Over the past decade, terrorist organizations and other violent groups have increasingly turned to aesthetic media—videos and images—to disseminate their world-views and attempt to persuade potential recruits to join their ranks. The so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is no exception. Once the caliphate was proclaimed in June 2014, the organization initiated an extensive programme of video production that instantly caught global attention owing to a sinister batch of videos showing prisoners being beheaded. Although ISIS was associated with extreme barbarism and ultra-violence, a closer scrutiny of its video production reveals a more variegated picture, including footage of everyday scenery and peaceful statebuilding activities. A study of the group’s video production from 2014 to 2018, however, reveals another striking feature: the quasi-absence of female bodies. It is an overarching characteristic of ISIS videos that they convey a masculine world from which women are by and large absent or at least blurred and veiled. The very large majority of bodies that materialize in the videos are men’s bodies. This holds true not only of those depicting executions and warfare, but also of those showing more mundane scenes of street life and marketplaces in the ‘Islamic State’. In contrast to male bodies, which are ostentatiously and carnally exhibited, female bodies are aesthetically ‘policed’ and kept in the ‘right place’: under a veil, in the background, blurred, out of focus, on an advertising board or addressed in a male voiceover. Hence ISIS videos produce a specific, gendered ‘partition of the sensible’ in which women are, with few exceptions, silenced and excluded from the public political sphere.

* This article is part of a special section in the May 2020 issue of International Affairs on ‘Violence, visuality and world politics’, guest-edited by Helen Berents and Constance Duncombe.

1 With the term ‘aesthetic media’ I want to emphasize that videos are not just visual but also involve the other senses, including tactile elements, sound, text, etc. See Manni Crone, ‘Religion and violence: governing Muslim militancy through aesthetic assemblages’, Millennium 43: 1, 2014, pp. 291–307.


5 Any woman who does, exceptionally, appear in person is covered by a burka and remains mute, deprived of speech: SITE, IS outlines rules for clothing worn by Muslim women in Mosul (Bethesda, MD: SITE Intelligence Group, 2 March 2015).

6 Jacques Rancière, Le Partage du sensible: esthétique et politique [The politics of aesthetics: the distribution of the
This aesthetic absence is puzzling. In contrast to Al-Qaeda, ISIS deliberately attempted to persuade women to join the caliphate—and many women did. Nevertheless, the ways in which gender is articulated in ISIS videos have not been addressed in academic research so far. Researchers with an interest in gendered aspects of ISIS more generally have for the most part considered women as female fighters, mothers or sympathizers. Yet Michael Kimmel has argued that in considering the gendered aspects of extremism, we must not overlook the obvious: that most people who join violent extremist milieus are men. Hence, if we are to deepen our understanding of the pathways into and out of extremism, we must pay attention to gendered processes and how masculinity and femininity are produced and invoked in extremist environments. To do so, it is useful to consider both the aesthetic visibility of men and the carnal invisibility and silencing of women, thus paying heed to Enloe’s caution against the ‘too-comfortable assumption that one can make reliable sense of militaries, wars, and militarizations by focusing one’s analytical attention solely on men’. Masculinities and femininities must necessarily be studied together, since they are relative and co-constitutive. Taken together, they make up a specific hierarchical order producing categories of ‘men’ and ‘women’ that are not fixed once and for all but are continuously in flux.

The main focus of this article is not only on how gender is produced in ISIS videos, but also on how the gendered aesthetic interacts with gendered spectators. We suggest that the ways in which gendered bodies are made visible or invisible in ISIS videos can enable gendered audiences to dream, feel pleasure or imagine themselves inhabiting those images. Hence, the question is not only which masculinities and femininities appear in the videos, but how gendered (in)visibilities interact with audiences of potential recruits in the West. How can ISIS attract women via images that allow only for oblique identification with subordinate female bodies? And similarly, how can young men be persuaded to take a one-way ticket to a caliphate that visibly promises a scarcity of women?

To start contemplating these questions of gendered spectatorship, the article proceeds in three stages. First, it teases out some of the theoretical and methodological conundrums involved in the study of aesthetic material, specifically videos, sketching some of the major claims and suggestions in the expanding field of visual security. Second, the article puts the interaction between videos and audience at centre stage. Its main intention—and contribution—is to investigate our understanding of carnal and gendered spectatorship. Finally, it moves on to the empirical study of ISIS videos, which suggests that the aesthetic interac-

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International Affairs 96: 3, 2020
Carnal aesthetics and dissonant masculinities in Islamic State videos

Carnal aesthetics and dissonant masculinities in these videos and a carnal audience allows for gendered dreams, pleasures, imagination and identification. In conclusion, the article briefly touches upon the question of how this approach is relevant for policy.

Visual security and ISIS videos

Which masculinities/femininities are made visible in ISIS videos, and how do they interact with gendered audiences in the West? To start thinking through this question, it will be useful initially to sketch out the theoretical contours of the academic field of visual security. When we study videos, photos or other forms of visual or aesthetic material, we are immediately confronted with a host of theoretical and methodological questions. How does the engagement with visuality differ from the study of text? What exactly are we studying—the content of the video, its meaning, framing, impact or circulatability? In 'the age of the image', International Relations (IR) and security studies have increasingly engaged with images, and aesthetic security has become an expanding field.11 While many studies of visual security have a strictly empirical scope, another strand of literature has grappled in more depth with theoretical and methodological conundrums related to the study of the visual.12 This literature is highly heterogeneous in terms of questions, ontologies, methodology and empirical focus. Yet irrespective of those differences, two major tropes run through the work: respectively, a primary interest in the power of images—how they affect an audience—or in the aesthetic regimes that underpin our ‘seeing’ security.

