O sublime na propaganda de ódio na Internet - uma análise de discurso

The sublime in hate propaganda on the Internet - a critical discourse analysis

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ABSTRACT: This paper considers how two rhetorical concepts, pathos and the sublime, are used to reinforce hate propaganda on radical Islamist websites. The concept of pathos comes from Aristotle's theory on modes of persuasion, which is based on the idea of stimulating dialogue, debate or even argument between a speaker and an audience to bring about the most favourable choice for the common good. The raison d'être of rhetoric, namely negotiation of social meaning through persuasive speech, has been recognised since Greek Antiquity. Although the desired goal of hate propaganda, above all else, is the destruction of social life, this article will show why pathos can be used to establish inter-subjectivity in a pseudo-shared social space, strengthening the impact of its persuasive action. Unlike pathos, the sublime is a sophist concept. Analysis of Islamic State's website (jihadology.net) reveals how the sublime is used to trigger action influenced by constraint, fear and intense violence, through language. Hate propaganda uses the sublime as a tool for radical manipulation. The article will show how this strategy not only deprives Internet users of all ability to judge, but also transforms them into agents totally committed to the destruction of society.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of the sublime was forged by Longinus (also known as Pseudo-Longinus) in late Antiquity and revisited by the English philosopher Edmund Burke in the 18th century (Doran 2015). Since then it has been discussed widely, particularly in the fields of Art History and Aesthetics. Like Longinus and Burke, in the context of this study the sublime is perceived as a communication strategy designed to arouse a feeling of terror and devastating emotional shock in the public. This article will show how the war propaganda produced by ISIS makes use of this strategy and how the sublime seeks to transform opponents into a clone of the single cause. In this way the sublime can be understood as a mode of transformation. In view of the complex nature of marketing on the Internet, this study looks solely at the verbal aspects of this discourse, although from a semiotic perspective, the persuasive strategies deployed on extremist websites involve simultaneous interaction with all semiological systems (fixed and moving images, sound, music, site architecture, layout, graphics, etc.) (Rinn 2011:145-158).

2. THE DISCOURSE OF THE SUBLIME: TRANSFORMATION THROUGH VIOLENCE

1. For a historiographical analysis of the terrorist organisation, we refer to a work by Pierre-Jean Luizard, *Le piège Daech. L'Etat islamique ou le retour de l'Histoire* (2015) and Warrick, Joby, *Black Flags. The Rise of ISIS* (2015). For a better understanding of the philosophical and religious issues at stake in contemporary Islamist terrorism see Nicolas Grimaldi, *Les nouveaux somnambules* (2016).

The sublime is connected with the sensible world. Longinus or Pseudo-Longinus, the philosopher and rhetor from late Antiquity (212 – 273 AD) accredited with writing the treatise *On the Sublime* (1993), defined it as both a way of thinking and a discursive practice that combines nature (innate ability) and technique (acquired knowledge). In the context of this analysis of rhetoric on Islamic State's website (jihadology.net)[1] , the sublime is dependent on the power of violence, seizes the passions of the audience, controls thinking, forms moral values, and defines the landscape of a particular group's imagination. The sublime thus asserts itself as a single social norm, brings a new order into the disorder of the world, and initiates what Nietzsche referred to as "*die Umkehrung aller Werte*" (transvaluation of all values) through the unexpected, shock, and ecstasy.

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It is important to remember that the sublime is partly characterised by its ethical dimension, that is, the aspiration for high moral values within a community. In German this aspiration is known as *das Erhabene*. Longinus established this firstly through the negative: "(…) Nothing is great, which it is considered great to despise, thus riches, honours, reputation, sovereignty" (p. 60). Then with a more positive explanation: "(…) Sublimity raises one up to where one is close to the majestic mind of God. Freedom from error escapes censure, but the grand style excites admiration as well" (p. 112). As a consequence however, the sublime is also understood through its radical universality. This imposes the aesthetic norm that applies to all people, for eternity:

> sublimity in all its truth and beauty exists in such works as please all men at all times. For when men who differ in their pursuits, their ways of life, their ambitions, their ages, and their languages all think in one and the same way about the same works then the unanimous judgement (...) induces a strong and unshakeable faith in the object of admiration. (p. 62).

