ISIS and Futurist Terrorism Versus Cyberpunk

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Thorsten Botz-Bornstein

Abstract

The origin of science fiction is twentieth-century Futurism. For the largest part of the twentieth century, science fiction maintained an optimistic attitude towards the future. At the end of the 1970s, the modern, optimistic, and futurist vision of the future, typical for avant-garde movements of the 1930s, took a negative turn and became dark, pessimistic, and cynical, in a postmodern sense; it became what would be called, in a word, 'cyberpunk.' In this article, I want to show that the terrorist organization generally known as ISIS (Islamic State) intends, or rather intended, to go back to futurism and modernism by overcoming postmodernism and cyberpunk. At the center of the futurist ISIS imagination is the machine. This is not the virtual, postmodern bio-digital machine inserted in bodies and manipulating a universe made up of data; rather, it is the analog, mechanical machine.

Key Words

aesthetics; cyberpunk; ISIS; Italian Futurism; terrorism; violence

1. Introduction

In this essay, I attempt to metaphorically connect the emergence of radical Islamic terrorism to a recent shift in cultural thought, namely the shift from postmodern cyberpunk to futurist modernity. More specifically, I compare the aesthetic attitudes of early twenty-first-century Islamic terrorism to the aesthetic ideas and practices of twentieth-century Futurism.

Cyberpunk is a sub-branch of science fiction most often depicting the fusion of high technology and low life in postindustrial urban contexts. It started as a literary genre with the works of Phillip K. Dick, William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, and Bruce Bethke, who were building on the earlier work of George Orwell, Ray Bradbury, and J.G. Ballard. Cyberpunk was popularized by movies such as *Blade Runner* and *The Matrix* and, by the 1990s, had become a catchword or a symbol for a certain cultural attitude developed in postindustrial Western countries and Japan. Today cyberpunk is not merely a genre, but stands for an aesthetic or perhaps even an ethical code.

Science fiction has not always espoused the negative and dystopian view of the future, but for the largest part of the twentieth century it replicated the optimistic spirit projected by the Italian and Russian futurists. Futurism was utopian and vibrated with a positive attitude towards a bright and technicized future. Futurists believed that a new and better world could be built once the old one had been destroyed.

At the end of the 1970s, the dystopian, postmodern view of science fiction, cyberpunk, moved to the foreground. The modern(ist) and optimistic visions of the future typical for avant-garde movements between 1910 and 1930 took a negative turn and became darker, more pessimistic, more cynical, but also more ironic. What this paper will try to show is that radical Islam, and ISIS, in particular, wants to leave dystopian, postmodern cyberpunk behind and return to the more modern, utopian expressions of Futurism. Futurism is a Western movement, but it can be metaphorically applied to non-Western phenomena that, technically, are not related to it. The world of ISIS is neither that of *Blade Runner* nor that of *Akira*.[1] ISIS effectuates the transfer from dystopia back to utopia by using religious elements in addition to specific futurist aesthetic codes.

2. The twin towers through futurism

Futurism can be seen as the ideological origin of science fiction. Thomas Michaud, in his history of science fiction, writes that "the futurists' belief in machines has served as the founding postulate of Science Fiction."[2] For the largest part of the twentieth century, the futurist love of machines left its mark on science fiction. Futurists had not only extolled speed as a central value of technological societies; they had also thought about androids and the impact of technology on society. This futurist heritage remained dominant in science fiction until the 1970s when the mood gradually changed. The "cyber" aspect of science fiction began to present the future through a dystopian filter. Much of cyberpunk takes place in the aftermath of nuclear disasters, which strongly contrasts with typical futurist visions.

As cyberpunk emphasizes the aesthetics of catastrophe and ruin, the machine becomes part of the general disaster. It no longer rules over the world but tends to disintegrate, either by being fused with organic matter or by being torn to shreds.

Cyberpunk became a popular and full-fledged aesthetic expression in the 1990s. During the same period, a new form of Islamic terrorism appeared on the international stage and quickly became important. Islamic terrorism had existed before, but the Soviet–Afghan War (1979-1989) had sparked a new wave of radical Islamism. The world became fully aware of the existence of radical Islamism when Al-Qaeda opened the twenty-first century by destroying the World Trade Center in New York City in 2001. The twenty-first century, which represents the mythical age of cyberpunk, could not have been inaugurated in a more futurist fashion: airplanes were sent into the skyscrapers. The Twin Towers explosion can be perceived as an explosion of colors similar to the one depicted in Umberto Boccioni's *Elasticity* (1912). Like in Boccioni's painting, the "elastic" and dynamic fire cloud is orange.

