Burning images

Performing effigies as political protest

Göttke, F.U.

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Double Bodies

In an effigy protest, a political conflict and its resolution is staged through the punishment of an individual by a community. This symbolic punishment does not affect the physical body of the targeted person, but rather ridicules, insults, and humiliates, attacking someone’s reputation and social standing. An effigy embodies an individual’s social or political status, highlighting the division between private body and public body recurrent in Western political thought.

Philosopher Judith Butler, who contests precisely this division—for instance, in relation to philosopher Hannah Arendt’s notion of the political—terms these two aspects the “private body . . . preoccupied with the repetitive labor of reproducing the material conditions of life,” and the “public body,” which appears “to speak and act.” Butler makes clear that this bifurcation of the body is an operation of power, “the effect of a certain regulation of bodily appearance” in Western political thought and practice. The notion of the public body is further subdivided into various social, political, and judicial aspects. The conditions of the social body, determined by social relations and codes of conduct, infer an individual’s good name, honor, reputation, or face that needs to be saved, the public persona or image. The political aspects attached or superimposed onto the private body include the legal person, citizenship, and political office, or categories like

nobility and sovereignty. These social and political aspects of the public body are made visible in various ways, with official insignia, like heraldic signs, or clothing linked to status and class. They are also made visible figuratively in honorary paintings, reliefs, busts, and sculptures. These figurative representations of the social and political body are closely associated with the term “effigy.”

Social and Political Effigy Traditions in Europe

In the past, the term effigy has been used quite broadly to mean an image or a representation of a person in visual art, literature, and theater. Currently, the term more narrowly denotes makeshift figurative representations of individuals made for, ridiculed and executed in political protests. Additionally, effigy is one half of compound nouns, born of genealogical and semantic relations to certain figurative sculptures: tomb effigy, funeral effigy, and coin effigy. While

3 The entry “effigy” in the Oxford English Dictionary reads: “1. A likeness, portrait, or image. Now chiefly applied to a sculptured representation, or to a habited image, as in 2.; also to a portrait on a coin; in a wider sense somewhat arch. 2. Phrases. in effigy: under the form, or by means of, a portrait or image; also fig. to execute in effigy, to hang in effigy, to burn in effigy: to inflict upon an image the semblance of the punishment which the original is considered to have deserved; formerly done by way of carrying out a judicial sentence on a criminal who had escaped; now only as an expression of popular indignation or hatred.” Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “effigy,” www.oed.com.
4 In archeology, the terms “effigy mound” and “effigy vessel” are used for burial mounds and containers in the shape of humans or animals in pre-Columbian cultures. Since this more general meaning is not relevant to my study, I don’t address it here.
each is a pictorial representation of someone’s physical appearance, more importantly, they represent the social and political status of the individual depicted. The roots of these European image traditions are found in ancient Roman image culture.⁵

In ancient Rome, public spaces, its temples as well as private houses, were crowded with sculptural representations of individuals: statues of ancestors, gods, emperors, senators, and other important personages were part of ritual life. The images of ancestors, exhibited inside the family home, facilitated the transfer of status from the family to the individual. Statues in public space represented the social and political position of those depicted within the hierarchy of Roman society, codified by location, size, material, pose, and attire.⁶ Images designated for lasting veneration were made from durable material like marble, bronze, or wood, while images used in ephemeral funerary rites were made of wood, cloth, and wax.⁷ During the Roman Empire (between 27 BC and 395 AD), minting golden coins was the exclusive right of the emperor.⁸ Their portraits on coins, a signs of imperial sovereignty, was also called effigy.⁹ The image of

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⁹ In numismatics, the portrait on the obverse side of a coin is still called an effigy.
the legitimate ruler was the basis for economic interactions. As a ubiquitous, travelling medium, coins spread the ruler’s presence throughout the empire and manifest their claim to the throne. Statue, funeral, and coin effigies were just some of the media used in Rome to manifest power. These same media could also be used to delegitimize power in the political ritual of *damnatio memoriae*, during which images of a disgraced person were condemned to destruction to erase their memory. All three types of Roman effigies—coin, statues, and ritual—continued to be used in varying degrees throughout European history.

This employment was not always without conflict, since the image prohibition of Abrahamic religions was a counter-force against abundant use of images. Developed in monotheistic Judaism in the millennium before the Common Era, the prohibition was established to avert the dangers of idolatry: mistaking the image for what it represents, and containing and reducing the omnipotent God in the image. Instead, in Judaism, the word and other non-iconic signs were given primacy in regulating the relationship between God and His Chosen People. This anti-iconic impulse was adopted by the newer monotheistic religions, Christianity developing from the first century onwards, and Islam founded by Muhammad early in the 6th century.

