support my hypothesis, I deconstruct the portraits of the IS fighters published in the English-version of Rumiya⁶ magazine, and I conduct a comparative and visual rhetoric analyses to understand the visual aesthetics constructions and the employed affect techniques aimed at the group's audience—while resorting to discourse analysis.

2. Heroization of the character

There are observable visual similarities with cover art of shooter video games, posters of Hollywood movies, Soviet Union and Nazi propaganda. This is an indicator of the narrators' assumptions concerning the visual preferences of the group's audience. Despite their cultural differences, I observe a topos⁷—a metaphorical thematic consisting of different elements that support an argument⁸—suggesting that the IS has resorted to familiar visual aesthetics construction suggesting heroization. I identify this topos as: the heroization of the character, which could be defined with the tentative visual aesthetics constructions⁹ discussed below.

¹ Joana Cook, and Gina Vale, *From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State* (London: ICSR, 2018), 3, accessed March 15, 2019, <https://icsr.info/2018/07/23/from-daesh-to-diaspora-tracing-the-women-and-minors-of-islamic-state/>.

² abbreviation for Islamic State

³ Gesche Joost, and Arne Scheuermann, "Design as Rhetoric—Basic Principles For Design Research," *Swiss Design Network (Hg.): Drawing New Territories. 3rd Symposium On Design Research, Zürich (2006)*: 3, 9, accessed October 10, 2018, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/55ae/2346ebaecf7c6e-362834338b0101208e41a4.pdf>.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶ Rumiya was a monthly magazine and a medium for ideological expansion that informs Muslims in the East and West about the Islamic State, conveys teachings of the organization's interpretation of Islam, stories, strategies, news, practical advice, and interviews with its fighters. Its last issue was published in September 2017.

⁷ "common place" in Ancient Greek

⁸ Christof Rapp, "The topoi of the Rhetoric," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2010), accessed March 12, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-rhetoric/supplement2.html>.

⁹ I say tentative visual aesthetics constructions because they do not regularly appear throughout the portraits of IS fighters. The tentative visual aesthetics constructions as create an overall impression that constitute the topos mentioned.

2.1. Straight posture with legs spread¹⁰

Throughout popular culture, particularly in Hollywood movies¹⁰ and shooter video games, the prototypical hero is often visualized with a focus on the character's physical fitness, and often with a weapon. He or she is portrayed having a straight posture with legs spread¹¹ suggesting fearlessness, power, confidence, readiness to encounter the enemy and to face any obstacle¹². In the case of the IS fighters, none of the portraits attempts to reveal their physical fitness. The general focus tends to be on the merging of the fighter with a weapon, his body posture¹³ and sometimes his head posture.

2.2. The merging of the human and the fighting tool resulting in the subject's "feeling of omnipotence"

Weapons are common motifs used in jihadi visuals to communicate the Islamist groups' dedication to armed resistance.¹⁴ The general aesthetic staging similarity between the IS portraits, Hollywood movie posters, and shooter video games' visuals could be identified as revolving around the merging of the human and the fighting tool resulting in the subject's "feeling of omnipotence".^{15 16 17} This gives the illusion that the movie and the video game hero or the IS fighter has the means to fight and to destroy the enemy overcoming the "obstacle" and becoming "the protector" of a city or "the protector" of the caliphate.

2.3. Depiction of the main character from behind facing an obstacle as a portrayal of a confrontation with the enemy

Another visual aesthetics construction common among Hollywood movie posters, shooter video games visuals, also adopted in IS portraits, is the depiction of the main character from behind facing an obstacle¹⁸ as a portrayal of a confrontation with the enemy.¹⁹ This construction seems to emerge from the paintings of the 19th century German painter Caspar David Friedrich,²⁰ who often depicted characters with only their backs visible while looking into the distance at vast landscapes or ruined architecture—for instance, his painting "Wanderer above the Sea of Fog" (1818).²¹ This influence is often used in still shots of video games to highlight the location of the game.^{22 23 24}

¹⁰ war and sci-fi movies

¹¹ I identify this as tentative visual aesthetics construction 1.

¹² See figures 1 to 5, and 7 to 13.

¹³ The fighter has the body posture of the prototypical hero.

