

The Image(s) Between Us The Performance of Death in a Post-9/11 World

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An excess of violence is not enough to open on to reality. For reality is a principle, and it is this principle that is lost.

– Jean Baudrillard

Our century began with what Jean Baudrillard called the 'mother of all events'[1] that would usher us into the era of highly mediatized, visually compelling global terrorism: The attack on the World Trade Center in New York (commonly known as 9/11) on September 11 2001. On that day, two hijacked airplanes flew into the twin towers, causing them to collapse into piles of rubble: an event that was streamed live on television screens across the world. The mother of all events produced the mother of all images: one of cinematic and catastrophic terror, in which illusion and fact synthesized to terrifying effect, bringing imagination and agency to a halt. The unexpectedness and scale of the attack made it urgent to televize the images of the collapse of the WTC buildings without sufficient facts. As we watched 9/11 unfold, we were taken hostage not only by the immensity of the event but also by the realization of dark visions – like watching a magic trick where the assistant's head is actually severed.

Baudrillard's *The Spirit of Terrorism* starts with the statement that we have all, without exception, dreamt of the collapse of the WTC, since 'no one can avoid dreaming of the destruction of any power that has become hegemonic to this degree.'[2] For Baudrillard, this acknowledgment is crucial if the event in question is to achieve its symbolic dimension. If we attempt to understand Baudrillard's claim by way of Freud, the actualization of the dream in real life is a nightmare: '[The terrorist violence] is not "real". In a sense, it is worse: it is symbolic.'[3] This symbolism is transmitted through the production and dissemination of images of violent acts such as 9/11: a sublime spectacle of terror.

Everybody, terrorists and politicians alike, understood the debilitating effect of the cold-blooded murder filmed in

High Definition on that day in 2001. In subsequent terrorist propaganda, as well as media representation of the War on Terror, we saw how the inherent magic of the screen could be used to inspire consent as well as fear. Since 9/11, we have seen the rise of a new 'Reign of Terror' whereby death has found its political significance through the processes of multiplication, accumulation and dissemination. Years after the attack live combat footage from the US-led retaliatory wars in Iraq and Afghanistan circulated across media platforms, from broadcast news to YouTube, creating a pivotal change in the requirements of reporting. Over the following decade, with the development of satellite technologies, digital photography and the possibilities afforded by the Internet, media would become increasingly driven by visuals, and the images of imminent death in war zones or actual dead bodies in zones of conflict, (including the corpses of Palestinian children following Israeli raids) would become a universally accepted approach in the reporting of political liquidation.

On 14 August 2013, Al-Jazeera news channel would live stream the Rabaa Massacre, an event following the counter-revolution in Egypt, where over 4600 people were killed and injured by the Egyptian police in a forced evacuation of the Muslim Brotherhood protest in Rabaa al-Adawiya Square. As we watched the continuous violence in shaky camera motion for hours, as victims were carried in and out of makeshift hospitals and morgues, the tragedy was mediatized like a dark reality TV show we could not stop watching. Death has taken over the platform of mainstream entertainment.

'It is the tactic of the terrorist model to bring about an excess of reality, and have the system collapse beneath that excess,' Baudrillard wrote in *The Spirit of Terrorism* one year after the 9/11 attacks. Since the medieval order of the Assassins (*hashshashin*), terrorism has been able to shift the struggle into the symbolic sphere by its willingness to sacrifice its own in the bid for power, through *isteshhad* (the act of martyrdom). After 9/11, such an interruption has been most pronounced in the gruesome images produced by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Relying mostly on online social platforms, the militia's extreme propaganda videos are elaborate, concise, and highly aestheticized. ISIS's imagery represents an interruption to the increasing homogeneity of the Internet, enacted with clear intentions: to stage death horrifically, through art direction, scenography, scripted performances, and technical savvy. (Consider here the statement Peter Groy once made on Bin Laden, calling him a video artist in his essay *The Fate of Art*.)