A majority of visual security scholars have approached videos and images through an interpretative or rhetorical lens: ‘We want to know what pictures mean and what they do: how they communicate ... what sort of power they have to affect human emotions and behavior.’13 With a focus on impact, these scholars underline the capacity of videos to influence the full emotional spectrum from fear to excitement.14 Roland Bleiker, for instance, claims that ‘part of what makes images unique is that they often evoke, appeal to and generate emotions’.15 Duncombe similarly stresses the specific capacity of videos to provoke affective

12 Andersen and Müller, ‘Engaging the limits of visibility’; Bleiker, Aesthetics and world politics; Bleiker, ‘Mapping visual global politics’; Hansen, ‘Theorizing the image for security studies’.
responses in the viewer, because they can ‘trigger emotions beyond those of static images’. 16

In the same vein, Lene Hansen has explored how images or ‘icons’ affect world politics. 17 In her view, images are powerful vehicles that, in contrast to speech, have an immediate emotional impact on their audience; but nevertheless the linguistic speech act will always overrule the visual in the end. The visual image is second to the spoken word, she argues, because an image ‘does not provide a foreign policy utterance independently of texts’; it needs linguistics—political speech—to become relevant for security or foreign policy. 18 The idea that the verbal overrules the visual echoes Susan Sontag’s famous claim that captioning is needed to transform a simple affect caused by a photo into understanding, reflection and critique. 19 Hence, when we study the emotional impact of images or videos—for instance, the way in which an ISIS execution video will make us turn away in disgust—what we actually study is not the video itself but ‘how the visual is responded to and constituted through spoken and written discourses: the visual does not enter the political without being the subject of debate or engaging with the discourses already in place’. 20 At the centre of Hansen’s visual framework are not the images but their impact on emotions, linguistic securitization and political action.

Inspired by Hansen’s framework, Simone Molin Friis has unpacked one of the notorious beheading videos produced by ISIS. 21 Although her analysis starts with a detailed description of the beheading video, the empirical analysis is preoccupied not with the video but with ‘the impact of ISIS’s beheading videos’ on British and American security politics. More precisely, Friis examines how political leaders such as Barack Obama and David Cameron invoked the beheading videos to justify ‘an escalation of military action and intensified counterterrorism efforts’. 22 Friis does, however, add some nuance to Hansen’s suggestions about how the visual exercises an impact on foreign policy discourse: ‘The way in which war is shown through various forms of visual media’, she suggests, ‘may affect the politics of war by shaping the interpretative schemes within which war is understood and responded to.’ 23

With the notion of ‘interpretative schemes’, Friis gestures towards the second theme that runs through the field of visual security: the idea that scopic or representational regimes condition the way we see and perceive security. 24 Images not only represent the world but also condition how we perceive it. 25 Interpretative schemes matter for world politics because they mould our perception and

16 Duncombe, ‘Violent imagery, social media and affect’, p. 2.
17 Hansen, ‘Theorizing the image for security studies’; Hansen, ‘How images make world politics’.
20 Hansen, ‘Theorizing the image’ (emphasis added).
21 Friis, ‘Beyond anything we’ve ever seen’.
22 Friis, ‘Beyond anything we’ve ever seen’.
23 Friis, ‘Beyond anything we’ve ever seen’.
25 Bleiker, ‘Mapping visual global politics’. 576
understanding of what will count as truth in international relations. Images are ‘frames’, which produce reality by showing something within the frame, all the while leaving other things out of it. When ISIS produces videos showing heroic battle scenes or everyday life in its former capital, Raqqa, we suspect that these images are framed, groomed, if not simply made up for the occasion. Putting the question of framing centre stage, this literature not only studies visibility but also gives attention to the invisible: that which has been silenced and left out of the frame.26 Judith Butler famously argued that official US photography shows only bodies that are worth mourning—dead bodies of American soldiers in official ceremonies—while corpses of deceased Afghan civilians are erased from the frames of war.27 A ‘frame’, she insists, is not just a representation of reality but an interpretation that shows something while hiding something else—for instance, the inconvenient bodies of Afghan civilians who are victims of collateral damage. In the same vein, Priya Dixit has called for a ‘decolonization’ of visual security.28 With a similar interest in official US footage, in this case of Osama bin Laden’s death, she demonstrates how a ‘decolonial approach’ can identify invisibilities in official US imagery and narratives. Official photos and speech about Bin Laden’s death present it as an efficient, heroic act in which ‘justice is done’.29 But Bin Laden himself—as well as the local Pakistanis who were involved in the operation or witnesses to it—are curiously erased from official footage. By paying attention to invisibilities, a critical ‘decolonial’ approach can deconstruct hegemonic ways of seeing and hence produce counter-visualities.

The point is not only that videos are ‘frames’ that produce reality, but also that they mould the very way we see and perceive images. ‘Interpretive schemes’ or ‘representational codes’ condition ‘how we see, how we are able, allowed or made to see, and how we see this seeing and the unseeing therein’.30 According to Andersen and Möller, images and videos are not just ‘frames’ but also aesthetic artefacts, which are themselves produced by specific representational codes that condition our gaze. Various scopic regimes will, for instance, produce different perceptions and ‘truths’ from an ISIS video. The way a European policy audience perceives an ISIS beheading video may differ from how an ISIS supporter perceives the very same video. While various audiences across the globe will see a barbaric act and turn away in disgust, an audience sympathetic to ISIS may rejoice at the spectacle of a heroic act.

The literature on scopic regimes is animated by a critical ambition of destabilizing hegemonic ‘representational codes’ and enabling ‘counter-visualizations’. Andersen and Möller, for instance, claim that images either operate within or challenge ‘the existing set of codes … with which the politics of security are visualized, naturalized and consequently consumed’.31 Animated by a similar

27 Butler, Frames of war.
28 Dixit, ‘Decolonizing visualization in security studies’.
30 Andersen and Möller, ‘Engaging the limits of visibility’.
31 Andersen and Möller, ‘Engaging the limits of visibility’.
ambition, Priya Dixit wanted to ‘decolonize’ the visual. But how is it possible to destabilize official or dominating codes and schemes? Andersen and Möller suggest that we engage the ‘limits of visibility’, situated at the intersection of the visible and the invisible. These ‘limits’ can be experienced in depersonalized photos that ‘shift attention from individuals to structures’—for instance, long-distance photos of remote military spaces. Such photos create ‘a space where viewers can self-critically examine their own viewing practices and thus become aware of these practices. This process of self-examination may result in a debate about and a resistance to dominant practices of visualizing/viewing security.’

