THE IDOLS OF ISIS

From Assyria to the Internet

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Prologue

SOMETHING IS WRONG. It's February 26, 2015, and Iraqi-born art historian Zainab Bahrani has just completed a lecture at NYU's Institute for the Study of the Ancient World. From the audience comes a voice, asking with some urgency what can be done to save Mesopotamian antiquities from destruction. What has provoked the question? I retreat to a corner to check my phone, and there it is: a video of men smashing sculptures in Iraq's Mosul Museum, posted repeatedly on my feed.

A bearded man dressed in the black *taqiyah* and white *thawb* of a devout Muslim addresses the camera. He stands before a fragment of a large Assyrian sculpture known as a *lamassu*—a protective deity that combines a bull's body, an eagle's wings, and a human head.

"Oh Muslims, the remains that you see behind me are the idols of peoples of previous centuries, which were worshipped instead of God," the man explains in Arabic, with the poise of a museum

docent. "The Prophet Muhammad commanded us to shatter and destroy statues. This is what his companions did when they conquered lands. Since God commanded us to shatter and destroy these statues, idols, and remains, it is easy for us to obey. We do not care what people think or if this costs us billions of dollars."

When he finishes, the video transitions to a museum gallery. Three men topple a life-sized sculpture from its pedestal. Others look on. In the ensuing montage men overturn sculptures, smash them with sledgehammers, and mutilate them with pneumatic drills. For two and a half minutes, these images of destruction are interspersed with shots of decimated sculptures strewn across the floor—often rendered in slow motion, lending the sequence a lyrical quality.

The audio is no less carefully crafted: A lone voice chants a Qur'anic verse and then the sound of a *nashid* weaves through the duration of the video. In haunting tones, the Arabic song declares: "Demolish! Demolish! the state of idols / Hell is filled with idols and wood / Demolish the statues of America and its clan." Even for those

1. Islamic State destruction in the Mosul Museum, Iraq. Video released February 26, 2015.

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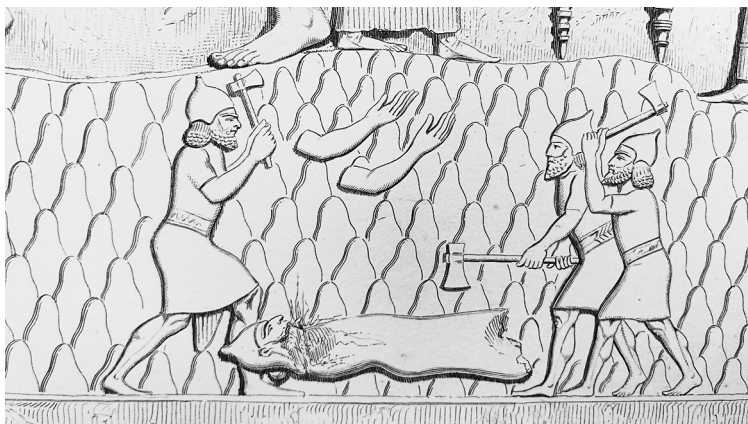
2. Three Assyrian soldiers smashing the sculpture of a king. Detail of a drawing by Eugène Flandin after a relief from Sargon II's palace at Khorsabad (eighth century BCE). Paul-Émile Botta, *Monument de Ninive*, 1849.

who cannot understand the lyrics, the music—punctuated by the sounds of shattering stone and machine-gun fire—is mesmerizing.

The video, I realized, bears an uncanny resemblance to a carved relief from the ancient Assyrian palace at Khorsabad, a town just north of Mosul. Both the video and the relief depict three men with sledgehammers smashing the toppled sculpture of a king (figures 1 and 2). What is there to say about these two images separated by more than twenty-five hundred years yet only fifteen miles? Why this persistent drive to destroy images—and to make other images showing their destruction?

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This book grew out of a personal connection to the latest events tearing apart Iraq. My grandfather was born in Baghdad in 1910, eleven years before the establishment of the modern state. He belonged to a Jewish community that had called the banks of the Tigris home since antiquity, and he grew up among the bookstalls and literary cafés that now survive only in memoirs. (I recommend

Sasson Somekh's *Baghdad, Yesterday*.) This was a world in which Iraqi Jews lived side by side with Iraqis of other religions. They shared a common language and actively participated in shaping the new Iraq. But my grandfather also lived through the Farhud, the June 1941 pogrom that left nearly two hundred Jews dead and precipitated my family's departure—first to Tehran, then Tel Aviv, and eventually New York. The unraveling of Iraqi pluralism that began with the departure of the Jews has continued to intensify. In the aftermath of the 2003 American-led invasion, Baghdad's mixed neighborhoods gave way to rigorous segregation between Sunni and Shia. The forces of purity spread further when the Islamic State conquered Mosul in June 2014: Shia shrines were demolished; minority communities were butchered, enslaved, or made to flee their homes. The region seemed headed toward a homogeneity that it had not known since before the Tower of Babel.

In those foregone days after the flood, Genesis recounts, "The whole earth was one language, one set of words" (11:1). On the plains of Shinar, not far from modern Baghdad, all mankind sought to build "a city and a tower with its top in the heavens" in order to remain united. With technological prowess, they set to work baking mud into bricks. But God frustrated the plan by confounding their language such that they could no longer speak in one voice. The project came to a halt and the people dispersed.

On first reading, the biblical story seems antagonistic to the means and aims of political life. God opposes the human aspiration to live together in a city. But deeper scrutiny suggests that the people weren't really building a *political* city.

