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Replacing Bodies with Pictures: Al-Qaeda's Visual Strategies of Self-Configuration

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Abstract | During the last months, many dramatic events concerning the Middle Eastern geo-political scenario have focused the global attention on the rise of the Islamic State and, in particular, on both the brutality and the expertise that characterize the visual strategies of communication of this new jihadist extreme fringe. But, in order to understand better the current relationship between Islamic radicalism and our mediascape, it might be useful to take a step back, deepening the use of new technological devices and digital media promoted by Al-Qaeda (the most relevant terroristic organization operative in the last decade), especially after the 9/11 attacks and during the consequent War on Terror. Therefore the article attempts to do this, firstly choosing a peculiar point of view for the analysis (the contemporary strategies of self-configuration in wartime) and secondly examining two exemplar matters on the topic: bin Laden's self-iconography (composed by a large numer of video-messages performed by the Saudi sheik from 2001 to his death) and the increasingly media importance gained by the Islamic *shahid* (a suicide-bomber who is also the author of a striking video-testament that precedes his final action of death).

Keywords | War on Terror, new media, war visuality, Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, *shahid*.

At the end of 2001, in the aftermath of Al-Qaeda's spectacular attacks, the formula “post-9/11” was incessantly repeated, both in institutional and informal speeches, revealing the need to synthesize a common expression able to fulfill a double function: on the one hand, to summarize the great importance of that day, considering it metaphorically as an historical watershed (Dudziak, 2003); on the other hand, to render an emotional and shared meaning to the state of emergency which arose after that awful event (Carbone, 2007). Until autumn 2008, when global economy started to collapse and *crisis* substituted *terror* on the “stage of urgency”, this formula – post-9/11– was, in other words, the recurrent term used to designate a very traumatic turn of the millennium.

Among its several meanings, 9/11 is also the most relevant *casus belli* in recent history. After that, as is well known, a particular kind of war, called War on Terror, was launched: at the same time, a reactive (Afghanistan) and a preventive (Iraq) war were declared against Global Terrorism[1], which gathers under the word “enemy” a complex and messy system of terroristic organizations hard to define within traditional geo-political boundaries and built around the sharp and whiskered face of Saudi sheik Osama bin Laden.

Nevertheless, the first scenario (Afghanistan), which has become the longest conflict ever fought by the United States in their history, was soon described as a «forgotten war» (Ricchiardi, 2006): a context where, with a few stellar exceptions, media largely ignored the fighting because they operated under a choking state pressure; on the other hand, the second (Iraq) represents the main war frontline, where the visuality of war has been updated by the contemporary proliferation of multiple points of view involved in the conflict, the spread of portable audiovisual devices used to take and reproduce pictures, and the introduction of innovative networked platforms of communication (such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube).

In fact, the War on Terror is the first war increasingly fought online[2], where those who struggle try to take advantage of new communication technologies, such a crucial instrument in the field of contemporary warfare that has been able to promote the online space as an important showcase of the conflict. In this sense, the concrete (and atavistic) idea of the battlefield is relaunched in a virtual landscape formed by collective imagination and data exchanges, just as the idea of the war frontline becomes a *diffused* horizon (Hoskins & O'Loughlin 2010; Roger 2013).

Therefore, this is a scenario that transforms the global net of digital communications into an unprecedented field of clash, as well as pictures into a powerful new offensive instrument, profiling a war – according to W. J. T. Mitchell – “fought by means of images deployed to shock and traumatize the enemy, images meant to appall and demoralize, images designed to replicate

1 The adjective “global” means that many theatres of war have been defined (or redefined) in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Among them are the Middle-East (Lebanon and Gaza Strip), the North of the Caucasus (Chechnya), South Asia (India, North-East Pakistan) and Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Philippines), a part of Africa (the Horn and some Saharan countries), South America (Colombia).