Images ‘at the limit’ can enable cognitive processes and critical thinking that will pave the way for a deconstruction of dominant representational codes. They can ‘challenge viewers to think’ and thus enable intellectual ‘self-examination’ that may lead to a ‘debate’. In contrast to Hansen, the scholars interested in scopic regimes and invisibilities place images at the centre of their analytical practice, but both strands of literature claim that we need reflection and speech to move from mere sense perception to policy and critique.

‘Aesthetic interfaces’ and the pleasure of carnal spectatorship

Against the backdrop of this brief theoretical sketch, we can now embark on the specific contribution of this article: namely, highlighting the interaction or the interface between video and audience, thus turning the focus from images or icons to the question of spectatorship—or, more precisely, aesthetic experience. If we want to get a better understanding of how ISIS seeks to recruit members and supporters through images, sound and music that will appeal to them, it is not enough to consider only the content of the videos. We must also engage with the spectator, the gaze, and the looking practices of people who consider joining an extremist group. But the gaze is always already embodied, carnal and gendered. I therefore turn away from questions of impact and destabilization/decolonization to questions of carnal spectatorship or aesthetic interaction with ISIS videos.

ISIS videos have often been perceived as a form of digital propaganda that feeds into processes of online radicalization. In line with the literature on visual security, radicalization scholars have argued that visual propaganda material has an ideological and rhetorical as well as a psychological and emotional effect. There is probably some truth to this. This article nevertheless investigates the idea that pathways to joining violent groups are not just intellectual or emotional—for instance, an aspiring jihadi being persuaded by theological arguments, or emotionally affected by violent imagery causing fear, anger or humiliation. The gendered interaction with male bodies in ISIS videos can enable young men and women in Europe and Australia to dream and desire, and to take carnal pleasure from

32 Andersen and Möller, ‘Engaging the limits of visibility’, p. 205 (emphasis added).
imagining themselves inhabiting those videos. Videos are not just objects of our gaze or powerful technologies that affect our intellect and feelings, but devices interacting with carnal and gendered audiences. Although security scholars have studied representations of bodies, they have not so far turned their attention to embodied spectatorship. But spectators interacting with ISIS videos are physically embodied actors ‘with skin and hair’. They are endowed with bodies that are not only gendered but sexual and mortal as well.

The senses of seeing, hearing and touching are situated in the body and closely linked to the body’s experience of pain and pleasure. If we set the gendered body of the spectator at centre stage, it will allow us to suggest that the embodied interaction with ISIS videos involves experiences of pleasure. The literature on visuality has often pondered the role of suffering bodies or the body in pain, but has also emphasized that human interaction with aesthetic artefacts involves pleasure. As Mirzoeff puts it: ‘Visual culture is concerned with visual events in which information, meaning and pleasure is sought by the consumer in an interface with visual technology.’ In that respect, the aesthetic interface between ISIS videos and a western audience of potential recruits is no exception. The experience of visual pleasure mixed up with processes of imagination and identification is pivotal for understanding how videos produced by terrorist organizations can attract young men and women in the West to leave their lives behind and join violent insurgencies abroad.

The embodied pleasures and forms of identification that ISIS videos call for and enable are made possible not only by ostentatious visibilities but also through invisibility and veiling. When we try to pin down some of the pleasures and imaginaries that ISIS videos articulate, we must look not only for visible representation but also for invisibilities, blurring and veiling. Sometimes it is precisely an invisibility that expresses and enables pleasure or desire. ‘What the picture awakens our desire to see … is exactly what it cannot show. This impotence is what gives it whatever specific power it has.’ Therefore, the analysis of aesthetic situations involving ISIS videos will not only consider what is explicitly said or shown in the aesthetic frames, but also look for invisibilities, absences and ‘aesthetic silence’.

34 The empirical focus of this article is on videos staging foreign fighters from the so-called ‘West’. While it is well known that many foreign fighters for ISIS came from western Europe, it is less widely known that an estimated 230 Australians travelled to Iraq and Syria to join the caliphate. Several ISIS videos feature Australians prominently.


41 Hansen, ‘“With skin and hair”’, p. 69.
Manni Crone

The ‘aesthetic situation’ or interface that we are trying to pin down is neither a one-way perception nor a one-way effect: it is not a question of either I look at the beheading video, or the beheading video looks at me, affects my emotions, and calls for critical thinking and a political response. It is a question of simultaneous perception and effect. The aesthetic situation is a dialectical, oscillatory interaction between a gendered audience, seeing, hearing, touching, and the aesthetic device, looking back at the audience, desiring something, asking for something. There is a cleavage in the aesthetic experience, ‘a split, which opens up in that which looks at us, when we look at it’. Hence, we are not confronted with a methodological dilemma that requires us either to deconstruct the interpretative schemes which condition the way we see security or to claim an emotional affect that can legitimize political action. The focus is rather on the ‘in-between’, the aesthetic situation characterized by aesthetic ‘reciprocity’. The task at hand is to put our relation to the ISIS video into question:

to make the relationality of image and beholder the field of investigation … to turn analysis of pictures towards questions of process … and to put in question the spectator position: what does the picture want from me or from ‘us’ or from ‘them’ or whomever? Who or what is the target of the desire expressed in the picture?

