CHAPTER 4

The Twenty-First Century:

Religious Terrorism, Politics, Image and the Brutality of the Spectacular
4.1 The rise of Islamist fundamentalism: Al-Qaeda, paradox, irrationality

On September 11, 2001, Al-Qaeda terrorists hijacked three American commercial aircraft full of passengers and crashed them into the World Trade Center in New York. A few minutes later, both Towers crumbled leading three thousand people to their horrifying deaths. This event, occurring at the dawn of the twenty-first century, represents the defining moment of contemporary terrorism as an ultramodern, or postmodern phenomenon.¹ Those unprecedented terrorist attacks on Western territory did not just shape the ways we view terrorism today but they admittedly divided the world into a pre-9/11 and a post-9/11 one. Simply put, all discussions about terrorism today begin with, or are premised upon, Al-Qaeda’s horrific deeds on that specific day after which, as many people duly repeat, the world will never be the same again.

The decline of leftist and nationalist terrorist violence in the late 1980s was almost simultaneous with the rise, during the following decade, of so-called religious terrorism. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Communist model (which evoked, falsely or not, the sense of the “end of history” and the beginning of a new world order based upon capitalism) delegitimized the socialist agenda as well as leftist struggles around the world including the Middle East. The decline of socialism in combination with the Iranian Islamic revolution reinstated religion in people’s consciousness and legitimized religious violence as well. Indeed, most terrorist attacks during the 1990s were believed to be acts of Islamist fundamentalists or other (non Western) religious fanatics. A prominent example is the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma, USA, which killed 168 people. Before 9/11, that attack was the first mass-casualty terrorist incident on American soil. Responsible for the attack was not a religion-motivated group, as it had been initially surmised, but Timothy McVeigh, an American Gulf War veteran with right-wing convictions and an absolute determination to make them known to the world. The Oklahoma bombing, however, did have something in common with extremist religious (Islamist) violence as it has emerged in the past few decades: they were both non-fastidious and non-particular in terms of the extent of the violence they would exercise.
For the religious terrorist, violence is a “sacramental act or divine duty executed in direct response to some theological demand or imperative. Terrorism thus assumes a transcendental dimension, and its perpetrators therefore often disregard the political, moral, or practical constraints that may affect other terrorists.”

Terrorists motivated by religion see themselves as “outsiders” aiming at fundamentally changing the existing order, while “this sense of alienation also enables [them] to contemplate far more destructive and deadly types of terrorist operations than secular terrorists.”

Religious terrorism, nowadays, is seen as permeated by the logic of indiscriminate violence against fellow or foreign civilians with the express purpose of putting a usually political (rather than religious) message across. Therefore, greater lethality means more attention from the media and, consequently, greater persuasiveness through psychological blackmail. Religious terrorists do not take hostages. They aim at killing as many innocent people as possible—rarely do such terrorists acknowledge the innocence of a victim because, in their view, there are no such victims. And even when they have taken hostages, it is just to put them to death or “execute” them in a ritualized manner in front of a camera so that the trembling world can watch through the internet. After 9/11 religious terrorism had almost invariably been associated with Islamist extremist violence which was often repackaged as “new terrorism” that opposed itself to the “old,” revolutionary kind of terrorism:

[T]he coinage of “new terrorism” has been part and parcel of an incendiary discourse that is designed for the sole purpose of relegating “terror” to an alien domain. Unlike “old” terrorism, which is defined as a violent but unlawful form of political resistance, “new terrorism” [supposedly] refers to the non-conventional, non-political and even “irrational” violence that primarily targets western civilians. Furthermore, such “irrationality” of violence is said to be motivated by terrorists’ perception that civilian populations in the west are “complicit” with their state policies against them.

If revolutionary terrorism was about “rational” political violence aspiring to right a wrong or point to the need of uprooting an injustice, the “new” kind of terrorism is about “irrational” “political” activity that does not only aspire to punish those accepting the injustice done but also to create generalized confusion as to what its true religious or political goals might be.
Over the past fifteen years Al-Qaeda has been synonymous with religious terrorism, at least until very recently—when ISIS made explicit to the world that a new wave of religious terror that is even more brutal and irrational would rampage the planet. Despite the newness of its 9/11 strike at the heart of America, Al-Qaeda was hardly a new terrorist organization in 2001. The group (whose name in Arabic means “The Base”) appeared in the 1980s during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan when foreign fighters flowed into the country to assist the resisting mujahidin. Allegedly the name of the group was first used in 1988 in reference to a number of Afghan Arabs who had agreed to be part of an Islamic “rapid reaction force” whose mission was to oppose future invaders of Muslim territories.5 Al-Qaeda’s ideology and goals were never hard to define theoretically. Starting off with the “sinful” presence of U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia, Osama Bin Laden, leader of the group at the time of the September 11 attacks, now dead, went on to talk about the necessity of uniting all Muslim believers (the ummah) and creating an independent Muslim state—a caliphate—ruled by shariah law and the moral, social, and religious practices related to a close and literal (rather than a metaphorical and metaphysical) reading of the Koran.6 According to Laden, the creation of the caliphate—which, by the way, ISIS is currently (at the time of writing this project in 2015) consolidating—has always been prevented by the continuous and tyrannical interference of the West in the Middle East.

Al-Qaeda primarily addresses a Muslim constituency and calls attention to the fact that it is Christian Crusaders as well as a Zionist conspiracy (the Jews) that work against the possibility of the caliphate. In other words, the West has supposedly declared war on Islam and therefore Muslims have to strike back by unleashing “jihad” (interpreted by Islamist militants as “armed struggle” even though it only means “struggle”) in order to protect the ummah from the presumed unholy Western conspiracy. The problem is that Al-Qaeda, to counteract the influence and activity of the West on Muslim countries, announced jihad not just against Western forces (military personnel as well as civilians, diplomats, etc.) but also against corrupt—that is, secular—Islamic regimes that promote the interests and mores of the West in the area. In fact, the Al-Qaeda terrorists declared jihad even against Muslim populations that, according to them, are not “Islamic” or “Muslim” enough, that is, not staunch and consistent defenders of the Koran. It is evident from the above that it has become almost impossible to narrow down to just a few categories the parties, people, or
countries that over the years Al-Qaeda has threatened with terrorist violence. Reading or listening to such chilling messages as the one below makes one think that it all comes down to practically a total annihilation of “nonbelievers”—this last category obviously being broadly and arbitrarily defined:

Allah commanded us to strike the Kuffar (unbelievers), kill them, and fight them by all means necessary to achieve the goal. The servants of Allah who perform Jihad . . . are permitted to use any and all means necessary to strike the active unbeliever combatants for the purpose of killing them, snatch their souls from their body, cleanse the earth from their abomination. . . . The goal must be pursued even if the means to accomplish it affect . . . unintended passive [populations] such as women, children and any other passive category specified by our jurisprudence. This permissibility extends to situations in which Muslims may get killed if they happen to be . . . near the intended enemy. . . . Although spilling sacred Muslim blood is a grave offense, it is . . . mandated in order to prevent . . . [the abandonment of] Jihad. . . .

“Jihad,” then, is the magical word, the password through which Al-Qaeda terrorists have access to an ever-expanding world of religious conflict and apocalyptic rage. It is the metaphysical key to unlocking maximalist (but wistful) thoughts about Islamic world domination. “Jihad” as a slogan or catch-all phrase points to the embodiment of an apocalypse, the sublime realization of God’s will at the expense of apostates, nonbelievers, polytheists and generally all those doing harm to Islam. The very utterance of the word “jihad,” that is, serves to spread fear in the mind of the enemy as well as the hearts of their own Muslim constituencies.

