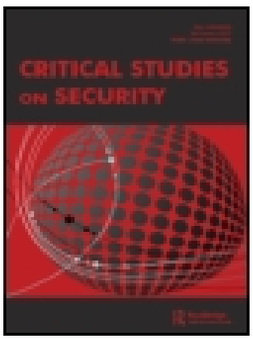

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ARTICLE

Evil™ — Islamic State, conflict-capitalism, and the Geopolitical Uncanny

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ABSTRACT

To make sense of so-called Islamic State's stunning rise to power, and counterintuitive success in captivating media attention and attracting global recruits, commentators often describe the organisation through the lens of 'the brand'. Such assessments rarely take under serious consideration the world of public relations and marketing. This article, conversely, applies the logic of the boardroom to the battleground of IS, assessing the group as the War on Terror's corporate competitor for hegemonic control of conflict-capitalism's global market. To apprehend IS through its Western-facing brand identity is to encounter a monstrous Geopolitical Uncanny-through which Islamic State traps us in the tautological trade of apocalyptic warfare: a captive market ultimately created in our own image. Islamic State positions itself for American consumers as ultimate threat to our very civilizational soul, rendered legible in a localised brand identity that responds to audience expectation: Evil™. IS' designer apocalypse promises to deliver zero-sum annihilation, and leaves us no other choice than buy-or-die. Yet there is more to the success story of this insurgent start-up than a receptive market. Islamic State's sales pitch, after all, is industry standard for conflict-capitalism. Every combatant group attempts to project an inflated threat capacity to enemy and competitor; in the global attention economy, imagistic intimidation comprises a causal prerequisite for market visi/viability and product differentiation. Not all organisations, however, meet with such superlative success. Seduced by the shiny veneer of Evil™, American consumers did not simply purchase a designer branded apocalypse; we accepted the image projected as that of sinister authenticity, and in the process-unwittingly invested in Islamic State stock, transforming from customers to shareholders. Herein resides the terrifyingly valuable symbiosis of supply and demand, for the fear by which Evil™ obtains designer brand equity is not that of potential annihilation, but certain recognition-too vivid for direct contemplation.

KEYWORDS

ISIS; branding; terrorism; propaganda; War on Terror; Islamic State

What are we doing? We are selling a product. That product we are selling is democracy.

– Colin Powell

I say to you that we are in a battle, and that more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media.

– Ayman al-Zawahiri

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How would one sell the End of the World? The high price tag of zero-sum conflict far exceeds the average consumer's budget; a narrow consumer base offers only limited dividends. To successfully merchandise and Armageddon, then, requires a skilled salesman able to reposition luxury as commodity, and recast apocalypse's demand for perpetual investment as an indispensable household necessity. George W. Bush's post-9/11 exhortation might provide inspiration for copywriters: 'go shopping with your families' or the terrorists win.[1] If cost-benefit analysis calculates the value of inaction as annihilation, no price proves exorbitant for the sum saved – after all, we are told, our very existence depends on this purchase. Only the most Machiavellian insurgent start-up could secure sales from such a risky proposition of existential-economics.

Why, however, do we buy? Fear's power – whether for political or economic mobilisation – is well known (Furedi 2005; Klein 2008; Nacos 2011; Stampnitzky 2013); that Islamic State harnesses horror's emotive capacity as organisational 'brand' is similarly familiar (Koerner 2016; Berger and Stern 2015). However, even when terrorism experts borrow the language of branding, such examinations superficially confine the concept to linguistic shorthand – overlooking profoundly useful implications of marketing frames to contextualise contemporary propaganda and political communication. To better understand the symbiotic appeal of fear and fascination underpinning Islamic State (IS) appeal demands a novel approach – one that takes seriously fear's functional status as commodity.

To do so, I depart from the normative frames applied by security and terrorism studies, offering a sustained analysis of Islamic State propaganda through the lens of marketing, public relations (PR) and entertainment media(s) – keeping in mind Daniel Boorstin's prescient 1961 observation that latter are increasingly subsumed into the now-indistinguishable realm of politics and news. This paper first examines the global marketplace in which Islamic State operates, focusing on the group's Western-facing brand identity of all-encompassing evil. I then offer a close reading of the execution video 'Message to America' as a viral advertising campaign designed for an American market, designed to mobilise desires for just vengeance in an apocalyptic showdown. Only through a thorough deconstruction of Evil™, Islamic State's unique selling proposition, can we truly understand both why Colin Powell's 'democracy-as-product' failed to convince the global market as well as the appeal of IS, not just for sympathisers, but for ourselves. What, exactly, are we buying into – and, critically, *why*?

Conscientious brand identity for the IS terror conglomerate's multiple markets

Conventional media and academic accounts of Islamic State characterise the group as comprised of transnational terrorists hell-bent on instigation of the apocalypse (McCants 2015; Wood 2015), a sales goal attuned to the conditions of an American market, where Armageddon's ideological-commodity finds a particularly receptive customer base – primed to consume increasingly standard War on Terror narratives circulated by news and entertainment media (Barret Gross and Giles 2012; Takacs 2012). A scarcity of on-ground sources, however, raises questions concerning our understanding of the enigmatic, yet seemingly ubiquitous, terror conglomerate. Alireza Doostdar cautions, 'it is difficult to even say what ISIS is if we are to rely on anything beyond the group's self- representations', a notation on

propaganda that proves applicable to the discursive field of advertisement (2014). In short, we see IS as IS wants to be seen. To Muslims, IS promises autonomous strength through homeland utopia, to the (presumed non-Muslim) West – barbaric, endless violence and evil embodied. Stated differently, consumers lack adequate informational material upon which to base pre-purchase assessment of Islamic State's corporate record, and therefore, rely on the brand's legibility as Evil™, a supply we secretly demand to participate in the pleasurable confirmation of our own superiority – the good guys, after all, must win in the end.

