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Religion and Violence: Governing Muslim Militancy through Aesthetic Assemblages

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One of the ways in which the relationship between religion and violence has been conceptualized is through the concept of “radicalization”. In the wake of the London bombings, “radicalization” became a favored policy term that was reinvented in order to manage and prevent the new phenomenon of “homegrown terrorism”. Around 2005, it was a widespread assumption that “homegrown terrorism” had a religious dimension, and the concept of “radicalization” therefore had to articulate how religion and terrorism were related. Most concepts of radicalization describe a cognitive transformation, where the progressive adoption of radical religious ideology is the first step in a process that—eventually—could lead to terrorism.

The argument that religion and violence are connected through intellectual processes can also be found in academic literature. Max Weber, who studied the relation between religion and practice, famously argued that a specific Weltanschauung—a protestant ethics—was paving the way for an ascetic practice that contributed to the growth of capitalism. More precisely, it was a specific interpretation or rationalization of religious dogma (the idea of predestination) that subsequently made religious actors act in specific ways. Weber’s influence on the study of religion before and after 9/11 cannot be overstated. Recently, Cecelia Lynch has proposed a neo-Weberian model of how to understand the relationship between religion and violence. “(W)e must first assess”, she writes,

“what religious guidelines suggest for particular situations, and then look more deeply into how religious actors interpret those guidelines – how they bridge the gap between religious rules and particular situations to decide how to act”. In the same vein, Juergensmeyer & Sheikh have argued that the key to understanding the religion/violence-nexus is to scrutinize the “epistemic worldviews” of violent actors. According to this “socio-theological” approach, the important question is not why the violent actors did what they did, but “how they viewed the world in such a way that would allow these actions to be carried out”.

The aim of this paper is to challenge this intellectualist vision of violence. I question that pathways to religious violence are primarily cognitive and suggest that processes of radicalization also imply embodied practices of self-government. The notion of “self-government” is inspired by Foucault’s somehow neglected notion of “care of the self”, which implies that individuals can adopt an “art of existence”, i.e. a practice through which they strive to modify and transform themselves. This transformation, which eventually will allow someone to embrace violent militancy, is not only intellectual, but also implies a transformation of the body and various “body techniques”. Curiously, concepts of radicalization as well as IR-discussions about religion and violence tend to make abstraction from the body. But by abstracting from the body, we miss an absolutely critical dimension of violence. Violence—religious or other—is often performed by bodies or directed against bodies.

From this suggestion to include the body and the “body techniques”, I turn to the empirical question of how young Europeans currently bring about such a bodily transformation, or how they govern themselves to embrace religious violence: what are the international technologies of the self through which religious militancy becomes possible? In order to answer this question, I consider the current rise of visual and social media to suggest that religious violence in Europe today is largely enabled by aesthetic technologies of the self, such as for instance jihad- and martyr-videos. These aesthetic technologies are international in the sense that they are used across geographical borders. Young men in Europe can for instance use jihad-videos produced in Syria or Somalia to transform themselves to embrace religious violence. When it comes to Muslim militancy, which is the focus of this article, aesthetic technologies currently sidetrack traditional intellectual technologies of the self as the Koran, the fatwa or Islamist doctrine. In contrast to intellectual technologies that primarily work through the intellect and make use

6. I refer to “young men”, because young men are extremely overrepresented in violent milieus, and jihad-videos make visible masculine environments, where women practically never appear in the visual frame.
of linguistics, aesthetic technologies are “assemblages” in which speech, visualities, sound and materialities interact in ways that produce specific “frames” of violence.7 Such “jihad frames” materialize masculine bodies in interaction with religious artifacts and ornamentation.

This article does not propose a fixed definition of religion. In line with other scholars as for instance Talal Asad, I consider “religion” to be a historical category, which can therefore be examined genealogically in its various articulations and configurations.8 Inspired by Saba Mahmood, I suggest that ‘religion’ is always “local and particular, pertaining to a specific set of procedures, techniques and discourses through which highly specific ethical-moral subjects come to be formed.”9 By considering “religion” in these terms, my approach differs from Max Weber who, as mentioned, would locate the forms of religion that could have an influence on practice in the actor’s contextualized interpretation or rationalization of religious dogma. In terms of methodology, I approach “religion” ethnographically; I understand religion as a common sense category, where “religion” is initially taken to be what various actors (including the scientist) in a context of relatively shared sensibilities and epistemic attitudes name or inscribe10 as “religion”. This “religion” can materialize not only as text and speech, but also as bodies, clothing, performance, sound, songs, etc.. A group of young men that I was talking to for instance called themselves "ahl-e sunna"—people of the sunna—and at the trial of their friends performed their deen—“religion”—by ostentatiously praying in public. There might not be total consensus about what religion is, or about what “things” qualify as religious, but in a specific context of shared sensibilities and epistemic attitudes there will probably be a relatively shared common sense about “religion” that will at least allow for a negotiation of the category.

