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The beheading of James Foley: a crossing of gazes between East and West

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Abstract: This paper analyses “A Message to America,” the 2014 ISIS video that presents the beheading of American photojournalist James Foley. This short film served as a model for the more than 200 graphically violent videos posted online by the terrorist group before the fall of the caliphate in 2019. The main objective of this research is to question the truth-value of violent ISIS videos and to advocate a critical approach to them. To this end, four key issues need to be explored: the quality of the videos; their status as art, documentary, or propaganda; their target audiences; and the purpose of the message being conveyed to each of those audiences. To deconstruct the mechanisms employed by the constructed fallacy of this video and critically expose its literal and metaphorical meaning, we use textual analysis, the methodological tool developed in Greimasian semiotics. The results reveal a carefully planned text with a clearly recognizable narrative structure (crime and punishment). This video is a propaganda documentary that makes use of the tools of fiction to stage a real event: Foley dies, but his death is not shown on camera; it is only staged. Targeting two different audiences, an implicit Muslim viewer, and an explicit Western viewer, the text can be interpreted as a crossing of gazes between East and West.

Keywords: ISIS; violence; video; propaganda; textual analysis

1 Introduction

This paper presents a textual analysis of “A Message to America,” a 4-min 40-s video in English made by Al-Furqan, one of the main studios of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (hereinafter, ISIS), showing the beheading of the American photojournalist

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James Foley. The video was posted on YouTube on August 19th, 2014; the following day, the United States National Security Council confirmed its authenticity. It was the first ISIS beheading video, and it established the pattern and rituals that would be perpetuated in the rest of this disturbing audiovisual corpus. Prior to the fall of the caliphate in 2019, there would be at least another 1,500 videos, 15 % of which would contain graphic violence (Lesaca Esquíroz 2018: 106).

These videos of terror represented and exhibited as a spectacle constitute just one piece of the ISIS propaganda that has been studied by numerous scholars. These studies all concur on two key points:

- 1) It was a shockingly successful comprehensive global propaganda campaign (Al-Rawi 2018; Gómez Montano and Velasco Arias 2015; Lesaca Esquíroz 2017, 2018; Ligon et al. 2015; López 2015; Mahood and Rane 2017; Rey-García et al. 2016; Ryan 2014; Sunde et al. 2021; Winter 2015; Zelin 2014), with a constant presence on social media platforms, especially Twitter (Bauer 2015; Berger and Morgan 2015; Friedman 2014; Klausen 2015; Macnair and Frank 2018), which has effectively created a new urban tribe, “jihad cool,” with its own codes of dress, musical tastes, etc. (Behn 2014; Picart 2015; Qvotrup Jensen et al. 2021). Long before its proclamation, ISIS had already made extensive and effective use of propaganda (Avilés Farré 2017: 215), with its black national flag, emblem and anthem (*nasheed*), and the production of films, posters, pamphlets, etc., as early as 2006. But in mid-2014, the Islamic State’s strategies took a qualitative leap forward with the establishment of the Al-Hayat Media Center, responsible for producing material for Western audiences in English, German, Russian, and French. By December of that same year, ISIS propaganda was being disseminated in 23 languages. And its media outlets were diversifying too: there was its other global production studio, Al-Furqan; 33 regional studios; a magazine in Arabic (*Al Nabá*); five online magazines in foreign languages (*Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* in English, *Dar al Islam* in French, *Konstantiniyye* in Turkish and *Istok* in Russian); its radio network Al-Bayan with “news” bulletins in Arabic, Russian, and English; the off-line propaganda agency Maktaba Al Hama; and most notably of all, its presence on social media platforms, especially Twitter, and the sophisticated use it made of them.
- 2) In view of the first point, ISIS propaganda needs to be analyzed objectively and in depth with the aim of articulating counterpropaganda options (Aly et al. 2014; Berger 2016; De Graaf 2015; Farwell 2014; Leander 2016; Schmid 2015; Sorenson 2014), although this is an objective that goes well beyond the scope of this study.

However, there have been no specific, in-depth studies of the beheading videos. Scholars have analyzed them only incidentally, and as a result there is no clear consensus on certain key aspects. One of these aspects is their quality, as the videos seem on first viewing to exhibit a professional style, and their high aesthetic and technical quality has been pointed out by numerous authors (Gómez Montano and

Velasco Arias 2015; Macnair and Frank 2018; Rey-García et al. 2016). Others, however, while admitting to their technical quality, reject their aesthetic value (Lesaca Esquíroz 2017; Picart 2015).

