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LATE MODERN ANXIETY AND DIGITAL JIHADIST ALTERNATIVE IN ANNA ERELLE'S *IN THE SKIN OF A JIHADIST* AND TIMUR BEKMAMBETOV'S *PROFILE*

Abstract: For almost a decade, ISIS has held the status of the West's radical other, its symbolic and real challenge to the western idea of modernity becoming ever more prominent and threatening with a growing accessibility of online propaganda content and recruitment via social media platforms in a largely unregulated social networking environment. In that context, the paper discusses Anna Erelle's book In the Skin of a Jihadist and its film adaptation Profile as two distinct but complementary visions of the West and its other. My argument is that Timur Bekmambetov's adaptation, as a Baumanesque critical reading of the West's late modernity, is supplemental to the original text and its liberal views of jihadist otherness. Profile thus views the West and ISIS as two universalist visions of the world so that by facing the dangerous alterity on the computer screen, the West should not only see the morally inferior enemy to be exposed, transformed or eventually defeated but the reflection of its own late modern failures, disappointments and frustrations.

Keywords: alternative, digital, ISIS, jihadism, late modernity, liquid, othering.

'[Shamima] Begum's mere presence has become inseparable from the ways in which this island sees itself, the way it defines its internal borders and who belongs within its clearly defined lines.'

Fatima Rajina, "The Girl in the Mirror: On Media Representations and Aesthetics of Shamima Begum" (2021)

This paper reads Anna Erelle's 'investigative journalism novel' (Halfyard, 2021) *In the Skin of a Jihadist* (*Dans La Peau D'Une Djihadiste*, 2015) and Timur Bekmambetov's film adaptation of the book, *Profile* (2018), as complementary critical views of two professedly antithetical visions of the world. Connected by the same basic narrative of a journalist passing as a young convert interested in becoming a jihadi bride, told within the broader context of a growing number of young women leaving Europe for ISIS after being recruited on social media platforms, the two works differ in their respective portrayals of the ways in which the West - Erelle's France or Bekmambetov's Britain - faces its sociocultural anxieties while confronting the enemy on the computer screen. Led by the liberal ideas of otherness as a distant alternative which lacks in our 'qualities and virtues' (Young, 2007:p.5), Erelle's account is a record of a 'noble mission' of exposing the crookedness of a brutal system concealed behind the digitally mediated utopian fantasy of the Islamic caliphate and attempting to save young and vulnerable volunteers from being misled into taking the dangerous path of ISIS. Bekmambetov's adaptation, on the other hand, is read as a Baumanesque commentary on what appears to receive little critical attention in Erelle's book - the late modern alternativeless 'velvet totalitarianism' (Bauman and Donskis, 2016) of western liquid societies, characterised by multiple dissolutions of pre-existing solid codes and loyalties, processes of deregulation, precarisation, individualisation, technocratisation, which effect moral insensitivity and endorsement of pragmatic and consumer-commodifying logic of social and political conduct (Bauman and Donskis, 2013). Against this background, joining the Islamic State, digitally and physically, is seen as an attempt at fleeing the liquid modernity's privatisation of the experience of 'ontological insecurity' (Young, 2007:p.3).

The clash between the West and ISIS, depicted in the book and film, occurs in the topical context of 'projections of risk' (Morrison, 2020:p.129), in which fundamental questions of national self-perception and identity are being increasingly raised across Europe with reference to Islamist extremism. These concerns were made evident again, for instance, during the 2022 presidential campaign in France, with candidates such as Zemmour and Le Pen founding their campaign narratives on redrawing the internal boundaries between 'us' and 'them' within the social ambience largely defined by complex and conflictual processes of reckoning with the colonial past.² In the UK, undergoing similar developments, the rife threat of radicalisation within Muslim communities is the subject of Ed Husain's *Among the Mosques* (2021), a recent exploration of challenges faced by Muslims

² Gilles Ivaldi (2022) argues that the two candidates of the French far right disagreed on a number of socio-economic themes but shared basic far-right nativist views.