This relational ontology implies that the video is not a thing or an object, whose meaning the researcher can pin down once and for all. Images and videos are inherently mysterious and enigmatic, troubling our certainties. ‘Making visible is always disturbing the seeing in its act. Seeing is always an operation of the subject and hence a cleaving, disturbing, agitated and open operation.’ If we want to disturb the ‘representational codes’ involved in seeing security, we are not obliged to deconstruct them through ‘depersonalized photos’ or rational debate. Even in situations where an audience interacts with dominant, stereotyped aesthetics materializing human beings and faces—for instance, ISIS videos showing muscular foreign fighters on the battlefield—the video will present cracks, fissures, enigmas, disturbing absences, lacks and invisibilities that puzzle us, tickle our desire and ‘hit us physiologically … below the belt’. Seeing is a physiological experience of a lived body.

Gazing at masculinity: methodological considerations

As I ventured into the world of ISIS videos, I was initially struck primarily by the display of ultra-violence (beheadings, live burnings, people being thrown from rooftops, etc.). Yet little by little I started to notice another disquieting feature: the peculiar—or so it seemed—absence of women. Compared to the ostentatious

43 Mitchell, ‘What do pictures “really” want?’, p. 82.
45 Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*, p. 51.
46 Hansen, ‘“With skin and hair”’, p. 451.
47 Sobchack, *Carnal thoughts*.
display of carnal masculinities, the invisibility of female faces and bodies came to the fore as an aesthetic curiosity to be further explored. Bodies gendered as ‘female’ are indeed conspicuously absent from the very large majority of ISIS videos; when they do, exceptionally, appear, they are almost always shown in oblique and subordinate postures: mute, veiled, blurred; hardly ever active, speaking or centre stage.48 Initially, I focused on visibility and therefore asked which masculinities the videos produce, which ‘partition of the sensible’ they propose, and how the specific gendering of men (and women) can enable western youth to dream, imagine and eventually take action. To move forward with these questions, I narrowed down the empirical scope to videos depicting European and Australian foreign fighters, so that I was able to understand the linguistic elements and had some familiarity with the audiences they addressed. I deliberately chose not to study non-western subjectivities—whether Arab or Middle Eastern men—in the hope of steering clear of an orientalist gaze, avoiding the pitfall of examining ‘the barbarian other’, for instance the perverse ISIS executioner performing an archaic form of violence. Many of the executioners were indeed Europeans. In this article, I was interested in the familiar, in ourselves, in how ‘we’—French, Germans, Australians—materialize in ISIS videos. From this empirical point of departure, I picked out three videos for in-depth analysis. These three were released between April and August 2015, at a high-noon moment of the caliphate when the number of foreign fighters flocking to Al-Sham (Syria and Iraq) was at its apogee. One video was chosen because it encapsulates a typical, if not stereotypical, and hegemonic form of masculinity that appears in a host of foreign fighter videos: the strong, muscular, virile, hyper-masculine fighter engaged in scenes of violence and homosocial bonding.49 But as I was on the lookout for cracks and fissures in the ideological gloss, I took an interest in two other videos articulating atypical, dissonant forms of masculinity: videos featuring men nursing new-born infants. Over a decade ago, in a detailed study of a male nurse, Jo Warin showed that men who interact with infants and small children experience their masculinity as ‘dissonant’, at odds with ‘hegemonic masculinity’.50 This dissonance is even more pronounced in the case of ISIS, which otherwise advocates the restoration of traditional, hierarchical gender roles, positioning men as potent fighters and women as weak, subordinate mothers. The sample was deliberately small to allow for a thorough, in-depth analysis of foreign fighter gendering in ISIS videos. The first is typical and thus representative of many other, similar videos; the other two are idiosyncratic and

48 An exception is a video released by Al-Hayat in February 2018, at the moment when ISIS had lost its capital, Raqqa. The video surprisingly breaks an aesthetic taboo by showing two women sitting on a pickup truck with AK-47s, and even one woman participating in combat alongside men. See SITE, IS shows battle footage from ‘Revenge for the chaste’ offensive, features women in battlefield (Bethesda, MD: SITE Intelligence Group, 7 Feb. 2018, http://sitemultimedia.org/video/SITE(IS)_Inside_Caliphate_Ep7.mp4. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 4 Feb. 2020.)
49 SITE (Wilayat Homs), Austrian fighter Mohamed Mahmoud calls for lone-wolf attacks in Austria, Germany in IS video (Bethesda, MD: SITE Intelligence Group, 5 Aug. 2015), http://sitemultimedia.org/video/SITE(IS)_HomsProvince_Tourism_Ummah.mp4.
deliberately not representative. I could have chosen videos featuring other forms of dissonant masculinity—old or deaf-mute men—but chose to focus on videos with infants because they explicitly addressed women as well as men, and thus allowed for consideration of female spectatorship.

How, though, can we study the mysterious ‘man question’ at all, when we hardly know what masculinity is? Inspired by Raewyn Connell and Bruno Latour, I take gender to be relational, and therefore study masculinity as it emerges aesthetically in interaction with ‘things’ (actants) and bodies (‘male’ or ‘female’). What, for instance, does it do to masculinity that a body gendered as ‘male’ interacts with infants? Or weapons? Or with female fighters? The focus is not on representations of ‘masculinity’ but on the question of how bodies are produced as ‘male’ (or ‘female’) through interaction with other gendered bodies and things, thus echoing Enloe’s call ‘to become energetically curious about women’s varied and dynamic roles vis-à-vis the constructions and reconstructions of masculinity’. This approach implies that masculinity is neither situated in the biological body nor a mere performance, but emerges in a wider ontological web of things and bodies—assemblages—that produce aesthetic signs of ‘masculinity’. Once I have examined the gendering of bodies which, to a commonsense perception, appear spontaneously as ‘men’, I will move on to ponder the difficult question of ‘carnal spectatorship’.