This article considers so-called 'Islamic State' as the War on Terror's corporate competitor for hegemonic control of conflict-capitalism's global market. Islamic State positions itself for American consumers as ultimate threat to our very civilizational soul, rendered legible in a localized brand identity that responds to audience expectation: Evil™. IS' designer apocalypse promises to deliver zero-sum annihilation, precluding any choice but buy-or-die. Yet there is more to the insurgents' success story than a receptive market: the sales pitch, after all, is industry standard for conflict-capitalism. Every combatant group attempts to project an inflated threat capacity to enemy and competitor; in the global attention economy, imagistic intimidation comprises a causal prerequisite for market visi/viability and product differentiation. Not all organisations, however, meet with such superlative success. Seduced by the shiny veneer of Evil™, American consumers did not simply purchase a designer branded apocalypse. We accepted the image projected as that of sinister authenticity, and in the process, unwittingly invested in Islamic State stock – transformed from customers to shareholders.

Islamic State's integrated PR reveals a cohesive corporate ethos and organisational vision. IS designs, produces and deploys particular multi-media campaigns that are calibrated to appeal to certain spectatorships (Tinnes 2015; Winter 2015; Zelin 2015). For an audience comprised of disaffected Syrian and Iraqi Sunni Muslims, Islamic State promulgates the distinctively seductive offering of a pseudo nation-state entity, an appeal to those in search of political sovereignty, quotidian dignity, economic autonomy and civic security guaranteed by the existence of a strong, paternalistic governmental apparatus accorded legitimacy by a combination of proof-text (territorial control) and faith (divine mandate). To consumers located at a distance – physically or politically – from the tangible, terrestrial product on offer, however, Islamic State deploys a markedly different set of appeals.

Birthed a despised bastard from the Pax Americana's illegitimate intervention in Iraq, Islamic State's insurgent start-up offers an insidiously novel – yet disturbingly familiar – alternative to established modalities of political affiliation and social allegiance: a defiantly and conscientiously anti-American brand of (paradoxically) parochial-cosmopolitan citizenship. IS' very name contains the conglomerate's mission statement, and fundamental *raison d'être: state*. Conceptually and behaviourally, IS most closely resembles an emergent nation-state engaged in imperialist expansion, flagrantly unilateral in internationalist orientation: an entity that refuses all jurisdictional and legal authority beyond that invoked by teleological divine mandate. More than a monstrous by-product of Iraq's invasion, Islamic State constitutes a conscientiously crafted reflection of the campaign's *sui generis*, exculpatory rationale: the expansionistic responsibilities conferred by divinely granted exceptionalism.

Herein resides the terrifyingly valuable symbiosis of supply and demand, for the fear by which Evil™ obtains designer brand equity is not that of potential annihilation, but certain recognition – too vivid for direct contemplation. As an inherently amorous moral characterisation, evil – in isolation – defies representation. Evil's nebulousness takes shape through negation, rendered comprehensible only by simultaneous consideration of oppositional antimatter: righteousness. To apprehend IS through the brand prism of Evil™ is to encounter a monstrous Geopolitical Uncanny, with which Islamic State traps us in the tautological trade of apocalyptic warfare – a captive market, ultimately, made in our own image.

In the same sense that the 'condemned at Burgos are still a gift from Franco to Western democracy … to regenerate its own flagging humanism', IS fulfils consumer desire – cathartic consumption of America's own imagined righteousness (Baudrillard 1994, 18). Evil™ follows an integral rule for the cultivation of powerful, if perverse, brand loyalty: implicate customers in the company mission's shared vision, and transform passive consumer into active stakeholder. Islamic State sells us apocalypse as redemption. To consume Evil™ is to engage in a particularly violent and self-destructive retail therapy; the apocalyptic product offers only a profound buyer's remorse. Fear's transactional value ensures that there can be no return: all sales are, by definition, final. Pre-purchase anxiety, hesitation at the register, calls into question civilizational brand loyalty. Only a shamelessly impoverished citizen, devoid of patriotism's immense social capital, could publicly question the budget's bottom line. Inherent to the appeal of Evil™ is apocalypse's unique selling proposition, that most fundamental structural assumption of conflict-capitalism – the customer is always right.

From product launch to proof of concept: advertising Armageddon

June 2014: Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, falls to Islamic State insurgents in a rapid-fire campaign of territorial conquest that stuns regional experts, security analysts, government leaders and jihadi competitors. In an equally audacious media blitzkrieg, online sympathisers deploy publicity tactics more characteristic of corporate engagement than the careful, centralised communications preferred by clandestine militant groups. By 'piggybacking' on a trending Twitter hashtag, IS seized control of the global attention economy, hijacking the World Cup's spectacle of transnational sportsmanship with vicious images of gruesome atrocity (Gibbons-Neff 2014).

