



Visual rhetoric of the Islamic State (IS): Persuasion in the field of terror

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Abstract

Terror organizations deliberately utilize the power of the image. Through examples, the present analysis employs an iconological-iconographical approach to examine the pictorial world and design of the Islamic State (IS), revealing that the IS uses classic, sometimes commercial motifs. These serve primarily to manifest power through mechanisms of fright, superiority and brutality. Each instance of staged choreography and planimetry functions like a classical battlefield victory image. The IS folds many symbolic messages into these motifs (crucifixions, destruction of cultural objects) through traditional iconoclastic methods. In social media, other more recent visual worlds predominate, covering topics of freedom, health care and family. In Western commercial style, they depict "normal" social life within IS-controlled territory while downplaying the regime's violent acts.

Keywords

Terror organization, Islamic State, iconography, iconoclasm, propaganda

Introduction

"Every military or political organization – outlawed or not – in the world has maintained a 'brand identity' over time" (Beifuss/Bellini, 2013, 7). Consequently, the IS's visual online communication appears strategically planned and stage-managed to produce emotional effects. "Inside the images of its actions against minorities and unbelievers, we see campaigns of genocide, crucifixions, stonings and open massacres as specific symbols ... the IS also targets cultural icons and religious centers with an aim to eradicate entire societies" (Jasper/Moreland, 2014, 5). Images are increasingly important in 21st Century communication, even terrorist propaganda, since images are quickly and ubiquitously spread through social media (Lobinger, 2012, 23).

The IS – also known as ISIS or ISIL - utilizes photographs and informational graphics. In annual reports published since 2012, graphics are employed to present macabre accomplishments (Watson, 2014). The proportion of IS's communications devoted to visual communication is significant. The present article examines these visual communications from perspectives of media creation, pictorial manipulation and communications design.

Statement of the problem

American communications theorist Harold Lasswell defined propaganda as "management of collective attitudes" and "control over opinions" through "manipulation of significant symbols" (Lasswell 1927/1971). The IS's pictorial worlds raise questions of how such techniques facilitate the group's appeal notwithstanding its chilling methods and practices and how it can attract new members even from Western countries. IS foreign combatants have increased from around 300 to over 20,000 (Kirk, 2015). This increase is strongly attributed to the IS's use of multimedia (Hofstetter/Montoya, 2014). Which visual elements – primarily images – does it circulate? How does it use pictorial language to control followers and attract new members? How are images categorized and what are the dimensions of their meaning? The aim is to discover the extent to which strategies, methods and elements of visual presentation and media design support propagandistic intentions.

Current state of research

Analysis of terror groups' visual language has only recently become a subject of communications science research.

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Tulloch and Blood (2012) examined key images of terrorist attacks or wars. Beifuss and Bellini (2013) analyzed logos and iconography of many terror organizations worldwide. Brezeale, Pleggenkuhle and Scott (2015) researched the identity-building factor associated with terror groups. Few studies of the IS pictorial world have emerged. Nissen (2014) described the images distributed by the IS via social media as a struggle for 'hearts and minds'. Gambhir (2014) deals with content, motifs and symbolic meaning in the IS propaganda magazine "Dabiq". In "The ISIS Twitter Census", Berger and Morgan (2015, 2) extensively examined approximately 20,000 Twitter accounts associated with the IS and its supporters. Jasper and Moreland's (2014, 5) study explains why cultural icons and religious centers are targeted within entire societies. The rare scientific research focused on IS pictorial language is often fragmentary. Our qualitative examination of IS visual communication aims to close this knowledge gap and help explain the organization's appeal.

Methods

Several online images were identified that were probably distributed by the IS itself and accessed by Western media. Many such motifs appeared in Western online and print media. Based on Panofsky's (2006) approach to the description and interpretation of images and inspired by Müller's (2003, 40 ff.) index categories, the visual material was classified into subjects/genres, qualitatively and iconographically analyzed, and interpreted iconologically. Our methodology was guided by Panofsky's visual analysis, substantially broadening the analysis of "production-related aspects" described by Bohnsack (2011). Regarding the analysis of the strategic production context – that is, which messages should be derived from the images – iconological context analysis (Bock/Isermann/Knieper 2011, 56 ff.) fundamentally influenced the research. Thus conclusions may be drawn regarding strategic aspects of the pictorial world. A limitation, however, is that the producers' image creation process and individual disposition could not always be reconstructed.



Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

Results

Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi

Pre-iconographical level

Image foreground

In the foreground, viewed from below, a powerfully built man, around 50 years old, is standing upright behind a microphone, facing the camera, his head turned 45 degrees left and tilted back. He gazes emotionlessly, almost staring, past the camera's right side. His nose is wide, eyebrows thick, beard abundant; his mouth is closed, its

corners turned slightly down. Wearing a black kaftan and turban, he raises his right arm and lifts his index finger. A shiny object adorns his wrist.

Image middleground

In the middleground are gold-colored handrails at each side of the individual, who is presumably standing elevated on a staircase or pulpit. At the right middleground is a stone balustrade of similar materiality to the marbled walls and columns in the background.

Image background

In the background are two stone columns with filigree, floral and geometrical ornamentation (Bänderwerk/Mäander). At the left, behind a column, is an electric fan. In the background, to the individual's right, two tulip-shaped wall sconces emit a green-glowing light. At the upper left, the ISIS flag is superimposed.

Iconographical level

The photo is captioned, "A year after ISIS declared a cross-border caliphate and rebranded itself, the elusive so-called leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has still only been seen once." The photographer is not credited.

Iconological level

Perspective projection

The individual is vertically positioned somewhat left of center, his torso and legs unseen. The microphone stand draws the viewer's attention, giving the individual a tilted appearance.

Choreographical staging

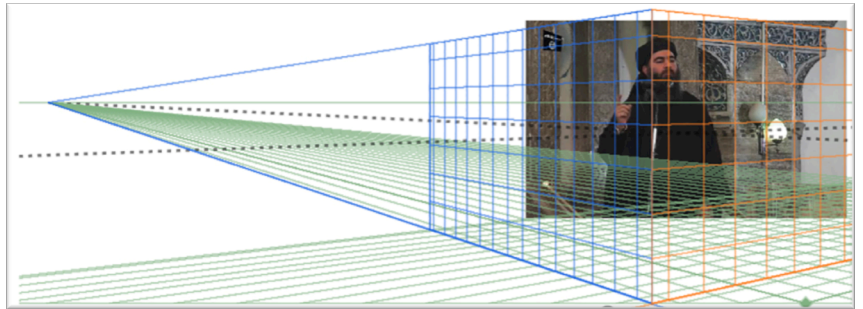
The photo portrays IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, also called “Caliph Ibrahim”. The image was likely created in July 2014 in Mosul’s Great Mosque. A video with similar images exists, suggesting that this picture was taken at the same time. Besides the video and photos, there are few pictures of al-Baghdadi, who normally appears masked, earning the sobriquet “invisible sheikh” (BBC News, 2015). The photo appears unstaged and, from its lighting, was probably taken in the evening. The upward-angled shot suggests a taller person, creating an impression of power, self-confidence and superiority. The head’s backward tilt and the raised chin reinforce this impression. The IS logo identifies the image’s processor/distributor.

Planimetrical holistic structure

It is a two- or three-point perspective. The vanishing point is clearly at the right side, formed by sharply sloping lines in the background (building) and foreground (wall). The second vanishing point proceeds leftward into the interior, passing between the columns. Accentuated by his bodily shape and particularly by the dark, monotone clothing, Baghdadi’s appearance forms an ascending triangle at the image’s center. Additional image-guiding lines emerge from the raised index finger pointing at the sky; as an extension, the edges of the columns in the background; and the microphone stand. The lowered gaze parallels the triangle’s right side. This impression is reinforced by the head which, together with the beard and turban, forms an inverted triangle. The point at this triangle’s base, when extended, also parallels the other triangle’s right side. Although Baghdadi is perceived as an important and central element of the image, closer examination reveals the lines formed by his stance to be conflicted and divergent. The photograph’s medium shot guides our attention to one person.



Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

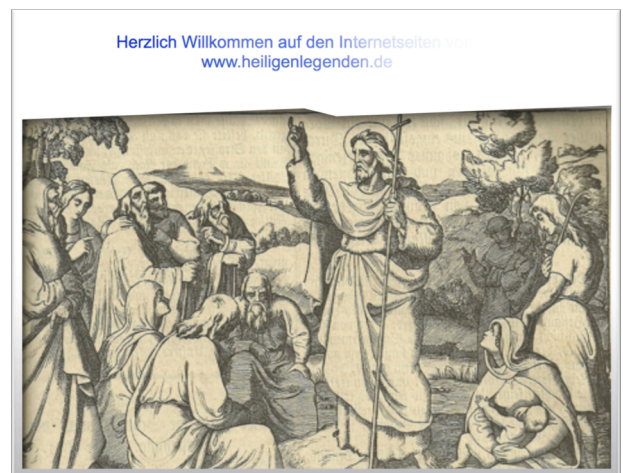


Iconological-iconical interpretation / summary

The extended, upwardly pointed index finger is generally perceived in Western cultures as threatening gesture (raised or moral index finger). Historically, examples exist where discussions or worldviews by eminent philosophers or scholars were symbolized by the raised index finger:



St. Athanasius in a painting by Raphael



John the Baptist is often depicted with raised index finger and referenced in Islam and Christianity.

In today's media, the symbol of the raised index finger associated with Muslims is frequently interpreted as "sympathizing with the IS", appearing in IS photos as that organization's symbol. Explanations of this image in IS motifs often cite the example of "Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi with raised index finger in the Mosul Mosque." "More specifically, it refers to a fundamentalist interpretation of the tawhid, which rejects any other view, including other Islamic interpretations, as idolatry. Zelinsky writes that when ISIS uses the gesture, it affirms an ideology that demands the destruction of the West, as well as any form of pluralism. For potential recruits around the globe, it also shows their belief that they will dominate the world." (Skoler, 2014)

The original Islamic meaning of the raised index finger is that "...when ISIS militants hold up a single index finger on their right hands, they are alluding to the tawhid, the belief in the oneness of God and a key component of the Muslim religion. The tawhid comprises the first half of the shahada, which is an affirmation of faith, one of the five pillars of Islam, and a component of daily prayers: "There is no god but Allah, Muhammad is the messenger of Allah." (Zelinsky, 2014) "In prayer, the finger is slightly raised to attest to Allah's oneness and the prophecy of Muhammad" (Bärliner, 2015). In summary, the raised index finger should be interpreted both historically and today as expressing defense of power, assertion of a position, and claim to rule.



The ancient city of Palmyra, under IS control since May (Stern, 2015)

Palmyra

Pre-iconographical level

Image foreground

In the foreground is a regularly shaped, sand-colored portico similar to a beveled edge/rugged cliff or bordure. The IS flag is superimposed at the upper left.

Image middleground

In the middleground, 25 men in olive-colored overalls kneel near the edge of a platform, their hands behind them. Some lean forward, hanging their heads; others slump back; still others look toward the observer. In front of them, centered and standing erect with legs apart, a black-clad (baggy trousers, loose top) individual poses, his head covered. Behind stand 25 additional individuals wearing beige (kaftans) with head coverings (presumably turbans) in earth colors. A large flag (approximately 7m square) hangs vertically in the image's center; it features white Arabic characters along the upper edge and black Arabic characters in the circle below.

bans) in earth colors. A large flag (approximately 7m square) hangs vertically in the image's center; it features white Arabic characters along the upper edge and black Arabic characters in the circle below.

Image background

The portico is flanked left and right by a monumental, temple-like ruin with approximately ten columns. The flag is suspended from the roof by two cables. The sky is a monochrome sandy color.

Iconographical level

Like a theatrical ensemble, the men stand arrayed in a row across the stage, the oversize IS flag serving as backdrop, its size guiding the eye. The writing at the top lies specifically along the observer's horizon. It comprises the Arabic words "La 'ilaha 'illa-llah" (There is no god but God [Allah] – the first part of the shahada) (Beifuss, Bellini, 2013, 51). The white circle below contains three lines in Arabic: "Muḥammadun rasūlu 'llāh" (Muhammad is His messenger – second part of the shahada). "The words are written in reverse order, reading from top to bottom 'Allah', 'Messenger', 'Muhammad' (Beifuss, Bellini, 2013, 61). The flag is an element of the Muslim profession of faith "...the solid flag was the Prophet Mohammed's war banner" (Prusher, 2014).