I don’t consider "religious violence” as a nexus linking two distinct entities together in such a way that religion is somehow the precondition of violence. Hence, there is no causal relation between religion and violence, and religious bodies are not considered to be particularly violence-prone. At particular moments however ”religion” and violence may contingently assemble in a specific, but transient configuration. In contexts where religious violence takes on a political significance, it will in some ways resemble other forms of violence that convey a social critique as well as political imaginaries/fantasies/utopias.

Initially, the article makes an empirical claim; it strives to make sense of how a contingent assemblage of religion and violence is currently articulated in a specific context (Denmark). But from this empirical point of departure, which is underpinned by a

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fieldwork experience, I set out to give a theoretical account of how religion—as enacted and materialized in jihad videos—can enable violence, jihad and eventually martyrdom. Or more precisely, the article attempts to reframe the idea of a relationship between religion and violence, where the one is enabling the other. Religion and violence can of course be analytically distinct; nevertheless, if we consider pathways to religious violence, I suggest that religion and violence are co-constitutive and always already empirically entangled through various “techniques of the body.” The notion of “body technique”—which is akin to the notion of “habitus”—includes not only the physical body, but also its ornamentation, practices, inclinations and habits as well as the practical and theoretical reasons involved in such bodily behavior.

A number of scholars have recently touched upon the role of visual technologies for international government and security. Although inspired by this literature, the present article offers a slightly different perspective. For one thing, the religious technologies of the self are not conceived of as merely visual, but more precisely as “aesthetic assemblages”, i.e. as technologies that juxtapose linguistics, sound, images and matter. For another, the focus is not on how aesthetic technologies affect an audience or how they “conduct the conduct” of others. I do not ask, for instance, how al Qaeda or similar groups use jihad videos to recruit or radicalize young men in Europe. Instead, I focus on the micro-politics of militancy and ask how young men in Europe use international aesthetic technologies to govern and transform themselves to become Muslim activists. In other words, I take the perspective of the “audience”, which is neither seen as the passive receiver of a rhetorical speech-act, nor as a “crowd”, but as subjects that—although not

11. The focus of the article is made possible by three years of regular contact to a milieu in Copenhagen including people who have been convicted, accused or acquitted in four terrorist trials. Moreover, I have assisted at three trials, which have been the occasion to meet up with these people in the first place and subsequently see them outside the courtroom: in a mosque, in a café, in a private home, at a research institution. Moreover, I have had access to material presented during the trials: room-surveillance, telephone-surveillance, surveillance of internet-usage etc. Although such material is biased, it has nevertheless given me a glimpse of how the young men in this environment use jihad videos.


14. Although my empirical work is located in Denmark, I consider that the arguments about aesthetic assemblages and body techniques are relevant in a broader European context.


entirely “autonomous” or “free”—are nevertheless able to transform themselves through the imitation of religious bodies that materialize in militant videos.

Pondering the question of how young men in Europe currently engage with religious militancy, I develop an argument in four steps. 1) First, I discuss the intellectualist approach to religious violence as implied in most concepts of radicalization; 2) second, I suggest that pathways to religious violence imply a transformation of the “techniques of the body”; 3) third, I claim that today such transformation is largely enabled by aesthetic technologies of the self; 4) finally, the article suggests that aesthetic technologies provide religious models that enable imagination, identification and mimetic practice.

**Religion and violence: from cognitive “radicalization” to embodied militancy**

Concepts of “radicalization” often describe an intellectual process, where the progressive adoption of religious ideology can lead “moderate” youth towards extremism. Surprisingly, the vast literature on radicalization, or IR-literature on religious violence, hardly touches upon the role of the body. This is all the more surprising since, from a fieldwork perspective, the body appears to be absolutely critical for young men engaging in militancy. In the milieu in Copenhagen I was in contact with, the body was constantly problematized as a site of physical and moral improvement, or a site through which the antagonism to Danish society could be played out. I therefore suggest that radicalization could be considered not merely as a process of cognitive and practical transformation, but as a process that implies a transformation of the “techniques of the body”. This process is not a linear one leading from one point to another, but as a fuzzy, chaotic process, which in some cases might lead into violence. Hence, I’m not rejecting the term “radicalization” altogether, but rather trying to rearticulate it and come up with alternative ways of understanding it.