Subsequently, corporate spokesman Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani announced the long-dormant caliphate's resurrection, a watershed moment in the evolution of jihadi politics (Hamid 2016). In addition to the original Arabic-language audio press release, Islamic State disseminated multilingual textual translations to ensure the widest possible audience for the launch of a product with pretensions to world domination. In a final flourish, al-'Adnani rebranded the group formerly known as 'ISIS' through the erasure of geographical designations, and declared the existence of a singular, global government with transnational jurisdiction: the *khilāfa*.

No contemporary product launch in an era of overcrowded global markets, however, can afford to neglect segmented demographic research, critical for maximum return on investment. For the American (presumed non-Muslim) consumer base, IS crafted a brand identity attuned to customer expectations, a sales pitch for Manichean absolutism

rendered legible on the Western market – upon whose hegemonic opposition IS political legitimacy depends: Evil.™ Seen in this light, apparent political executions may be better understood as a brand launch, designed to captivate an audience with unforgettable performances of brutality incarnate – such as the 2014 beheading of James Wright Foley (Harkin 2015, 170–202).

'Message to America', and each of the online, multi-media ad campaign's four subsequent instalments, depicts the carefully choreographed beheading of a Western hostage. Foley's appearance in the political snuff cinema of Islamic State served as a beta-test for sequels to come, and sparked a global hysteria, media hyperbole and inflammation of viral fear, a ritualised mourning period that most closely resembled the intense aftermath of September 11. But on that day, a terrorist attack claimed thousands of casualties on American soil; here, however, no iconic tourist landmark interrupts an eerie, two-dimensional desert-deathscape – or the victim's singularity.[2]

The execution film instantaneously achieved blockbuster status, indicative of Islamic State's mastery over affective persuasion. Contrary to terrorism experts' characterisation of Islamic State motivation as competitor differentiation, coercive intimidation, enemy provocation and/or – alternatively – recruitment mobilisation (Tinnes 2015; Zech and Kelly 2015), I argue that 'Message to America' constitutes a compelling advertisement for apocalyptic warfare. Moreover, IS produced this campaign with attentiveness to market specificity, and aimed to seduce American consumers into warfare's purchase through a deliberate, if counterintuitive, deification of sacrificial victims.

Foley's death video serves as a brand vehicle for Evil™, Islamic State's corporate identity on the Western market, whose attention the organisation desperately needs for a political legitimacy conferred through oppositional negation. The ad campaign's inaugural episode breaks innovative new ground in the genre of jihadi beheading cinema; corporate signature, narrative cohesion, high production values, cast selections, character development and screenwriting, as well as cinematographic choices (pre-production rehearsal, set design, costume selection and post-production edits) together evidence experienced, sophisticated professionals tasked with Islamic State production and PR.[3] No detail proves insignificant, from opening to closing credits.

Islamic State's pathos-laden narrative – embodied in Foley's disembodiment – moves the audience, emotionally as well as politically, towards self-affirming

acceptance of vengeance warfare. Subsequent episodes encourage and intensify this response, perversely building consumer trust as a demonstration that the IS conglomerate always delivers on promises. For Western spectators, inclusion of Islamic State's iconic, sinister, and unforgettable logo signals the corporate ethos as well as a citizenship identity, formed in opposition to, and violent negation of, our own. Yoked to vivid documentation of gratuitous violence, Evil™'s visual signifies certain death, and provokes immediate revulsion. Post-production addition of a black and white flag, affixed to the videos' upper left corner, solidifies the serialised ad campaign's cohesion, and underscores definitive claims to not only authorship, but also quality control and corporate record.

IS adoption of the banner serves serendipitous, if superficial, semiotic purpose: reminder of the group's Manichean political project, an interpretation undeniably coded for, and received by, non-Muslim Western audiences. The flag's inclusion similarly functions as a seal of sinister authenticity, confirmed and re-inscribed with each new atrocity sequel. As numerous jihadi groups display variations of the black banner (Bahari and Hassan 2014, 15–17), Islamic State's juxtaposition of the flag with acts of extreme, counter-normative violence works to outbid insurgent competitors who similarly claim undiluted, theological authenticity.[4]

Lest one forget, IS' expansionistic proclivities indicate organisational appetite for a market broader than regional insurgency. The group's claim to caliphal status – transnationally, simultaneously state *and* nation – evidences pretensions to global domination, which constitutes a challenge to the hegemony of imperialist rivals, rivals, foremost: the United States.[5] Alongside an alternate logo that calligraphically denotes the production company as al-Furqān Media, Islamic State's black flag graphic mimics the formulaic presentation of Fox News: 'ideological clarity' as a component of brand differentiation, 'news' branded with the fervour of patriotic self-identification (Brock and Rabin-Haut 2012, 55–59). Careful logographic guidance of the viewer enables IS to brand Evil™ for American spectators, and deliver an Oscar-worthy performance of existential threat.