In chapters 8 and 9 Longinus identified five sources of sublimity. The first, presented as by far the most important, is "grandeur of thought" (p. 64), that is, an innate natural ability to form grand conceptions. The second source, "powerful and inspired emotion" (p. 64), is also perceived as an innate gift, albeit one it is necessary to awaken in the human mind through training. It is this which enables sublimity to become "the echo of a noble mind" (p. 64). The other sources concern learned skills rather than innate ability. The third is the formation and use of figures of speech, especially those based on semantics such as metaphor and metonymy, and those based on morphology. The fourth source is choice of words as a rhetorical technique designed to elevate the noble mind. One example Longinus referred to here is exaggeration (p. 73) and hyperbole. The fifth and final source concerns "dignified and elevated composition" (p. 62).

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To better understand the normative power of the sublime, the 18th-century British philosopher Edmund Burke (1729 – 1797) specified the three principal faculties involved – the senses, the imagination, and judgement – in his work *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757, 2009). With regard to the senses, Burke established a relationship with the universal scope of the sublime: "We do and we must suppose, that as the conformation of their organs are nearly or altogether the same in all men, so the manner of perceiving external objects is in all men the same, or with little difference" (p. 66). The power of the imagination plays a dominant role in theories on the sublime. Burke maintained that "the imagination is the most extensive province of pleasure and pain, as it is the region of our fears and our hopes, and of all our passions that are connected with them" (p. 71). He then explained further:

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime (p. 96). He concluded his thoughts by considering "the idea of death (…) this king of terrors" (p. 97).

The very idea of violent death, killing and committing suicide by terror attacks defines the use toe the sublime on Islamic State's website (jihadlogy.net) which provides access to the online propaganda magazine *Dabic* (Gambhir 2014) This magazine occupies a special place in the well-oiled ISIS[2] propaganda machine as it sets out the organisation's views against its adversaries and distils the official word of ISIS . Fifteen issues of the magazine were published between July 2014 and July 2016. Issue no.3 "Un appel à la Hidjrah" (The Call to Hijrah)[3] which was circulated after the beheading of the American journalist James Foley on August 20th 2014 (jihadology.net/category/dabiq-magazin, consulted on 07-05-2017) is of particular interest in this study. This is because it was written entirely in French (which is our main research field).

From the perspective of Longinus's model of the sublime, a prime characteristic of the IS rhetoric of violence attracts the reader's attention – the recurrent use of linguistic errors such

2. See the Reporters without Borders publication, *Jihad against Journalists*, especially the third section "Islamic State's Propaganda Machine" https://gallery.mailchimp.com/5cb-8824c726d51483ba41891e/files/RAPPORT_DAECH_FR_WEB.pdf (consulted on 7-5-2017).

3. The term Hijrah or Hegira comes from classical Arabic and means "exile". It refers to the emigration of a Muslim from a non-Muslim to a Muslim country. In the propaganda of Islamic State it is used as a call to join its ranks.

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as grammatical mistakes. Given Dabic magazine's highly polished presentation this is quite surprising. Especially as French tradition attaches significant importance to correct linguistic expression. But as the same strategy is used in the English version of *Dabic*, Therefore, we can stay that mistakes are used by the IS as a symbol of the braking down of common rules. The violations of the rules of grammar aim to destabilize the language as is the first and the most important factor of social coherence. At a first glance, discovering the high number of linguistic errors in the examples below could lead the reader to assume that the speaker of IS was not very well educated. But this would seem contradictory to the magazine's quite obviously demanding specifications. That leaves the hypothesis of negligence, the type of arrogance terrorist "journalists" show towards their audiences, or, more malevolently, linguistic violence by and through language. Without a doubt this is in fact a rhetorical device designed to plunge the audience into doubt and uncertainty about the meaning they are able to attribute to the speech[4]. Therefore IS terror is about destabilization or even destruction of society, through disruption of common rules.

3. SPELLING AND GRAMMATICAL ERRORS (AS A RHETORICAL DEVICE)

Let's consider some examples, taken from issue no.3 of *Dabic*, "Un appel à la Hidjrah[5]" (2014).

a) *"Les Etats Unis ont tué***s**[6] *des femmes"* (p. 3)

b) *"Après que les attaques aériennes américaines* **aient** *officiellement commencé"* (p.4)

c) *"***D'***avoir été témoin de l'exécution de l'Américain James Wright Foley a raffermi les cœurs des croyants"* (p. 37)

d) *"les milices chiites financé par l'Iran"* (p.38)

e) *"Des occasions ont été donné"* (p. 39)

4. For further reading, see M. Rinn, "L'à-peu-près dans la figuration de la violence rhétorique" [Errors of grammar and spelling as a device in violent rhetoric], Le Français moderne [Modern French], 79th year, issue no.1, 2011, pp. 100-111.