Iconological level

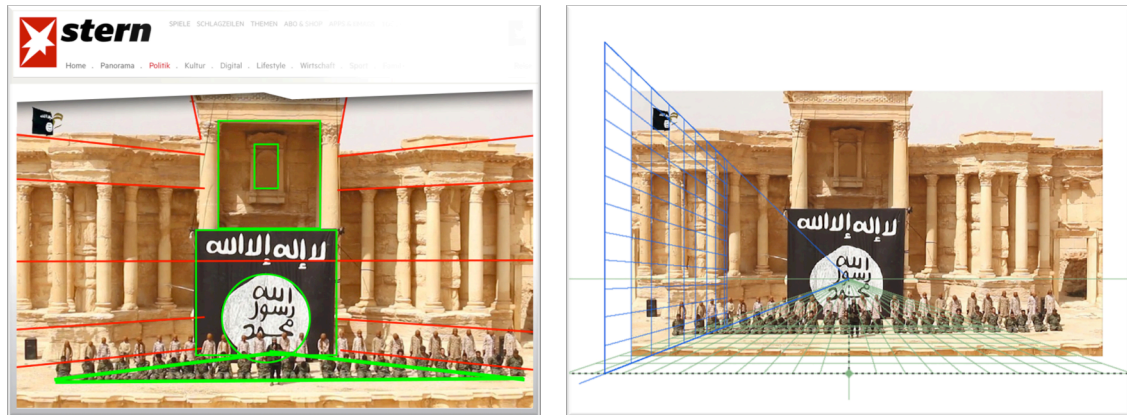
Perspective projection

The photo was taken in the Theater of Palmyra in Syria from a slight elevation. The shadow of the man at the center indicates time of the photo as late afternoon or early evening. The lineup of individuals fills the second-lowest sixth of the image. Taken together, they occupy only a small share of the motif's vertical space.

Choreographical staging

The black-clad man in front of the group issues "the orders". He postures himself like a commander, facing away from them. The image was shot during the seizure of Palmyra, one of the ancient world's most important cultural centers. The photographic object is the execution of Syrian soldiers before an audience that was said to include children, among

others (Spiegel Online, 2015). The executioners stand menacingly and imposingly behind the kneeling soldiers.



The ancient city of Palmyra, under IS control since May (Stern, 2015)

Planimetric holistic structure

This shot was taken from a single-point perspective. The photo's vanishing point is the "Seal of the Prophets" at the flag's center. The image is defined by two rectangles: the square flag and the rectangle above it, framed by the columns. The niche within the upper rectangle is empty, creating the impression that the figure that would have been there has been visually replaced by the black IS banner. The wide shot setting deliberately introduces the site (Palmyra) and the action (seizure).

Iconological-iconical interpretation / summary

The photo, in central perspective, creates a heroic effect recalling images of Hitler's processions at the Nazi Party rally grounds in Nuremberg, staged to create a monumental demonstration of unending power along Roman patterns (Hengst, 2015). The Palmyra representation follows the age-old iconoclastic tradition (Besançon, 2009) in its demonstration of supremacy (after wartime victories or revolutions) through destruction of the vanquished group's cultural objects. The victors' power narratives include images celebrating them as conquerors through the destruction of symbolic figures like sculptures (Lenin statues in Eastern Europe), monumental structures (Palmyra in Syria) or shrines (Bamiyan in Afghanistan). Destruction of cultural objects is clearly a deliberate symbolic act of assuming power, since the loss of symbols inflicts pain similar to that caused by the loss of human life. Iconoclasm has been scientifically documented since the early Middle Ages, especially during the Byzantine iconographic conflict (Brubaker, 2012).



Children on a playground: „The scenes could be from any park, anywhere in the world, but these children live under the control of ISIS“ (Stanton, 2015)

Family and children – Daily life

Pre-iconographical level

Image foreground

Two dark-haired children (approximately 10 years old) play on a wave-shaped climbing apparatus. Another child wearing pink shoes, probably female, is seen behind the apparatus at the image's far right. The apparatus sits on a lawn with bare and grassy patches. Open-mouthed, the child facing the observer to the apparatus's right smiles and appears pensive. He glances right and below, past the camera. He wears a bright, heavy pullover similar to a sweatshirt with a blue/orange pattern on the front, jeans, and sneakers. With his left foot on the next rung of the apparatus's ladder, he appears about to climb higher. Each hand grips one of the vertical bars. The second child on the apparatus, facing away from the observer, is stepping forward in the opposite direction. His arms are raised as if to balance himself on the rungs. He wears a diamond-pattern pullover with blue and white stripes around the sleeves and a solid blue back, dark jeans and sneakers. The IS logo is superimposed at the upper right.

Image middleground

All that is visible in the middleground is the lawn, alternately illuminated by late afternoon sun and darkened by long shadows. Scattered along the ground are light-colored objects, possibly paper or debris.