in modern Britain, where a significant number of young Muslims, contrary to established expectations (Seidler, 2007), construct their identities upon literalist interpretations of Islam as a comprehensive ‘moral codex, social, cultural and political practice’ (Alam, 2012:p.17),³ occasionally in threatening and violent opposition to fundamental principles of the society they live in. Multiple acts of terrorist violence that targeted European cities over the past two decades are read as violent confirmations of the opposition and its escalation into ‘the terrorism of proximity’ (Alam, 2015:p.15). They invited further questions of whether such departures from the trajectory of secularisation and patriotic loyalty to homelands in the West towards imagined entities founded upon radically alternative codes, such as Sharia Law, should be viewed as deviant occurrences to be contained or, as Fatima Rajina suggests, ripe opportunities for the West’s self-examination in the face of the radical threatening otherness in its midst.

That threat and the attendant need have become even more pressing with, as Jeffrey Simon (2013) calls it, ‘the technological wave’ (cited in Picart, 2015:p.375) of radicalisation and recruitment for ISIS over the internet, brought about in ‘a world in which the *ummah* was already conceived by many to be a virtual imagined community’ (Smith, 2022:p.83) traversing cultural and geographical borders.⁴ The digital caliphate, as Abdel Bari Atwan labels it (2015), is an evolutionary stage of radicalisation whereby the physical threat by the ‘terrorist from the neighborhood’ (Alam, 2015) has been upgraded to the digital terrorist threat present in the private spaces of our personal computers or social media profiles, additionally perverting some of the greatest promises of (late) modernity, such as ‘freedom of movement and freedom of choice’ (Bauman and Donskis, 2016), into sources of our greatest fears. Platforms for creating communities that cannot be found in the immediate offline surroundings and gathering of individuals with diverse experiences of social marginalisation (Chayko, 2020), social networks have created opportunities for ISIS to appeal to embittered individuals with its ideas of ‘pure Islam’ (Roy 2017) or promises of creating a physical and digital space inhabited by equally pure and genuine *homo islamicus* (Alam, 2012:p.73).⁵ The Islamic State is constructed and

³ Unless otherwise noted, all direct quotes from Allam’s works referenced in the paper (Serbian) are my own translations.

⁴ Todenhöfer (2016) argues that because of this ISIS’s global pretensions remain a genuine threat despite its geographical disappearance; Smith (2022) also discusses ISIS as ‘a hybrid organisation’ whose ideological influence goes beyond its geographical boundaries (pp. 86-88).

⁵ Smith (2022) thus argues that the strength of ISIS’s appeal lies in its ability to convince potential followers and recruits via ‘media jihad’ that the pure and ideal Islamic society is found in the present ‘instead of an idealised future.’ (pp. 85-86)

mediated as a digital fantasy and political imaginary of 'reverse globalisation' (Alam, 2012:p.53), mirroring disappointments and frustrations with the West and presenting real-life opportunities to redress them, among which is a form of reversed migration of young men and women as fighters or jihadi brides, who thus reenact the archetype of *Hijrah* or migration for the sake of 're-establishment of a genuine community of believers' (Alam, 2012:p.74).

In the Skin of a Jihadist: Why do THEY join ISIS and give up on normal lives WE live?

Identifying the 'evil phenomenon' (Erelle, 2015) of digital jihadism as a new form of subcultural networking among youth in opposition to parent and dominant cultures, both perceived as infidel, Erelle notes that a growing number of teenagers 'act normal around their families, but once alone in their bedrooms, they travel to their virtual world which they take for reality' (Erelle, 2015), soon forcing their parents to face the fait accompli of their migration to the Islamic State, naively believing that they leave 'to be reborn in a new land' (Erelle, 2015). Erelle's act is thus shaped by a number of lost teenagers, like 'Norah, Clara, Leila, Élodie, the Bon brothers, Karim, and Karim's best friend' (Erelle, 2015), all perceived as victims of jihadist propaganda, whose ingenuity lies in providing a 'narrative framework' (Roy, 2017) to normally noble aspirations of young people, whose hearts are set not on 'easy money, guns, or drug dealing' but on 'being respected and gaining recognition' (Erelle, 2015),⁶ or affective connection and a sense of belonging in their lives unremittingly marked by experiences 'of not fitting in' (Erelle, 2015). Similar to them, Mélodie is conceived as a young, sensitive, unstable and introvert person with no real friends, 'with a difficult and scarring past', 'tired of her dull and futureless life [...] lost and looking for purpose' and choosing 'to be Robin Hood over Cinderella' (Erelle, 2015) in an alternative life which would be devoted to those worse off than she is, such as children in Palestine or Syria, whose experiences are, as Roy (2017) further argues, exploited by the Islamist propaganda as material which provides concrete contours and contemporary relevance to the often abstract concept of jihad. Apart from that, the lives of young women like Mélodie are marked by an absence of fatherly figures, a void - as was the case with Colleen LaRose, the notorious Jihadi Jane - soon filled by 'virtual male mentors and abstract "brothers"'