**Hyper-masculinity, ‘fratriarchy’ and homoerotic pleasure**

As mentioned above, the first foreign fighter video was picked out because it articulates a stereotypical kind of masculinity that appears in a host of videos. The video narrates the whereabouts of a dozen German-speaking fighters in the province of Homs. To the sound of a beautiful a capella nashid (religious song), the first scene shows eight fighters, dressed in military camouflage, driving through a dry desert landscape on two Toyota pickup trucks. The fighters, supposedly returning from battle, carry the usual AK-47s and two black ISIS flags waving in the wind. The trucks halt, and the fighters step out into a lush green landscape and sit down in a row, laughing and talking, body against body. The camera zooms in on two of the fighters, one of them overloaded with ostentatious military gear and gadgets, framing him as the group’s commander. He looks directly into the camera and addresses the ‘beloved brothers’ in Germany and Austria, urging them to join the caravan and travel to the caliphate.

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55 SITE (Wilayat Homs), *Austrian fighter Mohamed Mahmoud calls for lone-wolf attacks*. 

582

*International Affairs* 96: 3, 2020
Carnal aesthetics and dissonant masculinities in Islamic State videos

In the next scene, the commander and one of the fighters, wearing a Taliban-style hat, are standing in the beautiful tourist site of Palmyra, an ancient city dating back to the Roman empire. Two handcuffed prisoners are kneeling down in front of them, turning their faces to the camera, their backs to the fighters. The fighter with the Taliban hat stares directly into the camera and addresses ‘my brothers the lions of Islam in Germany and Austria’. He urges them to join the caliphate and, if that is not possible, ‘wage jihad in Germany or Austria’. But then he raises his voice and fumes: ‘Why do you sit at home and do nothing?’ In the next frame, the two fighters raise their AK-47s, take aim and shoot the two prisoners in the head from behind. The execution itself is not shown, but the last frames exhibit the two bloodstained corpses.

What kind of masculinity emerges from this video? The German-speaking fighters materialize as hyper-masculine, über-cool and always in postures of complete dominance and empowerment. Although their bodies appear to be strong, stout and muscular, the stereotyped jihadi masculinity is not located in the physical body but produced through the interaction with varied forms of body ornamentation and a series of obligatory gadgets or ‘actants’—things that are not mere objects but endowed with agency: military attire, AK-47s, tactical or bulletproof vests, ostentatious watches, cartridge belts and walkie-talkies. Some of the fighters are stout, but interacting with assemblages of military gear and AK-47s, they are endowed with potency and virility. A black man in the group is wearing an impressive ring, an ornament that also appears in other videos, for instance one featuring the German rapper Denis Cuspert. The video shows Cuspert’s tattoos (normally taken to be haram, forbidden) and a flashy ring in close-up, thus associating the life of jihad with cool milieux of hip-hop, rap and western youth culture.

In foreign fighter videos more generally, the male bodies are always interacting with weapons and technological devices: they drive around in trucks, off-roaders, cars, tanks and other military vehicles; they carry the obligatory AK-47, if not more potent forms of weaponry and artillery (often in thinly disguised phallic postures). These man–weapon assemblages—men interacting with AK-47s, heavy artillery, huge missiles pointing to the sky—feed into the eroticized, transgressive and pleasurable atmosphere that permeates the videos. Benjamin Meiches has argued that there is a poignant relationship between weapons and desire. Weapons are not just passive instruments that humans can use at will, but things endowed with agency and a capacity to rouse desire. The desire to stab or shoot, for instance, ‘emerges from an encounter with the weapon’, which has a ‘pronounced ability to incite desire’. The weapon endows the ‘weapon possessor with a sense of omnipotence’ and ‘operates as a pluripotential object that stimulates multiple forms of desire that cannot be derived from the apparent utility of weapons for humans’. Hence, the ubiquity of weapons produces ‘erotic’ mascu-

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58 Meiches, ‘Weapons, desire, and the making of war’.
linities that exude potency, pleasure and desire, fleshed out in recurrent scenes showing smiling, satisfied jihadists. At the moment the two German-speaking fighters execute their defenceless victims, the face of one of the fighters brightens up in a broad, lustful smile.

But above all, these ISIS masculinities are produced in a pleasurable interaction with other male bodies. In foreign fighter recruitment videos, male bodies are not distinct individuals or isolated monads, but always part of homosocial/homoerotic assemblages. These homosocial communities are discreetly ‘raced’, in the sense that they are made up of a potpourri of races and ethnicities and hence promise an all-male brotherhood in which racial hierarchies are abolished while gender hierarchies are restored. The homoerotic communities articulated in ISIS videos do not necessarily involve explicit homosexual practices or genital sex, but in a more subtle manner articulate the pleasures that men can take from being together without the disturbing presence of women. In the video mentioned above, for example, two of the fighters are pictured sitting body against body behind some greenery with pleased, satisfied smiles on their faces.

This homoerotic atmosphere, where violence and pleasure intermingle, resonates strongly with the male communities that Paul Higate has portrayed, using the term ‘fratriarchies’. In contrast to the more familiar patriarchy, fratriarchy relates to contexts where men are together without having the responsibility for children, that is, in settings where men rule ‘not as fathers but as brothers’. The fratriarchies that Higate describes are characterized by ‘norm-bound transgression’, ‘hierarchy’ and a ‘heroic figure, the rowdiest fratrist, who presents himself as a role-model, to be rewarded with esteem and collective admiration from fellow hegemonic members of the group’. In the German-language video, the sinister execution is transgressive in its perversity (the defenceless prisoners are shot from behind), yet normative in the context of ISIS and contributing to the coherence of the group. The performance of the normative–transgressive execution creates a hierarchy between those who carry out the killing and those who are mere flag-bearers or drivers. Interestingly, though, the heroic masculinity articulated in the video is ambiguous and paradoxically ‘unheroic’. Recent attempts at redefining ‘manliness’ associate it with ‘courage and spiritedness’, or ‘strength, courage, mastery, and honor’. Yet the heroic masculinity in the ISIS video is linked not to courage but to raw dominance. The fighters in the video never expose themselves to any kind of risk or danger, but take pleasure from shooting two handcuffed prisoners from behind—an act that would normally be considered cowardly. Hegemonic, heroic masculinity, then, is not necessarily related to courage, but rather is connected with a perverse, transgressive pleasure