The Twin Tower attacks announced the end of cyberpunk and inaugurated a futurist era of Islamism that can be called "Islamic Futurism." Italian Futurism utilized airplanes and aviation. "Aeropittura" (air painting) became one of the most important expressions of futurist aesthetics, especially through the work of Tullio Crali, Giacomo Balla, Giulio D'Anna, and Tato. Several of those paintings show airplanes almost crashing into modern skyscrapers, or they deal with the threatening nature of other modern machines.[3] 9/11 announces the rise of a futurist aesthetics that is not linked to communism or fascism, as was the case with Italian Futurism, but to Islamism. It is the same futurist aesthetics that would later be developed by ISIS in its modernist propaganda.

In cyberpunk, the acceleration of speed leads to the acceleration of time. This is the basis of cyberculture, as was shown by Mark Dery in *Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the Century* (1996), and also by Paul Virilio in *La Vitesse de liberation* (1995). Cyberpunk experiments with mind-body relationships, which suggests new perceptions of reality and the invention of alternative realities. It is this fantasizing about different realities that makes cyberpunk different from Futurism. Futurism, too, is about experiments with speed and, at times, even about experiments with the body, but those experiments are not supposed to generate an alternative reality. According to David Tomas, "Cyberpunk centers around an alternative postindustrial culture predicated on the interface of biotechnologically enhanced human bodies, interactive information technology,

and omniscient corporate power."[4] All three items are new and cannot be found in Futurism.

My thoughts on the relationships between futurism and cyberpunk are very much inspired by Franco Berardi's book *Dopo il futuro: Dal Futurism al Cyberpunk. L'esaurimento della Modernità* [*After the Future: From Futurism to Cyberpunk. The Exhaustion of Modernity*] (2013). In this book, Berardi explains that much of contemporary Western culture has shifted from an optimistic vision of the future that was still present in Italian Futurism, towards the pessimistic perceptions of the future, of which cyberpunk has become the ideology and the aesthetic expression. However, what I want to demonstrate is that ISIS, in Western imagination, tends to shift the vision of reality back to futurism.[5]

My idea is to place the most recent emanations of terrorism into the picture that emerges from the above "cyberpunk-futurism" opposition. What status does Islamic terrorism have within the landscape of different futurisms? While Western and Japanese cultures evolved, over a course of almost a hundred years, from futurism to cyberpunk, a new, global, and immensely intriguing cultural phenomenon developed almost in parallel: Islamic fundamentalism. On a superficial level, the apparently nihilistic ideology of terrorism that is openly preaching murder and destruction might yield the impression of being just another derivation of dystopian and pessimistic cyberpunk attitudes. However, the contrary is the case. Alberto Fernandez, who works for the Brookings Institute specializing in terrorism, holds that "the seemingly authentic black flag, the savage videos, and the black dress–all this is not nihilism, but extremely violent idealism."[6] This means that Islamic terrorism is not "cyberpunk" but "futurist." ISIS, metaphorically speaking, marks a reaction to cyberpunk. Given the particular religious background of ISIS, such a realization should not come as a surprise. ISIS culture is radically opposed to most movements by which Cyberpunk was influenced: New Age, with its relativism and anti-authoritarianism, or the avant-garde, especially when the latter includes ironic elements.

3. Terrorism and Cyberpunk

In general, the cultural environment in which cyberpunk developed is very different from that of the early avant-garde. First of all, there is a large difference between futurism and cyberpunk in economic terms. Cyberpunk thrived in postindustrial societies in which unprecedented economic affluence and the satiation of basic material needs fostered individual creativity but, at the same time, spawned boredom; it is obvious that when the economy's service sector generates more wealth than the manufacturing sector it is no longer

necessary to toil for a living. At the same time, an entire optimistic, work-oriented industrial world fell into ruins. Such a negative reading of postindustrialism leads to the perception of a cyberpunk reality that was unique to the Western world and Japan. "Postindustrial" signifies that the so-called industrial world has disappeared not because energies were used on wars or the world's destruction, but because society has been taken over by weakness, anomie, and change.

A further effect is the weakening of the sense of reality. In postindustrial economies there is no lack of money or goods, but a lack of reality. The industrial society still produced "real goods," even if those goods were often mass-produced and "*entfremdet,*" that is, cut off, from the laborer. In the postindustrial world, the *Entfremdung* (alienation or distancing) is taken one step further. It has become an information society where tangible goods have been replaced by images and abstractions. The postindustrial economy is an "information economy" peddling, mainly, information. The non-real aspect of this society is reinforced as the entire economy is driven by digital technology combined with corporate demands that cannot be directly traced to real people. In this economy, markets and services have been centralized, bureaucratized, and rationalized. Reality itself is no longer experienced first-hand but has undergone the same process of rationalization and centralization. As a result, human experience becomes simulated, not only in economic terms but in all aspects of life. The difference between the original and the copy becomes insignificant. In the end, the new kind of simulated, postmodern, reality will be marketed by corporate giants who specialize in the new business of "reality peddling." Greil Marcus describes the cyberpunk world as a world in which

> industries have turned upon individual men and women, seized their subjective emotions and experiences, changed those once evanescent phenomena into objective, replicable commodities, placed them on the market, set their prices, and sold them back to those who had, once, brought emotions and experiences out of themselves–to people who, as prisoners of the spectacle, could now find such things only on the market.[7]

A crisis of values becomes unavoidable. Correspondingly, in cyberpunk literature, the postindustrial world is described as a world of social isolation, disintegrated families, political corruption, scientific charlatanism, and juvenile delinquency, and one in which consumerism is left as the only available ideal.