Death on camera introduces a dramatic categorical shift that is isolated from and irreconcilable with historical context – an impasse precipitating the production of more desire, and with it the renewed hopes for transcendence. Because an image never shows a real death, it constantly transfers to other spheres, ensuring the continuation of a narrative that transcends the reality of death for the sake of its symbolic impact on those who are forced to witness it. Image and counter-image become the new political order administered by a logic seeking to avenge images. Killing is made at once unreal (an image) and necessary (for the production of more images). And as we sit behind our screens, radiation collecting in our eyes and in our bodies, we are the growing repositories of state and terrorist waste: the new paradigm of the blind narcissus. It is within this paradigm that this essay attempts the impossible task of responding to *seeing* death, and even to momentarily indulge in the moral debate with regards to images.

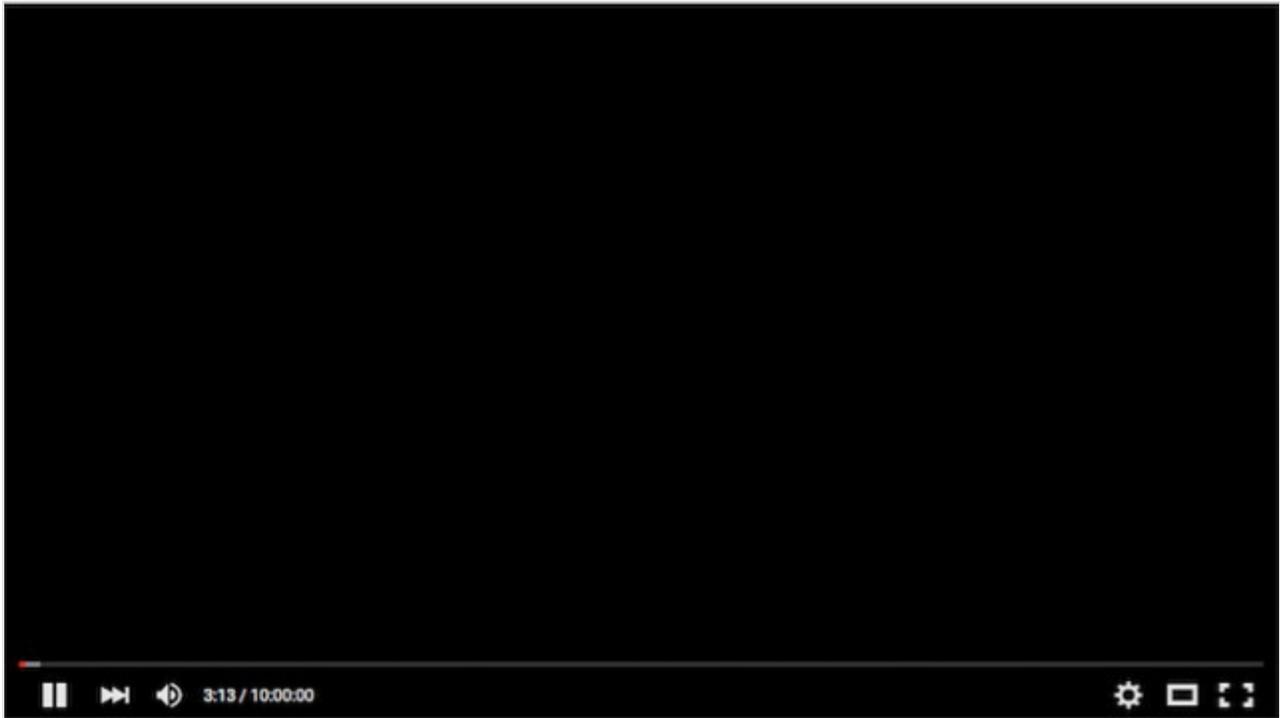


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In October 2004, Al-Jazeera broadcasted excerpts from a tape showing Osama Bin Laden accepting responsibility for the September 11 attacks in 2001, while condemning and threatening the Bush administration with further attacks. The Bin Laden video, placed in conjunction to the iconic image of the airplanes crashing into the World Trade Centers, and the footage from the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, conclude the triangulation of offense, defense, and psychological warfare presented in this very public showdown between terrorism, global powers, and the media. The world became divided into antagonists, protagonists and parasites. In this ménage, Islamist terrorism gained the upper hand; propaganda videos exhibited intelligence, murderous stamina, extreme faith, and a fluency pertaining to the technological tools of the western world. Above all, it presented a clear adeptness at constructing narratives for the purposes of propaganda, using the same techniques the western world have often used for their own purposes.