61 Higate, ‘Drinking vodka from the “butt-crack”’, p. 453.
63 Harvey C. Mansfield, Manliness (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
65 Some ISIS videos do link masculinity to courage: for instance, suicide videos or some of the feature-length ‘Hollywood-style’ films such as the famous Flames of war. See SITE (Al-Hayat), Flames of war: fighting has just...
Carnal aesthetics and dissonant masculinities in Islamic State videos

that stems from a position of pure dominance—not only in relation to the enemy but also, in some other videos, in relation to women.

Strictly speaking, the monolithic masculinity of ISIS foreign fighters roaming around in the province of Homs is not produced by the subordination of women, but is conveyed through their aesthetic absence. Yet although women are invisible, they can be evoked linguistically. When the gang leader delivers his rabble-rousing recruitment speech, glaring directly into the camera, he does not address women but asks the ‘beloved brothers’: ‘How can you be silent in the face of your sisters being stripped and imprisoned in Germany and Austria? How can you see this and yet sit and do nothing?’ The aesthetic absence of women, together with the linguistic framing of sisters as weak, helpless and dependent on male protection, produce masculinities that have the monopoly of speech, violence and killing.

If we want to understand how young men can be mesmerized by these homoerotic frames of male bonding, we must consider ‘the quasi-erotic appeal of extremist politics to young men, offering that chance to prove their masculinity, to be a man among men and reap the sexual payoff of women’s admiration’.66 But men are not necessarily on the lookout for women’s admiration. They can take pleasure from living on the edge with other men—or, as Jack Donovan puts it: ‘I am attracted socially, sexually and conceptually to adult men and adult masculinity … I am attracted to the expression of MAN as an archetype.’67 In some extremist environments today, androphilia, trivialized misogyny and a nostalgia for the restoration of potent forms of manliness seem to thrive.68 These ideas flourish against the backdrop of a perceived ‘decline of masculinity’ in a feminized world in which women now ‘wield the ax of the state over men’.69 Michael Kimmel has examined how certain men in extremist milieux—Islamist and far right—strive to restore dominant forms of masculinity with a view to overcoming what they see as pervasive feminization and the ‘castrating politics of globalization’.70 To restore masculinity to dominance and reassert men’s power, men must break free of the constricting bonds of the heterosexual family and enrol in small, violent, homosocial gangs.71 This remasculinization goes hand in hand with a glorification and idolization of the male body.

But if young men in the West can be charmed and seduced by the prospect of restored masculinity, violent gang life and docile or, even better, absent women, how are the sisters to be lured in? Will they be enticed by a life of service and subordination—not only to God but also to virile, muscular men? And if the recruitment videos that strive to attract physically fit men could work through


66 Kimmel, Healing from hate, p. 4 (emphasis added).


70 Kimmel, Healing from hate, p. 427.

identification with visible male bodies, how can the videos attract women, when female bodies are invisible or blurred?

**Dissonant, domesticated heteromasculinity**

Although the hyper-masculine and domineering fighter is aesthetically prevalent in ISIS videos, a closer scrutiny of these artefacts reveals a gendered complexity of sometimes dissonant masculinities (including, for example, old and disabled men).\(^2\) Attempts to articulate a monolithic masculinity often ‘fail, remain partial or appear as always in process’, just as the performance of normative masculinity is marked by ‘disjunctures, slippages and paradoxes’.\(^3\) The articulation of manifold, dissonant masculinities can potentially contribute to a diversification of the audience, attracting both men and women of various sexual orientations. As well as the potent, virile masculinity that appears in violent settings, some ISIS videos showcase a masculinity that is at odds with the hegemonic masculinity, staged in peaceful, secure, urban contexts, pointing to the mundane pleasures of heterosexual family life. A case in point is a video featuring a French (former) fighter with sparkling green eyes, sitting on a hilltop with the ISIS capital, Raqqa, in the background.\(^4\) The ex-fighter is dressed in a kaftan with a discreet cartridge belt around the shoulder, thus hinting that although he is unarmed (and therefore in a sense castrated, without the phallic symbol of a gun), he still bears a token of a previous virile masculinity. In contrast to the homosocial intermingling in the war videos, he is all alone, and thus lacking not only guns and military gear but also the homoerotic company of male bodies. Adopting a typical recruitment posture, he addresses the camera head-on and assures his (female?) audience that the Islamic State is secure: ‘They will tell you that the Islamic State is a dangerous place, but as you see,’ he gestures towards the background, ‘all the cities here are secure. We live in security. We live a normal life … No fear. No anxiety.’ With these peaceful ‘frames of security’ we are far from the world of homoerotic death and violence that most ISIS videos flesh out. Normal everyday life in the Islamic State turns out to be a life that arguably lacks all the transgressive pleasures of death, dominance and homoerotic gang life. This second video featuring the (castrated) French fighter suggests that, as well as security, ISIS also proposes more mundane welfare-state services: ‘The Dowla Islamiyya gave us a house and money to furnish it … Each month, we receive a salary.’\(^5\) In the next frame, the French ISIS recruit drives a car (not a truck or combat vehicle), indicating that ISIS provides not only military vehicles for its soldiers but also cars for its urban citizens. In contrast to videos of male bonding and violence that explicitly strive to attract young, fresh, male bodies to ISIS, the French foreign fighter in the everyday security video calls

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72 SITE ([Al-Hayat](https://www.sitemultimedia.org/video/SITE_AH_RaqqahProvince_AbuSalmanFaransi_Story.mp4)), French IS fighter, former businessman describes conversion to Islam.