I believe that ISIS interferes in *this* crisis and suggests an alternative life style which is, most probably unconsciously, inspired by futurism. As long as there was industry, the world was futurist. Cyberpunk has plunged the world into a dystopia in

which values, even the value of reality, are in decline, having been replaced by pseudo-values and a mediatized pseudo-reality. A slightly mocking statement about Westerners' addiction to "your lattes and Timberlakes," made in a recent issue of the ISIS magazine *Dabiq*, suggests an admittedly confused critique of Western postindustrial consumer culture. [8] ISIS has moralistic concerns regarding the danger of corruption by the materialism, mechanization, and hedonism inherent in Americanism, and also its degraded popular culture. The terrorist organization contests *all* Western discourses, regardless of whether they are based on capitalism, communism, nationalism, or democracy.

4. The "derealization" effect in modern wars

Another important "reality problem" concerns war. In the world of futurists, wars were still "real" wars rather than cold wars or cyberwars. Winning a war would lead to a better life, which is not necessarily the case today. The "derealization" of wars began at a time when futurists were most active, more precisely during the combats of World War I. Paul Virilio described World War I as the "first mediated conflict in history, because rapid-firing guns largely replaced the plethora of individual weapons. Hand-to-hand fighting and physical confrontation were superseded by long-range butchery."[9] Ernst Jünger, in his novel *Storms of Steel* (1920), depicted the industrialized warfare he had experienced in World War I in such a derealized way that reality became distantiated through the photographic lens. In his literary portraits of battlefields, Jünger appeared affected and, simultaneously, strangely unaffected and distanced. These are probably the first signs of cyberpunk. In the art of that time, the distorted perception of the reality of war goes often hand in hand with avant-gardist techniques. Jünger's descriptions seemed to be surrealist, while Italian and Russian futurists distorted the reality of war in their own avant-garde ways. Mayakovsky, for example, glorified the violence he perceived in the Russian Revolution, though he was more critical of the World War violence, by miniaturizing the shocking force and the graphic naturalism of warfare and by replacing it "by the style of folk-song and fairy tale."[10] Another Russian futurist poet, Khlebnikov, conveyed a "hyperbolized self-image, claiming that wars, like birds, peck grain from his hands."[11]

Later, new technologies would change the standards of how wars can be perceived because they would most radically change the criteria concerning what can be seen and what cannot be seen. War became less real and more "cinematic." In other words, techno-culture was slowly moving from futurism to cyberpunk.

It is in the 1960s that an essential decision regarding futurism or cyberpunk had to be made. The 1960s saw the creation of a variety of modern postwar utopias, but there was a red line distinguishing the two ways of conceiving the utopia: as something dogmatic or something that leaned towards relativism and irony. Franco Berardi explains that the dogmatic version would lead towards terrorism, while the ironic version would lead towards progress.[12] Sixty years later, the question emerges in an altered context. This time, it is addressed to Islamic terrorists who have made their choice very clear. They will go for dogmatism and not for irony. In other words, Islamic terrorists opt for a futurist, as opposed to a cyberpunk, vision of the future. While the progressive cyberpunk culture of irony has taken over much of the West, ISIS decided to revert to futurism.

What is the difference between an ironic and a dogmatic culture? In general, ironic cultures consider the link between signifier and signified as loose and open to interpretation, while dogmatic cultures attempt to firmly reattach the signifier to the signified. ISIS has applied this strategy in many fields. For ISIS, words do not fly around in a deconstructed universe, but are rooted in a geographical ground as well as the "ground" provided by sacred texts. This insistence on an absolute overlap of signifier and signified has become one of the main sources of a culture clash by which the world is rocked at present.