Politics presupposes plurality. It's a strategy for reconciling opposing opinions and interests that grows out of a need to live together despite our different perspectives on the world. It attests to our ability to overcome differences without recourse to violence. Doing so is difficult, and often isn't pretty. It's what Max Weber

famously called "a strong and slow boring of hard boards."[1] By contrast, the biblical story imagines a time when mankind didn't need politics. Already speaking as one, the people aspired only to prevent future dissent. Their city would be, not a political arena, but an infrastructure for enforcing unity. Babel's builders built in the hopes of securing a world without politics.

Aristotle understood this all too human desire and warned against it. "By advancing in unity, a political community will eventually cease being a political community," he writes in the *Politics*. "As if one were to turn harmony into mere unison or rhythm into a single beat."[2] If we could become as unified as Babel's builders supposedly were, Aristotle implies, we'd no longer be political. We'd no longer need to be. Despite perpetual illusions to the contrary, this wouldn't leave us better off. It would be a form of slavery. Instead we should cultivate our capacity for politics, and this requires understanding images.

The public space in which politics occurs is never unadorned. It is shaped by images that influence how we perceive the world—forming our desires and imbuing us with shared values and ideals. The images may be paintings, sculptures, and photographs, or movies, television shows, video games, and memes. (Though literature likewise shapes our commitments—and there are important parallels between iconoclasm and censorship—I don't focus on verbal image-making in this book.) Without such shared images, the political plurality that Aristotle likens to harmony would produce only cacophony. We'd be locked into irreconcilable individuality, incapable of projects that require collective vision. And yet, dangers arise if images take too strong a hold on people's minds. They can polarize us into factions incapable of communicating with one another or reduce us to a unity that speaks with a tyrant's single voice. Politics needs both images and a citizenry capable of evaluating them critically.

The same month ISIS released the Mosul Museum video, its online magazine *Dabiq* featured a twelve-page article titled "The Extinction of the Grayzone."[3] It describes the group's intention to divide the world into two camps "with no third in between." Space for doubt, moderation, and compromise must be abolished. Islamic State images are purposefully brutal; they seek to compel people to take sides. The fully polarized world ISIS imagines will have "no place for grayish calls and movements. There will only be the camp of *iman* [faith] versus the camp of *kufr* [apostasy]." In other words, there will be no place for politics. For it is only in "gray zones" that productive dialogue and debate can occur. Gray zones coincide with what political philosopher Hannah Arendt called the public realm. To retain the freedom that Arendt argued emerges with politics, we must cultivate gray zones, not eradicate them. But how do we withstand images that seek to polarize us? And what kinds of images might instead nurture the gray zone of politics?

I first watched the Mosul Museum video on Facebook. Hailed as democratizing political access, online platforms have also been accused of entrapping us in homogeneous echo chambers where we all share "one language and one speech." Far from offering up the world in its plurality, social media generates a plurality of worlds. Algorithms distort our experience of the public realm.

In her book *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle concludes that technology makes us "forget our human purposes."[4] Though her work focuses on loss of privacy, its implications for the public realm are equally worrying. People happily use technology to flee face-to-face conversations, Turkle observes, "because face-to-face conversations are difficult." Technology offers to make interactions easier. It seduces us with "the idea of a relational world that might be 'friction free,' kind of like the machine world."

But politics will never be friction free, and political action can't be algorithmic. Politics is messy. That's why it has always been

tempting to flee the demands of politics by abnegating responsibility to a superior force—God, History, the Market, and now the Algorithm. This longing to escape the mess of politics echoes in the iconoclast's hammer.

While Moses was busy speaking with God on Mount Sinai, his brother Aaron made an image to guide the recently emancipated Israelites. Moses demands an explanation. "I flung [gold] into the fire," Aaron tells him, "and out came this calf" (Exodus 32:24). Aaron's denial of agency illustrates a common anxiety about authoritative images: we do not want to take responsibility for how they orient us in the world. Outsourcing that responsibility makes life easier. Men like Moses can't abide such chicanery; they know that images are the work of human hands. This doesn't make Moses any more open to political life than his duplicitous brother. His aversion to the Golden Calf cannot be appeased by correcting its false attribution. He seeks a truly transcendent authority. Each brother, in his own way, wants to escape human responsibility for political life. Neither makes room for politics as a human endeavor, or the manmade images that necessarily come with it.

Moses's aversion makes idolatry difficult to circumscribe. Idols don't have a particular form or content that we can simply identify, isolate, and annihilate, leaving all other images intact. Any image can be perceived as an idol, whether in a positive sense—a standard worthy of orienting human life—or a negative sense: an impostor encroaching on the transcendent. Law can deem some images illicit, but not without other images enabling its authority.

In his opera *Moses und Aron*, twentieth-century composer Arnold Schoenberg reimagines the scene between the two brothers. Unlike his biblical namesake, Schoenberg's Aaron doesn't deny his own agency in making the Calf. Rather, he challenges his brother's idea that God's law can be established without images. Moses himself uses images, Aaron points out. When Moses destroys the Calf with

an utterance, the destruction serves as an image for the people. And the Tablets of the Law that Moses holds, Aaron asserts, are no less an image. When Moses then smashes the tablets in despair, the violent act is just one more image. Recognizing his inability to escape images, Moses collapses on stage, wailing, "O word, thou word, that I lack!"[5] The opera continues with a final act in which a reinvigorated Moses condemns Aaron for betraying the idea to the image, but Schoenberg never composed music for the scenes following Moses's collapse. We, like Moses, the opera attests, can never escape images. Iconoclasm itself engenders them.

