

Aktivismus- und Propagandaforschung

RESEARCH

Yorck Beese

The Film of the Islamic State

The Cinefication of Jihadi Video

MOREMEDIA



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Aktivismus- und Propagandaforschung

Reihe herausgegeben von

Bernd Zywietz, Mainz, Deutschland

„Propaganda“ ist nicht zuletzt angesichts der nationalsozialistischen Indoktrination und Agitation sowie eines gewandelten medienethischen Menschenbilds ein heute negativ konnotierter, abwertend gebrauchter Begriff. „Aktivismus“ assoziiert hingegen kritisch-emanzipatorischen Ausdruck und basisdemokratischen, auch künstlerischen Protest. Scheinbar zwei entgegengesetzte Pole im Spektrum öffentlicher und politischer Kommunikation verwischen ihre Grenzen gerade im Web 2.0: Beide setzen darin auf neuartige digitale Möglichkeiten individueller medialer Beteiligung sowie auf attraktive Nutzungs-, Ausdrucks- und Gestaltungsformen der Medien- bzw. Web-, Populär- und Jugend(sub)kulturen. Die Reihe „Aktivismus- und Propagandaforschung“ widmet sich diesem Themenkomplex zwischen Meinungslenkung und subversiver Aktion, Extremismus, *Counter-Speech* und *Participatory Culture*. Der Schwerpunkt liegt mit aufklärerischem, medienkompetenzförderndem Ziel auf theoretischen Überlegungen und empirischen Untersuchungen zu ästhetischen und rhetorischen Praktiken sowie (audio-)visuellen Textformen. Der Begriff der „Propaganda“ wird dabei kritisch-reflektiert, zugleich als analytisch sinnvoll erachtet und mit dem Ziel der Versachlichung eingesetzt. Wertneutral meint er eine weltanschauliche, auf politische Gestaltung abzielende Form systematischer persuasiver Kommunikation bzw. die dafür eingesetzten Medientexte.

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*There may be no escape from the will –
but seeing a different idea will remain
your essential choice.*

*This book is dedicated to my loved ones
who supported me during six years of
research.*

Foreword

This study, addressed to specialists in the field of propaganda media and film historians, recommends the study of contemporary propaganda video. The risk of fringe and radical groups producing media with a seeming quality look and feel has increased in recent years and since social media have become publicly available, some radical groups have received ample opportunity to put the values of democracy and humanity at risk through media experimentation. The Islamic State's film is perhaps the most important one out of the recent examples—certainly within the broader field of jihadi video—because it has driven its own development the furthest and is now finding imitators in its field, even if these developments are scarcely noted by mainstream media.

Objectors to the project of studying the increasing aestheticization of the Islamic State's film along with its conditions of existence might argue that the terror group called 'the Islamic State' has been inactive since its downfall in 2019 or that it does not produce video anymore. But its ideology lives on, carried today by numerous small insurgent groups in internationally dispersed small insurgencies. Objectors might also argue that studying the aesthetics of this inhumane film is an unnecessary nobilitation for the militant group's video production and that it runs the danger of mixing aesthetics with actual violence, but this is not the aim of this thesis. This work understands itself as a history of the Islamic State's video propaganda and its stylistic development towards a certain 'Hollywoodism,' yet, and perhaps more importantly, it also considers the Islamic State's film style an encoding mechanism of an inhumane ideology. As such, it will venture into the realm of aesthetics while analyzing the visible and 'invisible' devices of ideological communication through video film. Stylistic devices in this particular 'film' should thus be considered *functions* and *formalizations* of a violent and inhumane ideology that this work simultaneously studies scientifically and

rejects philosophically—the film of the Islamic State is not art, it only exploits cinematic devices in trying to capture the hearts and minds of its audience either through the occasional display of utopia or, more commonly through sickening displays of extreme violence.

The actual human rights violations depicted in this film should not be glossed over, and therefore this thesis will present carefully selected—yet still potentially upsetting—screenshots from Islamic State film as part of its analyses and discussion. Representations of death are a growing threat to humane societies that require an increasing media competency. The growing aestheticization in this contemporary propaganda film should be studied especially to make ideological communication and experimentation by the so-called Islamic State *predictable*. It is therefore assumed that the public addressed by this work has an interest in pulling back the curtain just enough on this difficult piece of film history (or perhaps better: video history), and that it will perhaps learn about this particular film's structure, aesthetics, and symbolisms, so that they and others can be safe from this film.

Yorck Beese

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I'm home.

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The Film of the Islamic State—“Like Hollywood”?