Aside from being an essential signal for generalized insurrection against the domination of evil, “jihad” functioned also as a rhetorical ploy for playing into the darkest fantasies of Western and Islamic people, and thereby ensuring that the right message would be received by the intended audience. Al-Qaeda was always anxious about its efficiency in communicating the threat it posed to Western hegemony as well as persuading Islamic militants that changing the world was a cause well worth fighting for. Like all terrorist organizations, Al-Qaeda depended upon the media to reach its audiences, mostly Arab television networks and the internet. We have already established that terrorists have a certain fascination with incendiary words and
impressive statements regarding a future act of asymmetric violence, almost as if they wanted to preempt the legitimacy of their otherwise unacceptable behavior; or as though the verbal message added real meaning and alleviating symbolism to their deed. What usually happened in Al-Qaeda’s case was that the Western media would rebroadcast and translate the messages in English for the whole world to hear. On the one hand, the “exoticism” of the language imbued Laden’s message with mystery and fearsomeness, but on the other, it pointed to the danger of Western constituencies becoming “lost in translation”:

While this global communication strategy act[ed] as a force maximizer for Al Qaeda’s messages, it risk[ed] misdirecting them. . . . On the one hand, [the group was trying to] convince targeted governments that its policy goals [were] limited to the Middle East . . . [and on the other it] sought to mobilize [militant Islamists] by pledging to transform the entire world. . . . To counteract this problem, Al Qaeda typically address[ed] the audience to whom it [was] speaking.⁹

Al-Qaeda, therefore, was always conscious of the power of rhetoric and the importance of spoken messages and their communicability to diverse audiences. Its close attention to rhetoric, narrative and theoretical substantiation of the validity and necessity of destructive violence will be useful later, in our discussion of the differences between the practices and (almost ideological) assumptions of Al-Qaeda and the apolitical and hardly ideological conceptions underpinning the more recent terrorist outrages of the Islamic State.
4.2 Modernity, religiousness, and the Enlightenment premise

How is it possible that one is still overemphasizing religion, let alone religious terrorism, at the turn of the twenty-first century? Why is religion so important to over-technological modernity? Shouldn’t we have made the transition from superstition and religiousness to reason and rationality as the Enlightenment had already predicted we would do? According to the principles of the mid-eighteenth century, human behavior would be enlightened by the activation of logic and by the act of prioritizing human experience and systematized thought over tradition, prejudice and mysticism. Empirical thought and the natural sciences would liberate humanity from the chains of religious metaphysics and convention thereby allowing it to progress into the future in unimaginable ways. Progress through logic constituted one of the basic premises of the Enlightenment, a premise which was in direct opposition to the dogmatic thought and determinism of the Catholic Church in Europe.
One of the assumptions of the eighteenth century was that scientific progress and enlightened thought would emancipate humanity from religious belief and the medievalism of the church: the more educated the people the less dependent upon religious institutions. The ideas of progress, rationality and logic still underlie the modern (Western) world. Paradoxically, however, the more we progress towards the future and a more sophisticated and technologically advanced society, the more we seem to regress into a less secular state: “By the mid-1970s . . . sociologists and anthropologists were surprised to find that the seemingly unstoppable advance of secularism had come to a halt. Instead, conservative religious groups were springing up on all continents and in all cultures.”

In the Middle East, predominant was the example of Iran with the overthrow of the Shah by Khomeini in 1979—the so-called Islamic revolution—and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In 1980, a year after the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini set the parameters for what exactly the existence of an Islamic state entailed and left no doubt about the origin of sponsorship of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism:

We must strive to export our Revolution throughout the world and must abandon all idea of not doing so, for not only does Islam refuse to recognize any difference between Muslim countries, it is the champion of all oppressed people. . . . We must make plain our stance toward the powers and superpowers and demonstrate to them despite the arduous problems that burden us. Our attitude to the world is dictated by our beliefs.

In other words, Khomeini predicts the shattering of all secularist regimes in the area and grounds that prediction upon the premise of the superiority of Islamic law to non-Islamic or secular law. Such a belief paves the way for sanctioning, in the future, terrorist activity (undertaken by religious groups espousing Khomeini’s system of beliefs) that will be based upon the premise of Islam’s “natural” superiority.

In modern times, to progress from hard-gained secularism back to religious fundamentalism constitutes a paradox. How can that paradox be explained? If modernity is associated with individual liberty, economic freedom, aestheticism and secularism, why has it turned religious at the same time? For one thing, religious revivals at the end of the twentieth century seem to have countered precisely the overwhelming domination of globalization—a by-product of modernity. If globalization attends to the needs of the “global community”—which is homogenized

and voracious—who will attest to the particular needs of local communities? In other
words, globalization may have proved beneficial in many respects—in connecting
people from different places in the world, for instance—but it has frustrated
expectations in some other cases. Societies, especially of the Middle East or Africa
that haven’t gone “fully global” yet, may

experience globalization as a threat. From their perspective, not only
does globalization seem to fail to deliver on the promise of prosperity,
it is sometimes viewed as a pretext for the imposition of alien values
and culture. Globalization, therefore, has accentuated the conflict
between the pre-modern, modern and late modern sections of
developing societies and, thus, contributed to the general sense of
instability which has marked many of these countries’ recent history.

[In this context of emotional, psychological and economic insecurity],
religion was the more obvious source of identity. . . . Religion offered
a sense of direction and guidance . . . and provided meaning, direction
and a sense of belonging in a world which appeared to have lost its
way.12

In several cases, the economic plight of those living in societies that have been left
behind or haven’t adapted to the new laws of globalization soon enough may well
lead them directly in the arms of religious fundamentalism. In Jean Baudrillard’s own
terminology, today’s fundamentalist terrorism “is not the product of a traditional
history of anarchism, nihilism, and fanaticism” but rather constitutes “the
contemporary partner of globalization.” The religious (Islamist) fundamentalist—who
is the carrier of just one type of fundamentalism, the other being Western and
Christian fundamentalisms—emblematizes the existence of a “heterogeneous force”
(which, for Baudrillard, is just one among many other heterogeneities) working
against not only “the global-techno-culture” but also “the mental system of
globalization” which favors a terrible homogenization of cultural particularity. In this
framework, there breaks out “a crushing revisionism vis-à-vis modernity and
progress” which takes the form of a non-historical as well as non-nostalgic “violent,
abnormal, and irrational” reaction against the “abstract universality of the global.”13

Baudrillard implicitly accepts the notion that this “irrationality” may present itself as
such—as “irrational”—in the mind of the globalizing West.
In a nutshell, reverting to religion in modern and late modern societies of the East or the West by no means entails a return to a traditional or more authentic way of living; rather it constitutes a forceful reaction to globalization—which, for countries of the Second or Third World is seen as a Trojan horse, an insidious way for the West to infiltrate the societies and cultures of the rest of the globe and impose its own values upon them. In that sense, both the emergence of religion and religious terrorism at the turn of the twenty-first century constitute new phenomena rather than older forms of political expression. For example, is there any real traditional and historical dimension in Osama bin Laden’s December 2001 public declaration blatantly calling for a ruthless jihad against all other religions? In his “Message to the Youth of the Muslim Ummah,” Laden argues that jihad has become fard-ain [obligatory] upon each and every Muslim. . . . The time has come when all the Muslims of the world, especially the youth, should unite and soar against the kufr [nonbeliever] and continue jihad till these forces are crushed to naught, all the anti-Islamic forces are wiped off the face of this earth and Islam takes over the whole world and all other false religions.14 Obviously, Laden’s “jihad,” launched in the aftermath of the terrorist attack in New York, bears ahistorical and utopian overtones that create a mythical reality of a long-awaited battle between Islam and its infidel adversaries. Long before 2001, Samuel Huntington, in “The Clash of Civilizations,” had ascertained that by no means did history “end” after the fall of communism and the end of the Cold War insofar as major conflicts between civilizations and religions were in store in the twenty-first century. Huntington was partly correct to talk about the probability of religious wars in the new century, but what he could not have anticipated are the ruptures created within each civilization by separate religious sects, extremist factions or parties who speak arbitrarily in the name of religion as a whole.

Bin Laden’s “Message to the Youth” cited above can very well be interpreted in that framework. He speaks in the name of all the Muslims and empowers himself as the sole defender of Islam on earth by invoking a twisted version of jihad to fit his polarizing agenda. It could be argued that his fundamentalist vision of Islam taking over the whole world represents a revisionary attempt to reconceptualize Islam as always already inimical to all other (inferior) religions and as the only authentic form of human existence. Such an attempt points towards reconstructing the traditions and
culture of Islam by treating them retrospectively as other than what they truly were; namely, by treating them as self-righteously fundamentalist. In this parallel universe where Islam is reconfigured as intrinsically fundamentalist and intolerant of other cultures and lifestyles, the Islamic element becomes Islamist.

