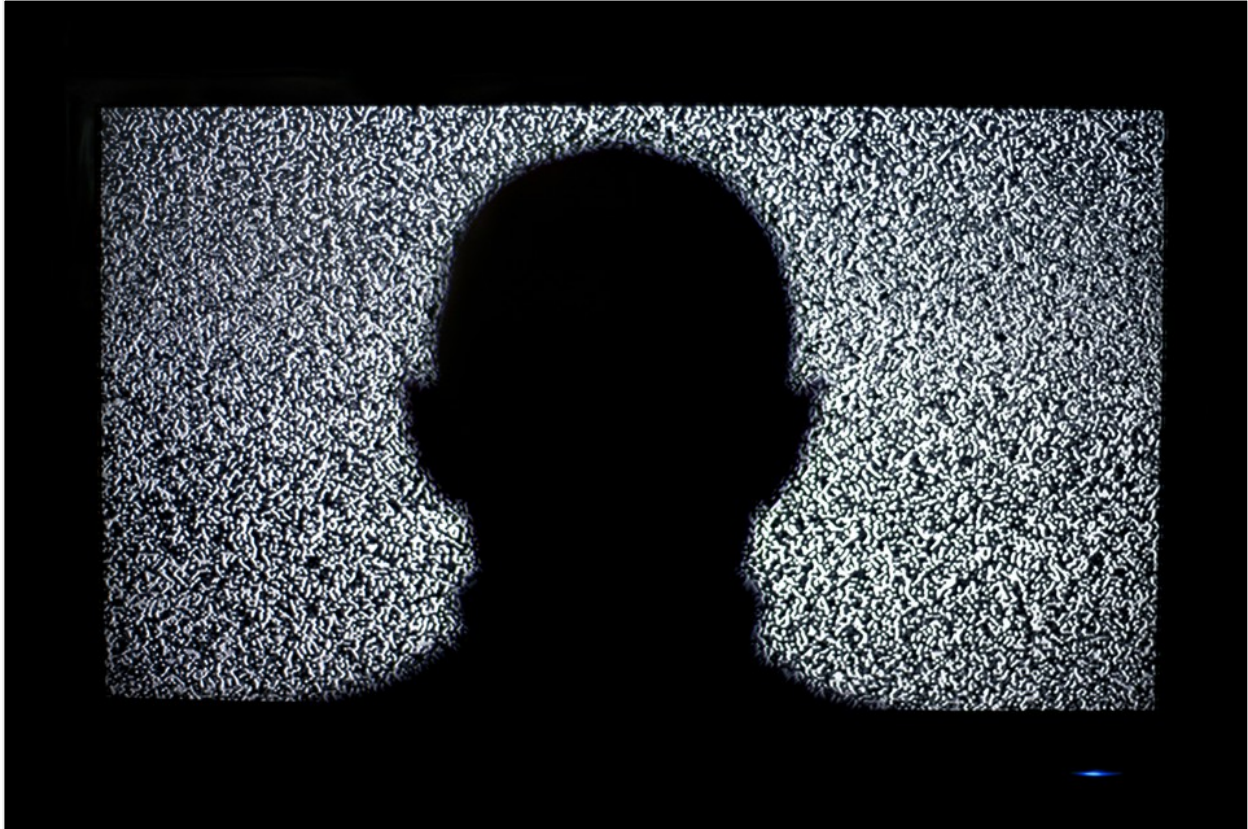


The Atlantic

The Jihad Will Be Televised

The sinister narcissism of ISIS and its lone-wolf emulators



Maciej Toporowicz / Getty

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JUN 28, 2016 | GLOBAL

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In *Memoirs of an Italian Terrorist*, the author, who purports to have been a member of a left-wing militant group, vividly conveys the excitement and pressures of living underground as a secret operative. There are questions about the book's authenticity—the author, who identifies himself only by the pseudonym Giorgio, declares that “what I write here can't be true, it can only be truthful”—but there's a telling detail in his description of mission preparation. “I would never set out to undertake a proletarian expropriation”—a communist-inflected euphemism for a robbery—“if I didn't feel that I was dressed right.”

For today's wannabe jihadists, whether “[inspired](#)” or “[directed](#)” by groups like ISIS, [style](#)—be it in the form of a righteous beard or a voluptuous application of [kohl eye makeup](#)—also matters. But perhaps not as much as celluloid, and for a certain kind of Islamized Giorgio the capture of atrocities on film matters almost as much as their actual commission. The British writer Neal Ascherson, in his foreword to *Memoirs of an Italian Terrorist*, referred to the “sinister frivolity of Italian urban terrorism.” In the case of ISIS and its so-called “lone wolf” emulators, “sinister narcissism” seems to be the more appropriate formulation.

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One evening this month, in the French town of Magnanville about 35 miles outside of Paris, Larossi Abballa, a 25-year-old Moroccan Frenchman, [ambushed](#) an off-duty police officer outside his home and stabbed him to death. He then broke into the house and murdered the officer's wife with the same weapon. Minutes later he recorded himself live on [Facebook](#) with his phone, boasting of his deed and declaring his allegiance to ISIS. A police SWAT team stormed the house and fatally shot Abballa, but his image and voice lived on: ISIS's Amaq news agency, which described Abballa as an “Islamic State fighter,” later uploaded to YouTube an [edited version](#) of the live video.