1

The film of the so-called Islamic State (IS), a terrorist group with origins in Iraq and Syria, is part of a history of video film that has so far remained relatively opaque. Knowledge of this film is scarce beyond the few instances in which it has made international news or spread through social media. Perhaps the best known releases are a series of crudely shot beheading videos from the Iraq War in 2004, the proclamation of a caliphate via the staged ascension of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to caliph in 2014, or numerous ultraviolet videos that were flooded onto social media between 2013 and 2019. One would think that such an obscure and inhumane film would be identified solely as bad propaganda, but observers in recent years have highlighted the increase in aestheticisation in the Islamic State’s video releases.

The most remarkable comment that has been made by media scholars and observers alike is a comparison to ‘Hollywood’. Whenever researchers and observers have tackled the subject, they were quick to note the ‘Hollywood-like look and feel’ of the Islamic State’s videos (e.g., Alghofaili 2015, Dauber & Robinson 2015, Hider 2015, Hoogkamer 2016, Bender 2016, Menner 2021). This comparison has been especially salient at the height of the caliphate between 2014 and 2017 when the Islamic State media wing was in its most productive stage to date and pushed its releases onto social media on a large scale. To further underscore the idea of cinematic-ness, the word “slick” has been commonly attached to notes on either the Islamic State videos’ audio-visual design or their assumed production quality, and it has since become an accompanying buzzword of choice (e.g., Becker 2014, Chulov 2014, Friis 2015, Hoogkamer 2016). Judging from these assessments it could appear then that the film of the Islamic State takes after or even matches Hollywood film.

For what little knowledge is available about the Islamic State's video production, evaluations of its video quality have been far too glaring—and, in fairness, it should be clarified right away that the Hollywood comparison is a superficial one, and observers and scholars of different disciplines have used it mostly as a generalizing (but certainly Hollywood-centric) shorthand to describe the aesthetic experience of Islamic State film of the caliphate years (2014–2019). Still, the comparison is at odds with the nature of the Islamic State and its film which, in an equally shorthand fashion, is better summarized as the video production of an extremist Sunni Islamist insurgency that tries to borrow the ideological blasting power of advanced cinema in its releases and therefore repurposes some of cinema's formal language.

The Islamic State's *film history* is part of a larger history of video production by radical militant Muslim (i.e., jihadi) groups that most prominently includes al-Qaeda and the Taliban. These three groups represent different projects of doctrinal expansion that are not generally capable of entering 'Western' mainstream. The so-called Islamic State¹ in particular began as an armed insurgency on Iraqi soil at the turn of the millennium. Staging itself as a state-building project it projects the aim of restoring caliphal governance as a genuinely Islamic form of statehood that had historically been lost with the downfall of the Ottoman Empire (to which no direct heritage is claimed). A radical theocracy on the inside, the Islamic State has launched media campaigns online and offline that have resulted in several terrorist acts across Europe, the Middle East, the United States of America, West Africa and Asia. These were accompanied by noticeable increases in an institutionalized video production that had been established by 2004 and that still continues today.

As a military coalition organized against the expanding Islamic State in the 2010s, researchers from various disciplines scrambled to gather what little information was available on the inner workings of the exclusivist group. The imminent threat to freedom, lives and global security that the terror group has posed has—justifiably and understandably—occupied the sciences much more

¹ The author hereby explicitly distances himself from the so-called Islamic State. He wishes to make clear that he does not want his work to be read as an adoption of the terror group's terminology, that he rejects the ideology of the group known as the Islamic State and that he does not support it materially, philosophically, or otherwise. The Islamic State's legitimacy as a state, as an Islamic form of governance and as a religion have been justifiably and correctly drawn into question (e.g., Ababakar et al. 2014). The author considers the Islamic State a sectarian threat to peaceful societies, to the freedom of choice, to the freedom of belief and to the inheritance of the Enlightenment with its origins in the Renaissance. Having clarified this, the phrase 'so-called' will henceforth be omitted when referring to the Islamic State because *a.* the phrase 'Islamic State' will be in ample use throughout the entirety of this thesis and *b.* the group's own name will have to attribute itself with its own inhumane film history.

consistently than its growing tendency to aestheticise its video releases. As a consequence, assessments of its film style and video quality were perhaps given somewhat in passing. Yet, the Hollywood comparison should be scrutinized more thoroughly since it might uncarefully nobilitate the terror group's video production (because it is made using retail technology), gloss over the dangerous and inhumane ideological contours (not least because of its crass interplay of utopia and violence), and, conversely, de-value other cinemas (especially those that are not limited by radical ideologies)—because, indeed, Islamic State videos have become *more like* cinema in recent years.