There seems to be more agreement on the question of their ultimate purpose. Although they are not recruitment videos, they are certainly propaganda, designed primarily to publicize terror and to make it appealing and worthy of imitation, at least in the eyes of the young men who make up their target audience (Gómez Montano and Velasco Arias 2015; Lesaca Esquíroz 2017; Ligon et al. 2015; López 2015; Ryan 2014; Winter 2015; Zelin 2014). It is obvious that these videos succeed in publicizing terror, but do they succeed in making it look attractive? And if so, how do they achieve this? What are the techniques they use?

The last of these questions is related to the role these videos play in what has come to be referred to as “creating the enemy” (Eco 2012; Stella 2009). In this respect, although the way these videos construct the Western enemy has been examined (Heck 2017; Ingram 2016; Lesaca Esquíroz 2018; Rasoulkolamaki and Kaur 2021; Rodríguez-Serrano 2017; Welch 2018), it is also worth exploring how Western viewers process these videos to construct their own enemy: radical Islamism. To this end, it is essential first to define the ideal spectator of these texts, their target audience: whether it is those Muslim youth aged 15 to 25 who browse social media in search of this kind of content, or Westerners who come upon the videos almost accidentally in their news feeds or on their television screens.

2 Objectives

The main objective of this article is to analyze “A Message to America” in order to understand the mechanisms that govern its construction and organize its meaning; in other words, to identify the devices that lay bare its artificial nature, its status as propaganda, and its aim to manipulate. Videos of this kind create stereotypes, mental images with extraordinary power, and to defuse that power it is necessary to recognize the elements that make them so effective. Moreover, only in this way can we shed light on the aspects that scholars have not been able to agree on. Specifically, we seek to answer the following research questions:

- 1) Quality of video: Is it a quality video with a good technical and formal structure regarding Western audiovisual conventions and codes?
- 2) Nature of video: Is it an art video? A documentary? A propaganda film?
- 3) Target audience: Who is it aimed at?
- 4) Objectives: What is the purpose of targeting each type of spectator?

At this point, it is important to introduce the definitions of “art” and “document,” and explain their relationship to propaganda. We rely on Talens et al. (1980) to define the artistic text as a text that demands an aesthetic reading; so, the text will be artistic

if it is an aesthetically dominant articulated structure, if its ordering principle or semantic gesture is aesthetic. Zunzunegui and Zumalde (2019: 36) call documentary to “those texts that make us believe that what they take as an object or matter has happened in the real world and is reflected in that text, offering us a truth (in a semiotic sense) that we can make our own, that we can plausibly share.” And, if a text that demands an aesthetic reading is artistic, and a text that demands a reading in the key of strong belief is documentary, propaganda can manifest itself in both: Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph des Willens*, for example, is a hybrid of art and documentary and, at the same time, it is propaganda, just like any other text.

3 Methods

The methodology used is based on the structural semiotics of Algirdas Julien Greimas (1984), and specifically on textual analysis, placed here “at the service of common sense, free of conceptual digressions and the indiscriminate accumulation of terminology that would nearly always end up constituting a barrier between the object of analysis and the observer” (Zunzunegui 2005: 7).

The video of Foley’s beheading is an audiovisual text; an artwork, a documentary, or propaganda, but a text nonetheless. And our analysis begins and ends with the text because “between the unattainable intention of the author and the arguable intention of the reader there is the transparent intention of the text which disproves an untenable interpretation” (Eco 1992: 78).

Textual analysis provides the researcher with the necessary instruments to deconstruct the structural mechanisms organizing the video’s formal features and reveal how its signifiers and persuasive strategies operate. This analysis thus considers the video’s visuals, the sound, the editing, the performances, the narration, and the enunciation, with the aim of unravelling its denotative (explicit, literal) meaning and its symbolic and connotative values (Calabrese 1985a, 1985b, 1999; Groupe u 2000).

4 Analysis and results

The video is divided into two blocks: the attack (duration: 1 min and 50 s) depicted with archive footage; and the revenge (duration: 2 min and 50 s) with filmed footage. The archive footage is presented to justify the filmed beheading, which, from the perspective of the text, is ISIS’s response to Barack Obama, who began the war by ordering the aerial attack on Erbil.