¹⁴ Afshon Ostovar, "The Visual Culture of Jihad," in *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists*, ed. Thomas Hegghammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 84.

¹⁵ Cilli Pogodda, and Danny Gronmaier, "The War Tapes and the Poetics of Affect of the Hollywood War Film Genre," *Frames Cinema Journal*, "Conflicting Images, Contested Realities (2015): 5, accessed January 27, 2019, <http://framescinemajournal.com/article/the-war-tapes-and-the-poetics-of-affect-of-the-hollywood-war-film-genre/>.

¹⁶ I identify this as tentative visual aesthetics construction 2.

¹⁷ For instance, see figures 2, 7, 9 to 12.

¹⁸ confronted with the enemy, destruction/explosion, and/or the city/land

¹⁹ I identify this as tentative visual aesthetics construction 3.

²⁰ an iconic artist of the Romantic movement

²¹ See figure 6.

²² Anjin Anhut, "Friedrich Romanticism and Games," *Howtonotsuckonvideogamedesign* (blog), August 2, 2016, accessed March 3, 2019, <http://howtonotsuckatgamedesign.com/2016/02/friedrich-romanticism-and-games/>.

²³ In the same blog post, "Friedrich Romanticism and Games," Anjin Anhut calls Friedrich as "one of the most video-game-defining artists out there" and claims that his paintings have inspired many principal visual motifs and concepts in action, adventure, and role-playing video games.

²⁴ For instance, see figure 8.

In the IS portraits, this construction could be separated into two categories: the fighter with the enemy in the background²⁵ and the fighter looking at a vast landscape²⁶. A jihadi fighter aims to elicit notions of bravery, strength, and religious devotion.²⁷ His greatest accomplishment is to become a martyr and a hero of the Ummah, a fundamental concept in Islam that expresses the importance of forming a Muslim community regardless of differences in cultural and geographical background.²⁸ Hence, the portraits of IS fighters with the enemy in the background suggest depiction of this bravery to overcome any obstacle to attain heroism. And the portraits of IS fighters looking at a vast landscape suggest the fighter's insignificance in comparison to Allah—the Creator of the heavens and the earth.²⁹

2.4. Looking away into the distance

Another visual aesthetics construction is identified as the character looking away into the distance.³⁰ If we look throughout history, one of the most iconic photographs with this construction is Guerrillero Heroico³¹ picture of Che Guevara, which is often accompanied by the famous quote “Hasta la Victoria Siempre”³² that reinforces the meaning of the gaze past the camera suggesting looking into the future. Moreover, shooting the subject from a low camera angle, which is often the case, glorifies the subject as if looking up to the person in admiration.³³ This also applies to portraits of Communist leaders³⁴, to some of USSR's propaganda posters³⁵, portraits of Hitler³⁶ and Nazi propaganda posters³⁷, and also portraits of IS fighters³⁸, which suggest making plans by fighting to ensure the future success of the caliphate. Moreover, the articles of Rumiya associated with those portraits adopt vocabularies that reinforce the heroization, glorification of the IS fighter, and the planning for the future of the caliphate.

3. Allegorization of women

After thorough analysis of the IS fighters portraits, I explore the representation of women, who are routinely excluded from the magazine, and instead, the visuals addressing them are of nature, of the Quran, of money and jewellery that should be donated for jihad, of house objects, or of arabesques^{39 40}. These elements reinforce the message of each article by associating them with the expected behaviour of women to construct the ideal Muslim

²⁵ See figures 9 to 13.

²⁶ See figures 14 and 15.

²⁷ Afshon Ostovar, “The Visual Culture of Jihad,” in *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists*, ed. Thomas Hegghammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 93.

²⁸ John L. Esposito, editor, “Ummah,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*. Oxford Islamic Studies Online, accessed January 12, 2019, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2427>.

²⁹ “The Religion of Islam: And the Jama'ah of the Muslims PART 4,” *Rumiya*, no. 3 (November, 2016): 17.

³⁰ I identify this as tentative visual aesthetics construction 4.

³¹ It was photographed by Alberto Korda in 1960. See figure 24.

³² It means “Towards Victory, Always”.