Which brings me back to the Mosul Museum video. While some in the video wield hammers, others point cameras, generating new images including the video itself. What does this video reveal about the role images play in politics? Why destroy images? Can we find better ways to live together in their midst? I will probe these questions over three chapters. First, I consider the claim that the sculptures in the Mosul Museum were idols that must be destroyed. Next, I explore the significance of the museum as a setting. And finally, I take up the fact that the destruction was recorded in order to be seen. Though the ISIS videographers may have wanted to shock, their video can help us think.

3

Videos

ICONOCLASM DOES NOT remove images so much as generate new ones. From the French Revolution to the Chinese Cultural Revolution to the recent campaign to remove Confederate monuments in the United States, acts of iconoclasm have survived through the depiction of those acts. Since Italian futurist artist F. T. Marinetti's 1909 call to demolish museums with picks and hammers, images of image destruction have been a mainstay of the avant-garde. Much earlier, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, both Protestants and Catholics produced hundreds of woodcuts, engravings, and oil paintings depicting iconoclasm that circulated throughout Europe and beyond. Why keep older images around by depicting their destruction? What work do these images of iconoclasm do for the regimes that produce them?

The Mosul Museum video produced by ISIS immediately reminded me of an image in Paul-Émile Botta's *Monument de Ninive*: a depiction of three men with sledgehammers hacking at the statue

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of a king. The original Assyrian relief is now lost; it may have eroded due to exposure or sunk to the bottom of the Tigris during a scuffle with locals when the French were loading crates intended for the Louvre. Thankfully, the artist Eugène Flandin copied the relief in situ at Khorsabad, the Assyrian capital in the time of Sargon II. In his drawing, three Assyrian soldiers surround a collapsed statue, its arms now lying to the side. The figure's hornless, conical helmet suggests that the statue once exalted a local king.

A caption connects the scene to the sacking of Musasir during Sargon II's 714 BCE campaign against the kingdom of Urartu (biblical Ararat) in the Armenian highlands. Though unidentified, the statue being destroyed likely depicted the Urartian king Rusa. On returning from his campaign, Sargon boasted of his accomplishments in a letter addressed to Assyria's national god Assur. He speaks of capturing Musasir, looting its palace and temple, and deporting many of its people. Sargon says nothing about destroying images. Yet years later, when designing the decorative program for his new palace, Assyrian artisans included the iconoclastic episode when depicting their king's victory. The depiction saves from oblivion what his soldiers succeeded in destroying. Why thwart that success by commemorating the act of destruction? Why decorate the palace with an image that acknowledges the existence of alternative political images?

The iconoclastic episode is part of a larger relief panel (figure 25). The immediate context shows Assyrian soldiers hauling off metal furnishings and two royal functionaries operating a large scale. Some scholars have suggested that the statue is being broken up for metal scrap—not simply destroyed but converted back into its raw material. To an Assyrian way of thinking, images of kings possessed *melammu*, an awe-inspiring radiance that emanated from kings and permeated the symbols of their royal power. By treating the Urartian king's image as nothing more than the metals

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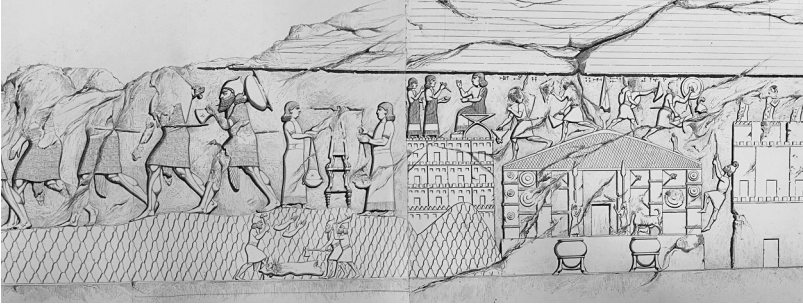
25. The sacking of Musasir. Drawing by Eugène Flandin after a relief from Sargon II's palace at Khorsabad (eighth century BCE). Composite image based on two plates from Paul-Émile Botta, *Monument de Ninive*, 1849.

from which it was fashioned, the Assyrian relief denies it this affective power. Rusa's statue joins the stockpile of plundered silver and gold Sargon will use to build his royal palace—a process depicted on its walls.

Sargon's son Sennacherib complemented his father's image of image destruction with images of image creation. His reliefs depict workmen in various national costumes (related panels show these enemies' defeat and deportation) quarrying stone, carving the *lamassu* figures for his palace gates, and transporting the colossal sculptures (figure 8).° The "king of the world" thus boasts that conquered subjects from all over the world have come together to

°In chapter 2, I mentioned the frontispiece to Austen Henry Layard's *Nineveh and Its Remains*, which depicts the removal and transport of Sennacherib's bull colossi to London—celebrating British technical prowess in much the same way the reliefs had promoted Assyrian achievements. Layard was clearly impressed by the engineering feats of his predecessors. In a subsequent book, *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon* (1853), the Englishman describes the ancient scene, informed no doubt by his own experience: "Although these rollers materially facilitated the motion, it would be almost impossible, when passing over rough ground, or if the rollers were jammed, to give the first impetus to so heavy a body by mere force applied to the cables."

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26. Family of deportees leaving a captured Babylonian city on an ox-cart. Detail from wall decoration of Tiglath-pileser III's Central Palace in Kalhu (Nimrud), later reused in Esarhaddon's Southwest Palace. British Museum, ANE 118882.

construct the image of Assyrian rule. But any individuality or diversity their costumes may once have represented has been stripped away by the Assyrian whip; the men are reduced to raw labor, just as Rusa's statue is reduced to raw materials.