In *The Spirit of Terrorism*, Baudrillard addresses the role of images in conveying the reality of a limit situation as ambiguous at best ('The image consumes the event, in the sense that it absorbs it and offers it for consumption') and at worse misleading ('rather than the violence of the real being there first, and the frisson of the image being added to it, the image is there first, and the frisson of the real is added').^[4] The image, which has absorbed the event, regurgitates the event as fiction. The gruesome ISIS video depicting the immolation of Jordanian pilot Moath Al-Kasesbeh in February 2015, for example, is the product of an act of fragmentation and magnification. The iconic scene, which depicts Al-Kasesbeh caged and set on fire, made headlines all over the world, turning the ubiquitous image of his death into a montage of sorts. It is the expression of total intentionality on the part of ISIS – they burned that pilot alive because he was part of the coalition against IS that bombed civilian targets who were burnt alive. The narrative of revenge is also a kind of staging in this respect. Thus, when the image of the punishment is presented on screen, it becomes difficult to differentiate

between the reality and fiction behind the event, since the image itself is by default a fabrication, or a staging, and the pilot himself becomes but a figure in a much larger narrative.

To this end, you might say that an image of death is not a real death, but rather a spatial and temporal interruption that suspends the very moment of killing. The actual murder happens once, at a moment in chronological time that will never be repeated. Yet, the real moment is forever lost (and forgotten); captured as a mock-moment returning not from the past but from the future to serve as an automated apocalypse. The sheer absurdity of the brutality we bear witness to, throws us off in four directions; this unstoppable death, so close, keeps popping up on our screens uninvited – how exactly should we react to it? The events of 9/11 introduced this question into our consciousness by presenting us with a situation where ethical, political and religious categories were confused, and the question remains unanswered today as we are confronted with the image of death on a daily basis, in the absence of any agency and an adequate language to deal with the magnitude of what we are seeing.

Take the online performances of ISIS, which are generative, contagious and viral. We cannot approach the gruesome performances of the Islamic State, and our responses to them, without looking at the transformations brought by the advent of the digital age and algorithmic abstraction. The flexibility and speed characteristic of digital technologies put certainty and crisis on an even keel, creating a state of permanent instability that is the norm. Automation, so to speak, mimics the state of exception, while remaining inaccessible to it. Both the Islamic State, and the despotic state allegedly fighting terror, transfer hierarchical forms of governance to the digital platform, attempting to institute a state of emergency as an interruption. It naturally fails, since automation in and of itself is a perpetual limit situation upon which the real is modeled, and not vice versa. '[Automation] has industrialized life and social skills-*savoir vivre* (eating, moving around, receiving people) by interfering in all social relations, as much as it has automated know how-*savoir faire*. All knowledge is outpaced.'^[5] This outpacing of knowledge means that all existing interpretive models used physically on the ground become obsolete. Violence becomes the only way to compete with this outpacing.

In this, we find ISIS propaganda videos real enough for governments to take action, and not real enough for people to take action. Of course, while ISIS claim to address people in their communiqués, their messages are designed for politicians, not for populations, since we are actually left incapable of taking further action in response to such senseless violence once we have witnessed it. On the other hand, those in power, who have tanks, and weapons and can mobilize armies, can take action and do so right away, without thinking. Meanwhile, those of us perceiving the conflict are left to distinguish the religious or ethical folk registers that instantly transmute such violent and visual interventions into acts of subjugation. Through the circulation of these deathly images, categories are blurred as objective data commingles with romantic idealism (or in other words, fact mixes with fiction).

This is where the real issue lies when it comes to the impact of ISIS imagery in the post-9/11 age: 'when something shifts from the composition mode of the physical world into the generative mode of the virtual – which one cannot interrupt or halt because its very ontology is to multiply quickly and to accumulate more emotions – we lose all agency.'^[6] The challenge for the witnesses of online violence, therefore, is precisely the reclamation of agency in the face of such interruptions as those produced by ISIS propaganda.