'Message to America' announces in no uncertain terms – and reiterates with each sadistic repetition – *this means war.*

Beheading constitutes an irrefutably horrific means of execution, by no means exclusive to Islamic State, terrorist organisations, or recognised governments: modern practitioners include Mexican drug cartels and the French state (Zech and Kelly 2015, 34). Nor did IS pioneer the decapitation snuff film; founding father Abu Musab al-Zarqawi provoked consternation among Al-Qaeda's inner circle with his use of the tactic as early as 2004 (Chambers 2012). Islamic State, however, enthusiastically embraced cinematic beheadings as organisational signature, brutally inclusive in indiscriminate application. What, then, accounts for the unparalleled attention garnered by 'Message to America'? Foley's death registers disproportionate horror, I suggest, entirely by IS design.

Paradigmatic security studies assessments of jihadi propaganda typically highlight executioners' accusations against depicted victims, focusing on terrorist claims rather than the performativity of the violence, or what victim selection may reveal concerning operational media logic behind casting choices. A shift in focus, however, reveals much about underlying strategy. In the case of 'Message to America', producers eagerly type-cast Islamic State as barbarism personified, monstrously sadistic and beyond the reach of rationality in an attempt to encourage audience identification with an ultimate innocent, whose heroism at the hour of death forecloses all response for empathetic viewers – save retributive violence. Mohammed Emwazi, in the role of Jihadi John, delivers an unassailable performance of evil incarnate, each line enunciated with cold, amoral precision behind an all-encompassing black mask. Opposite Emwazi, Jim Foley appears as vanquished Captain America, in whose death we identify our own most cherished and virtuous ideals.

Clad in the vivid orange attire of a detainee in the American War on Terror, Foley knees before a shadowy assassin, foregrounded against a flat, desert death-scape – at once nowhere and anywhere. This gruesome tableau's composition centralises the pair of singular villain and equally individuated victim, juxtaposed in a sharp colour contrast that denies viewers any possible escape route of set design. In apocalyptic conflict's archetypal numerology, the insidiously intimidate one-on-one depiction suggests Pax Americana and Islamic State as symmetrical competitor-foes.[6]

Despite the consensus among terrorism analysts that such production choices reflect a desire to entertain and seduce potential IS recruits, this interpretation provides only a partial explanation. Failure to consider the contingencies of demographic reception obscure the presence of multi-modal techniques and polyvalent messages; such assessments underestimate the strategic communications apparatus of Islamic State, as well as the inherent nature of media's differential affective impact in variegated sociopolitical context. No analysis to date takes into account a critical component of 'Message to America', which defines the film as a masterfully manipulative, innovation to the jihadi hostage genre, the addition of a singular narrative element that operationalises the enemy's empathetic emotions in a boomerang of backlash – purposeful *humanization* of the decapitation's victim. 'We' know Jim Foley – intimately. After all, he is one of *us.*

Islamic State names Western hostages, and leaves the faces of such individualised victims bare as they deliver the ritualised incantation of 'last words', a chance to bid the world goodbye, granted by their executioners in a calculated act of sadistic strategy. The human face's complex muscular structure, after all, accounts for mankind's superlative

expressive capacity, and instantiates the immense powers of affective familiarity and emotional identification. At the immediate level of recognition, easily decipherable, IS leverages against enemy viewers the painful asymmetry of Western media representation – or, what Judith Butler terms 'grievable life' (2009).

In contrast, performative executions produced for a more 'localized' audience, less apprehensible for an international media market, reveal considerable variation in target demographic. Conventional IS videos of this type aim to intimidate or coerce as a means to elicit compliance, and feature captives lumped together in an undifferentiated mass of uniformity, none of whom enjoy the agency of a voice – however scripted – conferred upon Islamic State's British and American sacrificial victims. Similarly, IS rarely (if ever) situates executioner and hostage as equal opponents in number, if not in strength. In sum, this genre illustrates purposeful degradation, erasure of the individual, and deliberate depersonalisation. IS makes no effort to humanise victims, but rather, the reverse. Finally, two additional elements found in 'domestic' IS decapitations fail to appear in 'Message to America': mass executions directly implicate the condemned with accusations, and justifications for punitive severity. Death appears in full Technicolor horror, often with post-production special effects to enhance spurts of blood or cries of pain.

In this sin of sadistic omission resides the terrifying genius of Evil™: an ability to elicit enemy empathy as a psychological weapon with which to trap viewers in the teleological prison of exceptionalism's superiority complex. 'Message to America' is staged – no hoax, but a carefully choreographed, masterful manipulation of audience psychology; as practice makes perfect, all exemplary performances require rehearsals. Victims' eerie composure in the delivery of pre-death statements, measured demeanour and controlled physiological responses evoke a strange sense of stagecraft, suggestive of sedation and multiple takes over a prolonged duration, further evidenced by uneven shadows that remain in the final cut.[7] More critically, IS producers edited out decapitation's brutal actuality, counter-intuitively minimising gore for Western audiences (Rogers 2014).