The attack (four sections):

- The introductory title for the video, in Arabic over a black screen, indicates the addressee of the message: “For the infidels of America.”

- Introduction and interpretative framework. Text in white letters over a black background, in Arabic and English: “Obama authorizes military operations against the Islamic State effectively placing America upon a slippery slope towards a new war front against Muslims.”
- Archive footage. The transition of a flash of white light opens and closes the footage of Barack Obama ordering the bombing.
- The simulated images of a bombing provide proof of the attack, and another text, in Arabic and English, confirms it: “American aggression against the Islamic State.” Fade to black.

The first statement in the video, “For the infidels of America,” is a key to its interpretation (Figure 1). It is the only text that appears solely in Arabic. Why address and at the same time insult the narratees in a language they don’t understand? Clearly, this sentence is not addressed to the American viewer, but to the Muslim, who is secretly invited to watch the message. In this sense, the discourse is addressed to an explicit spectator (the Christian), and an implicit one (the Muslim).

The introductory title is followed by another title in Arabic, beneath which appears the English translation in larger text: “Obama authorizes military operations against the Islamic State effectively placing America upon a slippery slope towards a new war front against Muslims” (Figure 2). This title signals the video’s interpretation of events, encouraging the spectator to adopt its perspective (Barthes 2002 [1982]: 30). This sentence subverts the meaning of Obama’s message, which bursts violently and unpleasantly onto the screen.

The footage showing Obama’s speech appears to have been downloaded directly from the White House website and is shown with interference in the image and sound that lays bare the seams in the editing (Figure 3). In this way, the text shows



Figure 1: The introductory title to the video, in Arabic: “For the infidels of America.”



Figure 2: Introduction.



Figure 3: Archive footage.

that the images we are seeing are a representation, an artifice, archival images belonging to the past. The footage was recorded on Thursday, 7 August 2014, and forms part of a statement by Obama that is completely decontextualized here. On that day, the president spoke to his nation's TV viewers; now, however, he is speaking to internet users around the world. And his words, intended to justify the air attack on Erbil, have been turned into the cause of his countryman Foley's death.

On the screen we see Barack Obama in the White House State Dining Room. The president offers a clear and carefully structured speech. When he speaks of ISIS, he speaks of terrorists and death. When he speaks of the US attacks, he uses euphemisms

like “operations in Iraq,” “targeted air attacks” (the word “targeted” is used three times), “humanitarian effort,” “targeted military action,” and “urgent assistance.”

The next day, the Pentagon announced that US fighter jets (Hornet F-18s) had fired on ISIS artillery on the outskirts of Erbil. This is represented in the video by a black-and-white overhead shot of an aerial attack on a computer screen (Figure 4). The bombing is accompanied by noise, unintelligible speech, and another title on the screen, in Arabic and English: “American Aggression Against the Islamic State.”

This technique evokes the strategy used in “Peace, Little Girl” (DDB 1964), a presidential campaign ad for Lyndon B. Johnson that shows a girl counting petals on a daisy while a voice begins a countdown in Russian; when the count reaches zero, an atomic bomb explodes. This simple juxtaposition of images was intended to portray Johnson’s Republican opponent, Barry Goldwater, as a reckless man likely to start a nuclear war.

However, there is a stark contrast between the clinical coldness of the attack and the gruesomeness of the revenge, as these images of modern missiles with their video-game appearance seem sterile compared to Foley’s bloody death. The “American aggression against the Islamic State” is an aerial attack, distant, digital, and impersonal: bombs launched by an anonymous pilot fall from the sky, killing people who are neither named nor shown. The Islamic State’s revenge against the United States, on the other hand, is taken on the ground, direct and personal: James Foley will be beheaded savagely in the desert by a member of ISIS.

The revenge (6 sections):

- The title appearing over a black background in English and Arabic stresses the video’s target audience: “A message for America.”
- Foley’s testimony. Filmed footage of the victim and his executioner in the desert; the prisoner, before he is killed, blames the US government for his death.
- Executioner’s speech. Filmed footage of the executioner blaming Obama and threatening further deaths.



Figure 4: Simulated images of a bombing.

- The executioner begins the beheading. Cut to black.
- James Foley lies dead, decapitated.
- Cliff-hanger. The executioner threatens another execution (Steven Sotloff's). Bright transition and final fade to black.