Scholarly works of recent years have produced only partial insight into this development as a cross section of the literature shows: media scholars have so far highlighted the relevance of analyzing the aesthetics of Islamic State videos (e.g., Zywiets 2015), and some disciplines, especially the political sciences (Friis 2015) and art history (Botz-Bornstein 2017), have laudably approached a selection of prominent video releases under specific aesthetic aspects such as image composition (Spiller et al., 2016). Video-based analyses have, however, commonly focused on subjects external to film style such as the identities of specific *mujahideen* (armed fighters) in select videos (e.g., Winter 2014), or have even stopped at paraphrases and notes on general rhetoric (e.g., McDearis 2016).

More rewarding investigations have been presented in works on classic jihadi videos genres such as martyrdom eulogies (e.g., Straub 2019) and iconoclasm events (e.g., Pfeifer & Günther 2020). These case studies come from Islam studies, but do provide a broader backdrop for understanding jihadi video and the film of the Islamic State in particular. Presenting a short study of Islamic State videos *as film* has been Akil (2016) who invests Deleuze's concepts of the movement image and the time image into an analysis of recent Islamic State videos, an approach that highlights increasing cinematic complexity (but may tread also on dangerous ground for applying aesthetic concepts to real-life violence in propaganda).

Focusing specifically on aesthetic qualities in the Islamic State's film are contributions by Zywiets (2018¹, 2018²) and Hoogkamer (2016), the latter of whom discusses aestheticisation and "Hollywood representations of death," but analyses only one particular video release. However, Hoogkamer was also the first to offer thoughts on the challenge to realism that the Islamic State's videos present, an idea that will prove fruitful to this study as IS video producers have indeed experimented with scripted reality scenarios in certain periods. Interestingly, Venkatesh et al. (2018) have identified some Islamic State videos as a "cinema of attractions" and thereby applied the language of film theory to their object of research, yet, oddly, they have also bypassed mentioning the theory of the *montage of*

attractions as formulated by the influential Soviet film theoretician and director Sergei Eisenstein (1957).

The Islamic State's highly aestheticised capital punishment videos, especially those from the 2014 to 2017 timeframe, have received a great amount of attention, specifically from authors residing in the political sciences (e.g., Friis 2015, Patruss 2016, Barr & Herfroy-Mischler 2017). Media scholar Krona (2021) has contributed an exemplary study of the visual imagery in beheading videos with respect to gestures of power and retributive violence towards hostages. Meanwhile, art historian Botz-Bornstein (2017) is so far the only researcher to offer a general thesis on the aesthetic character of the Islamic State's film. His work has gone so far as to compare Islamic State videos with *Italian Futurism*, an interesting suggestion that reveals some theoretical (and rather coincidental) parallels, at least to the pro-fascism leaning current of futurism. Finally, one journalistic observer has correctly proclaimed that the Islamic State's film is "not really Hollywood" (Bender 2016) but, sadly, omits discussion.

While many interesting aspects have thereby been covered by the state of research, the Hollywood comparison still remains rather vague.² If likening the video production of an armed insurgency to Hollywood film does not seem out of proportion by default (and several authors do avoid the comparison), the Hollywood-centric viewpoint on the Islamic State's film still awaits closer examination against the current state of research. Hollywood is a cypher of fiction and a technologically elaborate narrative illusionism which sets the bar high for militant insurgencies like the Islamic State who historically only carry cameras along with their rifles, who usually only edit footage from military operations and speeches into ideologically favorable propaganda, and whose ideological and economic foundations, to name only two factors at this point, differ greatly from those of any commercial cinema. In fact, the historic, economic, ideological, technological, and stylistic foundations of the Islamic State's video production should be *recognized* before any comparisons to possible stylistic influences. This idea should move into focus because not every film that is produced in professionalizing structures is automatically at the level of Hollywood, as this work will show.

² The author of this book has himself contributed articles on the production and editing of Islamic State videos (Beese 2018), emblematics in martyrdom videos (2019, 2020¹), animation in jihadi video (2020²), the technology of the Islamic State's media offices (2018, 2020³) and media publication in the Islamic State (2020^{4,5}).

1.1 Where 'Hollywood' Comes Into Play

In establishing a more nuanced perspective on the Hollywood comparison, this book will open with a comparison of the Islamic State's own film style not with any commercial movie, but with itself in order to illustrate the ongoing development towards more elaborate aesthetics in the Islamic State's video releases. A comparison of two paradigmatic releases from different periods will shed light on their respective film styles and provide initial thoughts on the development of Islamic State *cinematic-ness* in general. To briefly introduce the crucial terminology: film style consists of *cinematography*, *mise-en-scène* (staging), *editing*, and *sound* (Bordwell & Thompson 2013). Each of these areas implies an entire universe of cinematic techniques ranging from selecting filmstock to animation to soundscaping. In comparing the two following videos this thesis will open a noetic corridor that illustrates an increasing aesthetic complexity and that allows for a first assessment of the Hollywood comparison—hence the question, to which degree are the following videos 'like Hollywood'?