Concepts of radicalization introduce a distinction between “cognitive radicalization” and “behavioral radicalization”.17 “Cognitive radicalization” refers to a process, where a person increasingly comes under the influence of extremist ideas; “violent radicalization” on the other hand refers to the phenomenon of a person who—having adopted a radical “worldview”—is prepared to take the step from talk to action and thus to act violently in order to realize his or hers extremist ideas. Hence, concepts of radicalization not only emphasize the intellectual aspects of radicalization; they also claim a specific relationship between religion and violence, where religion, ideology or worldviews are seen as a precondition for violent action. This is a widespread idea, which in a different version is also to be found in Lynch’s neo-Weberian framework. “It is certainly the case”, she writes, “that actors employ religious justifications to engage in violence”18 or “religious adherents constantly navigate experiential, ritualistic, and doctrinal terrains in deciding how to act”.19 First the actor navigates various religious terrains; then he or she

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decides how to act. This approach “understands religious ethics as constitutive of social, economic, and political practices”.20

Similarly, in Radical Islam Rising, which was to inspire numerous definitions of “radicalization”, Quintain Wiktorowicz sketched out various phases of radicalization. Radicalization starts with a so-called “cognitive opening”, where a person becomes receptive to new worldviews. In a subsequent phase of “frame-alignment”, the old “moderate” worldview is exchanged for a new “extremist” one.21 Finally, the radicalized youth can be persuaded by religious authorities to go from talk to action, to take the step from mere adherence to specific ideas to violent action. Within this framework, action is conditioned by specific ideas. The cognitive transformation is prior and can subsequently condition violent action.

The problem with this conception of the religion-violence nexus is that it tends to intellectualize action. Religious discourse—for instance a fatwa—contains truth claims about whether specific actions are allowed, proscribed, forbidden or necessary under specific circumstances. Such intellectual discourse can of course inspire or infuse actions of people who strive to embrace militancy or martyrdom in the sense that they “interpellate” particular subjects.22 But the carrying through of a terrorist attack is neither the simple realization of a religious “truth” nor the mere effect of a radical speech act inciting people to take action by perpetrating a terrorist attack. No text or speech—religious or other—is endowed with “a natural authority that imposes it directly on its subjects”.23 There is no 1:1 relation between a religious “norm” and a subsequent militant practice in the sense that the activist simply follows the Islamic norm to the letter. Similarly, successful securitization is never mere rhetoric, where a speech act has an effect on an audience due to the authority of the speaker.24 The religious “truth”, “norm”, “worldview” or “speech act” does not precede the practice but is constantly produced—one could claim—by the very practice or interpretation of the norm or the speech act. If radical Islamist ideas are to be of any relevance for Muslim militancy, they have to be accepted, acknowledged, interpreted or practiced. There is no free-floating discourse out there awaiting an audience, but only punctual situations, where people orient themselves or transform themselves by roughly making reference to something they construct as a “truth” or a “norm”. By doing so, they at the same time authorize and produce the “success” of the discourse or the speech act.

Radical religious ideas are not necessarily the cause or the precondition for violent action. Radical ideas can also take the form of an ex post rationalization of violent behavior. In environments supportive of violence, violent actions are often invented in

24. Waever, “Securitization and Desecuritization”.

a rather ad hoc manner, where the militants find the solution along the way depending on the situation and the broader context (intelligence environment, capacities, access to weapons, sheer chance etc.). But all those disparate, messy, local practices can be rationalized and linked together in a more systematic manner so as to constitute a “truth”. If a scientist for instance makes an interview with a person engaged in violent activities to query about his “worldview”, the interviewee will probably rationalize his actions and produce a truth that the scientist will happily consider to be the “worldview” behind the violent acts. But since there is no single and authoritative truth about jihad and martyrdom—only a variety of contradicting interpretations of truths—such a truth constantly has to be produced. The continuous attempt to endow a certain violent practice with a truth does not necessarily take the form of a top-down persuasion or rhetoric, where religious authorities call upon young people to embrace jihad or martyrdom. To govern others or oneself is to constantly “be condemned to seek an authority for one’s authority”. Hence, it is the practice of government—including the government of the self—that continuously seeks to provide itself with a truth that could constitute an ethical basis for its actions.

Young people who strive for militancy (and eventually martyrdom) are not necessarily on the lookout for authoritative (religious) speech to confirm the way of life that they are striving to perform; first and foremost, I claim, they are on the lookout for living or dead models, who embody the life they want to live—specific ways of behaving, dressing, protesting, killing. They exercise self-government and adopt an “art of existence” through which they strive to become a particular type of person and live a particular kind of life. In this process of governing and transforming themselves they might intellectualize their practice by reflecting upon it, by consulting Islamist texts or fatwas… or simply by discussing various issues with their friends.

But what is the site of government and transformation in processes towards violence? What exactly is being transformed and what is the “ethical substance” of government with a religious dimension? Theories of radicalization as well as academic literature on the relationship between religion and violence have so far overlooked or abstracted from something, which is absolutely critical for pathways towards militancy, namely the body. At least from a fieldwork perspective the body appears to be essential. The young men in the Danish militant milieu were ornamenting their body by dressing up in specific ways, and they probably spent more time doing sports and exercise than going to the mosque. By framing cognition as a purely theoretical exercise, concepts of radicalization overlook not only the body, but also enacted forms of knowledge (hexis). The subject, which is involved in processes of radicalization, is presented as a pure intellect that, in a mysterious process that is hardly ever accounted for, can translate specific ideas or worldviews into action.

27. Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*.
Pathways to religious violence: transforming the techniques of the body

If we want to understand the social phenomenon of religious militancy today—and more precisely the pathways towards militancy—we cannot content ourselves with analyzing the semantics or worldviews of religious discourse. Instead of clinging to the distinction between religion and violence, I suggest to refocus the discussion and to consider the embodied micro-practices of Muslim militancy. The critical question then is not “what worldview is behind the hideous acts?” or “what do Muslim militants say?”, but more broadly “how do young men in Europe transform themselves to engage in Muslim militancy?”, “what exactly is being transformed?”, and “what are the technologies of the self through which young men come to embrace jihad?”

Concepts of radicalization implied an analytical distinction between a theoretical form of knowledge and violent practice, the one being dependent on the other. Although radicalization undoubtedly implies some kind of intellectual transformation (whose nature is still to be further clarified), I suggest that processes leading to violent militancy also imply a transformation of the body and more precisely the techniques of the body—a concept, which in Marcel Mauss’ formulation draws on the Latin notion of “habitus”.29 My point is not that processes towards violence are devoid of cognition and only concerns the physical body. Mauss’ concept of “body techniques” or “habitus” dilutes the duality between mind and body, since it includes both cognitive and bodily elements. A “technique” is namely a savoir faire, an enacted or practical kind of knowledge about how to act. A musician for instance knows how to play an instrument. A skilled jihadi knows how to handle a Kalashnikov. A technique however does not necessarily imply an instrument strictly speaking—a piano or a Kalashnikov—since the “body is the first and the most natural instrument of man”.30 A technique can thus be a body technique, which is an enacted form of knowledge about how to use the body, for instance a certain way of walking, dressing, fighting or killing. Like a musician who knows how to play an instrument, “man knows how to use his body”.31

Hence, the concept of “body technique” dissolves the distinction between cognitive elements and practice. It is about the practical knowledge that is implied in every human action. In contrast to intellectual forms of knowledge, that are to be found in most notions of “radicalization”, the techniques of the body presuppose a practical reason about how to act. This practical knowledge is not separate from the embodied practices, which it could therefore condition. The embodied micro-practices and the practical knowledge about how to act and behave are closely interlinked and co-constitutive; taken together they constitute a habitus or a technique of the body.

According to anthropologist Talal Asad, Mauss’ concept of “body technique” or “habitus” “invites us to analyze the body as an assemblage of embodied aptitudes, not as a system of meanings to be deciphered”.32 The notion of “body technique” does not regard

29. Mauss, “Les techniques du corps”. Curiously, Bourdieu has never paid a tribute to Mauss to whom his concept of “habitus” is clearly indebted.
32. Asad, Formations of the Secular, 251.
the human body simply as the passive recipient of cultural imprints or religious discourse that can be imposed on the body by repetitive discipline, but as the self-developable means by which the subject achieves a range of human objectives, from styles of physical movement, through modes of emotional being, to kinds of mystical experience.33 Moreover, the notion of “habitus”, which is implied in the “body techniques”, is etymologically close to “habit”, but semantically to “ability” – a socially acquired disposition to act in specific ways.34 Where “habit” implies the idea of repetition and routine, “ability” is about skills, knowledge and even virtuosity. Some people are more skilled or talented for acquiring the specific body techniques that are required to embrace jihad.

The techniques of the body are never natural, but always socially acquired. But the practical reason about how to use the body is not necessarily acquired through an intellectual process—reading the Koran or studying Islamist doctrine; it is a form of knowledge, which is acquired through repeated practice. It is a learning-by-doing. The musician does not know how to play an instrument, because she has read a book about “how to play the piano”, but through sustained practice and imitation of other pianists. Similarly, I suggest, the skilled jihadi does not know how to handle a Kalashnikov or make explosives merely by downloading fatwas or articles about “how to make a bomb in the kitchen of your mom”. He acquires bodily skills in violent environments, by living in criminal environments, going to a training camp or by joining a conflict zone, where it is possible to get real live experience about how to shoot or fight. But until he will eventually be able to get access to such a firsthand experience, he can govern himself by consulting YouTube-videos from conflict zones and militant environments.

A body technique is acquired through imitation of others, i.e. through tradition or education. As long as this education is not institutionalized and conferred to specific agents; as long as it rests diffuse and anarchic, the technique is transferred directly through practice without the interference of an intellectual, objectified discourse. A child who learns to speak, for instance, acquires a language through sheer imitation while being ignorant to the grammatical rules of language as they have been laid down by science. Similarly, I suggest, the process of embracing violent militancy is not necessarily an intellectual process, where young aspiring jihadis become radicalized by delving into highbrow discussions about the concept of jihad. Rather, they pick up specific ways of speaking, walking, dressing etc. that provide them with a specific appearance which materialize their being part of a specific militant subculture. In contrast to the average Dane who would talk about “Islam”, the young men in the Danish subculture would talk about “Islaaam” and thus through their linguistic habitus and corresponding body techniques clearly distinguish themselves from mainstream Danish society, but also from other violent subcultures.