74 SITE, French IS fighter discusses conversion to Islam, threatens Europe in video, ar-Raqqa Province (Bethesda, MD: SITE Intelligence Group, 7 June 2015), http://sitemultimedia.org/video/SITE_IS_RaqqahProvince_AbuSalmanFaransi_Story.mp4.

75 SITE, French IS fighter discusses conversion to Islam.
Carnal aesthetics and dissonant masculinities in Islamic State videos

...for ‘families’. Hence, the video expresses an explicit intention to arouse the desire of families to travel to the caliphate. Although families come in many forms and shapes, the notion of ‘family’ suggests that the video addresses not only ‘brothers’ but ‘sisters’ as well. The ‘frame of security’ articulates a strong heteronormative dimension, suggesting that the ideal ISIS family potentially replicates the ‘traditional’ nuclear family.

In the next scene, the French (former) fighter appears in a surprising posture, tenderly rocking a sleeping baby in his arms. The man–baby assemblage produces a clearly dissonant ‘nanny masculinity’ that is underscored by the interaction with the man’s attire: no green/black military camouflage here, but a loose kaftan in warm tones of brown, apricot, dark red. A soft, angelic light radiates from the baby and the father hums a sweet lullaby; no mother is to be seen. This aesthetic absence of a female body is curious. The new-born baby explicitly hints at the presence of a ‘mother’ somewhere outside the frame, and the language evokes ‘families’. The video’s inability to show the heteronormative family that is hinted at in the speech and through the presence of the baby points to an invisibility or lack in the middle of the frame, which invites the fantasies and imagination of the audience. Where did the mother go? Why did she leave? Will she ever come back? The violent videos with the German fighters produced masculinity through the total absence of female bodies and showed the transgressive pleasures that are made possible when men are on their own. The ‘nanny masculinity’ is conversely produced by the supposed presence of a female body lingering somewhere outside the frame—the baby being the indexical sign of a ‘mother’ as well as of (hetero-) sexual activities that are evidently taking place but which the video is unable to show.

This display of dissonant ‘nanny masculinity’ is not a one-off. In many other ISIS videos, men are seen taking care of children, infants and new-born babies; one famous example shows an Australian doctor working in a paediatric department in Raqqa. The masculinity of the paediatrician is produced through interaction with babies, infant incubators and, again, the aesthetic absence of the mothers. Hence, ISIS videos articulate not only muscular, virile fighters preoccupied with the violent founding of a new polity, but also handsome, green-eyed fathers and paediatricians catering for their families and the future citizens of the Islamic State.

The aesthetic articulation of a domesticated, castrated masculinity points to a multiplicity of masculinities as well as a complex field of overlapping power relations between men and women. Official ISIS ideology tends to relegate female bodies to a subservient role as weak, humble servants or procreating mothers, doomed to a life of obedience, pledging that they can ‘fulfill idealized roles as ... real women’. Although the perspective of female servitude and submission

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76 SITE, IS video promotes health services in Raqqa, doctors call on Muslims to join the group and help (Bethesda, MD: SITE Intelligence Group, 24 April 2015), http://sitemultimedia.org/video/SITE_IS_Raqqa_ISHS.mp4.
Manni Crone

can appeal to a great many\textsuperscript{78}—in particular because it offers a forceful counter-discourse to western gender mainstreaming—ISIS videos provide a subtler and more complex picture of ‘multiple, simultaneous and often contradictory gender hierarchies’.\textsuperscript{79}

A carnal experience of ISIS videos

Now finally, we can briefly engage with the conundrum of how gendered bodies interact with ISIS videos. Given the limited scope of this article, what is proposed here is not to provide an empirical analysis of spectatorship but rather, from an in-depth analysis of a small sample of videos, to start to contemplate the theoretical question of carnal spectatorship and how it relates to ISIS recruitment through visual aesthetic means. Accordingly, the article does not make any claim to empirical truth but, more modestly, proposes some initial ideas and suggestions informed by theoretical literature. Attraction to extremism is first and foremost a political process, involving linguistic as well as aesthetic forms of persuasion.\textsuperscript{80}

The idea I wish to investigate is that, in tandem with political convictions, attraction takes place through aesthetic interfaces that emphatically involve embodied forms of dream, pleasure and desire, which are not individual but inherently social and political.

Obviously, there is not one way of interacting with these videos but many ways, depending on the specific audience and the broader context. As Sue Tait has pointed out, today’s internet access to digital material enables ‘a multiplicity of spectatorial positions’ and a huge variety of audiences and gazes.\textsuperscript{81} Yet the interaction with an ISIS video is not only a visual experience involving the gaze, but a synaesthetic experience which involves all the senses of the body simultaneously. The young man interacting with an ISIS video will not only watch the dusty desert roads or the lively streets of Raqqa; he will also hear the nashid, the sound of a shot, somehow smell the smoke and feel the touch of muscular, sweaty male bodies. The aesthetic sense perception—seeing, hearing, touching, smelling— involves the whole living, carnal and gendered body ‘with skin and hair’, and is thus immediately linked to pain and pleasure. Watching and hearing the execution of two handcuffed prisoners can be painful to some; pleasurable to others.

The ISIS videos interact with their audience in a very explicit manner, in which the male protagonist solicits and interpellates the spectator directly, looking into the camera and summoning the ‘dear brothers’ or ‘families’ to leave their comfortable,


\textsuperscript{79} David Duriumsmith and Noor Huda Ismail, ‘Militarized masculinities beyond methodological nationalism: charting the multiple masculinities of an Indonesian jihadi’, International Theory 11: 2, 2019, pp. 139–59.