The relief illustrates not just technological achievement but a massive administrative program that affected over 1.5 million people. Assyrian policy aimed to erode local patriotic allegiance while promoting economic efficiency. Administrators directed laborers where they were most needed, much as the free labor market is said to do today. Whether these "human resources" were depicted as willing migrants on their way to new jobs (figure 26) or lines of workers straining to haul bull colossi to the palace, Assyrian resettlement policy transformed culturally distinct members of local communities into deracinated human capital serving the needs of a unified global economy. In an empire that historian Karen Radner has recently compared to a modern multinational corporation, political discord gave way to economic unity—or so the viewers of imperial imagery were meant to believe.

Sargon II's palace idealized the imperial ambition to unify the entire world. "On great limestone slabs," its inscriptions declare, "I engraved the countries conquered by my own hand, and I placed them along the base of the walls, making them objects of admiration. By the skill of the sculptors, I adorned the inside of those palaces with the people of the countries conquered by the power of Assur my lord, from west to east."[1] By unseating false kings and eradicating unjust ways of life, Sargon would enable all mankind to "be of one mouth"—a boast that echoes the biblical account of Babel. The end of political opposition would, like the elimination of images, usher in a world without politics.

Assyrian imagery reached far beyond the palace walls. Just as photography today makes works of art accessible to those who cannot travel to see them in a museum, cylinder seals disseminated the iconography of the Assyrian palace to those who never visited it. Seals depicting a ritual scene with a sacred tree, for example, replicated reliefs in Ashurnasirpal II's throne room at Nimrud. Others showing the royal hunt echoed the same palace relief that would inspire Saddam Hussein's self-presentation in the guise of an Assyrian king (figure 20). Such seals proliferated the image of Assyrian kingship by creating an "imaginary palace" that spread royal imagery wherever they, and documents bearing their impressions, circulated.

Assyrian kings also imprinted themselves on the natural landscape. Sennacherib had his image carved into the remote cliffs overlooking the Gomel River at Khennis (figure 27). Similar rock reliefs dot the extremities of the Assyrian empire in all directions. Perhaps best known are the Nahr al Kalb reliefs in present-day Lebanon. When Esarhaddon passed there in 671 BCE on his way to conquering Egypt, the cliff already sported three thirteenth-century BCE relief steles of the pharaoh Ramses II. The Assyrian ruler added

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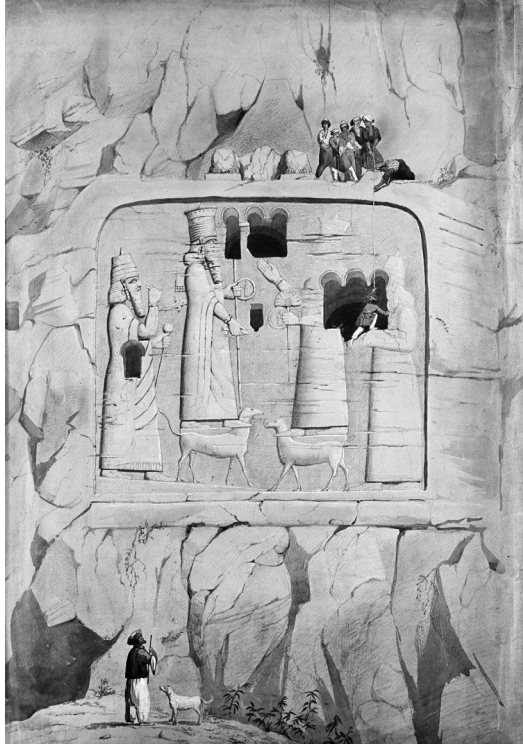
27. Watercolor illustration showing A. H. Layard climbing over the main rock relief at Khennis (704–681 BCE), Iraqi Kurdistan, 1853.

his own stele-shaped relief next to his Egyptian predecessor's (figure 28), thereby affirming the Assyrian capacity to transform nature's chaos into a realm of order, justice, and prosperity—even where it was evident that other kings had sought to do so as well. (The practice of rulers adding relief carvings at Nahr al Kalb has continued—from ancient Babylonian, Hellenistic, and Roman emperors to Napoleon III and Hezbollah.)

However forcefully regimes may try to eradicate rivals, none has yet attained a universal monopoly on images. No "king of totality" has produced images so total that they preclude alternatives.

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Nimrud's world-state, with one set of images for all, is not so easy to achieve. The images of conquered regimes stubbornly persevere, and new images inevitably arise. Regimes must therefore choose between ignoring and acknowledging images that (implicitly or not) call their own into question. Unable to eradicate competing images, the best a regime may be able to do is to delegitimize them.

Sargon's iconoclastic palace relief at once admits an alternative way of imagining the world and shows the weakness of that alternative. Assyrian soldiers strike down one physical sculpture, and the image of that destruction strikes at the power of many more. It serves as a warning against the temptation of false images and as a reminder that only the Assyrian king—reveling in his universal dominion—can realize truth and justice. Assyrian iconography

28. Rock reliefs at Nahr al Kalb, Lebanon. Photograph from an early twentieth-century postcard.

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creates a political community around a king whose monopoly on truth and justice denies the need for politics. Opposition appears only as insurgence.

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As we've seen, the relief carving of image smashing is but one detail of an extensive Assyrian iconographic program. The ISIS video of image smashing is likewise but one episode in a broader program of image production, which also includes videos of decapitations, military victories, acts of pious devotion, and the technocratic functioning of everyday life in the Islamic State. As in the Assyrian relief, the destruction of old images manifesting one political vision becomes a component in a new set of political images manifesting another. Old images are not erased. They are recycled.