2 Actually, the first war in which the Internet is present is the Kosovo War (1998-1999), but its functionality is rather restricted and therefore not very significative.

themselves endlessly and to infect the collective imaginary of global populations" (Mitchell, 2011: 2-3). But this is also a war where the conception of image as *simulacrum* – a notion developed with a suspicious and postmodern mindset during the Gulf War in 1990-1991 (Baudrillard, 1991) – has become weak, unable to ask the appropriate questions to its own time. Indeed, if we can surely say that reality is not disappearing, dissolved in the variety of its representations, we can also guess that nowadays another examination of the *ontological unreality* of images (especially digital ones) seems to be less useful than a meticulous study conducted on their *operative reality*, a primary perspective in the background of the War on Terror.

Consequently, we must interpret the war imagination shaped in the first decade of the new millennium as a complex, chaotic and cacophonous reality that requires some "exploratory paths" in order to be investigated. The path chosen in these pages is the self-configuration in the new media landscape: a model often employed by the current media system to negotiate the visibility of contemporary conflicts, as shown by several episodes of international news that marked the last decade and the fighting of the War on Terror. From the participative and citizen journalism (such as the so-called *warblogs*) to the video-footages directly shot and edited by the soldiers and uploaded to file-sharing platforms[3], from the Internet to the entertainment industry[4], nowadays various forms of self-representation take part decisively in the visual processes of the conflict, in its sale as a product for the audience, in its propaganda mechanisms.

Clearly, self-definition through images within the war experience is not a contemporary discovery (Struk, 2011). But in our mediascape, it is evident that the "war self-portraiture" has attained a significant sudden rise, to such an extent that today it can be interpreted as the main outcome of a complete permeation between actors in war and recording equipments, due to the proliferation of new devices, their increasing handiness and the low threshold of ability required in their use.

Among the results of this renewed relationship between human subjects and media system, it is possible to highlight an exacerbation of the already proverbial ambiguity of the verb *to shoot* (firing a shot, taking a picture), starting with the fact that the photo/video camera (now incorporated in many other technological devices) has become an ever-present accessory in everyone's war equipment. It is an exacerbation that creates a large confusion among those who claim the role of operators of visibility in an increasingly *mediatized* war (Cottle 2006), because it places the war self-portraiture among the so-called amateur images: a peculiar kind of images that has been a phenomenon of some importance since the end of the 19th century (especially concerning private production and consumption), but now influences in a really decisive manner the public and popular mediatization of the conflict. Indeed, mainstream circuits of

3 In this sense, it seems very significant the difference between two collective conceptions: one that depicts the Gulf War as the "first TV-war", similar to a video-game; the other that depicts the Iraq War as the "first YouTube war", similar to a reality show. See Hammond P. (2007).

4 Among the most significant self-representation attempts from the state of conflict produced for the entertainment industry, we can remember the movie *Redacted* (B. De Palma, USA 2007), the documentaries *The War Tapes* (D. Scranton, USA 2006), *Armadillo* (J. Metz, Denmark 2010) and *Restrepo* (T. Hetherington & S. Junger, USA 2010), the TV-series *Generation Kill* (HBO, 2008), *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011) and *Our War* (BBC Three, 2011), the TV-programme *Iraq Uploaded* (MTV News, 2006).

communication and information often use the plurality of images which refer to the conflict's private dimension in order to integrate their official narrations (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2011).

In this sense, the most remarkable case in recent times is probably the diffusion of Abu Ghraib snapshots (we commemorate just this year their tenth anniversary). In April 2004, the television programme *60 Minutes* and some articles published by Seymour M. Hersh on «The New Yorker» reported to public attention a shocking case of war tortures. The cause of the scandal relates not only to what the images show (notoriously, a group of western soldiers oblige Iraqi prisoners to submissive positions, often with evident sexual connotations), but also to the shocking revelation about the identity of their authors: photographs and videos were shot by the captors, who are authors of a self-portraiture gesture performed *in front of* and *behind* the camera – a gesture that, in some way, reconsiders even the role of the war reporter, replacing his function and his presence[5].

The pictures from Abu Ghraib are grainy and taken in low resolution, but the spatial distribution reveals a work of coordination and planning, activities linked to the idea of a real "staging": the soldiers' behaviour displays an ostentatious bullying and an iconography of self-affirmation that testifies the desire to demonstrate an ideological superiority resorting to a boasting bodily preponderance (for example, the folded arms or the thumbs up). Moreover, going beyond the specific contents, it is also possible to observe – as Susan Sontag has noted approaching these infamous images – that in the Iraqi prison the act of photographing *has become itself* an exercise of torture infliction (2003).