588

International Affairs 96: 3, 2020
Carnal aesthetics and dissonant masculinities in Islamic State videos

materialistic lives behind and join ISIS. A young ISIS sympathizer may, of course, be rationally and emotionally affected by the rhetorical harangue, be persuaded by the arguments and feel guilty for sitting at home doing nothing. Yet the aesthetic sense perception of the videos will not only stir processes of cognition and emotion, but also enable gendered forms of imagination, dream, desire and identification. The young man who watches an ISIS video can feel pleasure from identifying with the hyper-masculine foreign fighters and imagine himself inhabiting the ‘erotic’ world of male bonding and transgressive violence. He can dream of and feel pleasure at the idea of belonging to an all-male, all-race gang, catapulted into positions of power and dominance vis-à-vis enemies and women. Lingering over the frames of jihad, hearing the nashid, seeing the male bodies, he can imitate the body postures and techniques of the foreign fighters, adopt their way of walking, talking, shooting, laughing, dressing, thus anticipating the pleasures that will stem from a future life of jihad. He can feel pleasure from imagining himself taking part in virile gang life and restored manliness; or he can dream of the security that will follow from a tranquil, petit-bourgeois lifestyle with car, house, furniture, heterosexual pleasure and quality time with his child.

Yet ISIS videos attract potential recruits not only through visibility and identification, but also through invisibilities. Sometimes it is precisely an invisibility or a lack that expresses and enables desire. The ISIS videos can thus interact with male and/or female audiences through a variety of visible and invisible masculinities and femininities, and hint at homoerotic as well as heterosexual pleasures. Pleasure and desire are intricately linked to visibility and the gaze—but also to invisibility and lack. ISIS videos depicting muscular, gun-wielding men or competent, handsome doctors do not only enable male identification but can also give rise to female dreams and fantasies. Women interacting with ISIS war videos can, for instance, imagine that, once they have joined ISIS, they will be able to fill out the blind spots and engage in a relationship with a potent, virile fighter, a considerate father or a strikingly handsome doctor, all of them visibly lacking/calling for female companionship. The aesthetic politics of ISIS, then, works not only through visible pleasures of homoerotic bonding and violent transgression but also through invisibilities and lacks that call for hidden pleasures, imaginaries and fantasies of la petite mort. Such carnal reveries involving ISIS fighters are not individual but inherently social, informed by specific cultural and political contexts, and often intermingling with fervent political engagements.

Conclusion

Today, ISIS has abandoned its heartland in Syria and Iraq, and the caliphate has lost its territorial footing. Yet the scope of this article reaches beyond the changing fortunes of ISIS. The ambition has been not only to provide an empirical contri-

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82 Crone, ‘Religion and violence: governing Muslim militancy through aesthetic assemblages’.
83 Mitchell, What do pictures want?.
Manni Crone

bution to the study of ISIS’ media production, but also to raise a theoretical question about carnal, gendered spectatorship and recruitment through visual aesthetic means.

Studies of visual security and online radicalization have claimed that images and videos disseminated through digital media affect their audience rationally or emotionally. This article has turned the analytical attention away from the video—with its effects—towards the interaction between audience and video, and has tentatively put forward the idea that bodies interacting with videos are not only rational and emotional, but carnal. I have suggested that this carnal interaction enables gendered forms of identification, imagination and pleasure that are pivotal for aesthetic recruitment to violent extremism. Carnal or gendered dreams or aspirations of young people—as well as sombre fantasies about domination, violence and sex—have hardly been touched upon in studies of visual security or online recruitment. This absence is curious, when we consider that the current age is not only an ‘age of the image’, but also one in which the aesthetics of sex and violence are particularly prominent. Pleasure and desire are closely linked to the aesthetic senses—especially the gaze—while images, films and advertisements have always been associated with dream and imagination. Although political persuasion and conviction remain crucially significant, comprehending the current attraction to virile masculinity, homoerotic bonding or gendered fantasies of dominance and subordination could contribute to a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of aesthetic recruitment of young people.

In seeking to prevent online recruitment to extremist organizations, governments have often put their trust in counter-narratives in a bid to promote liberal democracy and gender mainstreaming. Scholars have joined the liberal chorus and argued that governments should encourage civic engagement and enlightened online education of young people. Yet initiatives that appeal solely to the intellectual capacities of the audience—their capacity to fathom that it is more sensible to be a ‘normal’ citizen endorsing liberal, democratic politics than to join a violent extremist group—will hardly stand a chance. Young men and women flirting with extremism are not only ‘cognitively open’ and on the lookout for political convictions to endorse, but also nourish embodied dreams, desires and imaginations about their intimate life, gender identity, social status … and sex. If the aesthetics of extremist groups produce masculinities, femininities and gender orders that appeal precisely because they oppose hegemonic gender mainstreaming, policy initiatives would benefit from better understanding this attraction, which currently appears to be on the rise. In terms of prevention, gender is not an easy path to tread, however. Kimmel, who for decades has taken an interest in

88 Neumann, ‘Options and strategies for countering online radicalization in the United States’.
89 Pearson, ‘Extremism and toxic masculinity’.

590

*International Affairs* 96: 3, 2020
Carnal aesthetics and dissonant masculinities in Islamic State videos

the role of masculinity in men’s adherence to—and departure from—extremist movements, claims that ‘if you ignore masculinity in understanding how these guys get into these movements, you will not be able to help them get out’.90 Against this backdrop, he suggests: ‘What we have to do is we have to understand that these guys get in to validate their masculinity. To get them out, you have to give them an alternative way to experience being a man.’91 How this alternative experience could be fleshed out is an open question that must be explored with great sensitivity to specific political and cultural contexts, avoiding the pitfall of reifying ‘masculinity’ as virility, strength and domination, or women as ‘peaceful saviours of violent men’. ISIS videos can at least show that there are a great many dissonant ways of ‘being a man’.

91 Kimmel, Healing from hate.