

## Self-Configuration Gestures from the State of Conflict: Abu Ghraib, Osama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda's *Shahid*

Lorenzo Donghi / Ph.D. Thesis Abstract<sup>1</sup>

Università degli Studi di Torino

My Ph.D. thesis, starting from the definition of some significant aspects of the media production concerning the images of the so-called War on Terror, in particular from 9/11 to autumn 2008 (namely, when the global economy started to collapse and *crisis* substituted *terror* on the international stage of emergency), attempts to focus on a selection of the most important and most recent bibliographies on the subject, especially on studies coming from the Anglo-Saxon area.

Two bibliographies are the main topics debated with the aim to profile the state of the art of the current research on the war representation: the first one focuses on the new media scenario, the backdrop wherein the contemporary war is fought and negotiated;<sup>2</sup> the second one investigates the presence and the functions of new operators of visibility that emerged (or were reinforced) in the last decade conflicts.<sup>3</sup>

As a matter of fact, War on Terror is the first war increasingly fought online, a context wherein those who fight try to take advantage of new communication technologies, such a crucial instrument in the field of contemporary warfare, to be able to promote the online space as an important showcase of the conflict. In this way, the concrete and tangible ideas of the battlefield are re-mediated in a virtual landscape formed by collective imagination and data exchanges, just as the same idea of war frontline becomes a diffused horizon.<sup>4</sup>

But the War on Terror is also a war wherein the conception of image as *simulacrum* (a conception that reached the highest point with a suspicious and postmodern mindset during the end of the last century) has become weak, unable to ask appropriate questions about 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

<sup>1</sup> Ph.D. Thesis supervised by Prof. Federica Villa and Prof. Giaime Alonge. For information: lorenzodonghi@yahoo.it

<sup>2</sup> Nathan Roger, *Image Warfare in the War on Terror*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke-New York 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Kari Andén-Papadopoulos, Mervi Pantti (eds.), *Amateur Images and Global News*, Intellect, Bristol 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Hoskins, Ben O'Loughlin, *War and Media: The Emergence of Diffused War*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2010.

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*, the primary perspective in the study of the War on Terror.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, one 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’ to be investigated. The path chosen in this thesis is the one of 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 broadcasts 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-footage directly shot and edited by the soldiers and uploaded to file-sharing platforms, from the global network to the entertainment industry, nowadays various forms of self-representation take decisive part in the visual processes of the conflict, in its sale as a product to the audience, and in its propaganda mechanisms. Under these circumstances, the main aim of my research has been to investigate forms and modalities of the self-portraiture as a privileged trajectory of undoubted relevance to the analysis of how media return contemporary conflicts to the audiences.

More specifically, this research has taken some symptomatic case studies into consideration in order to define the close relationship between audiovisual devices and men involved in conflicts, with the intention of understanding the interrelated solutions existing between “technologies of Self” and visual forms of contemporary war.

The first one concerns the diffusion of Abu Ghraib snapshots. Indeed, in April 2004 the television program *60 Minutes* and some articles published by Seymour M. Hersh in *The New Yorker* brought to public attention a sensational case of war tortures. The cause of the scandal relates not just to what images show (notoriously, a group of western soldiers forcing Iraqi prisoners into 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 ways, even reconsiders the role of the war reporter, replacing his function and his presence.

The second one concerns Osama bin Laden’s self-iconography. Osama bin Laden has been a political leader with no official portraiture, with no monuments erected in his honor or memory – indeed “no statues, monuments, palaces or regimes could be leveled as ways of performing the destruction of bin Laden”<sup>6</sup> – but he was also a leader who did not renounce a personal iconography, and who was able to use television and the Internet as the most powerful spaces of self-promotion. It means that bin Laden produced and released video-messages

<sup>5</sup> William J.T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2011.

<sup>6</sup> *Ivi*, p. 3.

### Self-Configuration Gestures from the State of Conflict

using his body as a symbolic figure (capable to easily change in response to political decisions or military campaigns) and demonstrating in this way a full attention concerning his own *mise-en-scene*.

The last one concerns one of the most shocking characters in the post-9/11 war imagination: the Islamic shahid. This term defines a recurring figure in the horizon of Islamic radicalism; 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 mediatic resonance. In this perspective, the shahid often shoots a video before his death, a content that constitutes the peak of his rituals of indoctrination: in this way the shahid can assert the authorship of his imminent gesture and he can also bid farewell to the world, exactly as in the case of an audiovisual testament.