Nevertheless, and in order to address the main issue indicated by the title of this paper, in the context of contemporary war self-portraiture it is now necessary to narrow the focus of analysis to a particular field, taking into consideration the self-configurative strategies adopted specifically by Al-Qaeda, the most relevant terroristic organization active in the last decade (Gray, 2003; Cook, 2005). This choice might seem to be a contradiction, a paradox, because it immediately reveals a problematic relationship between Islamic fundamentalism and new visual technologies: indeed, Islam forbids the creation of anthropomorphic images, or images of animated subjects, since Islamic visual culture, according to the precepts asserted in the Quran, is basically *an*-iconic (that is, devoid of figurative images, stigmatized as unholy) and only authorizes the representation of patterns of expression unrelated to reality, thus opting for an elaborate decorativism full of symbolic meanings (Belting, 2011).

Therefore, the aforementioned paradox is that in Islamic radicalism (namely where it is quite licit to expect an inflexible deference to the Quranic tradition) we should not find traces of self-representations; yet, they have become an invaluable weapon for both terroristic propaganda and proliferation, especially during the War on Terror. Under these circumstances, let us now consider two case studies: Osama bin Laden's self-iconography and the video-testaments shot by Al-Qaeda's

5 The most important public archive about the Abu Ghraib's pictures is probably the site of *Salon* review: http://www.salon.com/topic/the_abu_ghraib_files/.

suicide-bombers.

A digital ghost: Osama bin Laden's self-iconography

Osama bin Laden became a worldwide famous figure, easily identifiable with some peculiar features: turban, long beard, index finger raised in the air, as if he were putting an evil spell on his enemies. We mistook him for a messenger coming from a remote past, the spokesman of a barbarian Middle Ages who emerged into present bringing an ancient and frightful threat with him. His face kept us company for ten years, printed on the front pages of the world's most important newspapers, appearing on TV and web news, duplicated without limits on t-shirts, coffee mugs or stickers, similar to a movie star.

His face has been transformed into a symbol, a waving flag among the most extreme fringes of the Islamic world; a face that someone swears he has recognized in the majestic columns of smoke that rose up to the sky after the collapse of the World Trade Center, as if – instigates Clément Chéroux – in the most shocking effect of 9/11 we could find impressed no less than the mark of its author (Chéroux, 2009). Moreover, that body: tall, thin, placid but resolute, obsessively scrutinized by counter-terrorism analysts in search of a detail, a proof or a medical symptom.

Osama bin Laden was a political leader with no official portraiture, with no monuments erected in his honour or memory – indeed, “no statues, monuments, palaces or regimes could be levelled as ways of performing the destruction of bin Laden” (Mitchell, 2011: 3) – but he was also a leader who did not renounce a personal iconography, able to use TV and the Internet as the most powerful spaces of self-promotion. They are public spaces, obviously, but they have also been modified to fit a domestic and pocket-size dimension; spaces where the image of the most wanted public enemy has been continuously reproduced for the eyes of a global audience.

His body was so attractive that it was necessary to hide it after his death. Indeed, bin Laden is a denied corpse too, removed from everyone's gaze, a corpse that seems to lie in the depths of the ocean because of the effect that its mediatic exhibition would have caused, or the creation – for *that* body – of a place of pilgrimage. He was a stranger, becoming more and more familiar, to such an extent that people started to call him by the pronoun *He*, according to the waxwork sculpture created by Cuban artists Manolo Castro, Julio Lorente and Alberto Lorente, that represents bin Laden lying down on a rug, head on a pillow and an all-peaceful facial expression: an effort to provide us with that missing “last image”[6].

On May 2nd, 2011, after the assault on bin Laden's shelter in Abbottabad, Pakistan, U.S. Special Forces found several documents (recently disclosed) and unreleased videos. One of them exerts a peculiar fascination: it is not the usual call to the holy war, not even the last admonition to the heretic West; it rather consists in a moment of ordinary life, an informal and intimate situation in which an old bin Laden (with a grey beard, black headgear and a heavy blanket on his shoulders)

6 The work has been exhibited during the 11th Havana Biennial (2012).

watches on a TV screen some videos that represent him. Filmed in three-quarter view, with the left side profile quite recognizable, bin Laden holds a TV remote control in his hand and examines the menu on the monitor. Around him, a cluttered and unidentified space, similar to a basement, where many devices are stacked and a white electrical cord dangles from the ceiling[7].