Hence, a body technique is also a “social idiosyncrasy”, i.e. a certain way of behaving which is peculiar to a specific group.35 In one violent youth culture, young men will walk, talk, behave, smoke and dress in specific ways, which clearly distinguishes them from young men in other violent youth cultures. In one group they will have tattoos, shave their

33. Asad, Formations of the Secular, 251.
34. Mauss, “Les techniques du corps”.
head, wear big boots; in another they will have discrete beards, Adidas hoodies, pants above the ankles etc. The adoption of idiosyncratic body techniques is of course a general phenomenon, which is not specifically linked to violent subcultures. But in violent milieus—milieus including people with violent ambitions—people will typically strive to acquire body techniques allowing them to perform violence by doing physical exercise, training martial arts etc. Similarly, specific ways of dressing, walking, shaving, talking can create an appearance of being tough, cool or dangerous. One of the young men in the Danish milieu explained that when he and his friends entered a bus, many passengers would get off, apparently because the young men had a dangerous appearance.

**Radicalization as government of the self: from intellectual to aesthetic technologies**

From this theoretical backdrop, I make an empirical suggestion: In religious environments with violent ambitions, classical intellectual technologies of “conducting conduct” such as the fatwa are increasingly marginalized, while aesthetic technologies of the self—videos and images uploaded on YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat and similar platforms—are gaining ground. Depending on the context, there might of course be huge variations, and in locations, where access to new aesthetic media is rare, traditional technologies, including intellectual ones, might still be of relevance. But in locations, where new aesthetic media are accessible to young people, I consider that they have a salient position and are increasingly challenging and marginalizing more traditional technologies of “conducting conduct”.

In the Danish milieu of militant Islamism that I was in contact with epistemic knowledge about violence and militancy was quite rare. Some of the young men in this milieu were very keen on behaving properly according to Islamic rules; they made reference to the Prophet as an example to emulate and also asked each other for guidance; some had sporadically followed a course with a local imam who had expressed public support of Osama bin Laden and Musab al Zarqawi.\(^{36}\) But during the three years I was in contact with this milieu, I only heard one single person explicitly making reference to religious sheikhs who had given fatwas on the issues of martyrdom or suicide-bombings.\(^{37}\) One could think that people in this milieu would abstain from touching upon such a delicate subject in my presence, but they often did. Once a person told me spontaneously on the phone, (which was probably tapped), that becoming a martyr was his highest priority. At another occasion, the same man, who was now accompanied by a group of friends, would not hesitate to praise martyrdom to the skies and claim, that “to die for Islam is the most beautiful thing you can obtain”. But such statements were never underpinned by references to Islamic scholars. When once, I asked him, if he could recommend a particular Islamic sheikh (in general and not only on the issue of martyrdom), he became vague and

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\(^{36}\) The leader of “Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia” and the Iraqi insurgency around 2005.

\(^{37}\) It was during his trial at the second Glostrup-case in 2008. The “sheikhs” mentioned were Abu Qatada, Abu Izz, Faris al-Zahrani, sheik Darhouni, Omar Abdel Rahman, Mohammed Boyeri, Abu Bashir al-Tartusi, Othman al-Khamees, Nasser al-Fahd, Omar al-Saif, Abu Muhammed al-Maqdisi.
stated that there were some scholars in Saudi Arabia, but only those who were in opposition to the government. But at the same time, the young men were ardent users of violent videos materializing frames of training, battle, attacks, dead bodies etc.38

Today, I suggest, a transformation of the body in view of embracing violence or militancy is largely enabled by aesthetic technologies—for instance videos that are uploaded on YouTube or similar platforms. Back in 1934, Marcel Mauss had suggested that aesthetic technologies could be instrumental in the transformation of body techniques. “Corpooreal tradition” is not only handed over through face-to-face interaction, but can also be transferred from one geographical site to another through aesthetic technologies. Mauss, who completely ignored the current media landscape, was not considering YouTube videos, but American movies. In an article, where he develops the concept of “body techniques”, he makes the following observation:

“While being at the hospital, I had a revelation. I had fallen ill in New York, and I wondered where I had previously seen young women walk like my nurses. I had plenty of time to think it over. Finally, I came to the conclusion that it was in the movies. When I came back to France, I couldn’t help notice—especially in Paris—how common this way of walking had become; the young girls were French, but they walked like Americans. Through the movies, American ways of walking had been introduced into France.”39

As mentioned, the significant aesthetic technology today is not American movies, but videos and images that are uploaded on YouTube, Vimeo, Instagram, Snapchat etc. “Aesthetic” here is not to be understood in its narrow modern sense as related to art products such as books, paintings etc. (although some jihad videos could perhaps with a lot of good will be considered as pieces of art). “Aesthetic” is taken in the original Greek sense of aesthesis, which has to do with sensibility and sense perception.