To end a human life through beheading proves no easy feat; the process demands considerable exertion and multiple protagonists. The act is neither quick, nor clean, but 'extremely bloody…faster and more predictable than death by hanging, lethal injection or gassing, but the spectacle is too grim for our sensibilities' (Larson 2014, 14). Judith Tinnes characterises the edits as 'strategic self-censorship', indicative of attentiveness to the viewership standards of Western media, whose attention IS desperately sought (2015, 81). However, given the thorough familiarity of Islamic State's PR team with the Internet's capacity for viral dissemination of all manner of viscerally repulsive horror-porn, Western media outlets likely constituted only one of numerous channels. IS terror-cinema, after all, descends from political snuff film director par excellence, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi – who rarely failed to garner headlines with each new atrocity-documentary, and whose 2004 decapitation of American contractor Nicholas Berg captivated global news networks even without a prime-time screening, thanks to the Internet (Larson 2014, 78–84).

A more convincing explanation for IS self-censorship in 'Message to America' emerges from comparative assessment alongside Berg's execution, a production that revels in savage characterisation of the violent act as retribution for American abuse of Abu Ghraib detainees. Five masked men loom over a terrified Berg, costumed in the now-iconic orange

jumpsuit identified with War on Terror detainees, who identifies himself through simple relational references to family and residence. No personalised communication follows. The centralised figure of this morbid composition, thought to be al-Zarqawi, proceeds to read a prepared statement laden with the formal theological flourishes of Classical Arabic; addressed to Muslim laymen and scholars, his recitation frames the death sentence as collective punishment, warranted retaliation against a victim explicitly termed 'prisoner'. Executioners swarm the seated Berg, granting the condemned no measure of dignity in the face of death, animalistic shrieks recorded in detail for the film's prolonged, grisly duration.[8]

Innovations in the production of 'Message to America', in contrast, demonstrate the degree to which al-Zarqawi's students exceed their jihadist forefather's mastery of sadistic cinematography. Jim Foley's execution breaks from the protocol of genre standards for script, plot and character development. The title indicates a shift in modality of address and target audience; no longer do renegade jihadists reach out to potential fellow travellers, but instead, seek direct contact with the American public. The film unfolds in English, and opens with an extended clip of President Barack Obama's remarks on airstrikes undertaken to halt Islamic State's advance; the scene next transitions to focus upon Foley, stoic star who needs no introduction.

Clad in the unmistakable uniform of a man condemned to death by the War on Terror, Foley exhibits no overt signs of coercion as he speaks directly to loved ones, friends and 'beloved parents', an intimate address evoking far more horror.[9] IS grants this captive a chance to say goodbye, a voice to bemoan his fate as the pathos-filled narrative culminates: 'I wish I had more time. I wish I could have the hope for freedom to see my family once again, but that ship has sailed… all in all, I wish I wasn't American'.

Only now does Islamic State's ultimate villain take the stage. Jihadi John fixes his eyes on the camera, as if the intended audience stands directly before him, and introduces his victim in a measured tone that – most disturbingly – betrays no hint of malice: 'this is James Wright Foley, a citizen of your country' (Al-Furqān 2014). The language of statehood and international legal framework of sovereignty pervade the executioner's monologue:

> You're no longer fighting an insurgency, we are an Islamic army and a State that has been accepted by a large number of Muslims worldwide, so effectively, any aggression towards the Islamic State is an aggression towards Muslims from all walks of life who have accepted the Islamic Caliphate as their leadership. So any attempt by you, Obama, to deny the Muslims their rights of living in safety under the Islamic Caliphate will result in the bloodshed of your people.

The singular villain delivers his words' performative promise, as he brandishes a knife and begins their violent inscription upon the neck of a similarly individualised victim. Compositional focus dissolves into momentary blankness, viewers left with an impression of Foley's stoic attempt to resist the grimaced recognition of his final moments. The final shot of 'Message to America' transitions to the stalwart composure of the series' next star – Steven Joel Sotloff – held in Jihadi John's grip, as Islamic State's protagonist issues a calmly defiant caution: 'the life of this American citizen, Obama, depends on your next decision'.

Every detail of this dark production builds to Jim Foley's heroic martyrdom, an almost Christ-like acceptance of death in the face of indignity. IS renders the victim sacrificial, paradoxically preserves his humanity and encourages fellow citizens to self-identify through emotional recognition, and vicarious pain – the tragic, senseless loss of 'one of our own'. Within the temporal limitations of a film calibrated for Web 2.0 attention spans, Islamic State captivates American spectators in a show guaranteed to deliver record-breaking returns upon release of the cliffhanger's next instalment.

The 'Message to America' series maximised global exposure to Evil™ through careful calibration of Hollywood-style multi-media serialization. The plot development of type-cast characters ensured return viewers, by way of emotional identification – a process of audience implication in the continued existence of Islamic State's corporate mission. IS sadistically suggests that this man does not have to die, provided you – the viewer – act now. Intervene in the script; believe in this delusional illusion of choice. There is no other option. Who among us could resist? You want to change the outcome so badly that you almost believe you can. And, finally, when the next instalment in the series is released, survivor's guilt – a stain of collective culpability – leaves behind its mark of subtle, psychological trauma in desperate search of resolution. Because, after all – you did not *stop these monsters*.

Jihadi John's monstrous posture of adversarial equivalence ensured the sale of a designer apocalypse – Evil™ exerted a potent brand appeal so seductive it attracted investment at the highest levels, even from the CEO of competitor exceptionalism. Obama's review of 'Message to America' delivered Islamic State irrefutable proof of concept, and his words a public acceptance of all terms and conditions. The president characterised IS as ideological cancer in need of extraction by any means necessary, well worth the poisonous price of geopolitical chemotherapy Obama 2014a:

> ISIL has no place in the 21st century. Friends and allies around the world, we share a common security and a common set of values that are rooted in the opposite of what we saw yesterday… We will be vigilant and we will be relentless. When people harm Americans anywhere, we do what's necessary to see that justice is done. And may God bless the United States of America.