Islamist fundamentalism/terrorism is a rather recent phenomenon that has emerged as a reaction to the suppression of religion as the dominant way of living and a public affair in the modern world. In general, fundamentalism fiercely opposes modern societies’ tendency to render religious belief a private affair. Fundamentalists espouse (what they see as) “fundamental” values ranging from an austere lifestyle to a close and literal interpretation of holy texts. It goes without saying that Islamist fundamentalists feel that their dreams of living a flawless holy life cannot be fulfilled in modern secularism that favors the separation of religion from the public sphere and prioritizes a globalized or even hybrid identity for the citizen. As a result, they develop the propensity to cordon themselves off from the cosmic, cosmopolitan—and thereby, hubristic—(Westernized) world by alienating themselves from it, and often, by radicalizing themselves.

Islamist terrorism is inextricably intertwined with the notion of Islam as a political entity rather than religious dogma. Political Islam (or Sunni Islam), very much a product of the second half of the twentieth century, has justified several acts of terror against “infidels”—that is, people not worshipping Allah but a different kind of God—throughout the years and it would not be an exaggeration to say that Islamist terrorism has defined the precarious age we are living in. When the religious element turns political, metaphor turns into pure literality, and this is exactly the mechanism of rationalization activated by Islamist fundamentalists who, driven by their fanaticism and, more often than not, misled by their insufficient education and their eagerness to find in real life the exact analogue of theoretical and metaphorical teachings from their holy books, rush into terror and acts of extreme violence in order to construct ways of aligning theory and reality (or belief and action). The high death toll that we witness nowadays when there is a terrorist attack by Islamist fundamentalists is related to the attackers’ agonizing attempt to provoke the ruling regime by challenging its stability through acts that generate great publicity and encouraging other Muslims to join their movement against the common enemies. Their violent acts carry a strange symbolism that resembles the propaganda of the deed adopted by many different terrorist organizations or movements of the past.
The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, one of the most radical religious terrorist groups of the twentieth century, embodied the spirit of Islamist fundamentalism and terrorism insofar as it called for jihad—which, in this case, carries the meaning of the violent overthrow of the Egyptian government—so that a true Islamic state might flourish under the rules of shariah law. Sayyid Qutb, the “ideological godfather of Islamist militancy,” spoke of the need to fight the oppression of anti-Islamic governments alongside their Western allies and collaborators. The underlying assumption here is that one is inevitably anti-Islamic if one is allied to a Western government or culture. Fanaticism springs directly from such a dichotomous, polarized, thinking that recognizes that self (Islam) and other (non-Islam) are poles apart from each other. Another popular Islamist (Sunni) organization unleashing terror in Egypt after the Muslim Brotherhood was a group called Al-Jihad, or “The Islamic Group of Egypt” which became famous after the successful assassination of President Anwar Sadat in 1981. Al-Jihad allegedly wanted Egypt to be governed by Islamic law and its intention was to bring about a popular uprising of Muslims. Its leader, Abd Al-Salam Faraj, a former electrician without any religious education worth speaking of—half-education or none at all was the typical motif in Sunni Islamist organizations—took the Koran to the letter as far as the interpretation of “jihad” is concerned, wishing to render metaphoric language into full-blown physical reality (or what we think of as metaphysical religion into real, political action), thus coming up with, or inventing, a model for converting words (or literature) into gory deeds, as if squeezing real blood out of words of insurgency and resistance. The “unaesthetic” dimension of the holy text would, in other words, be rendered audible, palpable and “aesthetic.”

In a pamphlet that Faraj wrote entitled The Neglected Duty, he argues that those that interpret the word of the Koran and the real life of Muhammad in a metaphorical or abstract manner are the ones who actually betray the faith of the Muslims. In addition, all those religious scholars who take jihad to mean primarily a spiritual struggle against one’s own evil and weak nature serve the interests of modernist, apathetic and utterly blasphemous status quos and regimes. According to Faraj, going back to jihad means resuscitating Islam. This struggle will have to be the responsibility of all men (as it used to be in the distant past) and not just the military. Faraj points out that if one takes a good look at Muhammad’s life, one realizes that jihad as fighting can only mean “confrontation and blood.” As the Koran orders,
“[s]lay the polytheists wherever ye find them, seize them, beset them, lie in ambush for them everywhere”; fight them “and God will punish them at your hands, will humiliate them and aid you against them and bring healing to the breasts of people who are believers.”\textsuperscript{17} Of course, the holy book of Islam is here referring to the polytheists but that is a minor detail for Faraj who ventures willfully or not into a relative misreading of it. Apostates have to be terrorized and killed according to Faraj:

The Rulers of the Age are in apostasy from Islam. They were raised at the tables of Imperialism, be it Crusaderism or Communism or Zionism. They carry nothing from Islam . . . though they pray . . . and claim to be Muslims. It is a well-established rule of Islamic law that the punishment for an apostate will be heavier than for [someone] who is by origin an infidel. . . . An apostate \textit{has} to be killed even if he is \textit{unable} to go to war. An infidel who is unable to go to war should not be killed.\textsuperscript{18}

If apathy, moderation and consensus among different civilizations constitute blasphemous behaviors for Islamist fundamentalists, the injunction to take matters into their own hands—“God will punish them at your hands”—is decisive in the transformation of a radical theorist of violence into an active militant and a terrorist. Philosophically speaking, modernist apathy—symptomatic of globalization’s leveling tendencies, if we are to agree with Baudrillard—is here treated as the exact opposite of Islamist militancy and self-legitimating violent action. In this light, the true Muslim is apparently one who dispenses justice himself as God’s only representative on earth and in His very name, rather than someone who stoically as well as indolently awaits the Second Coming in order to judge or be judged.

4.3 Aesthetic attraction to apocalyptic violence

The various misinterpretations of Islamism revolving around the conscious attempts to restore to Islam the terrible power and significance it supposedly had in the past have led to the appearance of Islamist violence. Qutb’s and Faraj’s violent revisionist representations of the Islamic faith and practice created misconceptions as to the real
nature and meaning of religion. Islamist terrorists think of God as a real megacomputer who grants actual, tangible power to those He thinks fit. There is nothing more aesthetically appealing than the image of God as a powerful leader bestowing upon the chosen ones the gift of deciding who lives and who dies, an image resembling that of a soldier of the Apocalypse. There is nothing more irreligiously attractive than a vengeful God inflicting terrorist violence against anyone who does not comply with His exhortations. If religion is a narrative about power, then it sounds like a beautiful one:

Islam means “submission.” Theologically, it means submission to God. . . . But historically it has meant . . . submission to authority, to tradition, to culture, and sometimes even to the baser human instincts. . . . The corruption of the religious scholar and the distortion of religious knowledge are the most profound and difficult moral tests that Islamic society must undergo. The Prophet Muhammad . . . was aware of how the interpretation of religion depends on human perceptions. . . . Many contemporary Muslims tend to think of God as an instrument of power. Not as . . . the Motivator of the Universe, but as a personal power source . . . that can be called on to defeat or outstrategize your opponents. . . . If you pay your dues to God by maintaining basic rituals and practices . . . God will requite you by smashing your enemies.19

Islamist radicals endorsing acts of terrorist violence espouse an exclusivist rather than pluralist interpretation of the Koran—which is incidentally already suffused with pluralistic elements and examples of respecting difference and the other.20 The renunciation of pluralist readings of the holy book by hard-line Islamists resulted in the persecution of all—non-Muslims and Muslims alike—who, in the radicals’ eyes, risked contaminating Islam with the moral laxity and religious backsliding of modernity or were positively predisposed towards the possibility of a sincere negotiation and communication with other religious or cosmic cultures. Exclusivists sought to cleanse Islam of its foreign influences by violent means since they were “looking for a ‘pure’ and ‘authentic’ language in which to criticize the failed modern Muslim state, a state that had marginalized or displaced traditional religious authorities. . . .”21 Understanding Islam (and any other religion) in such a monolithic mode leads such groups as Al-Qaeda and ISIS to attack not only Western targets but
also “a centuries-old multivocal tradition of pluralism within Islam.” Islamist fundamentalism, that is, lays claim to such transcendental signifiers as “purity,” “authenticity” and Islamic “truth” which, however, point to an aestheticized and mythical Islamist past—the original Islamic society of perfect harmony, purity and divinity established by Muhammad and his comrades.