As said earlier, ISIS and much of radical Islam–Islamism–have decided to go back to a futurist logic. This was an entirely free decision. It is not backwardness that determines the actions of ISIS, but rather a firm belief in the future, which is a modernist tendency. The problem is, as Bassam Tibi points out, that radical Islam "Islamize[s] modernity [without making] an effort to come to terms with modernity by accommodating it culturally into Islam."[13] It is the same belief that led not only to fascism and futurism, but also to the consolidation of modern capitalism and communism. "Modernist terrorism produces the fanatic of a future creed," writes Roger Griffin, while Thomas Hegghammer highlights the "thrill of adventurism, the joy of camaraderie, and the sense of living an authentic Islamic life" that attract both Western and non-Western recruits.[14] In the past, ideologues such as Sayyid Qutb, a founding member of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Abdullah Azzam, a founding member of Al-Qaeda, presented Islam as a perfect, all-encompassing guide for individual and collective life. There was no space for nihilism in those ideologies, but only for the optimistic belief in the future. Utopianists are optimistic by definition. Qutb summarizes in his text, *This Religion of Islam* (*Hadha al-din*), the Islamic methodology (*manhaj*) and its positive effect on the world in the past and in the future.[15]

A similarly optimistic utopianism underlies Saudi Arabia's Wahhabism and the Iranian revolution under Ayatollah Khomeini. The eighteenth-century founder of Wahhabism, Abd Al-Wahhab (1703-92), saw traditional Islam as a degenerate version of pristine Islam that had to be supplanted by an entirely new, utopian formation of Islamic culture, while Ayatollah Khomeini saw himself as a progressive innovator of Shia thought. Similarly, the Muslim Brotherhood from Egypt perceived themselves to be an "avant-garde that was ahead of and even above the ordinary masses."[16] ISIS is not much different in its utopianism. John Gray, in his book on religion and utopia, argues along the same lines: "Islamist movements think of violence as a means of creating a new world, and in this they belong not in the medieval past but the modern West."[17]

As the futurist vision of Europe and the US as hubs of civilized solidarity fades into the past, some people are trying to violently push the wheel of time back towards an optimistic version of the future. Exactly one hundred years after the invention of Futurism, they want to reestablish the future as it had been imagined in the first decades of the twentieth century.

5. The real machine versus the virtual machine

The future that futurists and ISIS want to reestablish is a future in which the world will be "real" as opposed to virtual. Reality has become mediated at the age of cyberpunk, and ISIS-futurism opposes its own conception of a wild and violent palpable reality to the virtual reality of cyberpunk. For many young people who grew up in a cyberpunk environment, the mediated world is the only world they ever came to know. That's why they find the futurist reality of ISIS so fascinating. This idea itself–the plan to go back from the virtual to the real through futurist devices–could be considered an interesting project. The problem is that "going back to the future," as planned by ISIS, also reintroduces many negative components. What will be rediscovered in this "real future" are not only values like solidarity, unity, and empathy. "Going back to the future" also means reinserting some of the infamous creations of the modernity of the early twentieth century: totalitarianisms like fascism and communism, irrationalism, and the culture of violence that was preached by futurism. The shift from virtual cyberpunk to a "futurism of the real" has had immense repercussions on Islamist techno-culture.

At the center of the futurist ISIS imagination is the machine. The ISIS futurist machine is not the postmodern bio-digital machine inserted in bodies and manipulating a universe made up of data; rather, it is the conventional "mechanical" machine that is visible, edgy, bulky, and noisy. Marinetti, the father-figure of futurism, speaks of the "deafening din of the motor, bone

shaking reverberations of the chassis, [and the] cheek-coloring massage of a frenzied wind."[18] Similarly, when Raqqa and Mosul became again accessible to outsiders, the world was fascinated by what the press would soon dub "Mad-Max-style" armored cars and bulldozers. Those civilian vehicles with steel plates bolted to their bodies and other strange weapons of war often required remarkable engineering skills. ISIS could attract talents able to tamper with "heavy metal." Lacking its own sophisticated weapons factories and cut off from the international market, ISIS depended on improvisation. "In Syria and Iraq, ISIS has elevated the technical to an art form," wrote Kimberly Dozier and David Axe in *The Daily Beast*."[19] ISIS vehicles have also been compared to Burning Man art cars. Some bulldozers were filled with explosives leading the US army to coin the name "vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices" ("VBIED"). The same sort of crude but highly functional do-it-yourself technology is found in tunneling machines that ISIS engineers fabricated using old farm equipment. There were also drone factories and similar workshops. Self-made explosive drones feed into a myth of primitive but efficient technology. All this brings us back to the 1940s, when the British military, short on purpose-built armored vehicles, slapped sheets of steel armor on civilian trucks. The ISIS "Franken-trucks" could become relatively high tech as is evident from a special ISIS video from 2015, entitled "Jihadi University Video."[20]