⁶Through her research, Erelle is in touch with Abu Mustapha, who in her account figures as the 'more intelligent ... more honest' (Erelle, 2015) representative of jihadist volunteers, contesting with his profound personal convictions the loud and prominent and superficial ones like Bilel.

(Picart, 2015:p.374) like Bilel or alternative families and communities that replace defective and dysfunctional biological or local social communities. ‘Good-looking, he knew his religion by heart, and he was able to preach in four different languages’ (Erelle, 2015), Bilel is an ideal charismatic replacement for the figure whose absence and rejection Mélodie’s been going up against her entire life.

Aware of Bilel’s contemptible instrumentalisation of Islam and personal feelings, dismissing the words he used to recruit and seduce Mélodie as an attack on ‘[her] values, [her] convictions and [her] idea of humanity’ – highlighting, of course, the fact that she respects Islam as ‘a great religion that encourages its believers to have sympathy for others’ (Erelle, 2015) – Erelle is careful to underscore the strength of her values and beliefs in the face of a non-human like Bilel. She recognises in him, after all, ‘a human and understandable feeling: loneliness’ (Erelle, 2015) - a personal defect which made him, like the other teenagers mentioned in the book, turn against the society he grew up in and choose the path of ISIS and morbid dreams of killing thousands of infidels. Erelle’s otherwise commendable act of critical distancing from negative cultural essentialism and stressing the need to individualise pathology (Roy, 2017) might, however, also be viewed as problematic in the process of understanding the character of digital jihadism and its appeal in the West. Are the individualisation of pathology of ISIS’s victims and the opposition between Erelle’s and ISIS’s value systems, reduced to almost a basic dichotomy, provocative enough in terms of critical appraisal of the West as an important push factor in the radicalisation of youth? Erelle admits that she occasionally experienced personality slips despite her best efforts to maintain a clear separation between herself and the character she develops: ‘I wondered if I was becoming a little schizophrenic... I felt like a tightrope walker teetering forward on an invisible wire’ (Erelle, 2015). Are slips like these, when Anna and Mélodie become dangerously close and almost indistinguishable, crucial in realising that Erelle’s portrayal of her own ‘normal’ life – which includes hanging out with her friends and part-time work for newspapers - has been carefully edited to maintain the separation between her (real) fortunate self and the (performed) unfortunate other by concealing the frustrations that aren’t brought on by personal failings, dysfunctional families or lack of structure in education and upbringing? In other words, do Anna and Mélodie, regardless of their different personal backgrounds, share the same frustrating reality to which ISIS offers its digital alternative?

***Profile*: Joining ISIS in Search of THEIR Solidity amidst OUR Late Modern Liquidity**

Equally focused on exposing the manipulative appeal of the ISIS's digital fantasy, Bekmambetov's *Profile* insists that widely accepted expert analyses of digital jihadism as a means to voice the adolescent resistance to parent culture are only partially sufficient, stressing the need to question western late modern society as a non-problematised order of normalcy those young people turn against. The crisis of meaning weighing down on the young people Erelle uses to shape her act, as Bekmambetov suggests, is not only rooted in dysfunctional families or personal fallacies but in the very makeup of society they inhabit, defined by late modern processes of individualisation, privatisation and egoisation (Dawson, 2013), to whose negative consequences adults like Amy Whittaker (Valene Kane), the film's version of Anna Erelle, are not immune.