³³ Alison Jackson, quoted in George Galloy, “A Very Modern Icon,” *New Statesman*, June 12, 2006, accessed April 28, 2019, <https://www.newstatesman.com/node/164522>.

³⁴ See figures 24 to 26.

³⁵ See figures 20 to 22.

³⁶ See figure 23.

³⁷ See figures 18 and 19.

³⁸ See figures 16 and 17.

³⁹ rhythmic linear patterns

⁴⁰ See figures 27 and 29.

women in the caliphate suggesting their purification. Therefore, the second topos could be characterized as the allegorization of women. As the group believes a woman is dependent on her guardian, there is a lack of female identity in the visuals of women in the IS, which complements the ideological constructs and beliefs of the group towards women, and thus not representing women reinforces their subordination manifested in the symbolic representation. Therefore, these elements and the photographs themselves become an allegorical representation of women.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, despite the cultural differences, based on the observable similarities in the visual aesthetics constructions, I argue that the Islamic State has deliberately or unintentionally resorted to visuals of cover art of shooter video games, posters of Hollywood movies, Soviet Union and Nazi propaganda for inspiration particularly in regards to the portraits that revolve around the heroization of the character. This indicates that the Islamic State has adopted from Western popular culture that young men are exposed to through Hollywood movies and video games. This furthermore suggests that the group has intentionally thought of each element in the visual delivered and has employed rhetorical communication and used techniques in order to appeal to its audience that seems to mostly consist of young men, and to have an effect on them by evoking in them fantasies of heroism that could be realized in real life. This means that the topos of “heroization of the character” can be seen as an umbrella of affect techniques—triggering affects—that is made up of different elements of visual aesthetics constructions. Whereas, the allegorical representation of women suggests to represent them as subordinates in need of purification to construct the ideal Muslim woman in order to support the Islamic State fighter.

5. Appendix

Hollywood movie posters



Figure 1 The Dark Knight
Directed by Christopher Nolan (2008)

Poster design by
Intralink Film Graphic Design (2008)



Figure 2 I Kill Giants
Directed by Anders Walter (2017)

Poster design by
RLJ Entertainment, Inc. (2017)



Figure 3 Saving Private Ryan posted
Directed by Steven Spielberg (1998)

Poster design by
BLT Communications, LLC (1998)



Figure 4 Dunkirk
Directed by Christopher Nolan (2017)
Poster design by
Concept Arts (2017)



Figure 5 Captain America:
Directed by Joe Russo, Anthony Russo (2014)
Poster design by
BLT Communications, LLC (2014)

**Caspar David Friedrich's
Wanderer above the Sea of Fog (1818)**



Figure 6

Video game posters

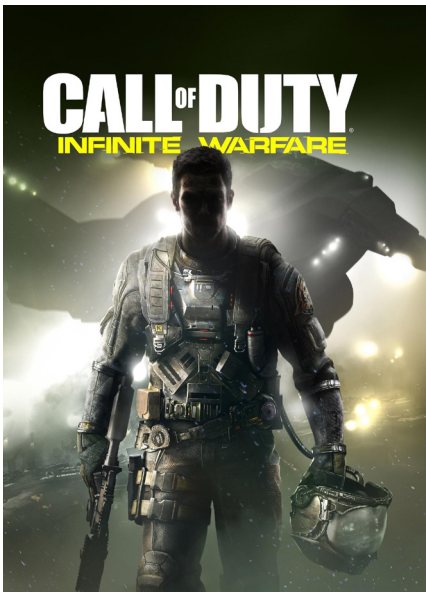


Figure 7 Call of Duty:
Infinite Warfare
Joe Cecot (2016)



Figure 8 Star Wars Battlefront I
Niklas Fegraeus (2015)

Islamic State fighters' portraits in RumiyaH

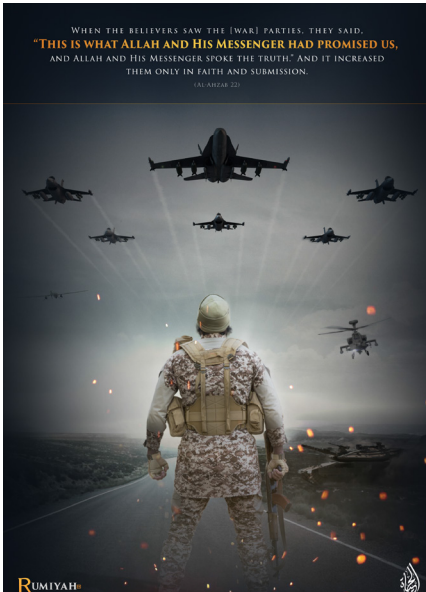


Figure 9 This Is What Allah and His Messenger Had Promised Us (2017)