Recent literature on security and new media tends to emphasize the role of images and hence the sense of vision.40 Muslim militancy however is not merely governed through images and visual technologies, but more broadly through aesthetic technologies. A very simple reason for making this argument is that there is no such thing as a purely visual media or technology.41 A purely visual technology is an abstraction. “On closer inspection, all the so-called visual media turn out to involve the other senses (especially touch and hearing).”42 “There are no purely visual media because there is no such thing as pure visual perception in the first place.”43 All media are on closer inspection mixed or hybrid media, and for this reason I suggest that “visual media” could more appropriately be called “aesthetic assemblages”. Aesthetic technologies such as videos that currently circulate on various platforms are “assemblages” in the precise sense that they juxtapose linguistics, sound,
images, materiality etc. Aesthetic assemblages about jihad and martyrdom do not only affect the eye, but also the other senses and thus provide an experience of synaesthesia, which refashions our bodily perception and emotions. In contrast to intellectual technologies (fatwas etc.) that work primarily through the intellect, aesthetic technologies address not only the intellect, but also the senses, the feelings and the bodies of an audience. The point is not that aesthetic assemblages are devoid of intellectual elements. As assemblages, they very often include linguistics in the form of caption, speech, voice-over, lyrics etc. The point is merely that in aesthetic assemblages the intellectual dimension is often overpowered by aesthetic qualities that involve the senses more directly.

By producing, articulating and circulating words, images, sound and matter combined within an “assemblage”, certain understandings of jihad, violence and death are articulated and promoted. Martyr- or jihad videos are “frames” in the precise sense that they allow some realities to come into being, at the exclusion of others. They produce truths about jihad and martyrdom, but at the same time models that can enable young Europeans to eventually engage in jihad themselves. Through matter—bodies, weapons, clothing, scenery etc.—specific articulations of religion, violence and death are brought into being and materialized. When these aesthetic assemblages are shared on social media and circulated to other contexts, the “framed” reality of jihad in for instance Syria becomes accessible to young men in Europe. One of the ways in which the new aesthetic assemblages differ from linguistic ones is that they travel instantly and irrespective of language barriers.

In 2013, some men from the Danish militant milieu went to Syria, where they produced four short videos that were uploaded on YouTube and Vimeo and shared on Facebook. The videos that open with a nasheed (Islamic song) stage a group of men who sit in a beautiful landscape, apparently Syria (Sham). The male bodies interact with religious artifacts that are not merely dead things, but things endowed with an agency in the precise sense that it is through “intra-action” of things and bodies that the mujahidin materialize and come into being. The men are constituted as mujahidin through AK-47’s, tactical vests, Palestinian headscarves covering the face, Taleban-style hats etc. The linguistics of the video—Danish with English subtitles—is about the obligation to leave the comfortable, material life behind and join jihad in Syria. The men deploy a specific linguistic habitus, where they speak Danish with a put-on socio-linguistic dialect mixing Danish and Arab vocabulary (kuffar, murtadin, Allahu Akbar etc). At a certain point, they grab their AK-47’s and loudly go through the loading motions. They get up and start shooting at various targets of identifiable Danish politicians and intellectuals.

44. Butler, Frames of War.
46. Cf. for instance http://vimeo.com/73161679. In 2013, I was no longer in contact with this milieu, but I could follow them through various social media.
Through aesthetic assemblages—through linguistics, images, materiality, sound—Danish Muslim fighters are materialized and come into being. This is not just an intellectual appeal, but a synaesthetic frame that in detail shows what the life of militancy in Syria looks like, sounds like, smells like, feels like and how Danish mujahidin dress, talk, move, shoot, laugh etc. The jihad frames that are shared on Danish social media not only show living Mujahidin, but also dead ones. Some of the young men who are staying back in Denmark have uploaded martyr-videos of their friends who have died in Syria.48 To the sound of a peaceful nasheed evoking martyrdom, one video for instance makes visible the lifeless face of the dead friend, and in close-up shows his body, his dress, the wounds, the bandaging, the blood as well as the ways in which his co-fighters intra-act with him by gently wiping his face and covering him with a blanket.