For ISIS, engineering has become a matter of grinding, fixing, and explosions, exactly as it was in earlier days. ISIS hammered out medieval torture devices, such as the "biter," by using the skills of an old-fashioned blacksmith.[21] Especially for people who grew up on the internet thinking that the computer and software stand for technology, those machines must be fascinating. As was recently claimed, young people need to discover the tactile world outside the house and feel the "wind on their phizogs."[22] Such a statement sounds very much like a futurist recommendation. Being steeped in the "puritanism" of the internet, where the human body cannot be smelled or touched, but only seen and heard on a small screen, young Westerners flocked to Syria to join the Islamic State because they were longing for physical reality. For once, reality was not a desert, as Baudrillard had argued, but contained actual machines.[23] Apart from that, ISIS achieved a reality effect by resorting to, and showing, execution, torture and murder. Death became more real as the act of killing shifted back to the mechanical. Malcolm James notes that

> from the guillotine onwards, modern Europe has associated just killing with modern mechanical efficiency, and with the alienation of the killer from the killed. In this way, deaths from drones or cruise missiles have come to be represented as moral,

civilized and modern (regardless of who they kill or how they kill them). When mechanical killing at distance is represented as being modern and civilized, killing at close quarters represents what is pre-modern and uncivilized about the East.[24]

The very reality, or palpability, of death has been reestablished. Such a reality is extremely analogical. Representation can be overcome through cruelty, as Jacques Derrida famously demonstrated in his text on Artaud: "The theater of cruelty is not a *representation.* It is life itself, in the extent to which life is unrepresentable (*irréprésentable*). Life is the nonrepresentable (*non représentable*) origin of representation."[25] Derrida's insight is in agreement with Futurist principles of representation. Likewise, for ISIS, things simply *are* what they represent. First of all, the curious principle of exerting "violence for its own sake" turns violence into a reality that is not mainly political. ISIS' violence is not "reasonable" violence directed at the destruction of an enemy. According to Olivier Roy, it is much "more anthropological than political."[26] Furthermore, the hypermediatization of ISIS propaganda videos benefits from this pattern. Manni Crone holds that "the current rise of visual and social media" enables anthropological violence to be shown through "aesthetic technologies of the self, such as, for instance, jihad and martyr videos."[27]

There is a certain machine aesthetic at work here. In ISIS reality, machines tend to be very large, while in postmodern reality machines are getting smaller and smaller until they reach nano size or disappear into a virtual universe where reality, even the biological one, is merely simulated. ISIS looted tanks and hi-tech weapons from the Iraqi army, and those machines were constantly paraded through the cities they had conquered. Long rows of SUVs became the trademark of the ISIS imagology. A video titled, *There is no Life without Jihad* (2014), is the most famous documentation of this. [28] In the ISIS universe, machines are used as torture instruments and cars are used as killing machines. The "German chair," apparently invented in the Communist Democratic Republic of Germany, and other machines were used to torture hundreds of people in a quasi-industrial fashion.[29] Therefore, the machine becomes very closely related to the real, living body.

In postmodern reality, the human body is no longer a real body but a gene machine, that is, a chain of interlinked signs. Postmodern (cyberpunk) bodies often have prosthetic limbs or have gone through genetic alteration. The postmodern body is not, according to Kevin McCarron, "a biological essence but a site for cultural enscription."[30] As a result, "the interest cyberpunk writers take in the body is of a strictly negative kind."[31] For ISIS-futurism, by contrast, biology and technology

are not supposed to be made up of signs but of "real," palpable, things that exist objectively in time and space. While cyberpunk uses technology to dehumanize the body and humanity as a whole, ISIS arguably reconstructs humanity and the body through futurism. In a world where humanity has been deconstructed and subjected to the forces of capitalism and digitization, since information is prized above all else, ISIS offers an "old world" vision of reality, in which, amongst other things, the machine remains a masculine, dominating, and frightening device.[32] For Islamists, body politics and cyborgization cannot be subjects of interest because permanent body modification is forbidden in Islam.[33]

ISIS is technologically advanced, but its progress is based neither on gene technology nor on algorithms. By affirming its particularly concrete techno-ideology, ISIS sheds the pessimistic (cyberpunk) dystopia of postmodernity and points towards a bright technological future based on simple principles that men and women are supposed to easily believe in. In other words, ISIS replaces the complex automatized cognitive reactions of thinking machines determined by algorithms with simple binary reflections. Some of those reflections are supported by religious prescripts. Salafism, which relies upon scriptural literalism, revolves around binary opposites such as *tawhid* (oneness of God) versus *shirk* (idolatry), or religious ritual versus *bid'a* (innovation), and so on. Religion can be a great source of inspiration here because it has its own inherent logic and does not need the help of computers.

ISIS decided to reinvent reality, and reality always takes place in the future. The entire ISIS project is a big anti-"No Future" cry. For youngsters who grew up in social desolation, who are continually fed with reality shows and are exposed to images of eroticism that ironically preclude any actual contact with the body of the other, who also suffer from the lack of community spirit, and for whom sexual reality has been replaced not even by symbols, but by mere signs (the cum-shot in pornography is the peak of this development), a new kind of futurism can hand back many of the things that had been swept under the dystopian carpet of cyberpunk and virtual reality. ISIS understood all this instinctively. Manifesting a sense of historical coherence, ISIS picked up where the hippies had left off. It reinstalled in its universe the hairy, smelly, imperfect real body that postmodern culture had replaced with the digital, sleek, sterile, modular, and connected body. Beards and long hair, often dramatically flowing in the wind, display a strange break with military dress code. Al Qaeda started this project, but ISIS perfected it by overly aestheticizing it.