Thus Amy's remark at the end of the film, while giving the green light to her editor Vick (Christine Adams) to run the story, despite the threats to life she receives in Bilel's (Shazad Latif) fatwa – 'It's the fear that is killing us!' (*Profile*, 2018, 1:43:01) - identifies the sentiment which informs *Profile's* entire narrative, whose drama, typical of Screenlife films, draws from the 'shifting relationship between "real-life" and digital identities' (Kirby, 2023:p.138) and the central character's loss of agency over it. Bekmambetov's key argument is that fear, uncertainty and doubt are not exclusively related to '[vulnerability] to invasion and intrusion' (Kirby, 2023:p.144) from any of the obvious film's villains, like Bilel or ISIS. In fact, the video footage of Bilel's fatwa, a compilation of personal details, unintentionally revealed by Amy and easily overlooked by the viewer, identifying and targeting Amy's real self behind the performed character of Melody, only exemplifies Bekmambetov's Baumanesque identification of the true source of horror and anxiety: the contemporary life's liquidity, which commands 'incessant effort and undying vigilance' (Bauman, 2006:p.35) in face of diffuse and elusive threats from sources that are, like Amy's compromising personal details, easily overlooked and taken for granted but may be even less manageable than ISIS.

The strength of ISIS's appeal, as portrayed in *Profile*, lies in its ability to exploit not only global injustices or personal flaws and noble aspirations of its young followers but also individualised frustrations and late modern absence of collective means and solidarity to redress them. Bilel thus justifies his hatred of Britain and morbid ambitions to kill by citing examples of innocent people being killed in Syrian cities and his joining of ISIS, 'a real melting pot' (*Profile*, 2018, 01:05:01),

as presented to Amy/Melody, by typical experiences of racial discrimination and exclusion from the society he was born into.

'Last time I was searching for a job in London, I failed. I needed money. When I applied, what do you think they said to me? "You're a Paki, Go back to your country." I showed them my passport and said "I'm born in Britain." They said, "No, but your country of origin. You're a Paki." And that's when I got angry, you know. If you live in a society that don't respect you... I found a way to channel my energy, and when I got here, believe me, the first thing I did is I burned that piece of toilet paper I call a British passport ...' (Profile, 2018, 00:57:54-00:58:16)

'I spent my childhood in my neighbour's garden, like, fixing old bikes, you know, motorcycle engines. I wanted to be a mechanical engineer. And when I was 16, I got stabbed three times in a fight. And my older brother Saeed, he fought for me and the police came. And he got sentenced to 16 years for killing the guy. And I was like, "What happened? Why's he spending years behind bars because he defended me?" And Saeed, he was like the support system in my family, like... When my father walked out, I went here, the small one followed me. And he got killed in Iraq. And then my mum was sick after that.' (Profile, 2018, 00:59:17 - 00:59:56)

Systemic racism and discrimination, however, are not viewed by Bekmambetov as sufficient explanations for joining ISIS, since young white men and women, such as Taylor/Umm Saladine (Eloise Thomas) or Amy/Melody, also view ISIS as a counterbalance to their anxieties. Bekmambetov accounts for it by identifying sources of anxiety in the downsides of late modern subjectivity, primarily defined by a sense of disorientation and loss of key communal points of reference when facing complex and unpredictable social processes individually or, as Ulrich Beck (2002) observes, when finding 'biographical solutions to systematic contradictions' (in Dawson, 2013: p. 32). *Profile's* view of digital jihadism and ISIS thus picks up on the absent sense of community or 'community-based responsibility' for others (Ohaekwusi, 2018:p.75), supplanted by 'ego-oriented narratives' (Dufour, 2017:p.15), obsession with consumption (Ohaekwusi, 2018) or at best by network (Bauman and Donskis, 2016) as the only way in which Amy, for instance, interacts with the closest people around her. Shifting between Bilel/ISIS-related windows and tabs and those that regard issues outside the computer interface, Amy is shown struggling not only to maintain the distinction between the digital act and real-life self but also to stay on top of real-life challenges, such as late rent notifications, inability to count on any advance payments from the newspaper or any help from