**How do aspiring jihadis use international aesthetic assemblages to govern and transform themselves?**

As stated in the introduction, my prior interest here is not the content of jihad videos. I shall therefore not provide in depth analyses of which realities are produced in current jihad videos, or of how religion is materialized and embodied in “frames of jihad”. Nor is my focus on how aesthetic assemblages affect an audience. The ambition is to throw light on the interface between aesthetic technologies and body techniques. I’m interested in the micro-practices of religious government and therefore focus on how young men use such technologies that in various ways materialize religion to transform themselves and their body techniques to be able to embrace violence. In other words, I focus on the micro-politics of religious militancy and ask how young men in Europe use technologies of the self (jihad videos) to govern themselves to become Muslim activists and eventually martyrs. Technologies of the self are “actions that we can exercise upon ourselves, actions through which we can take care of ourselves, (…) through which we can transform or transfigure ourselves”.49

What I want to suggest is that young men in Denmark and Europe use jihad videos to create models and exemplary ways of life that through imagination, identification and mimetic practice will allow them to transform themselves, their habitus and body techniques. Once the viewer of militant videos has perceived the materiality of iconic martyrs, their ways of dressing and behaving, the smoke of battle scenes, the sound of nasheeds (Islamic songs), he is able to identify with the mujahideen and thus imagine himself performing the life of jihad (walking, talking, dressing, laughing, shooting, fighting in specific ways). The synaesthesia of jihad is imprinted on the imagination thus allowing young men to imagine themselves in those images. Imagination is not strictly speaking opposed to intellectual processes and cognition; rather it is an intermediary between sense-perception and cognition. According to Aristotle, imagination (phantasia) is a process through which sensation (aesthesis) is subsequently reproduced in the mind in the form of an image. Hence, imagination is not opposed to cognition in the

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48. For instance http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Jd-_GS0Ld0
sense of being “irrational”, but could more adequately be considered as a precondition of cognition, since “the soul never thinks without an image.” In the same vein, Judith Butler has suggested that “there is no thinking and judgment without the senses”. Hence, the aesthetic assault on the senses does not necessarily foreclose thinking, judgment and eventually action; on the contrary, sense perception is a precondition for thinking, judging and acting.

Sense-perception perceives something present—for instance a martyr video that I am watching here and now—while imagination, although having its point of departure in sense-perception, creates images of something, which is absent. Since imagination is about absence and non-actuality, it can give access to a non-present future. The aesthetic assemblages create a “sensorial regime of anticipation” through which, young men can come to imagine themselves inhabiting a future life of jihad. In aesthetic assemblages, subjects are called upon to transform themselves to be able to inhabit a violent future. By repeatedly screening jihad and martyr videos, the life and death of mujahideen come to permeate the sensory horizon of the viewer in such a way that violence, mortality and eschatology become part of the present. Viewers seek to adjust and attune themselves to the life of jihad by cultivating a sensorium that renders the violent life of militancy perceptible in the present. Hence, aesthetic experience links the user to a violent future in such a way that the significance of that future is infused into his or hers present imagination and actions.

Imagination can be turned towards the future, but it can also enable action in the present. Although it is not in itself cognition, it nevertheless contributes to our understanding of the world (theoretical reasoning), and more importantly to the ability to act in the world and upon ourselves (practical reasoning). The cultivation of a sensorial regime, which anticipates the violent life of jihad, is not just a passive reception of sense data in front of the computer; it is an experience, which through imagination has implications for practice here and now. When young people have lingered over and tasted the images, sound and sensations of jihad as it materializes in jihad videos, they become attuned to the possibility of violence, danger and violent death in such a way, that those images become part of their present thoughts and actions. Thus in various ways, violence and human mortality comes to imprint itself on their present experience and action.

Through mimetic practice, subjects can come to perform the body techniques and the religious kind of life that are made visible and audible in jihad videos. By imitating a model, mimetic practice is step-by-step transforming the body techniques of the user. Mimetic practice is not to be confounded with the intellectual attempt to consciously imitate the embodied practice of a Muslim fighter who is intellectually constituted as a “norm” to be followed. The modus operandi of the aspiring jihadi is transmitted through enactment without necessarily presupposing an intellectual discourse. There is no intellectual representation of the model to be imitated or any discursive instructions that are

50. Aristotle, De an. 431a.16-17.
51. Butler, Frames of War, xvi.
subsequently to be followed or appropriated. The “norm” is transmitted into practice without a theoretical discourse; it is enacted, lived and inhabited.

But this does not mean that the mimetic practice is “unconscious” and automatic, and thus comparable to a child who is learning to walk or to speak his mother tongue. In that respect, the “techniques of the body” that are acquired through aesthetic technologies are distinct from Bourdieu’s notion of the “habitus”. According to Bourdieu, “practical mimesis”—as he calls the process through which the habitus is acquired and transformed—“has nothing in common with an imitation that would presuppose a conscious effort to reproduce a gesture, an utterance or an object explicitly constituted as a model… (instead) the process of reproduction … tend(s) to take place below the level of consciousness, expression and the reflexive distance which these presuppose. What is learned by the body is not something that one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is”.