After the fade to black, the title “A Message to America” appears, in upper case and with obvious visual effects: the letters of the word “message” shine as they appear (Figure 5). The translation of the message in Arabic confirms the theory of the two audiences, two groups of empirical readers, the Christian and the Muslim.

James Foley, a photojournalist kidnapped in Syria in November 2012, and his masked executioner face the camera in a remote desert region, an empty Middle Eastern wasteland to Western eyes (Figure 6). Like the Obama scene, this setting is marked by two flags: the black ISIS flag and the white flag of the producer, both superimposed over the image. The black flag carries an obvious religious connotation, heralding the arrival of the Mahdi, the rightly guided one who “will come to restore the true religion and lead an age of justice before the end of time” (Gómez 2019: 233).

Foley's orange outfit, contrasting with the blue of the sky, brings out the brightness of both colors, and its juxtaposition with the executioner's black attire turns it into a danger sign (Heller 2004 [2000]: 131). But the symbolism of his orange clothing does not end there, because it is the same color that the American civilian Nicholas Berg was wearing when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, al-Qaeda's leader in Iraq, beheaded him in May 2004, in revenge for the torture of prisoners in Abu Ghraib. Since then, this orange uniform, similar to that worn by the prisoners held by the US government in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, has also become the uniform of Western hostages held by ISIS.



Figure 5: The title of the video, in English and Arabic: “A Message to America.”



Figure 6: James Foley and his executioner look straight into the camera.

Despite the clothing and the shaven head, Foley looks refined. We might expect him to cry, shout or grimace ridiculously or horrifically, given that the “grotesque face,” according to Stoichita (2016 [2014]: 37), is one of the most effective tools for representing difference. But he does not. Kneeling beside his executioner, he presents a serene, human face. The image includes one detail that seems out of place: Foley is wearing a microphone. The sight of this device once again undermines the credibility of the depiction, revealing that this man is speaking and being executed for the camera; he is acting, performing his own death on screen.

His performance is for two cameras that film him simultaneously, one positioned in front of him and the other to his left. Thus, the frontal views and wide shots alternate with oblique angled medium shots. The frontal perspective, a visual disengagement (*débrayage*) of the enunciation, places prisoner and executioner face to face with the spectators, who identify with them and cannot avert their gaze. However, the frontal views are always wide shots that maintain a certain distance.

Shortly after this, the screen is split between the current scene and a photograph of the journalist before he was captured (Figure 7). On the screen, the contrast between the two levels of reality is absolute: the Foley of the past, a free American citizen shown in a profile shot, looking at the viewer with an indifferent expression, juxtaposed with the Foley of the present, a prisoner about to die, appealing to the spectator. This strategy again underscores the opaque quality of the image because it reveals that we are not watching Foley’s death but a representation of it, a staging of it for the video.

A second picture of the young Foley then appears on the left half of the screen: a medium-long profile shot. This photograph is disquieting because it doesn’t respect one of the main principles of photographic composition: the law of the gaze. The



Figure 7: Foley, past and present.

portrait leaves no room for the subject's gaze, and the breadth of the space behind his figure gives the impression that he has lived with his back turned on the reality that he is now facing with his execution.

The visual movement is disconcerting for the Western viewer, as the internal organization both of the screen and of each composition forces us to follow the gazes of the characters from right to left, compelling a reading against our cultural tradition (from left to right).

Equally disruptive is the sight of Foley and his executioner looking at the camera and addressing the viewer directly, making it clear that the video is a pose, that the prisoner and executioner had agreed to be filmed (they wanted to gaze, and they did; they wanted to be watched, and they were). In this way, the spectator ceases to be a spy or a mere observer and becomes part of the scene, involved in the execution.

Foley speaks for 1 min and 25 s. His speech is as carefully constructed as Obama's; it is obvious that it was written beforehand and he recites it from memory or reads it (perhaps using a teleprompter).

Careful attention has been given to the form of this verbal message. It starts with the phrase "I call on," which is used three times, in an intensifying message addressed to his fellow citizens, from the most distant to the closest: first his friends, family and loved ones generally; then to his "beloved parents"; and finally, to his brother, John, a member of the US armed forces.