While the video generations from the 1990s onwards have excelled in playing virtual wars, ISIS shoots in real time. Whereas for the former everything is mediated, the latter reestablishes contact with the materiality of the human body. 'Postmodern' signifies decarnalization, until the body has become an interface just smooth enough to transport the flux of information. ISIS plunges the body back into a futurist type of modernity, where humans were not merely machines but *driving* machines. Real, hairy, analog, living bodies are driving through the concrete conquered space called the Caliphate. Those bodies can also be tortured. A more authentic and masculine lifestyle is supposed to bring back the "reality" that postindustrial culture has buried under a heap of rational calculations. Reality is made into something *real* (material) again through the development of the imagery of masculine action and violence. There are clearly futurist resonances in such imagery. ISIS seems to reenact the futurist myth of the techno-man in the form of the jihadi fighter sleeping with his Kalashnikov.

6. The reinvention of space

The ISIS world is not composed of codified signs but of concrete matter. In this world, *space* is no longer virtual but unmistakably material. Postmodernity had abolished not only the body, but also the space that bodies are supposed to live in, by turning space into an abstract cyberspace that can only be thought but not felt through the body. Since the day ISIS began conquering a part of the real world, we began to read maps again, even if those maps were only on Google. ISIS wants to turn the wheel backwards by reintroducing an ontological anchor into geographical space, in the form of stable points and positions. Through ISIS we discover that there is more to geography than multiplicities, lines of stratification, motion, change, and flight. In this war, borders are erased by real humans, who are able to draw new borders into the sand with their own feet.[34] The ISIS war is neither a Star Wars project nor a virtual Cold War, but it is about conquering stretches of real land inch by inch. Accordingly, the ISIS magazine *Dabiq* would give lengthy accounts of the geography of the new Caliphate. Space has once again become a grand narrative. After years of deterritorialization, ISIS reterritorializes space. This is a remarkable achievement for terrorists. Usually terrorists have no real territory, but they act on the territory of others.

Instinctively, ISIS adjusts its actions to what happened in older wars: that is, space is fought for by real, breathing bodies driving real, steaming machines. Is it surprising that this scenario appeals to a generation raised in virtual space with very little bodily contact? Also, speed has once again become important. I am talking about real speed measured by the movement of

bodies within space, not abstract speed witnessed in computer games. In the modern, as opposed to the postmodern, war, the fastest fighter could claim the territory. That's precisely what is happening with ISIS today, which reminds one of how Hitler gained territory in World War II: his transport structures were more efficient than those of the enemy. At a time when every millimeter of earthly space has been conquered and colonized to the point of having to go into outer space or into cyberspace to experience real adventures, ISIS discovers a space that is not merely mental, but palpably real, because it can be perceived by our five senses. This is exactly the space in which ISIS wants, or wanted, to build a "real" future. Life in the ISIS universe is not an amalgam of information and virtualized nano-technology; it rather constitutes a utopia for women and men manipulating real machines. The simplest machine is the sword and, as explained earlier, the act of killing with a sword emblematizes potentially a return to a more authentic, because more primitive, civilization. The sword is also a symbol of masculinity. Analysts found that ISIS' beheading videos are "symbolic rituals of confrontation," in which sexual identity and gender are performed and communicated through violence.[35] The videos are a display of masculinity and also a war of masculinities.

While postmodernism "lost" the future, ISIS re-installs it in the same futurist-like ontological terms. By doing so, ISIS brings back many elements, most strikingly a revolution that could be experienced in terms of a corpo-reality. Whoever thought that contemporary revolutions are electronic was proven wrong by ISIS. Revolutions are not limited to digital ones taking place in nano dimensions and silently undermining existing digital systems; and the economy is not an automatized technical system that nobody can escape. On the contrary, the economy can be destroyed and rebuilt because it is a concrete activity involving the exchange of real goods. This is another fascinating aspect of the so-called Islamic State: it is disconnected from international financial systems. ISIS is exchanging real goods for oil. A vigorous black market has replaced a virtual financial system and this market is, first of all, palpably *real*.