Qutb, who laid the ideological foundation for Al-Qaeda’s terrorism, taught that that “original” perfect society can be created again not by laymen and common people who have fallen prey to the cobweb of the West, but by a special vanguard of true believers who will organize jihad against the forces of decadence and make sure that the full “sovereignty of God” over every layer of society and life will be restored. Qutb’s visualization of a society with no formal power structures and his firm belief in violence as a reliable means of purifying the world are based upon a made-up myth about Islam as the only source of vitality on earth. What is striking, however, is that to shore up that mythical conception Qutb resorts to aesthetic elaborations of Islam’s superiority. For instance, he contends that religious imagination, rather than logic or intellect, has a catalytic role in the formation of the Islamic movement:

Islam was not a truth to be analyzed, but an ensemble of images that stirred souls and called Muslims to action. The source of this power . . . resided in the [Koran’s] aesthetic propensities, especially its unique abilities of artistic description, which enables readers and listeners to experience the divine message palpably. . . . [J]ust as the artist speaks through forms . . . so too does God communicate to men by means of images designed to render absolute value as intuitive. . . . The Islamist myth harnesses aesthetic power to present the cardinal features of its worldview. The mythic substance of this ideology [namely] the ensemble of images and symbols that crystallize . . . the struggle against the political and cultural power of the West . . . is the vision of Islam’s renewal.

Is aesthetics more powerful and dwarfing than the religious Word, then? Radical Islamism providing the theoretical groundwork for Islamist terrorism looks to the power of images, archetypes and symbols for evoking in the “true” believers’ minds a sense of epic and history making, and thereby rendering the myth of purity a realistic goal for the future.
The emergence of Al-Qaeda marked the advent of an unprecedented kind of international terrorism, one which did not have as its sole intention to publicize a cause or send a message, or even assassinate a statesman or any person of high stature for symbolic reasons; with Al-Qaeda we are reaching new high levels of terrorist destruction which aims consciously at killing innocent civilians in large numbers mostly through suicide attacks but also through planting bombs in symbolic or not areas that are packed with people. The older strategy of hijacking civilian aircraft to divert them to a different location and subsequently make political demands by capturing passengers as hostages was abandoned in favor of more shocking and thereby more effective strategies—destroying aircraft and killing the passengers was suddenly a more fitting choice.

Aside from the impact that Al-Qaeda’s cruel deeds self-evidently had on the citizens of the world, its leadership seemed frequently to wish to plant terror in people’s minds through frightening words and intimidating language. Osama bin
Laden, along with Ayman al-Zawahiri (the former second-in-command, now leader of Al-Qaeda after Laden’s death), had always demonstrated a propensity for dramatic announcement—mostly via video-taped messages disseminated through DVDs or uploaded on certain websites—regarding their future targets. In addition, both exhibited an interest in meticulously explicating the rationale behind attacks which would take place in the future. Bin Laden, especially, seemed to have a preference for narrative, a discursive and theoretical legitimation of Islamist “activism” aiming at persuading the receivers of his messages of the truthfulness and moral righteousness of his acts against people who had allegedly committed crimes and, as a result, were getting their comeuppance for them: “Terrorizing you, while you carry weapons in our land, is a legitimate right and a moral obligation. . . . These youths [our fighters] love death as you love life. . . . They will sing out that there is nothing between us that needs to be explained, there is only killing and neck-smiting.”

On the one hand, bin Laden resorts, reasonably but not rationally, to moral law and ethical obligation to foreground the legitimacy of killing in cold blood, providing also the justification for his acts: “[Y]ou carry weapons in our [holy] land”; on the other, he invokes the terrible and self-justifying materiality of “neck-smiting” which needs no theoretical elaboration or moral grounding. Thus he appears firm in an almost unconditional espousal of violence while reverting to a rhetorical exegesis of his group’s effectiveness: “[W]e love death as you love life.” If bin Laden’s words were accurate (and, as it turned out, they were) his strategic methodology was flawless. If the terrorists did not care about the mundane world but only about the metaphysical plains of the after-life, then they already had an advantage over those desperately clinging to the pleasures of life: to opt for life at all costs rendered one weak and faint-hearted.27 On the same wavelength as bin Laden, but more specific than him, al-Zawahiri issued a fatwa bestowing upon every Muslim the holy “duty” to kill Americans and their allies—both civilians and military—to punish them for their continuing imperialist presence in the middle East.

In spite of all the grandiose proclamations of Al-Qaeda, its actions, albeit lethal and provisionally quite effective in attracting attention to its causes, failed in making a lasting impression upon the international community or igniting horror that was necessary in order to awaken Muslim conscience. The reason was that most of its attacks took place far away from the Western stage thus hardly arousing a serious interest in its deadly operations. For instance, its simultaneous strike at as many as
three American embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Tanzania in August 1998 may have killed 224 people and injured almost 5,000 others, but still, it did not succeed in sending a clear message to America or its allies because it was “local” and, at least seemingly, irrelevant to the group’s theoretical declarations and manifestos: ironically, mostly African Muslims rather than Americans were killed. In fact, the hit backfired on Al-Qaeda since it created confusion as to its supposed “ethics” as well as outrage at the “meaninglessness” of the deaths—as we have already emphasized so far, terrorism, symbol and meaning go hand in hand, and the latter two were certainly lost on the people worldwide. Also, to empathize with the victims the Western viewer would have to feel close to them, both geographically as well as emotionally, and this definitely was not the case. Perpetrating an atrocity far away from the gaze of the interested party might, at best, raise transitorily some theoretical concern, puzzlement or a certain degree of sympathy for the victims but it wouldn’t seriously raise any eye brows in a dramatic way. For an act of terror to have any real effect of . . . terror and panic upon those who are the real addressees of the terrorizing act, it needs to be able to affect almost physically, or at least threaten to affect tangibly and dramatically its audience. If terrorism relies immensely upon the images it creates, and if it is not only about killing but also sending multiple messages to a diverse body of spectators, apparently the dramatic (but utterly real) act of violence has to be brought much closer to the audience that now cannot shrink from seeing or gazing at the act of horror, probably at their own risk. The terrible image, an image of terror, has to be brought home somehow . . .

Such an image of terror and horror was indeed brought home by Al-Qaeda to the U.S. on the morning of September 11, 2001, the first large-scale terrorist catastrophe provoked by Islamist fundamentalists on Western, American soil. Before 9/11, when two hijacked planes were crashed deliberately into the great symbols of capitalism and economy in downtown Manhattan, an act that was, let us recall, almost live on TV channels internationally, and until two more hijacked planes headed for the Pentagon and the White House to finish their destructive mission, nobody had thought that Al-Qaeda would have been capable of making good on its “promises” articulated by its leader in the previous years. That was obviously not an attack that intended to spread terror among its immediate victims, the passengers—who were definitely alarmed, yet hardly aware of what was really happening; it was an attack that aimed at spreading terror among those witnessing it. Never before was
Islamic fundamentalism and American citizens/viewers in such a close proximity to each other at the very heart of America, something which created for the first time an eerie feeling of terrorism’s palpability and brutal reality. Whereas in the past mass religious terror concerned other countries and nations, which automatically turned every act into something too distant and therefore too unreal and quasi-fictional, this time every citizen of the First World—including the “non innocent” (according to bin Laden) Americans—would be able to have an almost first-hand experience of real terror and thus get a taste of the real horror felt by citizens in other less developed countries around the globe.

9/11 admittedly ushered into the new era a novel form of ultra-terrorism that combined high efficiency, accuracy, inventiveness and infinite inhumanity on the part of the terrorists. Everybody agreed to the unprecedented nature of the attack. True, attacking the heart of Western economy and democracy using the West’s own technological means—civilian aircraft—and modernist products—such as the Twin Towers—against themselves seemed not just diabolical but also utterly ironic. Indeed, the irony consisted in the realization that the whole operation was highly theatrical, a performance trying to persuade the spectators of the ruthlessness of the actors. The terrorists (or “performance artists”) played the ordinary passengers to fool the airport’s surveillance cameras, pretended to hold real weapons (they only held paper cutters), pretended to be able to fly the planes as real pilots (they had received rudimentary training mostly through simulation programs and video games, also taking a crash course on flying at an American school), and finally pretended to divert the aircraft elsewhere (rather than crash it), in order not to alarm the passengers too much. As Rustom Bharucha argues perceptively, terrorists are usually “effective because they infiltrate security zones with all the performative accoutrements of ‘normal’ behavior, circumventing the protocols of surveillance. They are, for the most part, highly skilled performers, who accomplish their roles through rigorous training, supplemented by improvisatory audacity and a readiness to kill and die.” After all, “what kind of an impostor/infiltrator would one be if one allowed one’s ‘true’ identity to be revealed through the camouflage of pretense?” All that pretense, however, contributed to the spawning of a gory reality that looked paradoxically too fictional to be true.