The content of the message is the same for everyone, calling on them to revolt against the government that he identifies as the true killer, although it grows more bitter as it progresses. He tells his parents not to accept anything from the government that killed him with its recent aerial campaign in Iraq. And to his brother John he addresses two rhetorical questions to make him think about the lives he is

destroying, including his own: “Think John, who did they really kill? And did they think about me, you, our family when they made that decision?” Finally, he states that he is already dead, that he died the day that his brother’s colleagues dropped the bomb over Iraq. And he adds three wishes that the viewer knows will not be granted:

- “I wish I had more time.”
- “I wish I could have the hope of freedom and seeing my family once again.”
- “I wish I wasn’t American.”

His speech turns Obama’s on its head. Unlike Obama, Foley speaks of death in direct relation to the actions of the US government. The word “kill” is used twice and the word “killers” once. The word “death” is used twice and “died” once, in addition to a series of death-related metaphors:

- “Hit the last nail in my coffin.”
- “The lives you destroy.”
- “They signed my death certificate.”
- “That ship has sailed.”

Next, the executioner, standing in black with a gun over his shoulder and a knife in his left hand, recites his part slowly (Figure 8). His words are not as striking as his British accent, speaking to the audience in their own language (Lesaca Esquíroz 2017: 230), proclaiming to the world: “You see before you a man who, although raised among Westerners, continues to be a good Muslim.”

His ski-mask ensures his anonymity and turns him into a symbol of resistance. The media would quickly baptize him with the nickname Jihadi John, before the FBI identified him as Mohammed Emwazi, a Kuwaiti-born hip hop artist in his twenties,



Figure 8: The executioner points the knife at the camera, threatening the viewer.

who grew up in a well-off household in west London and studied information systems at the University of Westminster. He would participate in at least six other beheading videos before being killed in a US drone strike in Raqqa.

While he speaks, Jihadi John holds the prisoner from behind, brandishing his knife and pointing at the camera with it (in other words, at Obama, US citizens, and the Western spectator). He gestures in this way on six occasions, five of which coincide with the use of the second person in his speech: “your country,” “your military efforts,” “you are no longer fighting an insurgency,” “by you, Obama,” “your people.” The most obvious aspect of his speech is thus the rhythm of the verbal and visual disengagement of the enunciation (the manifestation of the addresser and the addressee in the discourse), whose connotative function, focusing on the spectator, is reinforced by the use of the second person and the present tense and by the speaker’s frontality and accusatory finger. The purpose once again is to implicate the spectator in the scene; the executioner wants Obama and the whole of the West with him to feel involved in his struggle. This strategy inevitably evokes the poster designed to recruit soldiers during World War I, with Uncle Sam (the personification of the US government) pointing his finger at the spectator while exclaiming: “I want you for US army.”

The one other time when Jihadi John points at the spectator with the knife is when he says: “We are an Islamic army and a State that has been accepted by a large number of Muslims worldwide.” Now he uses the first-person plural: we. In this way, “you” (Foley, Obama, the Americans, the West, the infidels or *kuffaar*) are framed as the bad guys, and “we” (Jihadi John, ISIS, Muslims, the faithful) are the good guys. It is a dichotomous discourse that establishes otherness through its emphasis on the differences between these two groups.

But it is merely a simulated otherness, as millions of Muslims around the world have declared publicly that ISIS has nothing to do with Islam and its principles (Juergensmeyer 2017 [2003]: 74). The Koran, like the Bible, forbids murder: “You shall not kill any person – for God has made life sacred – except in the course of justice” (17:33: 286). However, it is ambivalent in relation to violence, allowing for its use to defend the faith. The Salafi Jihadists thus consider violence to be a legitimate instrument for the creation of a global caliphate (Mahood and Rane 2017), although it is important to acknowledge that they are a minority movement.

After his monologue, the executioner positions himself behind the prisoner, and in a frame connected iconographically with both Christian imagery (see Juan Martínez Montañés’s relief sculpture *Degollación de San Juan Bautista*, 1610–1622) and Muslim imagery (see Behzad’s miniature *Beheading of a King*, late-fifteenth century), he begins to cut his throat (Figure 9). Foley barely even grunts. The cut to black elides the moment of death, concealing it from the spectator. We do not see Foley die; we only see him dead. In fact, although we see the executioner inflict some cuts on him, they do not bleed; they are not the real cuts that the addresser wants the spectator to believe they are. Foley was beheaded, but not in front of the cameras. His



Figure 9: The executioner is about to kill the prisoner.

death, though real, is a fictional death in the video, a death represented in the style of conventional fiction that averts the gaze at the moment of truth.