5. „A call for the Hijrah". In the Islamic tradition, *Hijrah* refers to Prophet Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina in 622. IS manipulates the original meaning of this term.

6. We underline the mistake.

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Errors of agreement between the past participle and the auxiliary verbs *avoir* and *être*, poor use of the subjunctive – a type of hyper-correction –, and incorrect syntactic constructions are indisputable evidence of gaps in knowledge of the basics of French grammar. The same cannot be said for the examples below, which suggest that IS propagandists seek to influence meaning by flouting the rules of spelling:

f) "*la libération de prisonniers Musulmans capturé*" (p. 3)

g) "*De nombreux soldats Américains*" (p.3)

h) "*les forces Israélites*" (p. 35)

i) "*des prisonniers britanniques et Américains*" (p. 38)

Incorrect capitalisation of adjectives relating to meaning or nationality places greater emphasis on those presented as heroes (*les Musulmans*) and their so-called enemies (*les Américains*). Example i) is a good illustration of this technique, as it creates a hierarchy of opposing forces, with American prisoners mattering more to IS – as the capital 'A' underlines – than British prisoners. In the context of a speech carrying the mark of the sublime, the important point here, regardless of the type of error – whether intentional or not – is that there is an error. This is the hallmark of great causes, or at least those inspired by great causes. As Longinus wrote, "it must be observed that, while writers of this quality are far from being faultless, yet they all rise above the human level" (1993: 112). This of course echoes with an earlier section in this article. Analysis of the speech of the Holocaust denier Ahmed Rami demonstrated why a fallacious argument will not harm – the opposite in fact – the convincing words of a man gripped by passion. As explained, this is because passion is a key characteristic of the genuine man of action. The difference here stems from the very nature of the cause championed by Islamic State which also expresses a divine purpose.

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4. FIGURES OF SPEECH

Unlike Longinus's first source of the sublime which is bound up with innate ability and divine grandeur[7] and has found a contemporary application in the discourse of terrorists, other sources of the sublime are more technical in nature. Longinus distinguished them by their "formation", including figures of speech[8]. As they are part of the art of public speaking practised since Greek Antiquity, it is useful to analyse them to understand, short of any metaphysical concept, the techniques of persuasion used in all discourse, however radical and violent. This is because figures of speech serve as regulators of distance and proximity between interacting parties. This means they define the social environment even if the purpose of the speech, as is the case with IS, is to destroy this. In other words, analysis of how Daesh uses discursive representation provides a way to understand their persuasive techniques, not only to lay them bare, but above all to override them. This is the very crux of the rationale behind this article: how to ensure the continuation of society through reasoned discourse? And how to bring back argumentation within our societies based on deliberation, citizenship and free choice?

7. Cf. *Du sublime*, chapter VIII, 1, 1993, p. 62.

8. *Ibidem.*

5. FIGURES BASED ON SYNTAX

a) "*Colère et haine ont été régurgitées de la bouche des mécréants et des hypocrites, les médias n'ont pas perdu de temps et ils ont immédiatement employés (sic), jours (sic) et nuits (sic), afin de tromper le public Américain (sic) et le reste du monde loin de la vraie cause de l'exécution de James Foley.*" (p. 37)

Non-believers and hypocrites have regurgitated anger and hatred, the media has not lost any time and has immediately employed (sic), day and nights (sic), to deceive the American public (sic), and the rest of the world far from the true reason for James Foley's execution[9].