Historically, futurism was the most explicit expression of the modern masculine spirit, that is, the masculine soul that is unable to accept defeat, shame, and depression. The only thing that men would allegedly need is a strong will, and here ISIS espoused the futurist idea of voluntarism fed by a long tradition of European philosophy, ranging from Nietzsche via Bergson to Sorel. Those philosophers had revolted against a rationalized environment that was no longer considered real. Unfortunately, Sorel's ideas inspired not only futurists, but also the mystifying and irrational ideologies of the Nazis. According to Arendt, at the time of World War I, "all traditional values had evaporated" and

"vulgarity with its cynical dismissal of respected standards and accepted theories" became more acceptable than reasonable theories and old traditions.[36] The parallel with ISIS is obvious. In the roughly thirty years preceding World War I, voluntarist subjectivism, neo-idealism, in addition to the search for a certain "spirituality," created an increasingly dense irrational nimbus in European culture. Voluntarism is the principle of relying on voluntary action, which happens to be a supreme principle of jihadism. Harleen Gambhir writes that "action precedes authority in this philosophy: Baghdadi is the Caliph because of his military victories; the victories did not come because Baghdadi was the caliph. The legitimacy of the Caliphate hangs on military victory and consolidation success, as proof of God's approval."[37] This sounds very similar to fascist and futurist principles of activism fed by voluntarism.

In a futurist world, the future has once again become predictable. In cyberpunk, the future is not predictable, though not because the number of options is so overwhelmingly large that nothing can be said about the future. In the dystopian imagination of cyberpunk, there is no time, or at least no real time. Time is abstract and contains no *durée* in the Bergsonian sense. As a result, there is no future, only an endless present, and the existence of any prophet in such a context will look awkward and inappropriate. In the futurism of ISIS, we have a prophet who makes predictions with absolute certainty. Whatever he says, will happen literally in *real time*. ISIS *believes* in the future, and the word 'belief' here has the connotations that it had in Futurism. It is a belief in progress, a belief that cynical cyberpunk completely abandoned. ISIS converts a virtual future of smooth and hairless people into a real future of manly and hairy ones. During this conversion many things happen. For example, youngsters begin to read. Young Western converts who have been raised on the internet and never touched a book in their lives are now reading the Quran. The ISIS future is not the future of the post-alphabetical YouTube generation, but the future of people who believe in texts again. In other words, postmoderns have been reconverted to modernity.

If ISIS will really achieve the creation of a new reality or not is an entirely different question; in 2019 they have failed to. At the end of the day, religious fanatics are puritans whose minds are attuned to what they think of as transcendental ideas. Instead of believing in a concrete world of mundane enjoyments, such as good food, drink, music, and art, they, at least ostensibly, cling to abstract principles, thus creating their own virtual reality. However, even though they aspire to a metaphysical world, quite paradoxically it is concrete corporeal pleasures that allegedly await them in the metaphysical afterlife. The contrast between these two attitudes is indeed puzzling.

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Endnotes

[1] Akira is a cyberpunk manga series by Katsuhiro Otomo that ran from 1982 to 1990. It takes place in a post-apocalyptic Tokyo. The animated film version (anime) came out in 1988 and is set in a dystopian 2019.

[2] Thomas Michaud, *Télécommunications et science-fiction* (Paris : Marsisme, 2008), p. 215 ; my translation.

[3] See Tullio Crali's *Aeroplani sulla metropolieliche*, *Tricolore*, *Bombardamento Aereo*, and *Volo Radente* [strafe] as well as Giacomo Balla's *Balbo and the Italian Transatlantic Flyers*, Giulio D'Anna's *Dynamism of Train, Ship and Plane*, and Tato's *Metropolitan Airplane*.

[4] David Tomas, "The Technophilic Body: On Technicity in William Gibson's Cyborg Culture," *New Formations*, 8 (1989), pp. 113–129; ref. p. 113.

[5] Franco Berardi, *Dopo il futuro: Dal Futurism al Cyberpunk. L'esaurimento della Modernità* (Rome: Derive Approdi, 2013). To some extent, the Italian movement of Futurism obviously asks for more nuanced views. The seeds of a dystopian vision of the future were already present in Futurism itself, which was constantly expressing not only hopes but also fears about the future. The machine might occasionally have been depicted as dangerous (but then, in return, the futurist man was able to tame it).

[6] Alberto M. Fernandez, *Here to Stay and Growing: Combating ISIS Propaganda Networks* (Washington: CMEP at Brookings,

2015), p. 11.

[7] Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the 20th Century* (Boston: The Belknap Press, 1989), p. 101.

[8] *Dabiq*, no.15, 2016.

[9] Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London: Verso, 1989), pp. 69–70.

[10] Katharine Hodgson, "Myth-Making in Russian War Poetry," *The Violent Muse: Violence and the Artistic Imagination in Europe, 1910-1939*, eds., J. Howlett and R. Mengham (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp. 65-76; ref. on p. 75.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 72.

[12] Berardi, p. 16.

[13] Bassam Tibi, *The Challenge of Fundamentalism: Political Islam and the New World Order* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 32.