Nevertheless, the ellipsis reinforces the brutality of the decapitation. The sacrificing of Foley is a profoundly dark, ancestral religious ceremony, the offering of a human lamb to the gods. He does not die at gunpoint like ISIS's non-Western hostages, and his beheading is neither quick nor clean. This would once have been deemed a noble, aristocratic death, the death of a Samurai. The executioner uses a short combat knife and works slowly, as if he were sacrificing a lamb. This ghastly form of murder is a provocation that once again will have a different effect on different spectators: the Westerner will be horrified while the Muslim will see a demonstration of force and a just revenge. It is in fact a clever form of war propaganda, capable of reconciling the old forms of killing (decapitation by knife is a powerfully atavistic, universal symbol) with the new media technologies used to film and disseminate it.

Four seconds later, Foley lies dead. A six-second horizontal pan from right to left (the opposite of the traditional direction of reading in the West), taken on a slight angle (connoting the power relationship between the murdered Christian and the Jihadist), shows his body lying face down in a pool of blood, with his arms across his back and his head held in his shackled hands. His body is headless, his feet bare. The murder weapon and his sandals are lying at his side.

The image recalls the paintings of the head of John the Baptist on a tray (José de Ribera 1644; Andrea Vaccaro 1660) and the portraits of cephalophores in Christian iconography, beheaded saints who carried their own heads in their hands. It could also be argued that these videos have started a trend. Jared Leto appeared at the 2019 Met Gala dressed in Gucci with a replica of his decapitated head as an “accessory,” an idea that Gucci had used previously on the catwalk in 2018.



Figure 10: Sotloff is sentenced to death.

The story doesn't stop here. Jihadi John presents another American journalist, kneeling in the same position and wearing the same orange uniform as Foley, and threatens Obama that he will also be murdered (Figure 10). With this "cliff-hanger" everything starts over again. Steven Joel Sotloff (his full name, like Foley's, appears on the screen) would die on September 2nd, 2014.

4.1 Inventory of mechanisms and persuasive strategies

This analysis reveals that the video is a text with a carefully planned narrative and formal structure. The author is familiar with the tools of filmmaking and uses them deliberately to communicate or create the desired effects of meaning and manipulate the spectator. It is a production of professional quality.

The internal architecture is carefully arranged, divided into two blocks: the crime and the punishment, separated by a title. The internal sections are divided by fades to black or transitions marked by flashes of light suggesting a cut in the video signal. The on-screen text appears in two languages: Arabic and English. The archive footage (Obama's speech and the bomb exploding) are juxtaposed in accordance with the logic of evidentiary editing.

It is obvious that the second part has been designed as a fiction sequence. The beheading scene is filmed with multiple cameras, the staging is meticulous, and the costumes have symbolic significance. The dialogues are perfectly polished, as well-structured as the video itself, and peppered with metaphors, repetitions, and rhetorical questions (Foley's speech is almost poetic, an allegory of death). Visual effects are also used, like text with moving, shining letters and cuts in the sound and image.

As a result, “A Message to America” offers a new documentary discourse based on the fictional staging of a real event. Its status as a documentary is obvious not because it presents a “real event” but because it represents it as if it were. In other words, “it attributes a *meaning* to it that the spectator considers realistic, *plausible* or convincing (it constructs a *truth*)” (Zunzunegui and Zumalde 2017: 782). However, like many documentaries (none of which reflects reality as it is), it is the product of a meticulous design intended to manipulate the spectator (to make the spectator do something, or “*faire faire*” in semiotic terminology). Although it is elaborately filmed, the most expressive device is the editing, through which the text constructs a narrative based on a structured argumentative chain of events.

It is therefore a coherent although complex text because, despite its realism, the artificial nature of its construction is repeatedly evident.

It often seems to give the impression of telling the truth. Its narrative structure is thus clearly recognizable (attack and revenge, or crime and punishment), and it is edited with the purpose of developing an argument, giving the impression of proving what is being asserted; the filming style is also realistic, without dramatic lighting or grotesque characters, and the image generally confirms what the text is saying and vice versa (even if the meaning emerges from their interrelation, they could say different things and, in their contradiction, generate a new meaning).