What added to the theatrical and ironic dimension of the attacks was the feeling that it was essentially not an outside agency that had created such a chaos. It
was rather a force on the inside—or better an inside force—that achieved the unthinkable deed. The aircraft were products/symbols of Western technology, while the terrorists lived for long as ordinary citizens among other Western citizens. In other words, the enemy was invisible (hence, invincible) because it was intrinsic to the system, posing as a structural “failure” within it. Derrida is right to argue that the nature of the attacks resembled to a great extent the logic of the “autoimmune” system attempting to protect itself against the . . . protecting mechanisms of the system’s (that is, the state’s) security. To do that, the autoimmune system has to self-destruct intentionally. 30

September 11 fulfilled both criteria for what a terrorist outrage at the turn of the century constitutes: it killed three thousand people without hesitation and it sent a powerful visual message to those witnessing it. In other words, it fulfilled the criteria of great lethality and effective (as well as dramatic) communicativeness. The performative dimensions of the attacks were not lost on viewers and artists who admitted to having felt some kind of “envy” at the “artistic perfection” and “professionalism” of the strikes. 31 Novelists and fiction writers withdrew “backstage” letting journalists covering the events take over and try to describe the indescribable or inconceivable using tropes, literary devices and apocalyptic language.

Terrorism without the image of it is next to nothing. There is an unquestionable aesthetic side to the phenomenon, which is more important than people are ready to accept. In the age of information, media and the internet, a terrorist act has no impact on the world unless it has reserved some space in the collective imaginary. Although terrorism depends upon the media to transmit a message, make an impression and finally achieve its goals, one would expect that because of the growth of telecommunications and the multifariousness of world communications terrorism would manage to get through more easily and quickly. However, this is not exactly the case. In fact, it is precisely the opposite: because of the endless (mostly fictional) violence to which audiences are exposed every day, attracting attention has become an even more demanding task for a terrorist organization:

[N]ot only has media consumption become more diversified, people are less likely to be shocked or terrified by displays of violence . . .
[T]he amount of violence on television screens has risen substantially. . . . [I]ncreasing amounts of violence [on the TV] have raised the
threshold for what is considered “shocking” or “terrifying” by the viewing public. . . . [Thus greater] brutality and lethality is by far the most common way for terrorists to “get the message through” in the media age. . . . [Engaging] in increasing brutality [has the purpose of matching the] audience’s expectation of what “terrorism” is about.32

Without a doubt, American (and more generally, Western) audiences have long accustomed themselves to viewing scenes of unspeakable catastrophe in big budget Hollywood films. For that reason, they make a very demanding body of viewers. More crucially, if the level of violence in cinematic films has risen, then audiences and spectators will have become more and more desensitized to the atrocities shown, and, by definition, they will be more insensitive to real violence, when that occurs, since that violence will look fictional and fake to them. In fact, many Americans reacted to the image of 9/11 in a way that suggested that they were treating theatrocity as if it were a scene from a Hollywood film; a film, though, that had surpassed in quality and verisimilitude anything that they had watched up to that point. Still, the incessant reruns of the attacks on TV channels made everyone less and less sensitive to the horrid view—owing to overexposure—and evoked the feeling that the attack was actually not real; through the repetition of the scene over and over, the attack turned into a visually powerful spectacle, and an aesthetic, hence fictional, object. Ironically therefore, while the terrorists had ventured into an unprecedented operation in order to bring the horror of the real to the American public, that horrendous reality was increasingly turning into a fictional aesthetic product to be consumed by spectators around the world.

Despite its immoral aesthetics, actually because of it, the imagery of 9/11 lost almost nothing of its sublime quality throughout the years—sublime, in the Kantian and Burkean sense of simultaneously repelling and covertly attracting the eye. Besides, if we are so much familiar with scenes of cinematic catastrophe, then perhaps we can only appreciate and comprehend a real catastrophe on condition that it looks fictional; as though in order to fully experience our own plight we needed to put ourselves at a distance from it, thus treating it as if it were somebody else’s plight.

One can go as far as to say that 9/11 cannot “exist,” in a larger sense, without its (by definition, fictional TV) image, and this is exactly what keeps the attack frightening and fascinating at the same time. We should remind ourselves, at this point, that, strictly speaking, the attempt at destroying the towers with thousands of
people inside them was not the first in history. In February 1993 there had been another, only much less spectacular, attempt to demolish the lofty structures by another group of Islamist radicals who would later become part of Al-Qaeda. The bombing, supposedly as retaliation for the U.S. support of Israel, claimed the lives of six people but failed to bring down the towers or send a powerful image of destruction on an international level. Metaphorically, the 1993 attack was only a preview or low-quality rehearsal for the actual “first performance” mounted on 9/11.33

For Baudrillard, 9/11 as an uncanny image of unthinkable terror was the “mother” of all events, “the pure event” that encapsulated “all the events that have never taken place.”34 It is almost as though the absence of any landmark events during the 1990s had “exploded” into a singular symbolic occurrence of massive proportions:

The collapse of the . . . towers is unimaginable, but that is not enough to make it a real event. 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. . . . [T]he fascination with the attack is primarily a fascination with the image. . . . We try retrospectively to impose some kind of meaning on it . . . [but] there is none. And it is the radicality of the spectacle, the brutality of the spectacle, which alone is original and irreducible. The spectacle of terrorism forces the terrorism of spectacle upon us.35

When Baudrillard says that we can ascribe no meaning to the attacks he means that the extremely violent singularity we witnessed on that day is irreducible to any single logical cause trying to account for it—for instance, the injustice towards the Palestinians, or the unholy presence of U.S. forces on Saudi Arabia. Inevitably, the radicality of the violent spectacle has compensated for the impossibility of a logical explanation. The “terrorism of spectacle,” as he calls it, consists of the fact that the irreducible image of spectacular terrorism has erased completely the need for narrative and explanatory words: the unforgettable picture, that is, is worth a thousand words; only, one cannot possibly know what those words might be. The image “consumes the event, in the sense that it absorbs it and offers it for consumption.”36

Baudrillard thinks that the violence inflicted by Al-Qaeda terrorists is symbolic and spectacular (unlike, one might claim, the violence of ISIS) and, therefore, not absolutely “real,” in the sense that it aspires to humiliate rather than kill. Al-Qaeda has almost always chosen symbolic targets upon which it has unleashed its more or
less spectacular terrorism—9/11 represented the culmination of terrorist spectacularity. Nevertheless, this element of spectacularity should not blind us to the absolute fact of the excruciating pain and horrible death of all those who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Just because the “spectacle” of 9/11 did not show real blood and horrible suffering (mostly due to the instantaneity of the hits and the media’s inevitable focus upon the exterior of the buildings) it does not mean that death had not called on the victims in all imaginable ways. One could actually build upon that omission of real blood and suffering to make a case for the inherent immorality of the image of catastrophe at hand.

When it comes to discussing terrorism, grappling unknowingly with aesthetics is almost inevitable (and probably immoral too). The example of dwelling upon the newness or not of a terrorist strike is a case in point. Especially with regard to September 11, the unbearable cliché is that “the world will not be the same after this catastrophe,” or that “the attacks mark the beginning of a new era”—as if we knew what the “old era” was like. Baudrillard does think that 9/11 constitutes a novel kind of terrorism—one that combines inventiveness, accuracy, technical expertise, courage, a sense of irony, and a primal drive towards death—but other theorists disagree on the question of newness. For Zizek, for instance, the spectacular air crash into the WTC is the epitome of twentieth-century terrorism insofar as it relies upon a flagrant type of extreme, almost pornographic, visibility. By contrast, the twenty-first century, in his opinion, will be characterized by invisible, impalpable, almost silent acts of terror:

The true long-term threat is further acts of mass terror in comparison with which the memory of the WTC collapse will pale—acts that are less spectacular, but much more horrifying. What about bacteriological warfare, what about the use of lethal gas. . . ? [The WTC explosion was] the last spectacular cry of twentieth-century warfare. What awaits us is something much more uncanny: the spectre of an “immaterial” where the attack is invisible—viruses, poisons which can be anywhere and nowhere.\textsuperscript{37}

It is by no means certain that twenty-first-century terrorism will be conducted immaterially and tacitly since recent history has taught us that terrorist campaigns, especially during the second decade of the new century, have given a new meaning to the word “violence” by raising the bar of cruelty and barbarism and eventually
reconfiguring the notion of the real itself. The “new” kind of terror is completely devoid of metaphor and symbol, thus signifying the advent of the horribly Real under the guise of such dehumanizing organizations as the “Islamic State in Iraq and Syria” (ISIS).