her best friend Kathy (Emma Cather) or fiancé Matt (Morgan Watkins), with whom she relates primarily online through solving 'raw consumption' (Bauman and Donskis, 2016) dilemmas like which dress to wear, vacation countdowns or financial planning of living together. Amy's real-life story, as we learn in the film's key personality slip moment, when the fake jihadi bride act almost collapses under the real guilt-ridden self in search of a meaningful relationship, typifies the liquid modernity's neutralisation of moral engagement with others (Ohaekwusi, 2018). Amy's mother, namely, died of overdose after being harassed by a payday loan firm for not being able to pay off the debt with an enormous interest. Ignored now, Amy feels guilty over ignoring her mother's calls before she died - 'she called me right before she did it but I didn't fucking answer my phone because I was too busy doing I don't know what' (Profile, 2018, 01:01:41), thus confirming Bilel's earlier observation of late modern adiaphorisation of life in western metropolises like London, where 'people ignore you if you're in trouble' (Profile, 2018, 00:57:51). Facing the consequences of apparently wrong choices, Amy and Bilel, as well as other members of younger or older generations, regardless of different personal backgrounds, experience, as Almond, Appleby and Sivan (2003) observe:

'The very opposite of an enclave [or the digital fantasy of ISIS] – subordination. Individuals living in such a context are severely constrained, in an inegalitarian manner, as to how they behave, usually in terms of the category (or rank) they are assigned to; yet they do not enjoy the protection and privileges of group membership. They are manipulated, peripheral to all decisions that may determine their desitiny, and they have a limited scope for forming alliances. Consequently they are isolated, passive and conformist. Such people are perhaps not blatantly oppressed or deprived but certainly alienated.' (p.84)

Joining a religious community via online platforms, as the testimonies of the teenagers Amy uses to create the character of Melody suggest, could be seen as the benign first step of looking for 'communal references' (Bauman, 2004:p.26), often found in deterritorialised groups or online agoras, created in response to late modern individualisation and enabling alienated individuals to acknowledge and foster interdependence within a broader community (Dawson, 2013:p.99). Radicalisation within these groups comes as one form of illusory compensation for the late modern loss of subjectivity, among which Dufour (2017: pp.17–18) mentions addiction - alluded to in Amy's mother's story in *Profile* - and whimsical omnipotence granted by fantasies like ISIS, as depicted through Bilel.

In Place of Conclusion

Concluding his analysis of jihadist subcultures, Uliano Conti (2017) stresses the necessity of their interpretation within the European sociocultural context, and not from the position of their otherness or non-European genesis. The relationships between the characters in Erelle's book and its film adaptation, regardless of their physical location, are primarily determined by the European late modern context of 'individualisation and the post-traditional order', characteristic of, as Dawson points out, 'most, if not all, Western societies, but not of countries beyond the West' (2013:p.14). Anna/Amy thus shares with her alter ego Mélodie/Melody, as well as the antagonist Bilel – despite a pronounced insistence on the difference between 'us' and 'them' – the reality defined by precarity and insecurity. Living in the peculiar late modern state of vertigo, as Young (2007) writes, 'the malaise of late modernity: a sense of insecurity of insubstantiality, and of uncertainty, a whiff of chaos and a fear of falling' (p.12), both sides resort to 'the magic of othering' (p. 9), insisting on the superiority of self over the other.