However, combined with the poetic discourses and visual effects mentioned above, are other mechanisms that highlight the representational nature of the text: time jumps and ellipses; the ISIS flag and the producer’s logo added in post-production and functioning as signatures; the visible microphone; the split shots of reality; the gazes to camera; the verbal and visual disengagement of the enunciation through the use of the second person and an accusatory finger and, finally, the bogus killing, because this is a real video of a killing that is whisked away from view. It is not just that the scene of the execution is staged (at every moment, the characters, although not actors, are playing themselves, reciting words written by scriptwriters), but that the execution does not even take place in front of the camera. Its initial stage, what we see, is pure theatricality and representation; the subsequent killing, however, is real.

The text thus aims to create the illusion of reality, but at the same time it is opaque, self-reflexive: what it presents is not Foley’s death, but merely a representation of it. It is appalling to watch someone having to act out his own death, rather like being forced to dig your own grave.

The video could be interpreted as a crossing of gazes between East and West. In the first section, it is the Western gaze, with a visual movement organized from left to right. The West is archive footage; an indoor space, familiar and luxurious; a past time; a simulated attack, cold and impersonal; dark colors. In the second section, it is the Eastern gaze, from right to left. The East is filmed footage; an outdoor space, indeterminate, unfamiliar, empty, and remote; a present time that alludes to the future; a revenge that is simulated, but heated and personal; bright colors.

These parallels underpin the semi-symbolic system of the text, in which multiple contrasts in the expression of each section echo a semantic contrast in direct contact with profound structures of meaning: crime and punishment. This redundant contrast grabs our attention and guides our interpretation (Calabrese 1999): the West committed a cold, black-hearted crime; Islam responds with a violent but luminous revenge.

This video communicates its own message and from the outset determines the subjects of its enunciation: a narrator, ISIS, is literally sending a message to a narratee, America. At the same time, from the text it can be inferred that the author, also explicit, is ISIS. This is confirmed by the titles in Arabic, Foley's orange uniform, and the symbols of the terrorist group (the flag and logo of al-Furqan on the screen). Through these symbols, which appear (and disappear) in the second part of the video, ISIS identifies itself as author of both the killing and the audiovisual piece. The author vindicates its actions, while laying bare its productive activity and underscoring the artificial construction of the text.

It is a text that consciously targets two main groups of spectators that are not treated in the same way: the "American infidels" and the West, on the one hand; and the faithful, the Jihadists, and like-minded Muslims, on the other. In this way, although the explicit spectator is American (as suggested in the title, "A Message to America"), the introductory title does not overlook the Muslim spectator, for whom the reading is different: where the Western spectator sees a president trying to defend his countrymen and an innocent victim murdered in cold blood by a brutal killer, the Muslim spectator sees a foreign president declaring war on his fellow Muslims and a prisoner of war executed by a soldier of God in the name of the true faith.

Moreover, the video engages the Muslim spectator sympathetically (with the first title in Arabic), while taunting the Western spectator, as demonstrated by the interference over the images of Obama, the cowardly aggression with its video-game appearance, the orange uniform that was already part of contemporary iconography, the appeal of the Western victim (who looks at the spectators face to face and emotionally implicates them in his death), with his speech blaming his fellow Americans, the executioner pointing at the spectator in a nod to classic US war propaganda, his British accent (dismissing any ideas that the danger and the threat comes from external agents), the severed head and the threat of continued violence, as well as the sweeping leftward movement of the filming. This last strategy is highly effective because it requires Western viewers to follow the narrative in the opposite direction to their cultural tradition, creating an effect of tension and visual discomfort.

But it is without doubt the open ending with its suggestion of an endless repetition of the act depicted that is the most horrifying element. Foley, like Lewis Payne, the condemned man whose portrait is captioned by Roland Barthes with the words: "He is dead and he is going to die" (1989 [1980]: 166), has died and will die every time

the video is played. And so will Sotloff and those who follow him in a series without beginning or end.

The coexistence of two types of empirical spectators and of one model reader that foresees opposite interpretations (an interpretative bifurcation or a double reading) ensures that the video fulfils the two primary objectives of ISIS propaganda: (1) to terrorize the West, i.e., to show the world the extreme cruelty of the capital punishment it inflicts on its foreign hostages in accordance with its own severe interpretation of Sharia law; and (2) to legitimize ISIS, presenting its strength and serving as a manifesto declaring the underlying logic of its ultimate goal: to eliminate anything standing in the way of the caliphate and its vision of Islam.