The Nicholas Berg Video is certainly the most infamous and most widely-known video release by the early Islamic State. Published in 2004 at the beginning of the *War in Iraq* (2003–today), the five-minute video was a reaction to the human rights abuses in Abu Ghraib prison. The video shows a group of masked militants reading their ideological program while standing behind the eponymous hostage. On the technological side, the video has been discernibly recorded on two camcorders with an image cadre in 4:3 ratio with mostly one frontal full shot used in editing. The image is pillarboxed, resulting in a pseudo-widescreen image in the retained video file. Timestamps in the bottom right corner of the image and bleeding colors (an involuntary play on words) seem to indicate the use of VHS camcorders as recording devices, but perhaps quality has also deteriorated over several generations of digital copies.

In the film style column there is some rudimentary ideological communication to be noted in a combination of staging and cinematography, better called videography for the apparent use of retail camcorders. The scene shows five mujahideen literally *towering* over the hostage. It is the image equator that simultaneously enables and affirms this relation by assigning an *above vs. below dichotomy* and it thereby relays a positive evaluation of the fighters through visual *opposition*: the mujahideen are *above* the image equator and their hostage sits at their feet *below* the image equator, a basal but expressive composition of value assessment.

The auditory layers of the video are not functionalized beyond the on-camera speech by the towering *mujahid* in the image center. His statement includes a call to remove U.S. occupation from Iraq and an oath of vengeance for the human

rights abuses in Abu Ghraib prison, which are identified by the rhetor as “crimes against Muslims by nations of the cross” (i.e., Christian nations). Besides the sartorial code (*combat gear vs. orange prison garb*, the latter is reminiscent of images from Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay), the subsequent beheading of the hostage and the presentation of his severed head as *corpus delicti* are ideologically expressive elements that signal vengeance for an abuse of Muslims—conversely, it implies a valorization of Muslim blood over other bloods in the context of this video’s rhetoric.



Still taken from the Nicholas Berg Video (2004)

Any Hollywood comparisons can be safely disregarded for this video. It is, however, akin to a prototypical snuff video, i.e., a video produced solely for seeing death in sentient beings. A backdoor to cinematic expression is only found in the very basal *mise-en-scène* that encodes a power relationship for the on-camera personnel along the image equator of the lens (*above vs. below / towering vs. cowering = valued vs. de-valued*). Recorded on retail equipment by ideologically motivated laymen, the video serves the unbalanced self-image of the group and presents, at best, a perverse understanding of catharsis (assumably found in the act of an actual beheading that is framed as an act of retribution for the torture of Muslim prisoners). The video is, in a word, a document of inhumanity with access to only rudiments of film style.³

³ Previous work on this video has been presented by Zelizer (2010).

Since the release of the *Nicholas Berg Video*, the Islamic State had released hundreds of propaganda videos that were barely noticed due to the group's clandestine character and its obscure online publication practices. However, this would change with the nearing proclamation of a caliphate in 2014 when the Islamic State invested heavily in video production. In 2015 the Islamic State publishes the execution video *Healing of the Believers' Chests* through social media, likewise to global media attention and shock in equal parts. Produced in full high-definition resolution (1920×1080p), the 23-minute video features a topical animated title sequence, and it *narrates* the interrogation and subsequent burning-alive of a captive Jordanian fighter pilot who had crash-landed in the caliphate in three acts. This video's style is noticeably more communicative on the aesthetic levels and there is an almost elegant use of animation to be noted: as the hostage is interrogated, blue particle animations dissolve and reintegrate his image as if his face had been captured in a secret service databank—a topical visual effect that is indeed reminiscent of spy and agent movie aesthetics.



Healing of the Believers' Chests (2015); left: lighting creates a 'second face' metaphor; center: the hostage's image dissolves into a particle flight animation; right: the hostage is metaphorically swallowed by a wall of mujahideen

In the interrogation scene there is a lighting tactic to be observed as the hostage's face is side lit, a technique that renders one half of his face dark and thus effectively creates a 'second face' metaphor as if the hostage's true nature as an offender against the Islamic State were now exposed to the lens. In the third act, multiple focus-controlled and color-coherent camera angles then provide a seemingly full scene coverage of the hostage as he arrives at his execution site. The combination of videography with *mise-en-scène* results in a series of visual metaphors that include a literal wall of *mujahideen* that encloses the victim (similar to the visual of 2004) and a keyhole glimpse through said wall. It is at this point that this release communicates beyond denotation through soft focus: it is *as if* the hostage was being swallowed by the wall of mujahideen.