Mohammed Atta, supposed mastermind of 9/11 attacks
http://www.fbi.gov/pressrel/penttbom/aa11/11.htm

4.5 The rise of ISIS: exporting jihadism in a non-ironic age

On Friday, November 13, 2015, Europe experienced its very own “September 11” in Paris, France. That “Black Friday” or “European 9/11,” as it was called, involved the indiscriminate killing of more than 120 innocent citizens whose only crime was that they were having a good time attending a concert or simply having dinner at some of the restaurants of the French capital. The world was shocked to find out that Paris had been struck by a new wave of jihadists whose ruthlessness and barbarity, as it would transpire, was only ambiguously ideological or religious. There were six simultaneous strikes accurately orchestrated, one of which in a music theatre and another just outside the biggest football stadium in France (Stade de France) which was packed with 80,000 people at that moment. The responsibility for the deadly attacks was claimed officially by ISIS, the so-called Islamic “State,” whose aim was to punish France for its participation in the U.S.-led coalition against the organization’s newly-established “caliphate” on Iraqi and Syrian territory. In all, fifteen ISIS terrorists were implicated in the stunning deeds, seven of whom, as it turned out, had carried out suicide attacks leading nearby civilians to their deaths.
Europe had already encountered the ugly face of Islamist fundamentalist terrorism before—in Madrid and London, in 2004 and 2005 respectively—but this was the first time that terrorists had not hit, for instance, public transport during a busy working day to disrupt daily business routines or subvert even the economy of a Western country; rather they aimed for Paris nightlife and the relaxed rhythms of a European capital at the end of the working week (Friday), in what appeared to be a series of hideous acts of casual terrorism. Separate individuals or groups in two or three casually walked into bars and just as casually started shooting at people and killing in cold blood. In a statement that they issued on the following day, ISIS terrorists expressed their disgust at Western pleasures and the intrinsic immorality of the lifestyle of the West, pointing their fingers (as well as guns) at the “capital” of debauchery and decadence—Paris (!) In other words, what was at issue was not simply an outrageous attack of casual terrorism, but also a puritan or moralistic kind of terror which was casually inflicted on unsuspecting “decadent” individuals subjected rightfully to divine justice for their “profligacy.” In an unparalleled sarcastic gesture, the French satiric journal Charlie Hebdo (which had also been hit by Islamists a few months earlier for offending the Prophet Muhammad) announced on its front page two days after the tragedy: “They have weapons? So what? We have champagne!” The journal featured the caricature of a man who was shot at but dripping not blood but champagne—a dig at the fundamentalist aversion to alcohol and a direct comment on Western liberties flaunting their nasty, unhealthy, unethical, but still pleasurable habits of entertainment, intimacy, extroverted-ness, sarcasm and tolerance. The subtext of Charlie Hebdo’s illustration was related to the question of fear when it comes to terrorism: the latter wins when fear conquers all. Apparently, humor overpowers fear as well as terror.

ISIS represents an evolved category of terrorism: one that fuses Islamic law, religion, ideology, myth or even aesthetics. In that respect, it constitutes a new, far from traditionalist, conservative movement. That new wave of international terrorism—an offshoot of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and a true embodiment of a novel kind of medievalism—would be, in many senses, an upgraded model of terrorism attaching wholly new meanings to the concept of “terror” and “jihad.” If terrorism is usually deterritorialized, in terms of not occupying its very own territory but appropriating the territory of the other as a foreign entity working the demise of that “other,” then the “upgraded” model of ISIS is a deterritorialized entity par excellence (even though it
has acquired, indeed, its own territory, the caliphate, as we will see shortly), in the sense that the majority of its members do not just blend in with dominant Western cultures before they perpetrate their hideous acts; they actually live inside them. Ironically, this new kind of Islamist terror does not depend for its success mainly on the loyalty of its Oriental, Muslim subjects but, rather, on the fascination it has exerted on Western citizens of different nationalities, many of whom seem to have consciously and collectively “defected” to the self-proclaimed “Islamic State” in Syria and Iraq where they receive special “training” after which they return to their home-countries to put their newly-gained “knowledge” into practice—a number of the persons involved in the November 13 attacks in Paris were of French and Belgian nationality. In effect, what we are dealing with here is the absolute implementation of what we call “home-grown” or “Western Islamist” terrorism. If the “clash of civilizations” is still a valid concept it would have to be qualified: “a civilization clashing against its own self” would better describe the current state of affairs in Islamist terror, as we have already explained in the beginning of the chapter where we connected Islamism with the forces of globalization. Placed against the backdrop of globalization, jihad, in the context of ISIS, takes on chameleon-like qualities, adapting to new terrorist constellations and agendas by acquiring the status of an umbrella term which is always ready to legitimize an ever-expanding range of demands that are often too ambiguous and elusive to fulfill even if one wanted to—the contemporary version of jihad is, therefore, already a hybrid entity.

Regardless of the hybrid and pastiche-like qualities of ISIS jihadism, one should refrain from calling it “postmodern.” Postmodernism plays with irony and the symbol, even though it does not embrace them. ISIS terrorism is by no means ironic or symbolic as, for example, was the Al-Qaeda version of it materialized on 9/11. On the contrary, ISIS violence demarcates the coming of the filthy real as an internal, but also external, evil force working not only towards the destruction but also the dehumanization of the human, independently of religion, nation or ideology. If 9/11 constituted “pornographic” violence—one that was meant to be consumed aesthetically and obsessively from up close—the excruciating violence of decapitation, crucifixion, and mutilation constitutes the terrorist equivalent of snuff movies and the beginning of the end of irony. 39

It could be argued that the postmodern espousal of mediated experience and virtual reality in the twentieth century has gradually given way, in the twenty-first
century, to a passion for the real—for instance, passion for witnessing brutal violence as it is expressed nowadays by terrorist activity. A new category of propaganda of the deed arises since the brutality of the terrorist act is prioritized over the religious principles the act is supposedly founded upon: the real emerges as something which is above rational or religious explication of any kind. Islamist fundamentalist terror promotes the real as *material* rather than metaphysical reality. In this light, the paramilitary army of ISIS exemplifies precisely the onset of the palpably and materially “real.” ISIS has raised the bar for extreme terrorism insofar as it (unknowingly) offers an almost unmediated view of the ruthless and the real (for instance, real decapitations live on camera). In this light, the 9/11 terrorist attacks perpetrated by Al-Qaeda did not signify a new or even “real” kind of terrorism insofar as they were orchestrated as something spectacular, therefore, in a sense, fictional. In addition, they were made even more fictional as they were offered through endless TV reruns for our own consumption. By contrast, ISIS might be said to realize what twenty-first-century terrorism probably looks like: a terrible and gory aesthetic which presents, rather than represents, reality as something which is inevitably *brutal*.

In June 2014, ISIS or ISIL—Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant—a Sunni fundamentalist terrorist organization, took over most of the land in Northern Iraq and Syria, and in the summer of the same year it declared itself “The Islamic State,” having finally inaugurated a full-blown “caliphate” in the area, which had always been what Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden personally were longing for. In short, they have far surpassed all previous Islamist organizations in actually realizing what, in the recent past, had seemed only a utopian dream. ISIS’s leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed himself “Caliph Ibrahim” of the Islamic State, a caliphate that would occupy the lands of the entire Arab world by smashing the borders—imposed by Imperialist powers at the end of World War I—and eventually expanding upon Western territories. Immediately after establishing the caliphate,

[t]hey began to impose their strict fundamentalist vision: they set up makeshift sharia law courts in which “infidels” (non-Muslims, those who refused to publicly endorse their ideology and even those accused of petty crimes like drinking alcohol) were tried and, in many case, executed; women were forced into marriages and then raped; Christians were publicly crucified and left to die slowly over the course of several days; mass graves were hastily dug and filled with
the (mostly Shia) corpses of Iraqi Security Forces. With every victory ISIS increased in strength, money, military equipment and prestige among their fellow militant Sunni jihadists. They also increased in confidence.\textsuperscript{41} 

ISIS is not just the wealthiest terrorist organization in the world, having taken over many oil fields, plundered numerous antiquities from different countries, and stolen billions of dollars. It is also the most barbaric. Al-Qaeda pales compared to it. In fact, Al-Qaeda leadership was so horrified by the practices of ISIS that it renounced its dogma and tactics and finally disavowed its ties with it.\textsuperscript{42} But ISIS is different from as well as superior to any other terrorist group insofar as it has managed to occupy land: it is far from deterritorialized. The fact that it is now a \textit{state} turns automatically its terrorists into “soldiers” and their fundamentalism into a “grander” and a more prestigious and legitimate cause. Still, even as a state, it cannot but enforce state terror upon its own citizens, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Actually, as already explained in the chapter, Jihadist terrorism, first and foremost, turns against Muslims rather than non-Muslims. The idea behind this attitude is that apostates are, supposedly according to the Koran, a worse enemy than infidels. Yet, as we have already said, even the differences between an apostate and a non-apostate are too hazy to discern, thus leaving the jihadist free to interpret religious apostasy as s/he thinks fit.