A few weeks after the Mosul Museum video appeared, ISIS released a video of barrel bombs detonating next to relief panels of winged genies in Ashurnasirpal II's palace at nearby Nimrud (figures 29 and 30). Again, the destruction of ancient images, which had established the parameters of Assyrian political imagination, contributes to the production of a new set of images meant to define a new polity. These new images furbish a new kind of wall on the screens of our laptops and smartphones (figure 31). ISIS has built its own palace appropriate to our digital age, an onscreen palace simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. From this palace, the Islamic State has sought to define the House of Islam.

The group's Al Hayat Media Center has been chiefly responsible for the construction of this new palace. Using a teardrop-shaped logo that resembles that of Al Jazeera, Al Hayat produces slick, sophisticated videos in several languages and multiple formats— from minute-long, Twitter-friendly "Mujatweets" to hour-long documentary-style films. It also published *Dabiq*, the online
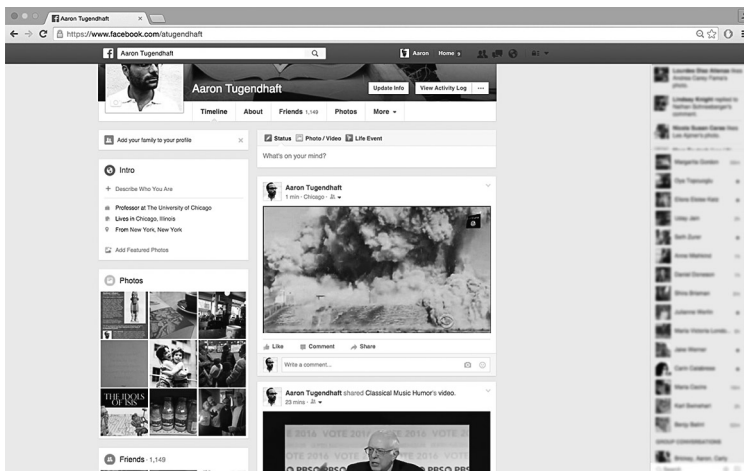
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29. Islamic State preparations to blow up Assyrian palace reliefs at Nimrud.
Video released April 12, 2015.

30. Islamic State explosion of the Assyrian palace at Nimrud.
Video released April 12, 2015.

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31. The destruction of Nimrud as seen on Facebook.

magazine that claimed (as noted in chapter 1) that Ibrahim "was not concerned about the feelings and sentiments of his people when he destroyed their idols." This diverse programming play-fully repackages and repurposes imagery from visual traditions ancient and modern.

First-person shooter video games are a constant reference point. ISIS has appropriated marketing images, for instance, from the popular franchise *Call of Duty* (figure 32). And user-generated modifications of the game allow players to don the persona of an ISIS militant engaged in combat against Westerners, Syrian regime soldiers, and Kurdish peshmerga fighters. The ISIS video depicting the destruction of Nimrud's ruins itself echoes an episode, set in the 1980s, from *Call of Duty: Black Ops 2*, in which the game's protago-nist, US Special Forces operative Alex Mason, travels to Afghani-stan to gather information about archvillain Raul Menendez. Fighting alongside the mujahideen, Mason must blow up part of a structure in order to block a Soviet advance (figure 33). The build-ing resembles the twelfth-century madrassa complex Gumbad-i

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Chisht-e Sharif. (The campaign opens with Mason looking up as his partner rappels down the Bamiyan Buddhas—famed, by the time of the game's release in 2012, for their destruction by the Taliban more than a decade earlier.)

When I began this project, I used research funds to buy a Play-
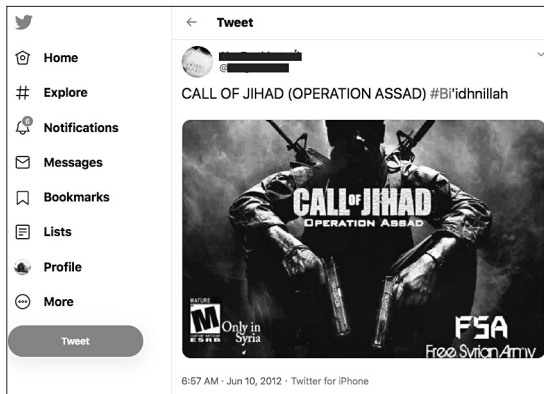
32. "Call of Jihad: Operation Assad." Meme circulating on Twitter based on promotional material for the video game *Call of Duty*.

33. A gamer playing Alex Mason explodes a medieval Islamic architectural complex in *Call of Duty: Black Ops 2*.

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Station gaming console and a copy of *Call of Duty*. Lacking the skill to progress beyond the first campaign, I asked one of my students to identify moments in popular first-person shooter games that corresponded to scenes in Islamic State videos. In addition to the *Black Ops 2* scene just mentioned, he identified parallel depictions of aerial bombardment, drive-by shootings (à la *Grand Theft Auto*), and an elaborate interrogation scene.

Many of these images originate not in the imagination of American video game programmers but in media coverage of American wars. Anyone who came of age watching news coverage of the 1990–1991 Persian Gulf War, as I did, can't fail to associate aerial bombardment with the new vision of warfare offered by camera-equipped "smart bombs." Similarly, the prisoner's orange jumpsuit in the interrogation scene pulls directly from images of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay following the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.

In reproducing such images in its videos, ISIS intentionally mirrors images of American imperialism. In other words, ISIS videos imitate video games that are themselves imitations of the real world. This does not mean that one somehow returns through them to the real world itself. The play element of the video game is preserved in the world ISIS imagines—albeit with serious consequences.