Figure 10 Either We Exterminate the Mushrikin Or Die Trying (2017)



Figure 11 We Will Surely Guide Them to Our Ways (2017)



Figure 12 A And You Are Superior (2017)



Figure 13 The Flames of Raids (2017)



TOWARDS
THE MAJOR MALHAMAH
OF **DABIQ**

Figure 14 Towards the Major Malhamah of Dabiq (2016)

Allah ﷻ said, "O you who believe, be patient, outlast [your enemy] in patience, perform ribat, and fear Allah that you may succeed" (Al-Furqan 2:191).

Allah's Messenger ﷺ said, "Two eyes Hellfire will not touch: an eye that wept out of reverence for Allah and an eye that spent the night keeping guard for Allah's cause" (Reported by at-Tirmidhi from Ibn 'Abbas; at-Tirmidhi declared it hasan).

It was reported that Abu Hurayrah ﷺ said, "Ribat for Allah's cause is more beloved to me than catching Laylatul-Qadr in one of the two mosques: Masjid al-Haram and the Masjid of Allah's Messenger ﷺ. Whoever performs ribat for three days in Allah's cause has performed ribat, and whoever performs ribat for forty days has achieved a complete ribat" (Reported by Sa'id Ibn Mansur from 'Ata al-Khurasani).

Abu Sa'ih Mawla 'Uthman said, "I heard 'Uthman ﷺ say at Mina, 'O people! Indeed, I shall narrate to you a word I heard from Allah's Messenger ﷺ. He said, 'Ribat for a day in Allah's cause is better than a thousand days other than it.' So let a person perform as much ribat as he wishes. Have I conveyed this message?' They said, 'Yes!' He said, 'O Allah, bear witness'" (Reported by Ahmad, al-Darimi, at-Tirmidhi, and an-Nasa'i).

Ibn Taymiyyah ﷺ said, "Ribat is to remain in a place that is threatened by the enemy as well as threatening to them. Whoever stays there with the intention of holding the enemy back is a murabit, and actions are by intention" (Al-Fatawa).

Allah's Messenger ﷺ said, "Ribat for a day and a night is better than fasting and standing in prayer for a month. If the murabit dies, his deed [of ribat] will continue on his behalf, his provision will be granted for him, and he will be safe from the questioner in the grave" (Reported by Muslim from Salman).

The Virtue Of Ribat

Figure 15 The Virtue of Ribat (2016)



Figure 16 A True Promise of Allah (2017)



Figure 17 Stand and Die—Upon That for Which Your Brothers Died (2016)

Nazi propaganda posters



Figure 18 Waffen SS



Figure 19 Waffen SS

USSR propaganda posters



Figure 20
Everything for the Front! Everything for Victory!
El Lissitsky (1942)



Figure 21 The Workers' and Peasants' Red Army
El Lissitsky (1933)



Figure 22 Forward! Victory is Close at Hand!
Nina Vatolina (1944)

Leaders' portraits



Figure 23 Adolf Hitler
Heinrich Hoffmann (1930s)



Figure 24 Guerrillero Heroico
Ernesto "Che" Guevara
Alberto Korda (1960)