9. Our translation.

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In addition to the many spelling and grammatical errors, as discussed in the previous section, here is an example of *zeugma*, a figure of speech which joins a number of heterogeneous parts in the same construction. In this way, the first phrasal sequence, beginning with "colère et haine" is linked to the second ("les médias") and then the third ("jours"). The figure of speech aims to create confusion in the reader's mind. It also reveals a strategy for justifying the killing of James Foley by emphasising "la vraie cause" or "true reason".

b) "*les Américains n'étaient pas **la** bienvenue*" (p. 37)

Distortion of the agreement in this wording is characteristic of *syllepsis*. Understood in the sense of a figure of speech, this device expresses the speaker's intention to place numerous people in the abstract ("les Américains") to underline the fact that the entire US nation was not "la bienvenue". The purpose of this process of generalisation is to transform the adversary into an anonymous entity.

c) "*Il [James Foley] est entré en Syrie avec du matériel utilisé dans l'espionnage, tout cela a été trouvé en sa possession lors de son arrestation.*" (p.37)

He entered Syria with material used for espionage, all of it was found in his possession when he was arrested

The same rhetorical figure is used in this example. However, the syllepsis produced has the reverse effect of creating a tangible form. Although the word "matériel" refers in an abstract way to the construction or composition of something, "tout cela" (all of it) suggests a number of instruments used in "l'espionnage ". In this way the speaker seeks to intensify the case against the person accused of espionage, as it so happens here, the journalist James Foley.

d) "*Ces bombardements aériens sur plusieurs grandes villes d'Irak et en blessant plusieurs.*"
(p.39)

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The two phrasal sequences joined by the conjunction "et" stand out due to the removal of a syntactic component essential for understanding the whole phrase. This process defines the *ellipsis*, a figure of speech that invites readers to add the missing components themselves. Logically, it is fair to assume that by referring to the bombardment of entire towns, the speaker is seeking to draw attention to the high number of casualties.

This is an example of a specific figurative device, which Longinus referred to in chapter 18 (1993, pp. 114-116) of his work on the sublime, dramatisation or amplification. Two more variations can be seen in the examples below.

e) "*Comme plusieurs musulmans en Irak, Afghanistan, Somalie, Yémen, Lybie et* **bien d'autres pays** *musulmans*." (p.39)

Like many Muslims in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Yemen, Libya and many other Muslim countries.

This sequencing of a number of Arab countries, ending with a generalised expression (bien d'autres pays musulmans - many other Muslim countries) has an amplifying effect. In this way, the speaker emphasises the many countries seeming to support the cause of IS.

f) "*Les soldats de l'Etat Islamique ont effectué une offensive* **brutale**" (p. 15)

IS soldiers have carried out a brutal attack.

As any military offensive implies the use of force, describing this as "brutale" amounts to *pleonasm*, a device whereby a superfluous explanation is included when the meaning of an expression is already clear. This device is used here to amplify IS's military achievements and impress readers of *Dabic* magazine.

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6. FIGURES BASED ON SEMANTICS

The following examples show why the figures of speech known as tropes[10] in the tradition of rhetoric occupy such a dominant place in the sublime discourse of Islamic State.

a) "***Une promesse** de Hidjrah non tenue envers Allah peut être le **résultat d'une fin** désastreuse pour le serviteur*" (p. 25)

A promise of hijrah to Allah that isn't kept can be the result of a disastrous end for the servant

This statement uses *metalepsis*, a figure of speech whereby the chronology of successive states of a base component is transferred to manipulate the development of a fact. If the quoted sequence were to be formulated as follows:

promesse/promise -> future = résultat d'une fin/result of an end -> past;

it becomes clear that the speaker's intention was to overturn the chronology of world events according to the format of past (fin/end) – present (résultat/result) – and future (promesse/promise). This technique highlights IS's desire – like all totalitarian regimes – to control time in society.

b) "*les croisés*" (p. 15)

Taken in the pejorative sense, this word (meaning crusader) is omnipresent in the discourse of IS. It is an example of *metonymy*, a figure of speech in which differences in meaning are applied to two or more related terms within a notional domain. In this case, it starts from the most broadly accepted meaning of the word, enemy armed forces, and moves to the most specific, people condemned to crucifixion, also including successively, Westerners, Christians, and converted Jews who wear the cross. The use of metonymy in this insult sheds light on both

10. On this topic, Longinus states "but further […] in commonplaces and in descriptions, there is nothing so significantly expressive as continuous and successive tropes" *op. cit.* p. 104.

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the numerous adversaries IS recognises and the organisation's diachronic perspective, namely from late antiquity to the present day.

c) "*mes vrais assassins, le gouvernement américain*" (p. 40)

"my real killers, the US government"

Here, two juxtaposed phrasal components are linked semantically by way of metaphor. This transfers the meaning by likening different notional domains in order to reorganise the world view. Through this technique, and in comparing their opponent to an ordinary band of criminals, the author's intention is to identify members of the US government as killers.