In June 2012, ISIS began to release a series of videos on the internet called *Saleel al-Sawarim* (*Clanging of the Swords*). The first installments were rather wooden compilations of polemical speeches and combat footage. But the fourth, released in May 2014, displays greater rhetorical sophistication. Stylistically mimicking sequences from combat video games, the hour-long video opens with a computer-generated satellite image of the Middle East that zooms into drone-shot aerial footage of Fallujah. A dizzying spin immerses the viewer in street-to-street fighting at the very heart of the Islamic State's world. By imitating the first-person shooter perspective, subsequent scenes reiterate the video-game quality

of life in the Caliphate. The final sequence shows a man walking across a peaceful field, carrying a large ISIS flag fluttering gloriously in the wind. As in a video game's metastory, *Saleel al-Sawarim 4* closes with an image of justice triumphant.

One ISIS fighter even told a BBC journalist that his new life in the Caliphate was "better than that game *Call of Duty*."[2] Videos like *Saleel al-Sawarim 4* provide a glimpse of the kind of world ISIS offers its adherents—a world already familiar to those who have grown up on video games and have sometimes been recruited through online gaming networks. The Islamic State's recourse to a video-game idiom has consequently been interpreted as a recruitment technique.

Though true as far as it goes, this interpretation seems too simple. Why would someone wish permanently to inhabit a first-person shooter video game? If the appeal were simply the killing, a simulator would suffice. The gaming aspect must be significant: video games offer a very particular form of play.

In *Homo Ludens* (1938), a classic treatise on play, the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga defines play as "a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and consciousness that it is different from ordinary life."[3] First-person shooter video games exhibit these characteristics. The gaming console, which can be turned on or off at will, both provides a place for play and circumscribes play within a finite time. One is free not to play, but once playing one must accept the game's rules.

Play, Huizinga writes, brings a "temporary, limited perfection" into an imperfect world. It creates an order in which political action is neither needed nor possible. That temporary escape from politics becomes permanent in the world Islamic State videos imagine. Instead of "standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life,"

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the Islamic State's play-space is coextensive with ordinary life—to the degree such a life can still be called ordinary. Yet we lose an essential part of ourselves when we cannot stop playing. Huizinga recognized the horrors that accompany unending play. Writing on the eve of World War II, he saw no redemption in "the spectacle of a society rapidly goose-stepping into helotry."[4] ISIS videos, like fascist pageants, draw us into a world with no exit from play. They promise viewers a transformation like the one undergone by the protagonist of the dystopian online series *My Life as a Video Game*, an incessant gamer who finds himself pulled into the world of the games he plays.°

Video games give players explicit, unambiguous tasks. In *Black Ops 2*, for instance, Alex Mason is tasked with gathering intel on the Menendez cartel. Toward this end, he must investigate Raul Menendez's connection with the Soviets, defend a mujahideen base, retake a weapons cache, and interrogate a Russian prisoner. All of these actions are embedded within the game's metastory: the need to bring Menendez to justice for his anti-American activities. Players choose the steps to take to accomplish each task. Head right or left? Use the AK-47 assault rifle or a Makarov pistol? But one never considers whether the tasks are worth pursuing in the first place. Doing so would be senseless. Since the goals are encoded into the game-world, one can either accept them or not play. The

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° Strictly speaking, one is no longer "playing" once inside the game. Adapting terminology from film theory, media theorist Alexander Galloway distinguishes between "diegetic" and "non-diegetic" video-game actions. Diegetic actions involve characters and events that are presumed to exist within the game's narrative world; nondiegetic actions are external to the pretend world of character and story but still part of the game. For example, nobody within the game-world presses Pause, but pressing Pause is as much part of a first-person shooter game as firing a weapon. Nondiegetic actions occur at the border between the narrative world of the game and the world we inhabit in everyday life. That is where actual gameplay occurs. Within the diegetic realm, one isn't so much playing as being played (either by the machine or its operator). ISIS videos only appear to offer a world of play. In the Caliphate, one can never press Pause.

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game allows a player to focus on local success without examining final ends. It lacks, in other words, the prerequisite for political life: evaluating what constitutes the good for a group of people living together. Players cannot design alternative ends for communal life or initiate action to bring about change. They cannot be—indeed, do not wish to be—political. Obedience to the unambiguous rules of a video game offers an attractive alternative to the difficult choices and ambiguities of political life. Life within a video game resembles Ibrahim's regime without images—a life of unmediated obedience to the programmer's all-encompassing law.

Life on the ground in ISIS-controlled northern Iraq in 2015 didn't actually resemble a video game. Like Assyria's imperial artisans, Al Hayat Media Center produces images meant to mold political identity rather than to depict reality. Both the ancient Assyrian palace and its contemporary avatar offer viewers political images that obscure the human capacity for political judgment and responsibility. They generate political communities, but at the expense of producing citizens who do not conceive of themselves as political beings.

But alternative images that would encourage us to think politically remain possible. "Every image of man is defined against other possibilities," writes political theorist Wendy Brown in *Undoing the Demos*. "Even when one image becomes hegemonic, it carves itself against a range of other possibilities—tacitly arguing with them, keeping them at bay, or subordinating them."[5]

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By imagining the Caliphate as a first-person shooter video game, ISIS videos tempt viewers with the possibility of an escape from politics. So do the social networks that deliver those videos to our screens.

Consider al-Farabi's tenth-century idealized portrait of a prophet who decides on appropriate political images and disseminates them to the people. With his intimate knowledge of people's desires and likes, the prophet engineers images that structure social interactions and channel civic activity toward the regime's defined good. This making of prophetic images is a top-down, one-way affair. The people take no part in producing the images that govern their lives. In its ideal form, the Assyrian empire operated similarly. The king and his advisers designed the palace's visual programs, which provided the people with shared images of the good.