The intradiegetic level of sound (i.e., what is heard as part of the depicted world) is even used for on-site atmosphere in the third act. A confrontative

montage (*victim vs. mujahideen*) is interspersed with an open point-of-view montage that seems to suggest the *viewpoint of the victim*—a naturally inaccessible space whose presence on video clearly flags filmic illusionism! Narrated through multi-angle videography, parallel montage coordinates the execution scene as an external space with red-tinted flashbacks of the pilot's attack an internal object (i.e., shared memories of both the victim and the mujahideen). The parallel montage even creates an ideological equation: the pilot's alleged attack is counter-balanced in the narrative plot with his execution, i.e., the reasoning behind the video is constructed *in editing*: 'this man had brought (literal) fire that killed inhabitants of the Islamic State and is thus burned like the Muslim victims he had (allegedly) attacked'—in other words, *editing is itself meaning productive* and it communicates that the Islamic State punishes retributively under the talion principle, an eye for an eye. Yet, editing also presents no balancing philosophical counter point, which effectively renders its narration as an uncontested truth (i.e., propaganda).

By all indications, the second video was produced at least on a quasi-professional level as it has a far better defined access to the techniques and devices of film style than the first video. It presents a comparatively more complex ideological communication through the 'invisible' languages of film. The direct comparison of these two videos shows that there has been a historic development in technology and stylistic devices, some of which can be considered image traditions of the Islamic State (the *wall of mujahideen* trope is present in both videos) while other aesthetics are reminiscent of specific genres. However, the impression of an advanced film is only a texture applied to violent propaganda that does not complete the narrative norms of Hollywood (much less its production ethics) and that does not meet its technological criteria (for example, because several cuts appears rough).

What appears evident in the 'second face' metaphor in the second video (see images above) is that the Islamic State's film seems to conceive itself as a cinema of revelation as it presents the alleged 'true nature' of the hostage. In theory, this should move the Islamic State's film further away from commercial cinema, *even if* it imports aesthetics from commercial cinema and integrates them into its ideological communication. Thus, while still inadequate the Hollywood comparison is not entirely unappealing either, at least for the second video whose attempt to access the ideological blasting power of film is comparatively far better developed. This does indeed result in a comparatively more cinematic look and feel than the previous release, but the readiness to experiment with technology and film style does not necessarily amount to a video naturally *being* like Hollywood, even if the second video is edited to be a spectacle. How then can the label of

'Hollywood-like' be re-qualified and what concepts can be used to assess the increase in cinematic-ness?

Another question that arises concerns the traces of a genuine Islamic State film style that were already uncovered above: the *wall of soldiers* trope has repeated across the two releases. This visual metaphor seems to indicate that the Islamic State's film had image traditions of its own even before it experimented with more complex cinematic devices. It becomes clear at this junction that several aesthetic traditions are at work in the Islamic State's film, and it is their relations amongst each other that remain unclear at this point. Furthermore, the Islamic State's film earmarks itself as propaganda through its one-sided rhetoric and thus any comparison to other cinemas needs to be preceded by another question: how does the Islamic State's film locate in propaganda film history? Before turning to the cinefication of the Islamic State's film, four film histories in particular will be addressed on the following pages to demonstrate the nature of the Islamic State's film: the *history of propaganda film*, the *history of jihadi video* (specifically: *Sunni jihadi video*), the classical *history and concert of world cinemas* (which may need to be updated in the digital age), and the *theory of post-cinema*. These serve as a necessary basis for understanding the Islamic State's film.

1.2 Approaching an Almost Unexplored Propaganda Film

First and foremost, the Islamic State's film should be identified *as part of propaganda film history* for its fascist and violent communication, its slanted narrative stance, and for its attempt to tie misanthropic content to ideological and theocratic structures. As a very brief overview of the theory of propaganda in this subchapter will show, this film satisfies the conditions of propaganda. The earliest documented use of the word *propaganda* (from Latin *propagare*, 'to promote or spread something') dates to the year 1622. Through the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* (*Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith*), a papal edict, Pope Gregory XV decreed the institutional development of missionary work for the Roman Catholic church and allowed its professionalization (Bussemer 2005, 25).