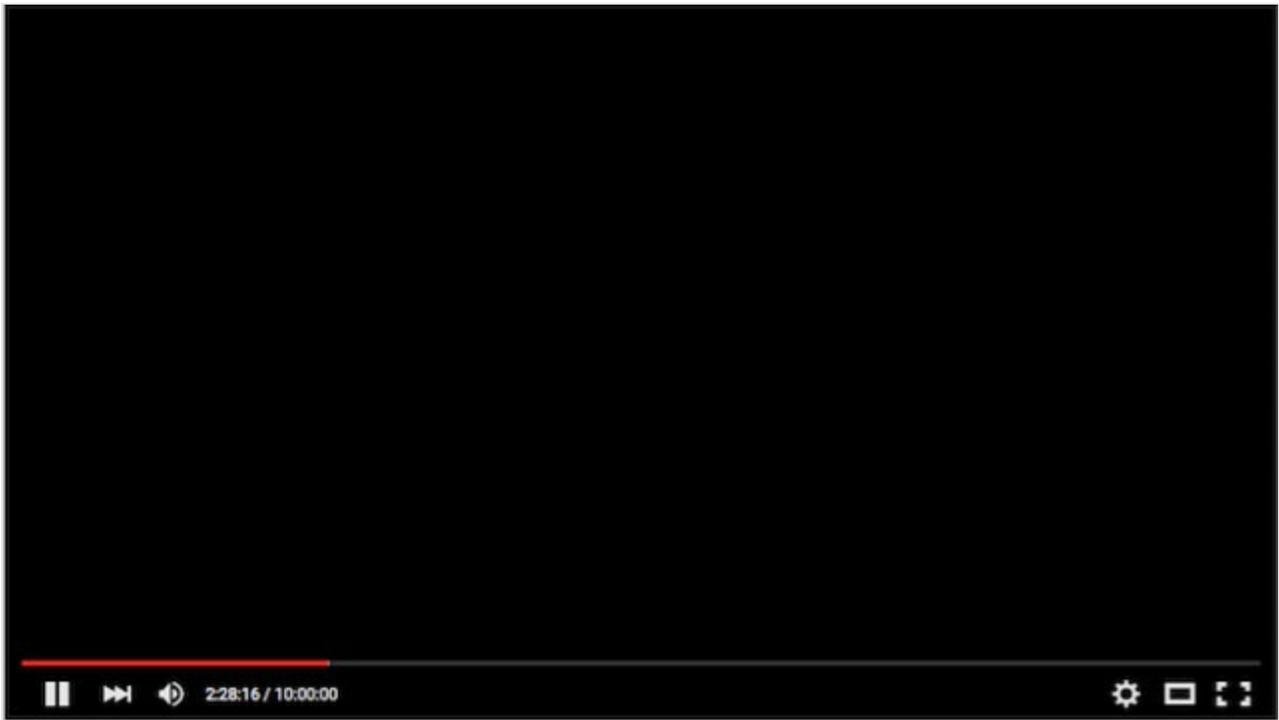


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What does it mean to witness the absurd death of another? *Shaheed* (Arabic for martyr), and *Shahid* (witness), share the same root: *Shahad*, which means 'to see'. The martyr is the one who sees God in paradise and lives for eternity in His presence. The witness and the martyr can never meet in reality, for the existence of one means the demise of the other. On the ground, in the aftermath of a terrorist or state-organized massacre, the photographer is a witness. The witness believes it his duty to document and testify to the violation.^[7] Their relationship is stratified from the onset. The witness obviously has power over the martyr; he has complete power over the martyr's body and the martyr's body's image. This imbalance of power, for the briefest of moments, prolongs the condition of violation. On the Internet, as we rapidly process the stream of images, we are all witnesses to something that is impossible to testify to. The screen is like a revolving door, across which the positions of witness and martyr are interchangeable any day. What becomes impossible with this fluidity is the very act of *seeing*, at the core of either status. No matter how many times we look at it, death in the image remains unseen. The image, at once the evidence of violence and the evidence of the violated martyrdom, brings two incompatible paradigms to a deadlock. Most importantly, it becomes difficult to address each death as what it is: a unique event.