But when we come to palaces built on the internet, matters become more complicated. Web 2.0 revolutionized how users interact with online content. With older websites (retroactively designated Web 1.0), proprietors posted content and users simply viewed or downloaded it. Content creators were few; most of us were passive consumers. As the millennium turned, new types of websites started to appear. Interactive platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat have given individuals the power to exchange text, audio, and video of all kinds, not to mention tagging, linking, commenting, and sharing. The old top-down, unidirectional content flow has given way to websites made by users. With Web 2.0, every user becomes a content creator.

In 2006 *Time* magazine celebrated this new class of "produsers" by selecting "You" as its Person of the Year (figure 34). "It's a story," the magazine euphorically reported, "about the many wresting power from the few."[6] Were *Time*'s editors right about the political implications of this technological revolution? If we are no longer passive recipients of other peoples' images, have we become our own prophets, collectively engaged in determining the images that define our political lives?

Over three-quarters of adult Americans now own a smartphone, and global smartphone ownership is projected to reach nearly
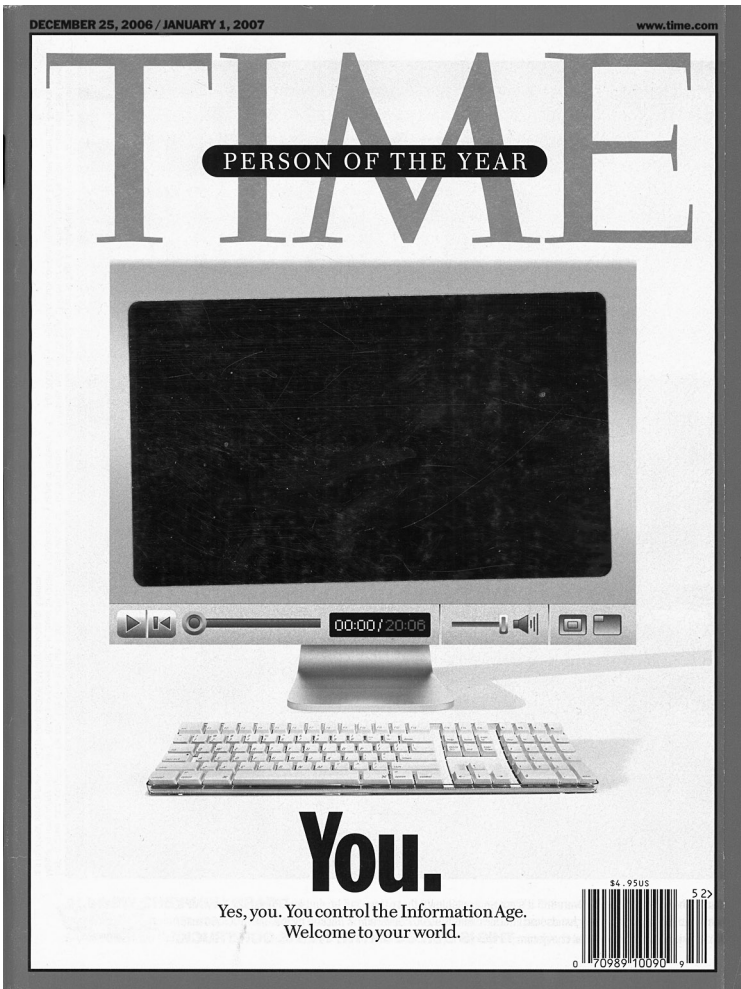
34. "Person of the Year: You." Cover of Time magazine, December 25, 2006.

three billion by 2020. These new tools do not merely facilitate the production and circulation of images—they shape our experience of them. Just as the Assyrian palace's physical architecture structured the experience of the images on its walls, digital platforms introduce an algorithmic architecture that determines how and

when images appear onscreen. The architecture, visible or not, is at least as important as the image. An Assyrian king was ultimately responsible for both: he controlled what images were made and how they were displayed. Today, these two functions have been divided between masses of cellphone-wielding image-makers and a few corporations that own the platforms, the architecture within which our images appear. This division between those who create content and those who control display complicates how images operate politically. Digital platforms determine when an image is seen, by whom, and in what context; understanding the power of these centrally controlled platforms necessarily dampens democratic idealism. Notably, four years after naming "You" Person of the Year, *Time* magazine bestowed that distinction on Mark Zuckerberg.

The founder of Facebook bets that "a fundamental mathematical law underlying human social relationships" can solve a problem at the heart of politics—how to manage conflicting desires.[7] Whereas al-Farabi envisioned a human prophet whose images could mold people's desires and thereby generate concord between citizens, Zuckerberg advocates a machine that knows so much about us that it can direct us toward happiness. Thanks to the online data we provide, Zuckerberg's machine knows many of our characteristics far better than al-Farabi's human prophet ever could. Facebook encodes our likes and desires, and directs us toward what—according to its understanding of the mathematical law of social interactions—we want. All-knowing and automatic algorithms replace the messy political work of managing desires. Facebook, in other words, is the perfect prophet.

The data-driven algorithms that power Facebook are merely the latest wave in a long history of trying to sidestep human judgment through quantification, measurement, and rule-governed bureaucratic processes. Archaeologists have recovered cuneiform mathematical documents that attest to ancient imperial admin-

istrators using algorithms to make quantitative predictions and determine resource allocation. Assyrian bureaucrats employed mathematical abstractions, approximations, and standardizations to manage people and goods. We see these functionaries at work in Sargon's Khorsabad relief (figure 25). Alongside the soldiers breaking a statue down for its metal content are a seated official and two scribes recording the booty. At a glance, we observe a rival king's statue reduced to raw material and converted into data. The Assyrian king aspired to establish justice on earth through quantification and rationalization; digital technology promises to do so far more effectively.