Since then the term *propaganda* has written its own history: while initially positively connoted, it has received significant criticism in the Age of Enlightenment, it was restored during the French Revolution, it became a political tool in the 19th and 20th century, and it sparked the interest of ideological interest groups and theoreticians alike (Bussemer 2005, 24–29). Among some of the definitions

of propaganda that are particularly pregnant with meaning are its formulations as the "management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of the significant symbols" (Lasswell 1927, 627), with attitude being "a tendency to act according to certain patterns of valuation" (Lasswell 1927, 627), as "a consistent, enduring effort to create or shape events to influence the relations of the public to an enterprise, idea or group" (Bernays 1928, 25), and as a "technique rather than a science" that serves in "the formation of men's attitudes" (Elull 1965, 3). The term *propaganda* has since passed through a broad conceptual history that has produced interpretations ranging from a polemic derogatory label to a means of creating long-term social coherence (Bussemer 2005, 29–36).⁴

Naturally, propagandists have employed various media in their ideological communication and film has been no exception. Quite the contrary, as propaganda film can look back on a vast history that is by no means at its end in the age of digital cameras and mobile phones. Classic scholarly literature characterizes propaganda film as a professionalized phenomenon that is commonly linked to fascist regimes with centralized power over professional production structures. Access to production studios and an availability of cinema professionals allowed their cinemas to produce a multitude of genres and film styles to spread their ideology and influence their audiences' attitudes either subtly or openly:

The aim of propaganda is to persuade an audience into changing its attitude and behavioral patterns. Contrary to value-neutral information or advertising that allows product review, propaganda uses irrational emotional arguments. To spread political theories, primal fears are evoked, information is manipulated through targeted dissemination or rumors and censorship. Part of the basic pattern of the propagandistic concept are the overreaching veneration of the potentates and the myth of invincibility, aimed at weakening the resilience of the enemy, and the glorification of the hero's death and the defamation, even demonization of the enemy, which serves strengthening the resilience of one's own people.

(translated from Grzeschik 2011, 559–560)

The Islamic State's film wholly satisfies these criteria: as the analysis above has shown it presents a demonization of the enemy (e.g., through lighting dramaturgy), it fans a primal fear for an enemy (e.g., the U.S. as a 'crusader nation' whom, for example, Nicholas Berg allegedly represented), and it organizes a binary world view (through dichotomies like *Muslims vs. crusaders* or *towering*

⁴For detailed theorisations and histories of *propaganda* the works by Laswell (1927), Bernays (1928), Elull (1965), Klaus (2003), Bussemer (2005), Auerbach & Castronovo (2013) and Starkulla jr. (2015) are recommended.

vs. *cowering*). It communicates these value assessments through its own stylistic entelechy as well as a developing cinematic-ness with the goal of influencing the audience's attitude towards, for example, an enemy stereotype or his executioners. As such, it is advisable to locate IS video film in propaganda film history and subsequently question its contrasts with other propaganda films.

1.3 Contrasts to the Islamic State's Film

Having very briefly identified the Islamic State film as propaganda this thesis can now work towards a better understanding of the Islamic State's film as propaganda *film*. The following vertical plan of the history of propaganda film shall serve as an initial differentiation. Islamic State film will ultimately have to be identified as a form of *insurgent jihadi videography* that has its roots in jihadi film history and that cannot look back on the institutional history of a studio system, but in zeroing in on this phenomenon the differences to previously researched 'conventional' propaganda films shall provide a better understanding. In providing short characterizations of notable historic propaganda films, this chapter will present those initial contrasts to the Islamic State's film.

The earliest concentrated efforts of producing propaganda film date back to the year 1916 when the *Bild- und Filmamt* ('Office for Images and Film'; *Bufa*) was founded as a sub-office of the Federal Foreign Office of the German Empire (1871–1918; Kreimeier 1992, 31–32). Designated as an "instrument of power of image propaganda" the *Bufa* was charged with producing film in support of Germany's involvement in World War I (Kreimeier 1992, 31–32). Perhaps the most important film of this period was *BEI UNSEREN HELDEN AN DER SOMME* ('With Our Heroes at the Somme', 1917) which proclaimed: "The steel helmet on their heads and with camera in hand they rushed on the long vehicles of the storm troops, rushing with them on the road of fire" (Kreimeier 1992, 32).

The film's characterization as a war report extends to other *Bufa* productions of this period, which are stylistically best described as a prolonged newsreel or even "optical reporting" (Jacobsen 1993, 16). Through their focus on the pathos of war these integrate into an overarching narrative that communicates a sentimental patriotism for "tragic, death, destruction, and self-destruction" (Kreimeier 1992, 32). This short description is already surprisingly close to a definition of the Islamic State's approach to film, which bases itself on on-site videography in the battlefield and other insurgent activities that are usually edited into video journals. Much like the "militarized film" of the *Bufa* (Kreimeier 1992) the film of the Islamic State preserves many characteristics of military video work because

its camera operators also stand in the tradition of carrying the camera along the rifle. As such, the film of the Islamic State is not originally the work of artists with guns but the work of soldiers with cameras who actively subscribe to the pathos of waging war, in their case in the name of an envisioned Muslim nation and a territorial caliphate.