The image shows bin Laden while he is looking at himself: a coherent conclusion for his iconic march, initiated with the aim of guaranteeing a relevant role in the international political arena for himself and his organization, even though *in absentia* (indeed, bin Laden's main concern was clearly to get away from a true manhunt). This means that bin Laden produces and releases video-messages using his body as a symbolic figure (capable of easily changing in response to political decisions or military campaigns), thus demonstrating great concern with his own *mise-en-scène*.

In fact, bin Laden's ten-year iconic production can be divided into three main different phases: the first (autumn 2001) when, after the attacks in the U. S., bin Laden depicts himself as an Islamic knight; the second one (between Afghani and Iraqi wars), characterized by a “Franciscan” iconography; the last one (from the presidential election of 2004 to his death in 2011), when bin Laden appears more similar to an international diplomat than a terroristic leader (Uva, 2008). However, the most important factor is the common will to expose his body and to stage his “set” with a very explicit symbolic intent, as if his video-messages were the steps of a complex and recurring self-filmography.

Christian Uva underlines that bin Laden does not use new media solely to promote them as a resounding loud-speaker to spread his political and religious declarations, but also to advertise his own image with the expertise of a real director (Uva, 2008: 73), in such a way that it is possible to claim that, from bin Laden's iconic birth to his invisible death, his body became the visual quintessence of a whole organization, an interface in charge of communicating with both the Western and the Islamic world.

We have to evaluate bin Laden's iconic production as an effort to impose on the market of political and religious symbology a really *global product*, one that appeals to the Islamic world stressing the orthodox traditionalism of bin Laden's appearance (a man of faith devoted to Allah, at the same time pious and extremist, an ancient figure that reappears in present day time preserving the ancient symbols of the caliphate) and also refers to the West, parading a wide set of technological devices, such as digital watches, microphones, satellite systems, video recordings, Internet connection and so on (Amadori, 2002).

Therefore, the large number of video-messages conceived, produced and performed by the Saudi sheik reveals its efficiency both by seducing his followers and terrorizing his enemies and makes an intelligent use of a combination of old Islamic symbols and modern media: the result is a serialized tale, a self-centred saga whose episodes are broadcast from time to time on TV and web platforms, addressing an increasingly wider and miscellaneous public.

Moreover, the variations observed in bin Laden’s self-configuration represent different roles

7 http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xilyxx_pentagon-cia-video-osama-bin-laden-in-abbottabad-pakistan_tech.

and embody different characters, constituting three peculiar acting performances that describe the chameleonic relationship existing between bin Laden and his own image. Engaged in a constant attempt to depict himself in many different ways, bin Laden assembles his personal video-gallery converting his physical absence into an iconic omnipresence, as a ghost that combines monstrosity and invisibility, hiding himself but suddenly striking and then re-appearing – albeit fleeting – in the fluid immateriality of image.

Like a new media preacher, or a fugitive who shows himself in the digital evanescence, bin Laden has long been replaced by his images, even if he missed the appointment with his very last one (the image of his corpse). In this sense, bin Laden represents a bizarre kind of bogeyman, an "absent enemy" increasingly recognized in the form of a voice on a tape or an image on a screen, constituting a case of paradoxical (dis)embodiment, as he is "both invisible – an elusive individual who evaded capture – and hypervisible – a household brand that represented all terrorism was" (Wingard, 2013: 92). He is a forbidden body which, in order to become an *icon*, combines the redundancy of his media representations with "the planning of his own disappearance" (Hill, 2009: 33).

Therefore, while the self-iconography of bin Laden seems to suggest a progressive "dematerialization" of his physical body, namely its substitution through the persistent presence of digital images, it is possible to note, as a symmetrical effect, a reverse proliferation of bodily images too, not to mention the urgency to find a *possible* body with which to visualize the leader of international terrorism. An example of this can be found in general Western media rhetoric and, in particular, in the final part of Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty*, when, recreating the assault on the compound of Abbottabad, the director chooses to show bin Laden with a phantasmal aspect, thanks to the effect of infrared night vision cameras installed on the soldiers' helmets.