From the opening night of 'Message to America', Islamic State's production company reaped instant dividends; Evil™ delivered extraordinary returns on investment – the United States bought stock.[10]

Jihadi John, Geopolitical Uncanny: an insurgent start-up's brand ambassador

Cursory analysis of the apocalyptic impulse buy reveals the brand's responsiveness to the operational logic of target market receptivity. Shock and confusion characterised American responses to the product launch, from security analysts to media consumers, even within the highest echelons of politico-military power. Major General Michael K. Nagata, regional Special Operations commander, privately confessed: 'We do not understand the movement…we do not even understand the idea' (Bennis 2015, 69). In public, Obama sought to tame the enigmatic group through the application of familiar frames used to render comprehensible the threat posed by al-Qaeda. The president outlined his plan to 'degrade and destroy' Islamic State, and emphatically concluded 'ISIL is a terrorist organization, pure and simple' (Obama 2014b). Only one aspect of the response to IS merits the characterization 'pure and simple', and it is this: Obama is wrong.[11]

The operative efficacy of Islamic State's advertisement campaign emerges with clarity from the disjuncture between Obama's public definitiveness and Nagata's private confusion.[12] 'Message to America' sells tautological self-assurance with the exceptional currency of weaponised nationalism – what Butler describes as the disservice mechanisms deployed in conflict, which underpin a 'certain version of the subject…produced and sustained through powerful forms of media', this subjectivity empowered by 'precisely the way in which they are able to render the subject's own destructiveness *righteous* and its own destructibility *unthinkable*' (2009, 47). The intensely emotional appeal of Evil™ forecloses any admission of complicity for a president whose response must perform calm reassurance for outraged, terrified citizens.

Subtlety plays no role in the ad campaign for Islamic State, who selected corporate mission statement as company name. Any attempt to discredit or delegitimise the organisation demands comprehension of statehood claims as precondition for credibility. Thus far, American counter-narratives prove flawed, indicative of the administration's dangerously mistaken belief that rhetorical recognition and political endorsement somehow operate synonymously – an assumption woven into the irresistible brand appeal of Evil™ that reveals IS marketers' insidious brilliance.

To apprehend the aspirational status of statehood as IS definitional foundation forces confrontation with the situation from which the group first emerged, and the conditional circumstances that enabled its rapid rise to power – ultimately, the disastrous and illegal invasion of Iraq, launched on false pretenses, as well as a subsequent and ill-conceived occupation predicated upon imperial arrogance and hubristic ignorance. A critical parallelism bears repetition here: Islamic State conceives of itself as simultaneous nation *and* state, global in jurisdiction, founded upon communal affiliation rooted in a

transcendent ideology of innate exceptionalism that necessitates programmatic settler-colonialist, territorial expansion and *sui generis* refusal to consider as (potentially) legitimate any legal constraints to assertions of sovereignty issued by any governmental apparatus other than its own authority. Within the IS worldview, this unilateralist orientation of course needs no justification; divine mandate requires nothing less from a superior nation upon whom prophecy confers eventual, triumphant victory as the world's final hour approaches.

Islamic State constitutes no mere mutation of the War on Terror's 21st century blowback, nor did the Iraq War serve as fundamental point of historical origin – simply the latest iterations. Rather, and far more disturbingly, Islamic State is an ideological Frankenstein of our own defiant nationalist creation, bred in reactionary response, and fed by the militarised hand of neoliberalism's voracious expansion: Manifest Destiny's uncontrollable adolescent progeny. This foundational narrative of inherent civilizational supremacy strikes a chord of eerie familiarity: a Geopolitical Uncanny rendered legible through its brand image: Evil™.

Islamic State demonstrates unparalleled mastery over global conflict-capitalism's operative logics, most notably, the imperative of segmented audience research for brand success. On a saturated global market in which corporations and countries struggle to obtain global visibility, brand differentiation proves especially urgent for small start-ups, and emergent nations. In the latter's case, 'diaspora may be viewed as a pre-existing network of potential brand ambassadors awaiting activation', a resource from which to carefully select credibly spokespersons who 'truly represent the personality of the country… the nation wishes to project' (Dinnie 2007, 72).

Jihadi John assumes the role of brand ambassador for Islamic State's apocalyptic product-promise to American consumers, building company credibility with each performative delivery (Prucha 2013). This salesman leverages to the fullest affective power's high transactional value, instantiated by an ability to function as polyvalent cipher for the aspirational desires of multiple audiences. Jihadi John stares down 'Message to America' viewers as he directly addresses the camera; the protagonist's dark gaze provides not even a singular blink to an audience denied the momentary relief of distraction from his sinister monologue, delivered in the distinctive accent of a London native – the threat not violent opposition, but monstrous recognition (Verkaik 2016).