Since the revolution in Egypt, the word martyr has been deployed to exert political and juridical pressure. The recurring phrase *Haq al shohada*, (often accompanied by images of dead victims) refers to the martyrs' posthumous right to a fair trial of their killers. On February 8 2015, twenty-five soccer fans from the 'Ultras White Knight' were killed in a stampede caused by the police's excessive use of tear gas, outside an

army-owned soccer stadium. Security forces 'panicked' and showered tear gas on crowds crammed in a cage-like passageway. Immediately after the event images of the deceased bodies, scattered on the pavement and at the morgue, were published on social media platforms. The photographs were taken and uploaded in haste, often without credentials. Once online, they were endlessly reprocessed; edited, rearranged in grids, inscribed with commentary, scripture, or questions. All victims were dubbed martyrs of the police's alleged planned liquidation of the Ultras. Facebook and online journals were littered with eyewitnesses' statements; they started with an oath and ended with a prayer like sworn testimonies. It was obvious that survivors saw it as their responsibility to relate the truth of what happened. Meanwhile, as testimonies, comments and opinions were shared, the victim in the picture was reduced to a virtual presence, silent, unreal and sublime.

At this point, it is worth noting Bataille's notion of '*Base Materialism*' for its resonance with the logic behind the contemporary revival of martyrdom. The philosopher Benjamin Noys explains it as follows: 'The 'logic' of base materialism is that whatever is elevated or idealized is actually dependent on base matter, and that this dependence means that the purity of the ideal is contaminated.'^[8] For Bataille, 'base matter is external and foreign to ideal human aspirations, and it refuses to allow itself to be reduced to the great ontological machines resulting from these aspirations'.^[9] Noys, following Bataille, argues that any attempt to do away with the notion of base matter – to idealize and purify something rooted in reality – is thus an insult to human dignity, 'because [base matter] can never be done away with despite the massive cultural, political, and philosophical denials of its existence.'^[10]

Thus, any language originating from the Manichaean struggle between good and evil, (the goodness of a martyr's death against the corruption of their killers), will not bring about justice when it comes to how we look at the images of terror circulating online. On the contrary, the violence of the images and the despotic bestiality and debasement they express through the language of ideology, will inevitably cause a logical logjam.

Here, we enter the absurd realm of headless saints – or that of moralizing horror – whereby the ideal is literally capsized by the image of mutilated bodies. A death that is impossible to exchange is paradoxically a wasted death. Because the system cannot respond to it with its own death, it cannot (and will not) sacrifice itself.^[11] To this end, the concept of martyrdom contains within it the very negation of a wasted death, and the possibility that death, while singular, can still be an unredeemable waste of life. While waste is tackled through its negation, the (literal, political and legal) space where death continues to be produced in a systematic manner – like parts on an assembly line – produces a thick impervious vacuum. In the case of ISIS, the image of death has precipitated a downward spiral of polemics on complicity, responsibility and justice: the absolute image returns to find us enshrouded in the haze of mediation and analysis. Fiercer than ever, like the ultimate pornographic nightmare, slicker than any fiction, the final threshold of horror is the image of a defenseless civilian being decapitated for the camera.

The irreversible cruelty in such imagery is at once visible (as an act) and invisible (through the actor). The terrorist introduces himself from behind a mask through a shocking murder on camera: an act that is attributed to the group, as a unanimous performance. He could be anyone, or every one. His appearance is simultaneously a disappearance. The entire performance is symbolic, and the players are readily exchangeable with any others. Thus, as much as the victims become fragmented, so do the perpetrators. Yet, we, too,

undergo such a process of abstraction, becoming both open targets to both terrorist and state violence alike – 'bare life exposed to death'[12] – as much as we ironically reenact the symbolic gesture of the invisible terrorist as witnesses to atrocities we cannot help but see.

In *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, Giorgio Agamben calls into question the very meaning of the witness, or rather, the 'complete witness' – one who exists at the disjunction between two impossibilities in which the notion of testimony contains within it an inherent lacuna. 'The language of testimony is a language that no longer signifies and that, in not signifying, advances into what is without language, to the point of taking on a different insignificance – that of the complete witness,' Agamben explains: 'he who by definition cannot bear witness.'[13] This insignificance stems from the impossibility of bearing witness, since the act can only produce a flawed, hollowed language. The lacuna formed by the language of testimony, the impossibility to bear witness, is filled with the image, which is meant to act as the evidence of killing. However, the image opens up into another irresolvable void: a finality that renders all action and speech redundant, coupled with a transience that negates finality.