"The decisive reason for the advance of bureaucratic organization has always been its purely technical superiority," writes sociologist Max Weber in his classic account of bureaucracy. "The fully developed bureaucratic mechanism compares with other organizations exactly as does the machine with the non-mechanical modes of production."[8] In its utopian formulation, automation circumvents the biases inherent in human decision-making. Disregarding love, hatred, and other personal, irrational, and emotional considerations, bureaucrats make decisions based on replicable calculation, *sine ira ac studio* (without scorn or bias). And they improve through constant practice. Bureaucracy thereby provides precision, speed, and the reduction of ambiguity and friction—all characteristics politics lacks. Digital technology, unknown to Weber, seems to take decision-making even further out of human hands. But algorithms don't function automatically, any more than the Golden Calf emerged fully formed from the fire. As Jaron Lanier reminds us, "Digital technology is really just people in disguise."[9]

Al-Farabi's prophet cultivates individuals so that they can share a life in common. Algorithmic prophets, by contrast, adapt the world to each individual. "A squirrel dying in front of your house may be more relevant to your interests than people dying in Africa,"

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Zuckerberg notoriously remarked.[10] You want squirrels, you get squirrels. On unveiling Facebook's redesigned news feed in 2013, Zuckerberg said the platform strives to provide everyone in the world with the best personal newspaper. Calibrated to individual interests and desires, every news feed is unique. Algorithms filter the data users produce and shape it into customized streams of information. Facebook's news feed mimics the Middle East peace plan announced in the satirical newspaper the *Onion*: "Everyone in Middle East Given Own Country in 317,000,000-State Solution."[11] Facebook goes to the opposite extreme of Nimrud's homogenous world-state; both overcome the problem of politics but at the expense of human freedom.

Social media hasn't yet succeeded in sealing us off completely. Internet trolls periodically unsettle the comfort of our algorithmically produced cells, just as barbarians always frustrated Assyrian aspirations to unite the world. Besides, not everyone's interests are limited to the squirrel in their front yard. Many of us want to engage the wider world in speech and action, and we often do so through social media. People regularly post and share content that identifies and defines issues of public concern. Facebook and Twitter have been used to organize activists around the globe. And online images constantly compete to exert their political power over us. People still act politically, and they do so online.

It is tempting, then, to imagine our shared online space not as a palace but as an agora, the meeting ground in an ancient Greek polis where adult male citizens could exchange opinions as equals. (It was also where Socrates made himself a nuisance, prodding fellow citizens to question what they liked to think they already knew.) The agora gave political freedom a spatial structure. Online platforms seem to open the agora to everyone (who can afford and access an internet connection) and thereby radically expand the space

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for practicing politics—even if users are in a constant race against algorithms programmed to constrict their reach.

"The hallmark of [ancient] non-political communities," Hannah Arendt writes in *The Human Condition*, "was that their public place, the agora, was not a meeting place of citizens, but a market place where craftsmen could show and exchange products."¹² To discourage citizens from engaging in public affairs, Greek tyrants tried to transform the agora into merely an assemblage of shops. Economically engaged, the people under a tyrant's rule would, he hoped, refrain from asserting themselves politically. The diversity of perspectives that gain voice in political space would give way to the unity of the tyrant's personal interest. Though a city could flourish materially under a tyrant, his arrival meant an end to freedom.

Tech giants accomplish something similar with their algorithms, but with a twist. Political action isn't replaced by economic activity but transformed into it. Platform providers rely on constant user activity to accumulate the data on which their profits depend. It's activity (not political action) that matters. Activity becomes data and data becomes wealth. From the data-miner's perspective, the only difference between images of your neighbor's kitten, a Bernie Sanders rally, and an ISIS beheading is how much online activity each generates. (A first-person shooter video game dictates the end for your action; a data-miner doesn't care.) The more we engage with the political images that appear on our screens, the more power we produce for those who control the platforms. The Mosul Museum video produced a spike in activity among both the euphoric and the horrified; it made the data-miners money.

Assyrian palace reliefs openly depicted the corvée kings demanded from their deracinated subjects—labor in the service of the regime. Social media, by contrast, disguises our servitude. What we experience as free engagement in daily life (wishing a

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friend happy birthday, calling out racism in a recent film, promoting a new band), Facebook and its peers register as data. Online interfaces allow tech companies to amass power while evading the traditional pitfalls of ancient tyranny: if we feel free, we are less likely to revolt.

How will these companies handle mounting confrontations with national governments and sinking public confidence? In April 2018, Zuckerberg appeared before the United States Congress to answer questions regarding the Cambridge Analytica data-sharing scandal. That year, Facebook lost fifteen million users in the United States. (Some left for hipper platforms; others sought an escape from social media altogether.) Zuckerberg has since acknowledged that without an improved regulatory framework "people are just going to get angrier and angrier [and will] eventually just say, 'Screw it, take a hammer to the whole thing.'"[13] Perhaps. But so long as we stay plugged in, Zuckerberg and his friends have us working for them— even when we are protesting against them.

Though political acts abound online, they lose efficacy when coopted into a system of mathematical control. Images reduced to data are drained of their *melammu*. A new form of iconoclasm breaks images down for their content without need of a hammer. This invisible iconoclasm raises no outcry. And yet, an iconoclasm that leaves images intact poses no less a threat to our freedom.