A real "final" image: the *shahid*'s video-testament

Regarding the second case study, it seems evident that one of the most shocking characters in post-9/11 war imagination has surely been the Islamic *shahid*. This term – which literally means both *martyr* and *witness* – defines a recurring figure in the horizon of Islamic radicalism, that is, a person who decides to sacrifice his own life in order to kill as many enemies as possible, assigning to his action of death a powerful symbolic value and a vigorous media resonance (not by chance, in recent years the *shahid* has become the protagonist of not only frightful breaking news, but also cinematographic and television entertainment). Also named *kamikaze* – although this term is improper, as it refers to a completely different war suicide context (Sacco, 2005)[8] – the *shahid* is an

8 Sacco argues that the main difference between the two terms lies in their respective fields of pertinence: indeed, if "kamikaze" refers to a particular action promoted by the Empire of Japan during WWII, when Japanese pilots crashed their planes into American aircraft carriers with the *political* aim to protect and honor their homeland, "shahid" refers specifically to the most radical fringe of Islamic culture, where holy suicide is an action considered as a *religious* instrument that allows one to gain the eternal life in the hereafter.

orthodox believer who decides to deliver his "testimony of faith" to the world: as a martyr, he kills himself in the name of a "superior cause".

The origins and meaning (as well as geographic distribution) of Islamic *martiropatia* (Guolo, 2002) are not easy to define, and their relationship with religion is also hard to profile: Quran forbids suicide (even if not unequivocally), and in general Islamic countries have the lowest suicide rates in the world. In addition, in the Quranic tradition martyrs die in battle, falling under enemies' shots: they do not kill themselves on purpose.

Nevertheless, it is possible to claim that, in Islamic religion, martyrdom is considered as a cultural framework initially identifiable as a Shiite specificity (an Islamic minority branch where the theology of self-sacrifice finds rich soil for historical reasons). Indeed, the radicalization of Islam has increased significantly since the last decades of the past century, particularly in two different contexts: the Iranian Revolution and the Lebanese Civil War.

In the first case, the uprising against the Shah and the Iran-Iraqi War promoted a diffusion of martyrdom never before observed in the history of Iran and probably of the whole Islam; in the second case, the suicidal martyrs who attacked the Israeli occupation forces were connected to the Shiite representation of Hezbollah (the "Party of God") and contributed to make Beirut the background for a significant increase in the number of martyrs.

Therefore, in Iran and Lebanon the *shahid* inaugurated an intensive recourse to holy death as an unavoidable fact, an outcome which may be the result of the inclusion of subjects in an upsetting modernity that tackles its contradictions (inside and outside Islam) with a politicization of religion – a process that shatters no less than the precepts that prevented someone from killing himself. In this initial phase, the choice of suicidal death was typical among swerving young people who belong to the lowest levels of society, urbanized for no more than two generations.

After a ten-year period, the Palestinian context imported martyrdom into the perimeter of the Sunni doctrine, presenting some affinities with the Iranian and Lebanese cases, namely the ambition to emphasize national identity through the consolidation of a religious glue (obviously, the Palestinian idea of *nation* does not refer to an existing reality, as in Iran and Lebanon, but rather indicates a future goal).

The First and Second Palestinian *Intifada* were the turning points of this escalation. In the First, martyrdom took on a rather symbolic role, subordinated to less destructive forms of rebellion against the Israeli authority: the *shahid*'s first attack happened in 1994, but the young Palestinian's silhouette who throws stones at Israeli tanks is the clash emblem to this day. In the Second, martyrs' photographs were affixed everywhere in occupied Palestinian territories: indeed, the *shahid*'s presence, quantitatively more relevant in this phase, was perceived by the collectivity as a form of testimony able to generate and spread a feeling of national belonging. Martyrs' actions started to be more and more encouraged, propagating by means of press, television or public spaces photographic covering. Moreover, a membership organization (often Hamas) led off the process that transforms the *shahid* from individual to martyr.