Although medievalist brutality is built into the structure of ISIS, its members are far from amateurs when it comes to using modern technology and the internet. Far from reaffirming the stereotypical image of the terrorist as an outcast, an underdog of the society, who plots against the regime that keeps her marginalized, the ISIS terrorist may well live on the crest of society, receive University education and thereafter radicalize herself for various (religious and other) reasons. Technology and computers are friends with this kind of terrorist who seems, at any rate, to occupy a space inside and simultaneously outside the systemic order and the status quo, as if fighting the system with the latter’s own means. Technology is very important for ISIS, more than it was for Al-Qaeda, because it constitutes an enormous propaganda weapon, both for recruiting members and disseminating its messages and purposes in order to create fear—the basic, let us not forget, function of terrorism. Intriguingly, ISIS treads the ground between medieval, traditionalist discourse and practice, on the one hand, and sophisticated, ultra-modernist methodology. To put it plainly, it practices brutal decapitations, but it also makes sure that the brutal image gets around
on the net. It crucifies people but it also jokes about it on social media such as Facebook and Twitter. It performs beheadings the old “traditional” way—in public—but it may also do it privately in front of a camera, releasing the (always edited) video on YouTube and other platforms for others to witness. On June 13, 2014, ISIS posted a picture of a severed head on Twitter. Along with the message accompanying the picture—reading “This is our football, it’s made of skin”—they placed as hashtag the words “FIFA WorldCup” so that unsuspecting users casually following the FIFA CUP account would be unknowingly exposed to the atrocious image of brutality.43

What strikes one as rather strange is generally how the ISIS “culture” has exonerated the knowledge and extensive use of the social media even though they are products of the West and Western modernity.44 The answer probably lies in that jihadists do not repudiate modernism and technological modernity, nor do they demonize scientific advances; it is “the West” as that “other” category that they are suspicious of, to say the least. They repudiate the West because they, themselves, are precisely the West’s own mutated by-products—besides, many Jihadist terrorists are of Western origin. Paradoxically, although the Islamic State owns territory, it moves around surreptitiously as if it were un-territorialized (rather than deterritorialized). Consequently, the Islamist fundamentalism that ISIS advocates is potentially “post-Islamist” and “post-fundamentalist” in terms of being a-Islamic or even short of all those “fundamental” qualities that would make it fundamentalist. It appears that contemporary jihadism embraces violence for the sake of violence and on the pretext of rescuing religious fundamentals. The threats to America on Twitter, for instance, emerge as mutations of Al-Qaeda’s original threats towards the U.S. which were often serious attempts at argumentation and were also permeated by a certain religious or ethnic “consciousness.” By contrast, ISIS threats often seem like carnivalesque tributes to Al-Qaeda’s legacy: “We will kill your people and transform America to a river of blood :)!” This message was appended to an irrelevant picture of ten ISIS “fighters” standing before the decapitated head of a Shia (Muslim) soldier—nothing whatsoever to do with American imperialism.45 It might be claimed that the lasting threat against the Superpower has degenerated into a threat extravaganza towards all people and all cultures and civilizations.

ISIS and the Islamic State’s intention is to play into the deep-seated fears hidden in the recesses of human psyche: the fear of annihilation beyond any reasoning hinging on religion, ideology, or politics. One also gets the feeling that the ineffable
violence perpetrated by the terrorist organization needs no justification or cause behind it, and therefore nobody should consider oneself safe because nobody is innocent. This realization might lead us to assume that perhaps there inheres in the whole jihadist universe a yearning for aesthetic destruction, or better, terrorist violence which is at the same time aestheticized. The killing spree by all imaginable means and the resort to extravagant methods of dehumanization point to a ruthless politics without any “depth.” Walter Benjamin’s insight that fascism is the aestheticization of politics is very timely. A politics which is seen from an aesthetic perspective constitutes a (non)politics of fascist destruction. It could be argued, with much reservation, that the Islamic State embodies the spirit of “Islamo-fascism.”

This kind of Islamist fundamentalism endorses the ideology of violence as a message in itself. Violence, in the case at hand, is not a medium; it is the message. In this light, ISIS tactics could be construed as sharing common ground with the dogma of the “propaganda of the deed” in the sense that atrocity and brutality are given priority over the theoretical foregrounding or (non)ideological explication after the (brutal) fact. It is the brutality that creates the politics.

The aesthetic aspect of the terrorists’ self-representation should not be lost on anyone who wants to really comprehend the fascination exerted by terrorist violence on common people and viewers. The graphic representation of execution and decapitation may be at the core of ISIS propaganda, but it is likely not the main component of its aesthetic strategies. The image of a beheaded body is an image of dehumanization and objectification of the human, indeed. However, aside from the uncanny attraction to such a horrendous view (which is usually offered in high definition), there is the (not as uncanny) aesthetic attraction to the image of a handsome fighter and a revolutionary that ISIS unstoppably propagates in order to lure females as well as males from the West into joining their “cause.” A multitude of Western citizens swarmed into Syrian territory keeping that image of beautiful robustness and manliness in mind, hoping that they could lead a life of adventure and real action that might divert them from the apathy, passivity and meaninglessness of modern living. Many of those would certainly have felt as if they were about to get a taste of the real thing, the authentic reality humans were supposed to live in, thereby sensing that they were approaching the sublime—telling themselves “this is it!”—that is, that Real, inaccessible Other (the terror of violence as encapsulated by the figure of the terrorist) which is at once frightening and, paradoxically, terribly attractive. Many
of those citizens have already returned to their home countries; at least, those who could make it back.

The aesthetics of terrorism is inextricably bound up with an excess of the real, namely, the reality of violence. The excess of the real brings into the equation the possibility of death. Most interestingly, in the case of ISIS terrorism, death—the terrorist’s own—is very often not just a possibility: it is a certainty. Suicide attacks for Islamist fundamentalism of the ISIS category may be celebrated as acts of sacrificial heroism (aspiring to attain the, almost Kantian, ideal of Islamist sovereignty) but they are no more than strategic options—killing as many innocents as possible with the minimum of effort—mixed with a touch of an “aesthetic morality”: the magnificent but self-serving cause of going to Paradise and marrying seventy brunettes. Baudrillard has already commented upon the aesthetics of pleasure derived from the very imperative of suicide attacks. He is talking about Al-Qaeda terrorists, but his thoughts are more appropriately applicable to the Islamic State’s methodology:

[T]hese terrorists exchanged their deaths for a place in paradise; their act was not a disinterested one, hence it is not authentic; it would be disinterested only if they did not believe in God, if they saw no hope in death, as is the case with us. . . . There again, then, they are not fighting fair, since they get salvation, which we cannot even continue to hope for. So we mourn our deaths while they can turn theirs into very high-definition stakes.\textsuperscript{47}

From the above we may surmise that there lies an unequivocal drive towards an aesthetics of happiness and self-fulfillment in the mind of the suicide bomber. The Islamist fundamentalist perpetrating a suicide attack is essentially granting herself the right to a pleasurable (material) life in Paradise while denying that right to her victims. This is not, of course, sacrificial heroism or pure madness. This is an act of narcissistic egotism. Nevertheless, such a narcissistic act unfortunately finds admirers (as well as imitators) amongst Western citizens that are still “uncontaminated” by the virus of deadliness. We who cling to life have the romantic tendency to look up to those who cling to death (even if the latter prefer to die in order to prove that they once “lived”) out of a natural (European) fascination with the figure of the young Romantic hero who ends her own life to protect her ideals—even though at times she does not even know what those ideals are exactly.
What 9/11, the subsequent War on Terror and the rise of ISIS have demonstrated is that terrorism is nearly impossible to defeat since it is already woven into the global, the technological, the modern as well as the aesthetic.