This is the image's life cycle – from appearance, to viral peak, to oblivion, predicated on a relentless repetition. Yet, as much as these images circulate, seemingly ad infinitum, the death does not become any less irrevocable – we are only pulled deeper into the drama the image perpetuates. Is it possible to imagine that the truest triumph of the terrorist act resides in the image of thousands marching the streets of Paris for Charlie Hebdo? That with this good gesture of solidarity and resistance not only terrorism triumphs, but globalization and neoliberal despotism as well? When we accept, in principle, possible immolation – 'the big lies of cunning reason'[14] – we accept that any death is exchangeable with another. Death reproduced symbolically by populations is reproduced practically by the universal 'system of generalized exchange', as Baudrillard calls it.[15].

Giorgio Agamben in *Remnants of Auschwitz* refutes any hint to martyrdom in relation to the Nazi exterminations, 'insofar as it implies the substitution of a literal expression with an attenuated altered expression for something that one does not actually want to hear mentioned, the formation of a euphemism always involves ambiguities. In this case, however, ambiguity is intolerable.'[16] After all: 'Why confer on extermination the prestige of the mystical?' Perhaps it is we, the survivors, who are in need of creating martyrs.

On March 03 2015, exactly a month after the immolation of Jordanian pilot Moath Al-Kasesbeh, a video of a couple getting married was uploaded on YouTube. The bride and groom and their friends restaged fragments of the Kasesbeh video; the cage in which Kasesbeh was immolated was reconstructed, and the bride and groom were escorted into the cage in a frenzy of dance and play with fake swords.

Reenactments are fascinating. Between the potency of terrorism and the neutered War on Terror, they have emerged as a hybrid response to terror that is saturated with influences from both sides: globalization and terrorism. Laughing hysterically in the face of death is in effect a communion with damaging universal forces; a token of loyalty to the post-death superstructures that control our lives through constant, rapid and infinite