Both *In the Skin of a Jihadist* and *Profile* are contextualised within the late modern condition of pluralisation and digital delocalisation of cultures and communities, social platforms and networking being the key sites of their respective plot twists. I have tried to stress the fact that Bekmambetov's adaptation is more decisive in pointing out the insufficiency of binary vocabulary when it comes to understanding the importance of the Islamic State not only as a major threat but also a reflection of Western late modern societies. Both narratives examined in the paper unfold within the unexplored and fearsome territory of the digital world, making Screenlife, as Bekmambetov insists, the only suitable narrative format to capture the tension and anxiety of real-time social media interaction with the enemy, provide a commentary on the intimate, complex and nonlinear interaction between the two opposed worlds facing each other through the computer screen (Wixson, 2021) and 'emphasise complex tensions between the real body/self and the multiplied online identity/self' (Kirby, 2023:p.140). In *Profile*, ISIS is portrayed not as a distant other, which can be eliminated by deactivating accounts, arrests or citizenship revocations, as is the case with Shamima Begum and other women portrayed in *The Return: Life After ISIS* (2021), but a mirror to Western geopolitical and internal social contradictions, present, as one of the film's former ISIS brides observes, '[a]s long as there is injustice, as long as there is torture in prisons, there is human rights violations in the Middle East, as long as minorities are being excluded [...]' (*The Return*, 2021, 1:17:55-1:18:08).

Furthermore, the ambivalent emotions towards the West expressed by Bilel –who openly decries capitalism as ‘a blight on the world’ (Erelle, 2015) while not giving up on his late modern (consumer) subjectivity (Dufour, 2017; Dawson, 2013), ‘wearing the latest Ray-Bans and Nike apparel’ (Erelle, 2015) or being happy that in Syria they don’t miss M&Ms or Nutella (Profile, 2018, 00:59:06) – are not only indicative of his hypocrisy, Anna/Amy manages to expose by the end of the book/film, but, more importantly, of a late modern ‘bulimic society ... where both inclusion and exclusion occur concurrently’ (Young, 2007:p.32). ‘[Not] distant from Western culture but immersed in it’ (Young, 2007:p.152), young men like Bilel, as is shown in *Profile*, assimilated the values of the society they were born into prior to being rejected by it and consequently resorting to ‘the othering of the otherer... in a tactic which attempts to rescue dignity’ (Young, 2007:p.165), a risk to which young women like Amy are equally exposed.

Extremist Islamism, together with right-wing nationalism, an ever stronger force in European public arenas and their ‘projections of risk’, mentioned at the beginning of this paper, still remains a major ‘[conduit] for expressing grievances’ (Kepel, 2017) with liquid societies and, more importantly, a clear sign of absence of an authentic social alternative to processes effecting widespread experiences of individualised insecurity and uncertainty.

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**POZNOMODERNA TJESKOBA I DIGITALNA
DŽIHADISTIČKA ALTERNATIVA U KNJIZI U KOŽI
DŽIHADISTE ANNE ARELLE I FILMU PROFIL TIMURA
BEKMAMBETOVA**

Rezime

Već skoro punu deceniju IDIL važi za zapadnog radikalnog drugog, čija simbolička i stvarna prijetnja zapadnim idejama modernosti postaje sve izraženija i opasnija sa sve jednostavnijim pristupom propagandnom sadržaju putem interneta i regrutovanju putem društvenih mreža unutar velikim dijelom neregulisanog prostora za povezivanje putem različitih platformi. Ovaj rad u tom kontekstu analizira knjigu Anne Erelle *U koži džihadiste* i njenu filmsku adaptaciju *Profil* kao dva komplementarna prikaza odnosa Zapada i njegovog drugog. Ključni argument iznesen u radu jeste da je filmska adaptacija režisera Timura Bekmambetova, kao baumanovsko kritičko viđenje zapadne pozne modernosti, svojevrsna dopuna i dorada predložka

i njegovog liberalnog viđenja džihadističke drugosti. *Profil* tako na Zapad i IDIL gleda kao na dvije suprotstavljene univerzalističke vizije svijeta, te prilikom suočavanja sa prijetećom drugošću kao slikom na kompjuterskom ekranu Zapad ne treba da vidi samo moralno inferiornog neprijatelja koga je potrebno razotkriti, transformisati ili, na koncu, poraziti nego i refleksiju sopstvenih poznomodernih neuspjeha, razočaranja i frustracija.

► *Gljučne riječi*: alternativa, digitalna, IDIL, džihadizam, pozna modernost, fluidno, odstranjivanje.

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