Concurrently, the circulation of suicide bombers' video-claims also started taking place,

earlier in VHS format, then as digital files. The video recording constituted the peak of the *shahid*'s rituals of indoctrination, because before giving vent to his lethal action, the *shahid* used to record a video with the aim of asserting the authorship of his imminent gesture, praying and thanking Allah and bidding farewell to the world, exactly as in the case of an audiovisual testament (Simon, 2009). Interestingly, the first video-testaments consist of raw and unrefined contents and are very primitive versions if compared with the videos shot in the digital age – as a kind of prototype, characterized by a simple and basic composition and consisting, in most cases, of a single long take focused on the *shahid*'s body and face, with an American shot or a close-up. Also, the set is staged in an elementary way: drapes, banners, flags and posters are used to disguise the space (making it unrecognizable) with unsophisticated solutions. Moreover, a great amount of weapons (guns, bombs, rocket launchers) is often exhibited in front of the camera, as a sort of menacing threat.

The video-testaments shot after Al-Qaeda's sudden burst in the new media scenario are very different instead. Indeed, Al-Qaeda is a terroristic organization that does not promote martyrdom solely as an instrument used to create or reinforce a sense of national belonging, but also as a vehicle to reach a more articulated goal: the construction of an Islamic trans-national *Ummah*, that is not a territorial but a religious community composed by Sunni brothers who share the same faith (that is, a community that overrides traditional geo-political boundaries).

In this perspective, relevant discontinuities emerge between *pre* and *post* Al-Qaeda martyrdom. Firstly, after Qaedists' reinforcement, the *shahid*'s object of desire is no longer the individual in his relationship with the nation, but with the community: this is a crucial point, because the global *Jihad*, unlike other blurry Pan-Arab and Pan-Islamic purposes, is an "effort" contextualized both in Islamic countries and in Western societies, where radical Islam increasingly tries to take root (for example, in European and U.S. main cities).

Secondly, the recruitment of martyrs becomes an activity that does not involve marginalized and alienated subjects any longer. According to Farhad Khosrokhavar's definition, the "new martyrs" (Khosrokhavar, 2002) frequently come from the middle-class, they have no problems of social integration and they can benefit from a high education level, unlike the average of their fellow citizens (they usually complete their studies abroad, as in the case of many 9/11 attackers).
In third place, post 9/11 video-testaments constitute real global projects: they dominate the contemporary political and religious symbology (concerning both Western and Islamic world) and they play an important role in our media landscape, a system where advanced technological devices and innovative communication platforms are used.

Finally, the technical aspects of the videos are considerably different too. Post-Al-Qaeda video-testaments are generally footages composed of miscellaneous images (not simple long takes) which seem submitted to a heterogeneous logic, rather than a linear one. Moreover, it is now possible to recognize an intense use of special visual effects, absent in previous prototypes: in this way, testaments acquire a spectacular and artificial appearance and the set becomes the result of a digital configuration, a backdrop composed of different images. This means that the cover-up of the

set is now obtained with a digital trick, no longer with a physical space staging[9].

Therefore, even if it may seem unexpected, the *shahid* acts as a subject that does not entirely demonstrate an intimate connection with his last image. Indeed, the martyr, seated in front of the camera merely repeating written speeches, often composed by other people, declaims passages of the Quran or appeals to Allah with the usual formulas, recurrent in Islamic tradition; as a consequence, in some way, he "solves" the contact with his own image resorting to an impersonal and other-directed terroristic *performance* (Dayan, 2006).

The outcome is a gesture of self-configuration that does not consist in the result of an open relationship between a subject and his conception of himself, but in an image that, although created in a very reserved context, is already born as a public message, just waiting to circulate in the global media system to fully emphasize its spectacular hyperactivity. To support this claim, it is useful to underline that several video-testaments include images that represent the *shahid*'s final action (namely, his attack), and whose materials were necessarily added to the footage after his death: images that the *shahid* has never seen and will never see.