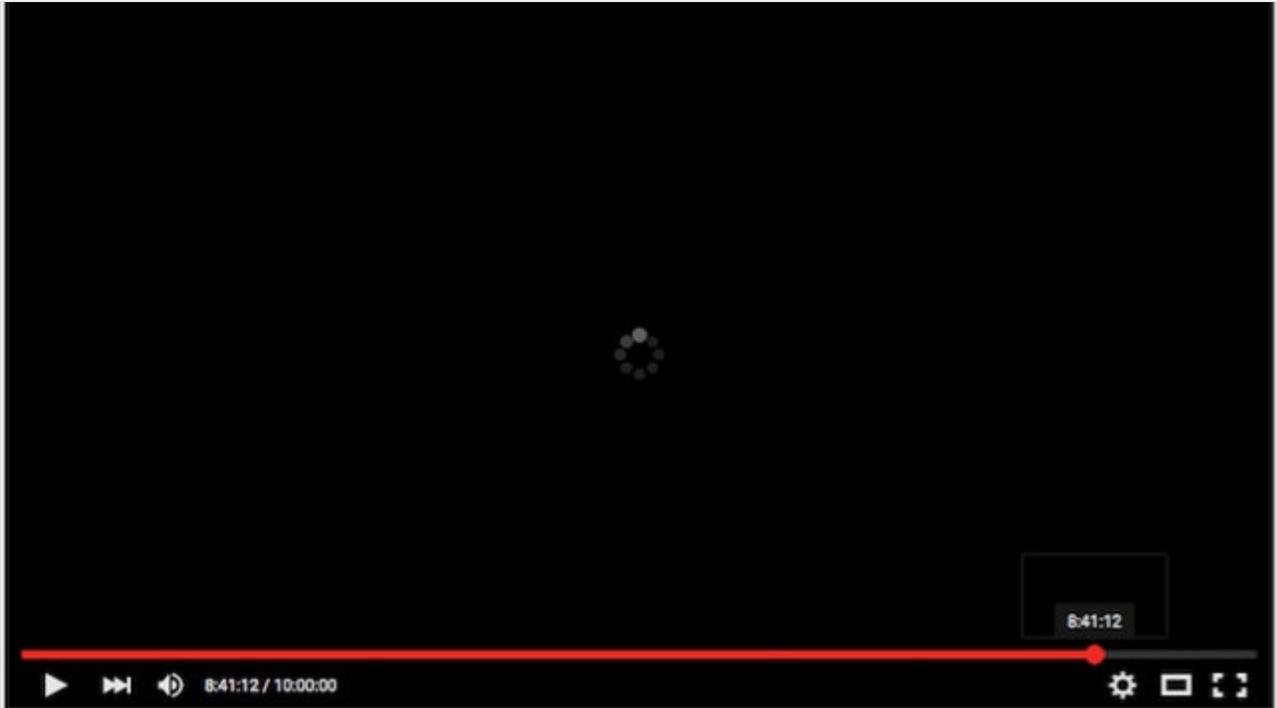


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proliferation of information and images. Reenactments are indeed a form of resistance: a resistance to the interruption caused by the image itself. A resistance of resistance. Reenactments thus betray a sense of loyalty to the status quo, resisting the introduction of new variables while offering a sense of being already partially lost to death. They signal, in a way, the failure of ISIS's online campaign to produce the rupture it intended. At the same time, by posing as activism's enfant terrible, they expose the naïveté of the revolutionary imagination. The image of beheading is unique, and a unique image has no place in the world of automatic understanding and generalized exchange.

What does this say about how we might relate to the regime of violence that exerts itself through the images disseminated through various networks that shape our perceptions and experiences of the world around us?

In the case of the wedding video, we see a further fragmentation of a violent, mediated event. It takes one detail and displaces and decontextualizes it so that it becomes ambiguous: it could mean anything. It could refer to the original event, but it doesn't necessarily have the same meaning or implications. For example, consider the fragmenting of the Egyptian revolution from 2011 onwards through the highlighting of certain key moments of celebration or violence through mediation, both via informal, social networks, and news outlets. When you take one aspect out of the context of a complex series of events, you attempt to change history through it. Yet, while the intention in the IS video is clear, it is much harder finding the logic behind why these people decided to celebrate in a cage. But there are points of overlap between death and celebration, or beheading and betrothal: the ritualistic aspect of both ceremonies. This brings us back to the irreconcilability of images of death produced in the support of a terrorist cause.

The Islamic State is a phenomenon existing on two separate but interdependent planes of reality. The first is a

physical existence on the ground that is structured and calculated. The second, as noted earlier, is an online existence that is generative, viral, and uncontrollable, since it absolutely depends on the effects digital technology has on our experience with images of death. As Bernard Stiegler writes: 'Digital technology greatly expands the power of understanding. Kant said understanding was necessary, but without reason it may be unreasonable. And that's exactly what happens: we have created an automatic understanding but there is no reason to steer it.'^[17] In other words: there is at once reason and unreason, both human and automated. Reason and unreason are completely compatible, not only in the events we are witnessing today, but also in our contemporary life in general. The wedding video that re-enacts the execution of a soldier is at once unfathomable, and wholly understandable. Eventually, a beheading video equals a wedding video. Thus, how we reconcile the contemporary compatibility of good and evil is the greatest challenge we face today, in a world that seems too attached to binary oppositions to think of something beyond the horror we currently face.

Since the September 9/11 attacks, our increasingly secularized existence has made it impossible to reconcile the mauled corpse with the eschatological ideal of martyrdom. It's unfathomable that such brutality is entirely pointless and followed by eternal nothingness, yet the idea of a battered body in heaven offers no further relief. That is the most damaging way in which the image of death cheats us. It jams together incompatible systems of meaning causing a conceptual blockage. The image is a call for action: it wants us to react and seek justice, replicating itself with urgency. But at the same time, we are stunted by the deadlock contained within their depictions. After all, when the political is transmuted to the visual realm, everything is accelerated through self-replicating images that feed off our deepest fears and desires. This economy, primarily based on a visual exchange of violence and transgression, is a form of highly effective propaganda that is willing a future made up of two things: violence and reenactment. That is the lesson terrorism learned from 9/11, and a lesson ISIS is teaching us now.