The *Bufa* dissolved in 1917 during the foundation of the *Universum Film AG* (*UFA*) in a semi-privatized attempt at producing film exclusively for propagandistic purposes with the support of War Ministry (Kreimeier 1992, 33–36; Jacobsen 1993, 36–37). The *UFA*'s declared purpose was to produce film in support of Germany's war efforts and as a medium of psychological warfare, but internal turmoil, the end of World War I, and the collapse of the monarchy prevented the *UFA* from producing pro-war film on a larger scale (Kreimeier 1992, 48–60). Instead, the company developed into the biggest film studio of the Weimar Republic (1918–1933) and provided fertile soil for such important directors as F.W. Murnau and Fritz Lang. This development already highlights another difference between the classical studio (and propaganda) film and the Islamic State's filmic activities: while the *UFA* controlled its own exhibition via theatres (as the Islamic State would, at least to an extent), it did not eliminate dramatic and fictional film from theatres, and it supported cinematic illusionism. The Islamic State's film, by contrast, is organized in a system of media offices that are directly subordinate to the military wing and that mostly function to advertise the militant group.

In the Weimar Republic (1918–1933) the *UFA* began a productive phase that is most associated with the aesthetically ambitious German Expressionism. The artistic climate of the Weimar Republic permitted film to develop "a dynamic industry" with "an urge for expansion" (Kaes 1993, 46). The film of the Weimar period was, of course, not propagandistic *per se*, even if it knew its share of national myths (e.g., Fritz Lang's two-part *THE NIBELUNGS*, 1924). Still, some directors who later rose to fame in the Third Reich, including Leni Riefenstahl, were already entering a film industry that prepared the ground for political film-making. Inspired by the success of Soviet revolutionary films like *BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN* (1925) several left-wing parties of the diverse political spectrum of inter-war Germany commissioned their own propagandistic works. For example, the *Prometheus Film* company committed itself to the *Communist Party of Germany* as well as the *Social Democratic Party* and produced films that leaned towards socialist ideals (Zygouris 2011). The resulting proletarian film oriented in the hard societal and economic issues of the time such as "mass unemployment, housing shortage, hopelessness, and the world economic crisis (1929)" (Zygouris

2011, 557), and it told family stories based on milieu studies that reflected the social drama of the working class (Zygouris 2011, 557–559).

The film of the Islamic State, by contrast, has never developed in the climate of a free play of politics or economy and it serves a historically unchanging ideological program. It did not initially know an accentuated aesthetic expressionism and could only discover the language of film style over time. For its prohibitive stance on fiction there can theoretically be no movies in the conventional sense, and social drama, if available at all, only serves oscillating narratives of Muslim victimhood, militant vengeance, or caliphal triumphalism. Through its rejection of nationalism (with the exception of a caliphate state) its film aims at demonizing non-Islamic State nations and potentates. Instead of a national founding myth or political programs it references the life of the Prophet Muhammad and his customs as authoritative over the present, and develops its expressionist qualities based only on its interpretation of religious symbolism.

Periodically, the film of the Islamic State also positions a utopianism that knows only societal completion under an implemented Sharia Law and a triumphalist ideology that is framed as Sunni religion (despite the Islamic State's discernible roots in *Wahhabism* and its tendency to expose itself as a *Kharijite* sect, which could theoretically preclude it from participating in Sunni Islam⁵)—this could be called the mono-fiction of the Islamic State's film. Furthermore, the Islamic State's film does not publicize its producers, staff, or cast. Instead, it is ostensibly produced by the Islamic State for the Sunni Muslim society and it is theoretically available free of charge on the internet, if one is able to find it online—it is thus not a commercial film and also carries some features that might disqualify it from other forms of cinema.

⁵ The author does not wish to uncarefully suggest that the Islamic State and its followers are members of the *ahl as-sunnah wa l-jamā'ah* (roughly: the people of the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad and the community), i.e., Sunni Islam. In fact, he wishes to acknowledge the following: 1. Some readers, especially from the media sciences to whom this work relates, may not be familiar with the bifurcation of Islam into Shia and Sunni Islam and are thus carefully introduced into the subject matter. The classification is also not entirely without calculation with respect to the existing scientific literature: observers will find that the Islamic State's film makes advances to Sunni Muslims whom it considers its audience (while, conversely, rejecting and even fighting Shia Muslims; see also Bunzel 2015, 7). Furthermore, readers will also find that vast parts of the literature on the Islamic State use this classification, as numerous citations throughout this thesis will demonstrate. 2. The Islamic State's ideology appears to root in Wahhabism and the author, who is not a scholar of Islam studies, is aware that the Islamic State's brand of Wahhabism may be a radical departure from Sunni Islam and that the Islamic State has indeed exposed itself as basically a *Kharijite* sect during the caliphate years. For an introduction to Islamic State ideology see Bunzel (2015).