[14] Roger Griffin, *Terrorist's Creed: Fanatical Violence and the Human Need for Meaning* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 21; Thomas Hegghammer, "Jihadism: Seven Assumptions Shaken by the Arab Spring," *Project on Middle East Political Science,* January 2014, http://pomeps.org/2014/02/03/jihadism-seven-assumptions-shaken-by-the-arab-spring, accessed 10/10/2016.

[15] Sayyid Qutb, *This Religion of Islam* (*Hadha al-din*) (Kuwait: International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations, 1972).

[16] Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 53.

[17] John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), p. 70.

[18] Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "The New Ethical Religion of Speed," *Critical Writings: New Edition*, ed. G. Berghaus, trans. D. Thompson (New York: Macmillan, 2007), p. 257.

[19] Kimberly Dozier and David Axe, "Monster Machines: ISIS's Armored War Jeeps Are Professional Grade," *The Daily Beast*, 18 March 2017. https://www.thedailybeast.com/monster-machines-isiss-armored-war-jeeps-are-professional-grade, accessed 11/10/2018.

[20] See Trent Baker, "Islamic State Suicide Bombers Unleashing 'Franken-Truck' on Kurds: 'Something Out of a Movie.'" *Breitbart*, 22 Nov. 2015, http://www.breitbart.com/video/2015/11/22/islamic-state-

suicide-bombers-unleashing-franken-truck-on-kurds-something-out-of-a-movie/ accessed 12/1/2018.

[21] Patrick Cockburn, "ISIS in Mosul," *The Independent*, 24 February 2016, accessed 5/25/2019.

[22] Robert McNeil, "Is Virtual World Making us Lose Touch with Reality?" *Belfast Telegraph*, 3 September 2010 http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/columnists/robert-mcneil/is-virtual-world-making-us-lose-touch-with-reality-28558010.html/, accessed10/10/2016.

[23] *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* is the title of a book by Slavoj Å½iÅ¾ek (London: Verso, 2002). The book's title comes from a quote delivered by the character Morpheus in the 1999 film *The Matrix*: "Welcome to the desert of the real." The Matrix quote, in turn, alludes to the phrase "desert of the real" to be found in Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacres et Simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981).

[24] Malcolm James, "The Colonial Representation of Jihadi John: Matters of Life and Death in the 'War on Terror,'" *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture*, 62 (2016), pp. 138–149; ref. on p. 143. The switch of vocabulary is puzzling here. Where James says 'modern,' I would say 'postmodern,' and where he says 'premodern,' I would rather prefer the term 'modern.'

[25] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 294.

[26] Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 148.

[27] Manni Crone, "Religion and Violence: Governing Muslim Militancy through Aesthetic Assemblages," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 43, 1 (2014), pp.1-17; ref. on p. 2. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0305829814541166, accessed 2/12019.

[28] *There is No Life Without Jihad*– AlHayat Media Center (@alhayaten) June 19, 2014

[29] Jack Moore, "ISIS Torture Methods Revealed," *Newsweek*, 15 August 2017, https://www.newsweek.com/torture-methods-isis-revealed-sitting-severed-heads-fuel-dousing-and-flying-650828, accessed 5/25/2019.

[30] Kevin McCarron, "Corpses, Machines and Mannequins: The Body and Cyberpunk," *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment*, eds. M. Featherstone and R. Burrows (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996), pp. 261-273, ref. on p. 262.

[31] McCarron, p. 263.

[32] Sometimes cyberpunk attempts to humanize the machine, too. This has mainly been the task of Japanese cyberpunk, which tends to depict machines as "cute." Japanese cute robots are unique and *gynoids*. Sexy cyborgs, first appearing in Gwyneth Jones 1985 novel *Divine Endurance*, and Hajime Sorayama's cyborgs from the 1980s, have become standard in cyberpunk culture.

[33] In Islamic scriptures, there are four hadiths speaking out against tattoos, one of them putting forward the argument that the body should not be permanently changed. The hadiths are: Sahih Bukhari, Vol. 7, Book 72, No 815; Sahih Bukhari, No. 823; Sahih Muslim, Book 24, No. 5300; and Abu Dawud, Book 28, No. 4157.

[34] It should rather be "wars" because we are talking about the Iraqi Civil War and the Syrian Civil War.

[35] Jeffrey Juris, "Violence Performed and Imagined: Militant Action, the Black Bloc and the Mass Media in Genoa," *Critique of Anthropology*, 25, 4 (2005), pp. 413-432.

[36] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland and New York, The World Publishing Company, 1973 [1951]), p. 334.

[37]Harleen Gambhir, "Dabiq: Strategic Messaging of the Islamic State," *Backgrounder: Institute for the Study of War*, 15 August 2014, pp.1–12; ref. on pp. 6–7.

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