Speculation raged about the implications of our masked protagonist's identity (Byman and Shapiro 2014; Daymon 2014; Hughson 2015).[13] Were *they* already among *us*? How many of *us* had joined *them*? What possible appeal could medieval, Middle Eastern insurgents hold for residents born (or bred) of the Free World? Disturbingly, Islamic State's brand ambassador is fluent in Hollywood's cultural idioms, Web 2.0's transnational, technological vernacular and the prophetic register of conflict-capitalism's profit margins: he speaks to us in a language we understand, inflected with intimate familiarity.

Jihadi John – like Jim Foley, his fratricidal victim – is *one of our own*. Among us, of us, but yet he violently rejects us. It cannot be *us*, so it *must* be them. What schizophrenic perversity accounts for such a betrayal? Surely, the only possible answer resides in the realm of pathological monstrosity far removed from our comforting, gated community that carefully guards within it secular liberalism's naturalised supremacy, scientific

rationality and humanistic logic. The language of mental illness and psychological disturbance often characterises perceived civilizational deviations, a useful rhetorical gesture for displacement of guilt as 'terrorists are turned into an irrational abstract agency [and] subtracted from the concrete socio-ideological network which gave birth to it' (Žižek 2002, 33).

The consumer response to Jihadi John's Evil™ unfolds precisely as IS designed; the spectral mask of our executioner-brand ambassador flattens biography into two-dimensional typecast: a blank screen for neurotic projection, a reflective surface entirely too bright for full apprehension of our Geopolitical Uncanny – lest the mirror shatter and force foundational fragmentation. Jihadi John's shadowy costume conceals the absent faced that launched a thousand drones, a promotional uniform through which Islamic State's nebulous Evil™ takes shape in mirrored refractions of consumer desire – ultimately, a deceptive Trojan horse of the Global War on Terror's latest iteration. I remind you: Islamic State knows the audience; demand constitutes a market precondition for the responsive creation of supply. Evil™ offers us cathartic consumption of our own righteousness, an escape from the unflattering light cast by a Geopolitical Uncanny. Islamic State knows us very, very well.

By way of conclusion – market conditions and consumer boycotts

Islamic State instantaneously, and irrefutably, captured the global attention economy's captive market. These venture conflict-capitalists, moreover, did so through the same metaphorical narrative and aspirational appeal used by corporate models of innovative commodity sales – the American Dream. Nike's rapid rise provides an excellent, if counterintuitive, example. According to Douglas Holt and Douglas Cameron, widespread perception of Nike's 'performance brand superiority' arises not from spectacular product design, but from the company's embrace of cultural myth – a 'powerfully motivating metaphor for the ideological anxieties Americans faced as globalization hit the American job market' (2010, 19–20). Nike deployed consumers' powerful need for the cathartic, self-affirming promise of American exceptionalism as a vehicle to sell shoes; Islamic State for the ware of warfare. Both conglomerates offer a powerful palliative for American consumers' globalisation-performance anxiety. Far from a barbarian horde of Machiavellian medieval minds, IS is comprised of viciously brilliant – if insidiously sadistic – marketers.

Talal Assad notes that the 'idea of a war on terror is uniquely developed and expressed in a particular place – the United States', and underscores terror's 'epistemological function as "an integral part of liberal subjectivities," despite our best dissimulative efforts, which aim to resist increasing doubts civilizational superiority' (2007, 41/2238). The American conglomerate of hegemonic exceptionalism, that originator of Brand USA's emancipatory promise, has fallen victim to a zealous overconfidence in inherent product superiority (Anholt and Hildreth 2004). If Islamic State's fanaticism resides in unshakeable faith of eventual, prophesied triumph, it parallels American secular liberalism's symbiotic extremist exceptionalism, which heralds the divinely mandated victory of capitalist democracy at History's eventual End.

Islamic State's company ethos intentionally repudiates 'Brand America', and secures the sale of apocalyptic Evil™ with fear's transactional currency. Not even the most sophisticated, resource-intensive, multimedia ad campaign can immediately reverse or repair the damage inflicted by defective merchandise and shoddy customer service. In such situations, to ignore customer dissatisfaction, cracks open the boardroom door for unanticipated competition – often from within, even (or especially) from young employees, formerly consumers, once attracted to the company's aspirational values but increasingly alienated by the claustrophobia and false promises embedded in the fabric of corporate culture. No one is better positioned to profit from a business empire's missteps than the CEO's protégées. It is the White House of precisely this executive master that Islamic State's kleptocratic Prometheus aims to destroy, by use of his own hijacked tools.

In a final, brutal irony that reminds us – yet again – of the insurgent start-up's parent company, Islamic State's English-language media arm, *Al-Hayat*, constitutes a blatant visual plagiarism of the *Al-Jazeera* logo. The calligraphic, teardrop-shaped emblem and identical colour scheme, provide proof positive of an undeniable model, but the citation is far more than merely stylistic – unfolding against the backdrop of Qatar's embrace of nation-branding, and the use of cutting-edge media technologies to create a niche for itself on the global market (Cooke 2014; Kamrava 2013). From where did the micro-state of Qatar, in turn, derive this mediated approach to PR and state legitimacy? One need look no further than the dividends reaped by CNN during the first Gulf War, in which conflict-capitalism contributed an innovative weapon for modern warfare (Talon 2011; Zayani 2006): one that endures, today, in the so-called propaganda channels of Islamic State's media apparatus.