Returning to the history of propaganda film, the Soviet Union (1922–1991) had begun its own history of film in the 1920s. To Soviet filmmakers like Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov producing art and producing propaganda were not necessarily mutually exclusive (Gillespie 2000, 51). Works like Eisenstein's *BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN* (1925) and *STRIKE* (1925) illustrate the principles of collision montage and intellectual montage that calculate dramatic and emotional effect in the audience and that simultaneously convey proletarian and revolutionary socio-cultural ideas (Gillespie 2000, 51–53). Without going into too much detail at this point, it appears that the Islamic State's film has over time learned different classical editing patterns. This includes even the afore mentioned *montage of attractions* of which theoretician Eisenstein once wrote that it allowed film to fore at the audience "aggressive moments [...] that subjec[t] the audience to emotional or psychological influence" (Taylor & Christie 1988, 87). The Islamic State's film would eventually discover a montage of attractions of its own in addition to patterns of continuous multi-angle scene coverage and collision editing seen in the above example of *Healing of the Believers' Chests*.

Soviet filmmakers had initially enjoyed artistic freedom until the Communist Party decided to formalize its film politics and tolerate no ideological competition in the education of the masses. Already Lenin had expressed his preference for film, stating that cinema is "the most important of all the arts" (Gillespie 2000, 19; Armstrong 2002, 2). Trotsky concurred, calling it "the most important weapon in propaganda" (Gillespie 2000, 19), to which Stalin later added that "film is an illusion, but it dictates its laws to life" (translated from Bulgakowa 2011, 682) and that "cinema is the greatest means of mass agitation. The task is to take it into our own hands" (Armstrong 2002, 2). Subsequently, Soviet film projected a socialist utopia through the photographically conditioned naturalism of film (Bulgakowa 2011, 682).

Then, in 1928, the Communist Party ultimately "resolved to take full control of the cinema" (Gillespie 2000, 20) and interfered heavily in the film sector by limiting artistic freedoms, stopping the import of foreign films, centralizing the lecture of scripts, implementing a system of censorship, and commissioning an exhibition system to supply the country with ideologically favorable film (Bulgakowa 2011, 682–683). Several genres were eliminated from production summarily and sharp demarcations began to show for the available formal techniques (Bulgakowa 2011, 685). The resulting authority of a repetitive form glossed over the "sometimes dramatic discrepancy between utopia and reality" (Bulgakowa 2011, 685) and united an ideologically conditioned idealism with social realism in a symbolic continuum that was insured by filmic illusionism, a development that came at the

expense of the filmic escapism that had been popular before Stalin's involvement in film (Gillespie 200, 15).

Both, the delimitation of available stylistic devices and a stringent formalism that excludes certain ideas from filmic representation, are observable in the Islamic State's film. While movies produced by the Soviet Union included a still somewhat diverse range of genres like anti-western, pro-system, and class warfare movies, the film of the Islamic State consistently generalizes and demonizes all persons and groups outside its own reach as *kuffār* (*disbelievers*). In attempting to dictate the laws of life to the audience, its film produces scenes of what it considers socially favorable social behavior, even if—or perhaps better: especially if—they revolve around murder, martyrdom, and war. During the caliphate years it has discernibly attempted to influence life within the Islamic State through idealized depictions of the caliphate as a utopia or by increasing the production of capital punishment videos as a deterrent against defectors, a development that practically exposes its film as an instrument of power in a surveillance state.

Interestingly, the film of the Islamic State shows a third parallel to Soviet film with regard to exhibition. To support ideologization through film, the Communist Party took control of film exhibition through *kinofikazija* (*cinefication*), “a country-wide, viewer-friendly, continuous supply” with “the mass medium of film—from production to distribution to reception” (translated from Beilenhoff & Meyer 2011). *Kinofikazija* was a “culture-political goal” of the Soviet Union under Stalin that lasted until the 1980s (Beilenhoff & Meyer 2011). Its aim was to increase exposure to the medium of film and thereby support the formation and information of a mass audience, including “diverse and far-flung populations” (Kepley 1994, 262):

In a vast, diverse, predominantly agricultural and largely illiterate society such as the Soviet Union, cinema could reach far more people than, for example, literature. Furthermore, the novelty of film and the immediate power of its imagery made film, or so the Soviet leadership believed, particularly effective. Film-viewing itself was a public, collective act and therefore even the mode of viewing could be a means of instilling collective consciousness.

(Armstrong 2002, 2)

Cinema clubs were established across the Soviet Union and remote locations were supplied with screenings by traveling projectionists. With the Soviet film industry even calling to “cinify the countryside,” *kinofikazija* targeted “population groups which had enjoyed little or no prior exposure to the new medium and furthered the formation and information of a mass audience” (Kepley 1994, 262–263).