Abu-Bacr-Al Bagdadi, leader of the Islamic State
Notes

1. “Postmodern,” both in its occurrence chronologically after the modern, as well as in its fundamental irrationality or inexplicability.


3. Hoffman, p. 89.


6. Bin Laden repeatedly addressed Muslims in his messages in favor of Jihad and against dissensions amongst them: “Oh Lord, unify the Muslims,” or “praise be to Allah . . . defeat[ing] factionalism.” See “A Declaration of War by Osama bin Laden, Together with Leaders of the World Islamic Front for the Jihad Against the Jews and the Crusaders,” August 1996. [http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa](http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa). Accessed 10 July 2015. From this declaration, one can easily surmise that Laden’s intentions had probably always been maximalist: driving the U.S. out of the Middle East was not his sole purpose. Especially the following excerpt is revealing: “The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it . . .” (my emphasis).


8. Al-Qaeda has frequently reissued renewed declarations of jihad against America and the West, which is partly attributable to its assumption that the enemy hasn’t taken its warnings seriously.


15. John Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 51. The Muslim Brotherhood operating in Egypt attacked mainly non-Muslims as part of its strategy to establish national independence. The Brotherhood did not go against the political and governmental order but rather played the diplomatic game of establishing links and coalitions with Westernized regimes and modernized governments. This is also the reason why a more fundamentalist and violent branch of the Brotherhood—which supported that the real enemy was the body of apostates within the ostensibly Islamic government rather than a foreign power—broke away from the mother movement. In 1965 members of the Muslim
Brotherhood were executed as they were found guilty of attempting to assassinate Nasser.


24. By “myth,” one does not mean a lie or some false system of assumptions. The term is rather employed to signify the entire body of the unconsciously adopted values and ideologies of Islamist fundamentalism. Those unconscious pseudo-ideologies (on second thought, aren’t all ideologies “fake” in the sense that they are based upon belief and faith rather than reason?) consist of mythic narratives that are partly fictional and partly true. However—and this is infinitely more important—because of their epic and “dramatic” qualities those unconscious ideologies are able to sustain an entire system of religious and metaphysical misconceptions that end up legitimating the exercise of violence and terrorism—by “unconscious” we mean the process of adopting unknowingly false ideological premises based upon whim, erratic feeling, religious faith and subjective emotion rather than upon logical argumentation, critical instinct and in-depth analysis. The inherent irrationality (or, rather, non-rationality) of the powers that underpin political ideology and the relation of those powers to symbolic (fictional) images have been diligently explored.
by such theorists as Georges Sorel or Carl Schmitt. See, for instance, Georges
Sorel, Reflections on Violence (London: Collier Books, 1950); in addition,
Heinrich Meier, The Lesson of Carl Schmitt, trans. M. Brainard (Chicago:

World Affairs 48, 1 (Jan 2004): pp. 29-41. 32-36. See also Issa J. Boullata,
“Sayyid Qutb’s Literary Appreciation of the Qur’an,” in Issa J. Boullata, ed.,
Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur’an (London: Curzon

26. Lawrence Wright, The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11 (USA:

27. Al-Qaeda terrorists were indoctrinated at an early age in the organization’s
worldview. Although they had various ethnic and national backgrounds, most
“were middle-class, educated professionals, who had spent much of their adult
life in the West. As such, they felt isolated, suspended between the Muslim
and Western worlds, belonging to neither” (Randall Law, p. 306). Only
mosques around Europe could provide them with some sense of belonging and
self-identity. But mosques were usually places where radical clerics taught,
who inevitably exposed those Western secular—and hardly knowledgeable in
religious matters—Muslims to their own maverick and fundamentalist ideas.
The most important feature those youngsters shared was an artificially planted
—via brain-washing techniques—eagerness to become “martyrs” by
participating in suicide attacks.

28. To this day, it is not absolutely certain that it was the hard core of the terrorist
organization that orchestrated the attacks on the WTC and the Pentagon. Al-
Qaeda was, and still is, a brand name characterizing a multinational terrorist
organism functioning more like a loosely-structured federation made up of
separate cells that did not exactly “work” on their own, but without necessarily
taking direct orders from Osama bin Laden either. The latter finally assumed
responsibility for the attacks on 9/11 although at first he had reportedly denied
his involvement in it. The beginning of the new century would, amongst other
things, reshape the way terrorists viewed their “struggle.” In the twenty-first
century, a terrorist group does not go out of its way to reveal immediately
whether it was implicated in an attack or not. In some twisted way, the
violence that remains a mystery, an unsolved case, creates a heightened sense of insecurity among the public, or even a sense of awe at the sight of the unexplainable.

31. German composer Stockhausen, for instance, was stunned by the “artistic” or concert-like aspect of the event. He famously said that it was the greatest work of art that the cosmos had ever attested to because of the non-rehearsal of the deed, its massive scale—invoking a huge “setting”—and the three thousand “actors” who died at the completion of the concert along with the “directors” who committed suicide at the culmination of the artwork—just like the artist who recedes and lets her work speak for itself and on her behalf. Of course later Stockhausen apologized for making such immoral comments.
32. Neumann, *Old and New Terrorism*, pp. 137-43. We cannot acquit the media and the internet of the important part they play in disseminating violence and imprinting it on people’s unconscious, but also in spreading the terrorist image. Neumann refers to an episode involving a group of British Al-Qaeda supporters in Birmingham. The group would kidnap a British Muslim soldier in order to coerce British Muslims generally into refusing to enlist in the British army. Afterwards, they would behead him in front of a camera and upload the video on youtube to attract a million viewers. Of course, this is not just a case of propaganda through the internet; it is also an opportunity for the murderers to indulge into the spectacle of death. See Neumann, p. 44.
33. Alternatively, both terrorist attacks could be seen as small pieces of a bigger scenario that might be completed in the future through a third attack (?). Part of the terror involved in an incident of extreme violence bears on the unconscious fear that the incident will likely repeat itself in the future with greater intensity.
34. *The Spirit of Terrorism*, p. 4.
35. Ibid., pp. 28-30.
36. Ibid., p. 27.

38. In January 2015, Islamists stormed the Journal’s offices killing 12 employees including the editor. Islamists do not exactly excel in grasping metaphor or humor; attaching oneself too closely to the Holy Book may in fact prevent one from being flexible enough to recognize the other’s weakness as a sign of her humanity.

39. At this point I am slightly altering Zizek’s insight that the WTC catastrophe relates to Hollywood catastrophes in the same way that snuff movies relate to regular pornography (see *Welcome to the Desert*, p. 13). Zizek argues that fundamentalist terror is a representation of the passion for the real, bringing up the example of the Red Army Faction in Germany, whose passion for the real turned them from theoretical mavericks into full-blown terrorists (p. 10). I would add that witnessing fundamentalist terror is also an expression of the same kind of passion.

40. Reestablishing the Caliphate has been a long-standing goal of Sunni Muslims. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt had this as its ultimate aim.

41. B. Isakhan, “The Iraq Legacies and the Roots of the ‘Islamic State,’” in *The Legacy of Iraq: From the 2003 War to the ‘Islamic State,*” ed. B. Isakhan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 223. The Islamic State is also responsible for destroying and looting archaeological sites, ancient buildings, statues and centuries-old temples just because those did not conform to their medievalist iconoclastic vision, their extremist reading of the Koran and their totalizing—as well as authoritarian—view of the world.


44. In the aftermath of the Paris outrages on 13 November 2015, the so-called “Islamic Cyber Army” sneered at the Anonymous Activists’ declaration of war against the jihadists. This is definitely a war on a symbolic level, but it is also suggestive of the jihadists’ gaming awareness.

45. Sekulow, p. 38.
This argument has indeed been made with regard to Islamist fundamentalism in general. See, John Gray, *Black Mass* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007). However, Gray goes beyond that by talking also about “Islamo-Leninism.” Interestingly he thinks of Islamist movements as aspiring to a new world through the exertion of violence. The Islamic state cannot hide its millenarian and eschatological roots by anticipating the coming of a messiah who will reorganize the world. Allegedly, the coming of the messiah will be precipitated through terrorist violence. See Gray, p. 70.

Bibliography


A Declaration of War by Osama bin Laden, Together with Leaders of the World

http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa


