Averted Gazes, Deferred Consumption: Osama bin Laden’s Cinematic Life and Death

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From the September 11 attacks in 2001 to Osama bin Laden’s controversial death in 2011, a decade of video productions has signaled a paradigmatic shift in the construction, dissemination, interpretation, and consumption of the image of the Arab terrorist. Bin Laden’s video-punctuated life and death constitutes a series that has accompanied the American public sphere in a spiraling progression from a catastrophic present—the planes colliding with the World Trade Center’s Twin Towers—cemented into an impregnable but forever-replayed part of contemporary history, to a threatening future in the shape of filmed warnings to the U.S.A., to finally an elusive and obscenely live assassination streamed through the SEAL team’s helmet-mounted cams and relayed to the Obama administration, but withheld from immediate public consumption. The carefully edited and subsequently released video of an ageing Osama bin Laden watching himself on a TV screen and holding his own remote control unit (the mirror image of a tele-controled, death-giving technology), a post-mortem apparition conjured up from the stash of films found at the Abbottabad compound, is perhaps the most significant icon of the coming age not only of tele-warfare, tele-terrorism, and tele-assassination, but also of the infinite deferral of the image of the Other Arab. From Adorno to Žižek, passing by Lacan, Barthes, Deleuze, and Virilio, Osama bin Laden’s cinematic life and death will be set as the ultimate emblem of a continuously shifting representation of the threat posed by organized terrorism on America.