The vehicle for the affective power of this brand, 'Message to America' follows conventional wartime schemas of divisive identification recast, repackaged and resold in a vivid Technicolor of sheer horror. Islamic State, however, proves far more adaptable than its

American competitors, responsive to market demands with the eager provision of an infinite supply to meet infinite demand. IS strategically type-casts themselves as the villains in this offer of existential conflict, and in the process, sells us an apocalyptic engagement figured as the righteous choice of just war – rendering criticism unutterable and resistance unthinkable.

It is a cliché that war thrives on demonization of the enemy; but, perhaps even more poignantly – war also thrives on the hero, the martyr: the fallen's posthumous deification. But both distorted archetypes dehumanise – the intertwined helixes of warfare's Manichean DNA. Slavoj Žižek's critique of contemporary capitalism proves instructive for economy's conflict corollary; to boycott the infinite exchange of apocalyptic confrontations, we must 'reject this very opposition… this can be done only if we resort to the dialectical category of totality: there is no choice between these two positions; each one is one-sided and false' (2002, 51). The time for an opt-out from exceptionalism is long past overdue.

Notes

1. Cathartic consumerism is a distinctly American crisis response, evident since the Second World War, and particularly acute in the aftermath of September 11 (Barret Gross and Giles 2012, 25).
2. I address here the initial product launch, and restrict myself to the murder of Jim Foley; each brutal episode in the 2014 series – save the finale – closes with a masked executioner's threat to the next victim, respectively: Steven Joel Sotloff, David Haines, Alan Henning, and Peter Abdel-Rahman Kassig.
3. IS' propaganda apparatus includes a variety of teams comprised of media professionals with experience in marketing, entertainment, and news production, according to a source involved in the negotiation process for Western hostages (and whose anonymity I preserve in response to security concerns).
4. For IS' perceived domestic constituency, this logo invokes the *rāyat as-sawdā'* (Muhammad's mythic battle flag), as well as a small set of apocryphal, eschatological Hadiths, and the imperial standard of the 'Abbasid caliphate – the Baghdad seat of which constitutes a prize long-dreamed for by Islamic State.
5. The corporate logic of branded nations, a relatively recent approach to domestic good governance campaigns and international public diplomacy, applies to Islamic State at a level far deeper than metaphor, and governs the organization's strategy for regional administration as well as efforts to attract investors and long-term residents. For further discussion, see: Rogers, Amanda. *Inside the Boardroom-Battleground of Islamic State: Nation-Branding, Competitive Positioning, and the Future of 21st Century Insurgency* (manuscript in progress).
6. Frame-by-frame forensic analysis identifies the presence of three hidden executioners, revealed through mistakes in otherwise professional post-production edits.
7. According to a source involved in the negotiation process for American hostages of Islamic State (and whose anonymity I preserve in response to security concerns), medications administered to calm the condemned men likely included anti-anxiety pharmaceuticals Xanax and Ativan.
8. A sadistic beheading video two years earlier, entitled 'The Slaughter of the Spy-Journalist, the Jew Daniel Pearl,' operates in parallel, and similarly situates the murder of a civilian captive within a discourse of justifiable retaliation for American actions in the War on Terror – in this case, abuse of prisoners held in indefinite detention at Guantanamo Bay.
9. Beneath the surface of familiar, forced foreign policy condemnations, Foley's recitation reveals another element that differentiates 'Message to America.' Although the captive lays

blame for his death at the feet of the United States government, Foley does so in a manner that emphasizes equivalent senselessness between the airstrike campaign's collateral damage and that constituted by hostages like himself: unnecessary *civilian* deaths, thus, emerge as a central theme shared by Islamic State and the American War on Terror. At no point does the script of 'Message to America' call for assignation of any personal guilt attached to the victim; instead, Jihadi John figures Foley, and those to come, as a sacrifice on behalf of someone else's sins – whether indifferent public or complicit commander-in-chief. Allegations of wrongdoing prove strikingly absent.

10. 'Message to America' reached the attention of American consumers at a rate of 94% brand awareness, 'higher than for any other major news event in the last five years' (Tinnes 2015, 80).
11. Although the group utilizes terrorism as tactical and strategic weapon, IS does not constitute a terrorist organization in any classical sense of the phrase. Such networks generally claim limited membership, and lack territorial control as well as the military capacity for conventional warfare. Islamic State, in contrast, routinely deploys fighters in the tens of thousands as combat-ready, professionally stratified units that engage in open operations rather than the clandestine maneuvers typical of asymmetric conflict, claim jurisdiction over a wide expanse of terrain, and operate the sophisticated governmental apparatus of a quasi-state entity.
12. The president's confident, inaccurate assessment recalls Jean Baudrillard's answer to the post-9/11 rhetorical posture of George W. Bush's administration. Baudrillard posits that, if the attack is 'the incarnation of fanaticism and violence, it is the incarnation of the violence of those who denounce it at the same time as of their impotence, and of the absurdity of combating it frontally without having understood anything of this diabolical complicity and this reversibility of terror' (2005, 2212/2828).
13. Although the shadowy figure's British English most immediately implicated European Muslims as potential Fifth Column within, Western leaders the world over rapidly moved to discursively assimilate Jihadi John into broader civilizational threat.

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