[1] Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), p. 4

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 5

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 29

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Bernard Stiegler, 'System and Technics. Interview by Helene Finidori', *Spanda Journal VI 1* (2015).

[6] Bassam Al Baroni, in an email conversation with the author in 2015.

[7] See Giorgio Agamben, 'The Witness', in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York:

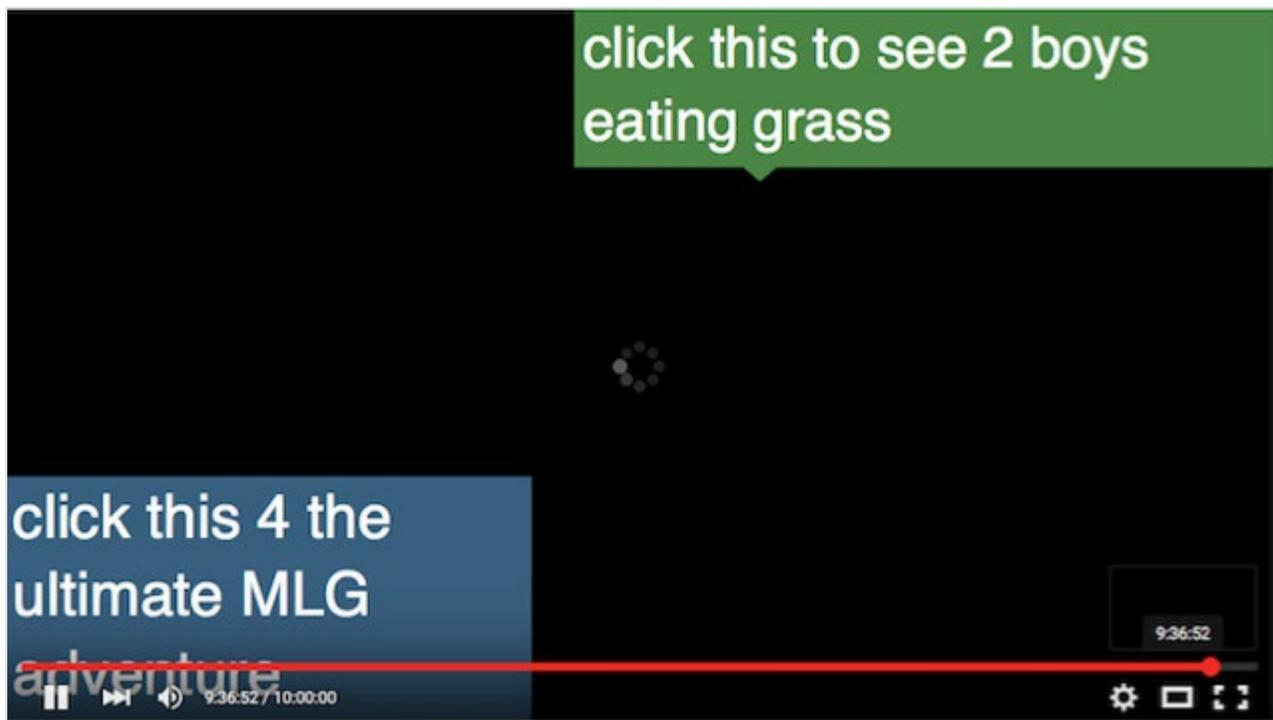


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Zone Books, 1999).

[8] Benjamin Noys, 'George Bataille's Base Materialism', *Cultural Values* 2.4 (1998): pp. 499–517.

[9] George Bataille, 'Base Materialism and Gnosticism', 1930.

[10] Noys, *op cit.*, p. 501.

[11] Baudrillard, *op cit.*, p. 18.

[12] See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

[13] *Ibid.*, p.39.

[14] See Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: George Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (Oxford: Taylor and Francis, 1992).

[15] Baudrillard, *op cit.*, p. 9.

[16] Agamben, *op cit.*, p. 31.

[17] Stiegler, *op cit.*

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