In conclusion, it is possible to suggest a key for interpretation. The self-configurative gestures performed by both Osama bin Laden and the *shahid* consist of processes that, at first glance, could seem very personal and intimate; instead, these gestures are performed in a collective and choral dimension that, on the one hand, requires the presence of other terrorists on the scene (even though they are not involved in the gaze of the camera) and, on the other hand, needs some significant post-production intervention to give the video-testament its ultimate and public form.

It is, therefore, an operation comparable to a "proxy", "a mandate", that considers external assistance not only helpful but even indispensable (although the framework within which it is carried out is the *self*-portraiture), at least to confer the videos shot by Al-Qaeda's members the value of high circulation contents in the context of new media, in order to reach as many addressees as possible.

According to the authors' original intentions, there is not an ideal or well-defined addressee, since, according to Al-Qaeda's objectives, it does not matter *who watches* the video, but that the video *is watched*, replicated and remediated in the global communication circuits. As Mitchell wrote, the most important thing concerning the terrorists' iconic strategies is that a video must work as a virus, a material that infects the nervous system of communications, as is the case of an epidemic disease or an "autoimmune disorder" (2011: 45)[10].

This open idea of the addressee attributes to Al-Qaeda's video-testaments a function that exceeds the canonical idea of self-configurative presence. Therefore, under these circumstances,

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9 As it is evident, for instance, in Ahmad al-Haznawi's or in Abdulaziz al-Omari's video-testaments, two suicide killers involved in the 9/11 attacks (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IlW39yVsQw0; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7T65faJSt8c).

10 Quoting a Jacques Derrida's metaphor, Mitchell claims that autoimmunity is a condition that occurs when the immune system mistakenly attacks and destroys healthy body tissue. In Mitchell's words: "Like almost everyone who attempted to picture the dynamics of terrorism and its effects on the social body, Derrida turned to a biological metaphor, but one focused on the defense mechanism of the organism itself, rather than on the usual picture of terrorism as a foreign invasion by alien microbes" (2011: 45).

representation becomes a term that, in our iconic perspective, can be interpreted at least in a double sense[11]. The first is representation *as the process of self-portraying*, that is, putting oneself into the image in order to create a virtual self-equivalent. In the presence of it, the subject can say "Here I am!" and is able to recognize himself in something "external". This meaning is obviously related to the idea of a new presentation (*re*-presentation) of the subject, his transformation into an image through a process of self-definition that considers the image as a copy, a mimetic duplicate.

The second is representation *as the process of being substituted by the image*. In this case, the subject has to face an image that acts "instead of" him, as an iconic appearance related to a physical absence. As a result, the image performs the role of a substitute that acts on behalf of the subject and consequently its role changes too, shifting from the function of *copy* to the function of *presence*; in this sense, its attitude is no longer only mimetic or repetitive, but becomes fully operative. Once again, it is important to distinguish between this idea of a vicarious presence of the image and the idea of *simulacrum*, that we have discussed in the beginning of the article: in fact, if the second consists of an ontological radicalization – maybe we could call it a "dramatization" – of the relationship between facts and their iconic representation that nowadays seems to have become obsolete, the first can instead prove very useful to understand both the mechanisms of contemporary circulation of images in our mediascape and their connection with reality.

Finally, I would like to conclude by giving particular relevance to this second acceptation of "representation", an important vector to study the "production of presence" (Gumbrecht, 2004) promoted by Islamic radicalism after the 9/11 attacks, especially moving from a self-configurative point of view. In fact, the recording of a video-message (Osama bin Laden) or a video-testament (the *shahid*) initiates a process that basically replaces a body with a digital content, allowing a virtual image (the video) to substitute – I repeat: not as a *simulacrum*, but as an *operative presence* – a biological image (the body) in the global visibility.

After all, if bin Laden is a fugitive, a body that must remain hidden appearing only in the video digital elusiveness, then the *shahid*, after his death, is also replaced by an image, a video-testament that continues his holy war in the media system. Two cases that show how these very peculiar self-configurative images demonstrate – so to speak – the desire *to be* and not just *to seem*: they want to represent an active substitute for the subject and not simply his copy; they want to continue a mission when the subject is absent, or, as in the body-bomber's case, when the subject is no longer alive.

11 In italian two different words exist to indicate the two meanings: *rappresentazione* vs *rappresentanza*.

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