7. CHOICE OF VOCABULARY

It is useful to analyse some examples inspired by Longinus's fourth source of the sublime: "a noble diction, which in its turn may be resolved into the choice of words, the use of imagery and the elaboration of style" (1993: 62). The discourse of IS is characterised by its very specific use of vocabulary.

7.1. LEXICAL INSECURITY

The examples below show a hesitance in the French language which is explained primarily by incorrect choice of vocabulary:

a) "*De nombreux soldats Américains ont exécuté des familles et violé des femmes sous la bénédiction de l'armée Américaines*" (p.3) ("sous" instead of "avec")

b) "*se sont eux-mêmes précipités vers le désastre*" (p.3) ("vers" instead of "dans")

c) "*moi et les autres Américains ont patientés désespérément les politiciens égoïstes qui sont* **dénoués** *de toutes compassions à décider de notre destin*" (p. 39)

This example accumulates a number of the devices mentioned earlier, namely ellipsis ("patienter les politiciens" for "l'action des politiciens"), lack of knowledge about vocabulary ("dénoués" for "dénués") and incorrect usage ("décider de" instead of "soulager").

d) "*ils se sont* **attirés** *des dettes de sang*" (p. 39)

At a first glance, this final example is confirmation of lexical insecurity ("attirer des dettes" instead of "contracter des dettes"). However, an underlying strategy of seeking to suggest and establish another meaning can also be identified. "Attirer des dettes de sang" thus comes to mean an intention to commit crimes. Juxtaposing the action taken with the action desired amplifies the criminal intent attributed to the adversary. This is a mark of the sublime.

7.2. RELIGIOUS VOCABULARY AND FOREIGNISMS

A noticeable feature of *Dabic*, is its use of religious vocabulary borrowed from the classical Arabic of the Koran. This can be linked to a source of the sublime, namely the call to divine grandeur. There are many foreign words in the body of the French language text and to find appropriate translations it is necessary to consult specialist dictionaries. The presence of these foreignisms is a deliberate strategy to amplify reference to the characteristic metaphysical dimension of Daesh's discourse.

a) "*Le 11 Chawwâl 1435 de l'hégire*" (p. 3)

The date means August 7, 2014; Chawwâl or Shawwāl being the 10th month of the Islamic calendar. L'hégire or Hegira means immigration, exile, or rupture, as in the departure of Muhammad's followers from Mecca in the year 622)

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b) "*hadith*" (p.14) (an oral communication from The Prophet)

c) "*Ghanimah*" (p. 3) (wealth taken by force from the enemy)

8. CONCLUSION

The persuasive power of pathos in revisionist discourse is clear. Analysis shows how emotions form part of the rationale. In this way the holistic Aristotelian model, encompassing discourse, the personality of the speaker and the emotions of the audience has found a modern day purpose on the virtual agora. The examples in this article also highlight the globalised nature of revisionist sophistry. The argument put forward in this article is that this barbarism finds its discursive expression in the sublime. First and foremost, the sublime affects the ability to judge. Burke established a cause and effect relationship with the imagination, centred on the fear aroused by the idea of death:

> No passion so effectively robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too, (2009: 120).

A key characteristic of the sublime therefore is destruction of the faculty of judgement, the human being is struck down by the advent of terror, or, as Longinus explains, is transfixed by "the startling image" (1993: 83). It should be noted that the meeting point between the senses, the imagination and judgement bestows a very specific aesthetic function on the sublime – delight. Burke asserts that "if the sublime is built on terror or some passion like it, which has pain for its object; it is previously proper to enquire how any species of delight can be derived from a cause so apparently contrary to it". This aesthetic emotion, contrary to the feeling of pleasure which Burke qualifies as "actual and positive" (p. 225) is aroused by terror of the spectacle of "ugliness" (p. 206). This helps shed light on the reasons why IS turn the assassination of their

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victims into a terrifying spectacle. IS hate propaganda, through the sublime, seeks to transform the recipient. In this context, transform means to kill. Hence, when IS broadcast his last wishes, James Foley expressed the desire to no longer be what he was, an American citizen:

"*Je pense que dans l'ensemble, j'aurais juste aimé ne pas être Américain.*"

"I guess, all in all, I wish I wasn't American" (*Dabic*, no. 3, p. 40).

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