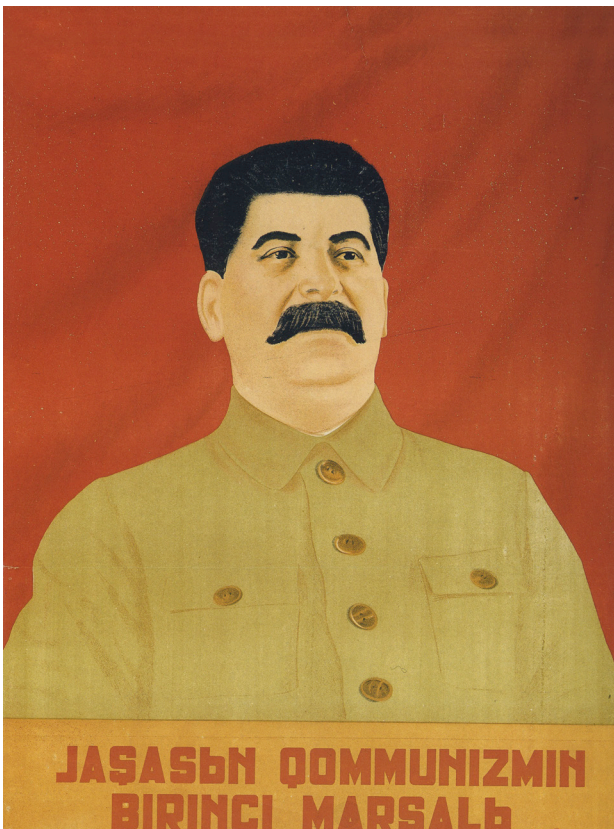


Figure 25 Long Live Stalin, The First Marshal of
Communism!
B. Lebeshev (1939)

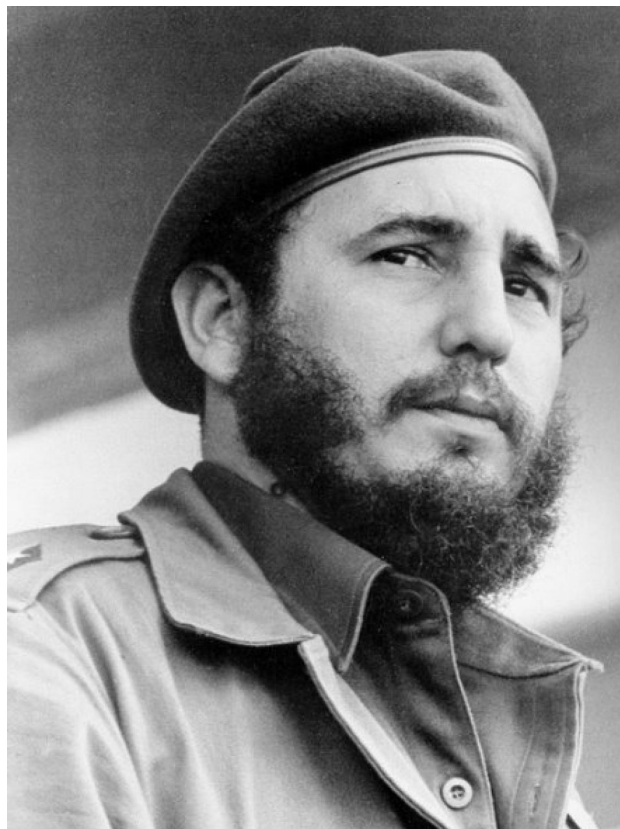


Figure 26 Fidel Castro
Liborio Noval (1953)

Visuals addressing women in the Rumiya



Figure 27 The Woman Is a Shepherd in Her Husband's Home and Responsible for Her Flock (2017)



Figure 28 The Flesh of Your Spouse Is Poisonous (2017)



Figure 29 Abide in Your Homes (2016)

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Figure 7 Retrieved on May 31 2019. <https://www.gamerfuzion.com/cod-infinite-warfare-modern-warfare-remastered-wallpapers/>.

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Figure 9 Rumiya issue 7, page 38.

Figure 10 Rumiya issue 11, page 4.

Figure 11 Rumiya issue 10, page 3.

Figure 12 Rumiya issue 8, page 3.

Figure 13 Rumiya issue 7, page 3.

Figure 14 Rumiya issue 3, page 24.

Figure 15 Rumiya issue 4, page 26.

Figure 16 Rumiya issue 8, page 6.

Figure 17 Rumiya issue 1, page 2.

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Figure 22 King, D. (2016). Red Star Over Russia—A Visual History of the Soviet Union from 1917 to the Death of Stalin. London, UK: Tate Publishing. Pages 326-327.

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Figure 27 Rumiya issue 9, page 18.

Figure 28 Rumiya issue 7, page 30.

Figure 29 Rumiya issue 3, page 40.