In contrast to the acquisition of a habitus, that takes place “below the level of consciousness”, I would argue that the body of the aspiring militant is problematized as a site of moral improvement and distinction. The body and the body techniques constitute an “ethical substance” that the aspiring jihadi can deliberately seek to transform. This transformation does not necessarily presuppose a coherent “worldview” or an intellectual interpretation of an Islamic “norm”, i.e. scholarly knowledge about whether a certain act is mandatory, forbidden, allowed or proscribed under specific circumstances. But the aspiring jihadi still has to do the ethical work of transforming himself, his body, his dispositions and capacities. He has to imitate the model that he has created through imagination and who he is now seeking to become. According to Mauss, the techniques of the body are acquired through “prestigious imitation.” A person, who is in the process of acquiring a specific technique and appearance, mimes the acts that have succeeded, i.e. the acts of persons he trusts or persons he endows with authority. In order to be able to transform his body the aspiring jihadi has to create such prestigious models to imitate and subsequently do the ethical work of transforming himself.

To conclude, I will provide an example of such a mimetic practice. In the Danish milieu, mimetic practice was sometimes performed quite literally. Around 2005, the leader of the insurgency in Iraq, Musab al-Zarqawi, adopted the tactic of beheading Western citizens in Iraq. Those beheadings were filmed and subsequently disseminated through al Qaeda’s media service. A young man who was part of a militant environment in Copenhagen—and who was later to be convicted for preparing a terrorist attack—mimetically performed a famous Zarqawi beheading with his brother and a friend. They mimetically reenacting the incident, but they also filmed it with the intention of subsequently up-loading it on YouTube. The short video, which was screened during his trial, showed two men who posed before a black banner, and who, in typical Zarqawi style, had their heads covered with black scarves. A third man, who was kneeling down in front of the others, played the role of the victim. The man, who was later to be convicted,
grabbed a knife and “beheaded” the kneeling man, while screaming “Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar!” The reference to Zarqawi’s beheadings is unambiguous, and the small video is a very tangible example of how young men in Denmark imitate the model of an iconic mujahid without consulting intellectual instructions about whether beheadings are allowed or not according to classical Islamic reasoning.

The ways in which the videos were used as a “pathetic” or emotional technology became evident from another incident. The brother of the young man, who was convicted for terrorism, screened an Urdu-language video called “The will of the martyr” over and over again. As the two brothers were under room-surveillance, the way they reacted to the videos was filmed and subsequently shown during the trial of the brother. The short video shows the departure of a man who is about to carry out a suicide attack somewhere in Pakistan. The video materializes a farewell scene, where the future suicide bomber tenderly hugs another man goodbye and then leaves in a car. In the next frame the car is seen exploding. Each time the brother—watching the video—reached the farewell scene, he broke down and cried vehemently. Through the short narrative of a farewell scene, the pathetic aspect of the video contributed to an emotional transformation of the emotions of the brother who, through imagination and identification, anticipated a future farewell-scene with his own brother (at least that was the interpretation suggested during the trial). The aesthetic technology is not strictly speaking affecting the emotions that are subsequently exteriorized or expressed in tears. Rather, through the repeated screening of the video, the brother is seeking to progressively transform his body techniques (including the emotions) to eventually be prepared to perceive, feel and act appropriately—in resemblance to the model in the video—when eventually having to say goodbye to his own brother.

**Reframing the religion-violence nexus**

The concept of radicalization, as well as Weber-inspired approaches to religious violence, implied that a cognitive transformation—or the adoption of radical religious “worldview”—was a precondition of violent action. This article is an attempt to rearticulate the question of a religion-violence nexus. Instead of viewing religious interpretations and worldviews as a precondition of religious violence, I have suggested a different approach, which takes the body or “the techniques of the body” into account. In many ways the body appears to be crucial for violence, and therefore, one could argue, theories of violence, that do not consider the body, tend to be very abstract.

But what is to be gained from considering the body and the body techniques? At a theoretical level, the “body-approach” provides a new understanding of religious violence and the subjectivity implied in processes of radicalization. Concepts of radicalization had their point of departure in rational, intellectual and democratic subjects who were able to conduct themselves ethically according to rational rules. From this backdrop, radicalization was seen as a deviation, where the intellectual subject would move from moderate, democratic values to radical ones and subsequently—leaving civilization behind—take the step into a barbaric realm of violence. What I have suggested here is to consider the whole human being, who therefore is not merely rational and intellectual, but an intellectual and embodied subject with senses, inclinations, habits, emotions,
desires, sexuality. In that perspective, violence is not necessarily a deviation from the normal “democratic” situation, but implied in the everyday practices of every society: the wrestling of young male bodies in sports, the fascination of weapons and violence, the pleasure at watching violent movies or videos, domestic violence, crime, the attraction of violent milieus, the pleasure of killing.\textsuperscript{57} Hence, the engagement in violent milieus or activities is not necessarily a rupture, but can also be seen as a continuation. This approach however also has implications for policy. If religious worldviews are not the driving force behind religious violence, then “counter-narratives” that set out to change the mindset of violent people by inculcating democratic values will probably not be very successful.

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\textsuperscript{57.} Cf. The film by Joshua Oppenheimer: The Act of Killing.