The liturgical sacrifice of beheading and its cultural connotations form part of this strategy. On the one hand, it evokes the Old Testament story of David and Goliath, common to both cultures. Just like David, the knife-wielding soldier of God will vanquish the American giant. On the other hand, Foley's severed head recalls the head of John the Baptist in one of the most iconic episodes in the New Testament (Larrauri 2015: 89), an allusion that will be recognized above all by Westerners, who will see it as the head of a saint unjustly murdered, offered "on a silver platter" to the spectator.

The perverse pleasure in the depiction of the beheading clearly also has a cultural origin. As is well known, anthropomorphic images are traditionally taboo in the Islamic world. The *Hadiths*, the collection of texts compiling the "tradition" of the days of Mohammed, warns that images constitute blasphemy because they imitate divine creation. The Jihadists, however, have shown themselves to be prodigious producers of images and videos to spread their faith in what looks like a blasphemous contradiction. Although the Salafi movement permits takfirism (infidelity to Islam to protect the faith), this long pan could perhaps be their way of asking forgiveness given that, as Hans Belting puts it:

... It was possible to be protected from images of living beings if their heads were removed and they were left faceless, since "image is equal to head. If the head is removed, there is no image." The equation of image and head is anthropologically significant. In the image, a head gazes or seems to gaze. It can therefore be confused with a living head. If in the image there is no gaze, then it ceases to be taboo and is reduced to a neutral thing or ornament. (Belting 2012: 58)

This analysis has demonstrated ISIS's capacity to adapt the content of Islam to both the Western mode of representation and to the globalized media. In Javier Lesaca's words: "All evidence suggests that Islamic State is not the product of a 'clash of civilizations'. On the contrary, it is the product of a Western civilization that has been adopted and spread to every corner of the planet."

Even if we agree with Debray (2007), this analysis also confirms that the contemporary world has become too interwoven to be characterized by dichotomy

any longer. In a (post-)modern world where, despite cultural differences, it is possible to speak of a “universal popular culture” (Huntington 2006: 25), everything is so intertwined that binaries of “us” and “them,” of friends and enemies, require elaborate constructions: “Difference exists; otherness is constructed,” writes Stoi-chita (2016 [2014]: 13). This video constructs its enemy through the metonymic character of Obama (representing the United States and even the whole Western world), and at the same time it contributes to our construction of Jihadi John (who embodies all Jihadists).

As Umberto Eco suggests, having enemies is an “ancestral need” (Eco 2012: 34). This audiovisual text, which appears to posit a radical separation between Islam and the West, is stylistically and ideologically modern and Western. What the text calls our attention to is not the death it depicts, but the fact that what we are seeing is a representation, a persuasive construction of the truth using strategies of fiction; in short, a simulation.

5 Conclusions

A constructed otherness, a simulated death ... this analysis has hopefully challenged spectators to read these videos critically rather than accepting them without question.

To answer the four research questions posed at the beginning of this article, we can assert that while the video of Foley’s beheading has been carefully and professionally constructed, it is not an artistic text, a structure articulated around a dominant aesthetic, as Talens et al. (1980), drawing on Genette (1997 [1994]), would argue. It is a documentary purposefully constructed with stylistic features drawn from fiction. And it is also ultimately a propaganda video, with a clearly connotative function, whose objective is to influence the spectator’s thoughts, attitudes, and behavior. To this end, it uses propaganda techniques such as the constant repetition of an idea, appeals to fear, the black-or-white fallacy (you are either with me or against me) and half-truths (stressing one fact to camouflage falsehoods). It is not, as it claims, “a message to America.” It is a message for two worlds, Christian and Muslim, and the video aims only to underscore the differences between them. It thus represents a brazen crossing of gazes, a battle between civilizations. Considering its function as propaganda, it is reasonable to assume that videos like this one should not be shown on television screens around the world; and yet, they have spread like wildfire. The solution is therefore not to ban them, but to encourage their analysis and advocate a critical approach on the part of the spectator. As proposed in this article, these messages can be defused through their deconstruction. Only in this way do they cease to be dangerous weapons.

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