Image background

In the background is the blurred image of a van, tailgate open, and a group of four to six individuals surrounding it. Two of them, standing alongside the car and possibly leaning against it, appear to be observing the children at play. The leftmost of this pair wears a light-colored head covering.

Iconographical level

According to media reports, this scene is taken from an IS propaganda video (dailymail.co.uk, 2015). The same source reports that "...these children live under the control of ISIS". Both the video and the image display the IS logo, indicating IS production.

Iconological level

Perspective projection

The shadows suggest the likely time of the photograph as late afternoon. The backlit children dress warmly in pullovers and long pants, possibly indicating an IS directive to cover the body appropriately. The long shadows on the lawn suggest tall trees or buildings outside the picture's frame. The photo is shot at the children's eye level. The parents remain farther away, blurred in the background, producing a sense of detached normality; the sun's rays accentuate the sentimental mood, creating a "friendly, sunny" impression.

Choreographical staging

The children are not playing together. Each of them is moving in a different direction. The observer's focus is drawn to the right half of the image to the child facing the observer. Normality and routine create an effect contrary to the violent IS images published to this point.

Planimetric holistic structure

The apparatus's wave-like appearance defines the image's lines. The horizon is in the upper third of the image at the children's eye level.



The vanishing point of this single-point perspective is situated at the head of the girl behind the apparatus. The medium focus draws the observer into the scene



Children on a playground

Iconological-iconical interpretation / summary

Portrayal of everyday situations, cheerfulness, childhood, normality and "happiness" is a departure in the IS pictorial world from the gruesome, chilling and frightening motifs circulated to date. It offers the pretense that life under the IS is normal and routine.

Summary

Based on analyses of the individual images, one concludes that IS uses classic and often commercial motifs to portray its power and traditional values. Using mechanisms of fright, superiority and brutality, these representations proclaim IS power. Individually, each instance of staged choreography and planimetry functions similarly to many classical images of battlefield victory. The IS builds symbolic messages into these motifs (crucifixions, destruction of cultural objects, displays of power) that were traditionally employed in iconoclasm, thus utilizing techniques already evidenced in 8th-9th Century Byzantine iconoclasm.

The IS consistently converts classic Western motifs into propagandistic visual language. These images are inspired by pictorial compositions that have contributed to Western visual understanding for centuries in the case of European painting - but also, in particular, for decades in documentary and journalistic contexts.

Classic, culturally compatible visual motifs are routinely used to convey messages. Thus the IS deliberately exploits its potential recipients' existing knowledge in order to enhance the effect of its own images. Notably, the IS rejects Western values in principle yet employs Western visual motifs. The historic power and competence of its pictorial compositions nurture its claim to power and truth as the final, incontrovertible assertion of the Islamic State. This occurs mainly with destructive visual tools of power (notably images of the destruction of Palmyra), but sometimes with constructive visual representations (the IS as welfare state). In such cases, the compositional strategies are similar to those employed by Western media that represent conflicting positions and values.

In social media, still other more recent visual worlds predominate, covering topics like freedom, health care and family. In Western commercial style, these images depict "normal" social life within IS territory while minimizing the regime's many violent acts. The camera positioned at individuals' eye level underscores the statement. These photographs depart from the hard and brutal characterizations of the IS, promoting on a social level the "values" and "advantages" of life in the Islamic State. Their hoped-for effect is that many young people will enlist in the "IS adventure". Thus a new IS image is eclectically created wherein visual content is contrary to martial images, producing great ambivalence in the observer.

Limitations and suggestions

The present study has several limitations. First, it is based on a reduced image set. These photos were specifically selected to address certain messages regularly conveyed by the IS to the public and accessed by Western media. Given the impossibility of determining actual authorship, we relied heavily on images published in Western media that featured a clear reference to the IS as author. This leads to a second limitation: these images largely represent a preselection by Western media and may possibly be less representative of IS's overall published images. Notwithstanding these limitations, the study represents a starting point in the analysis of IS pictorial worlds. Future research could perform quantitative analyses of larger visual samples. Individual IS media forms and in particular its published video clips have thus far gone largely unexamined (Christoph, 2015). Since 2014/2015, the organization has published short online videos resembling video ads concerning life in IS territory (mujatweets episodes). Regarding these videos, theoretical approaches drawn from marketing effectiveness research could become a fruitful line of inquiry.

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Biographical note

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