Abballa's attack took place less than 48 hours after Omar Mateen [slaughtered 49 people](#) at a gay hangout in Orlando, Florida, and wounded many more. Mateen's horrifying legacy is quantitative in nature: No other individual mass shooter in American history has [killed more people](#) in a single rampage. Abballa's legacy, by contrast, is qualitative: He is the [first terrorist](#) to broadcast live at the scene of his atrocities. And his actions may portend a horrifying new genre of terrorist [theater](#): live streaming political murder. Jason Burke of *The Guardian* was right: “It may not be long,” he [wrote](#) in February, “before an individual attacker, or a terrorist group, produces a live stream of an attack, with images broadcast from the point of view of the killer.” Or rather Burke was partially right: Abballa did not live stream the actual moment of slaughter, although it seems only a matter of time before a terrorist will attempt to do so.

ISIS has revolutionized jihadist propaganda by creating a visually distinct pornography of pain that combines high production values with intimate atrocity. Unlike its predecessor al-Qaeda in Iraq, whose signature production was the IED mash-up video, ISIS has become notorious for staging obscenely graphic, high-definition atrocities. These theatrical events drastically narrow the distance between the viewer and the victim, bringing the latter squarely into the foreground. ISIS doesn't just want to show the viewer the spectacle of a tank or truck exploding; ISIS wants to show the viewer the spectacle of a human body being savaged, up close. It is precisely this quality of horrifying intimacy that is the new element in ISIS propaganda—and a key to its global dissemination. This is the primordial secret, no longer well kept: The killing act is a spectacle people want to see.

Yet for all its malevolent creativity, not even ISIS “central” in Iraq and Syria has live streamed from a murder scene. There are structural reasons for this. To project an image of total power and control in its execution videos, ISIS must make killing look effortless and competent. This calls for heavy post-production editing—and hence rules out the live spectacular. In addition to this, live streaming is precarious from a security perspective, since it risks giving away the location of the atrocity. But for sheer horror, live streaming is hard to beat, because it further narrows the distance between viewer and victim: The killing may be happening in a distant place, but it isn't happening in any distant past. It is happening *now*.

“There have always been people ready to watch executions, and ready to enjoy the spectacle.”

By live streaming from the scene of his crime, Abballa also points to a new and growing trend in jihadist propaganda: the terrorist as *auteur*. It is likely that Abballa, who had proven links to terrorism, would have watched ISIS propaganda. But he was no mere spectator, and by filming in the immediate aftermath of his attack he propelled himself into the ranks of *creator*, producing his own brand of do-it-yourself ISIS propaganda.

Facebook quickly [removed](#) Abballa's footage and disabled his account. Had it not done so, it is a near certainty that people would have watched in large numbers, transfixed by the horror unfolding in front of their eyes, just as thousands [searched online](#) for the beheading video of the American engineer [Nick Berg](#) after it was posted online in May 2004. (The video was an early, and then-rare, example of the genre later perfected by ISIS; the title identifies the executioner as the al-Qaeda in Iraq leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.)

As the anthropologist Frances Larson [writes](#), "There have always been people ready to watch executions, and ready to enjoy the spectacle." Or as Susan Sontag has more [piercingly](#) put it, "It seems that the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked." One possible reason for this, [cited](#) by the intellectual historian Karen Halttunen, is the secret comparison we make between ourselves the person who suffers, and the satisfaction of prizing our own good fortune that results from this. Another possible reason, discussed in J. Glenn Gray's *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*, is related to what the author calls, invoking the Bible, "the lust of the eye": the urge to see "the novel, the unusual, the spectacular."

"Terrorist attacks," the scholar Brian M. Jenkins [observed](#) over 40 years ago, "are often carefully choreographed to attract the attention of the electronic media and the international press." The goal is publicity, which is itself a [strategic asset](#) that can be used for all sorts of purposes, such as winning recruits or putting an issue on the political agenda. Jenkins also remarked on how the "willingness and capability of the news media to report and broadcast dramatic incidents of violence throughout the world enhances and even may encourage terrorism as an effective means of propaganda." Today, with the advent of the internet and social media, that willingness and capability has increased markedly, and with it a further possibility discussed by Jenkins has [materialized: namely](#), ever "more extravagant and destructive acts" of terrorism.

It is [easy to condemn](#) the news media for its fascination with terrorism and for "playing into the hands of the terrorists" by giving them the publicity they crave. Yet audiences, too, collude in this. We denounce the killers, yet we are riveted by their awesome violence and their convoluted [life-histories](#). They are the classic folk devil we love to hate—and endlessly talk about. Terrorists know this and

draw encouragement from it, as does the international news media with which they are in a dark symbiosis. Which is why the jihad will be televised—and you and I will be watching.

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