In the burgeoning Christian religion, though, the idea of the incarnation of Christ made it possible to think

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10 Effigies were the figurative forms of images of power, next to it were non-figurative images like emblems and heraldic signs, or built structures like palaces and temples.
of images as representations of divine power. Christ, the incarnation of the invisible God, was conceived as the image of God, his historical manifestation.11 “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation,”12 asserts apostle Paul in his letter to the Colossians, establishing in the next line Christ as the source of all earthly power: “For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him.”13 Christ, as the incarnation of God, connected the temporal power of the earthly ruler with the eternal power of God and introduced a paradoxical relationship between the visible and invisible, image and truth.14

This paradox could not be solved dogmatically, as art historian and philosopher Marie-José Mondzain describes in her book *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary* (1996), and the Church Fathers developed sophisticated arguments around the status of the image in relation to power in order to philosophically manage the enigmatic relationship between image, truth, and power.15 Christ was thought to be fully human as well as fully divine. His two natures—the divine and the human—were understood as separate but coexistent within one body, which was thought of as an image. Through analogy, this

13 American Standard Bible, Col. 1:16.
enigmatic double nature and its containment in an image was transferred to the Byzantine emperors. Eternal power was folded into temporal power, as the emperor derived his legitimacy and authority from the metaphorical as well as the iconic analogy with Christ. Christ and the emperor were presented as two aspects of the same power. They appeared as two sides of the same coin—literally—when at the beginning of the eighth century, Emperor Justinian II of Byzantium had coins minted with an image of Christ on one side and an effigy of himself on the other.\(^{16}\)

Compatible with Roman traditions, the overlapping of divine and earthly power also became the template for the medieval European doctrine of divine kingship, in which questions about representation and the image remained central. While in Byzantium the paradoxical relationship between image and truth led to the two periods of Byzantine Iconoclasm in the eighth and early ninth centuries, in the Roman Church, the role of images in worship was not challenged until the Reformation in the sixteenth century. Despite cleansing church spaces and religious practices of images in parts of Europe, the representation of power with images of the ruler in the form of statues and coin effigies remained ubiquitous, and was adopted in other sociopolitical contexts including funeral rites and judicial procedures.

In the Middle Ages, tomb effigies appeared in France and England and were in use up until the nineteenth century. Tomb effigies are sculptures of stone or bronze on top of a tomb that depict the deceased lying in

eternal sleep. The effigies represent the public body of the deceased, reflected in their clothes, attributes, and heraldic signs.\textsuperscript{17} As a variation on tomb effigies, transi tombs show an additional, second effigy of the decomposing corpse.\textsuperscript{18} This sculptural doubling makes the conceptual doubling of the body into private and public—mortal and eternal—even more explicit.

A similar doubling of the body occurred in the lifelike effigies in the funerary rituals of kings in early modern France and England. Deriving from divine kingship, the king and queen—analogous to Christ, being both human and divine—had a mortal human body and an immortal body, their body politic.\textsuperscript{19} Upon death, the immortal body was embodied by a life-size and lifelike effigy made of wood, cloth, and wax and used during the funeral ceremony.\textsuperscript{20} The effigy was dressed in the royal regalia and waited upon as if alive, while the monarch’s physical remains remained hidden in the coffin.

In the seventeenth century, the figure of the sovereign reemerged in philosopher Thomas Hobbes’s book \textit{Leviathan} (1651). Written at a time when the English monarchy was in crisis, this reconfigured figure of sovereign power was Hobbes’s visualization of social contract theory. Art historian Horst Bredekamp suggests Hobbes was

\textsuperscript{17} Hans Belting devotes one chapter of his book \textit{Bild-Anthropologie} to the heraldic sign, which he understands as a non-mimetic medium of the social body. Belting, \textit{Bild-Anthropologie}, 115–42.
\textsuperscript{18} Transi-tombs became customary in the fifteenth and sixteenth century.
\textsuperscript{19} Ernst H. Kantorowicz, \textit{The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 382–84
\textsuperscript{20} Kantorowicz, \textit{The King’s Two Bodies}, 419–37.
inspired by English funeral effigies to imagine the sovereign as an “artificial man.””21 The _Leviathan_, and especially the image on its frontispiece, was an iconic emblem for a series of displacements that transferred the power of the collective to an individual, be it the king or any other chosen or elected representative. Political philosopher Susan Buck-Morss writes: “the sovereign figure as personification of the collective demonstrates the power of the visible image to close the circle between constituting and constituted power, explaining why even when the illegalities of an individual sovereign are exposed, the faith of the believer is still not shaken.”22 The figure of the sovereign still has strong global resonance in political thought today, demonstrating the capacity of images to make absence present, and the abstract comprehensible.23

In the same period that funeral effigies emerged, the punishment of effigies became customary in formal justice throughout Europe and was practiced until the nineteenth century for crimes like desertion, treason, heresy, or counterfeiting.24 If a perpetrator could not be apprehended, their effigy was tried and punished instead. In February 1667, an effigy of banker Louys Bais was hanged in Paris on order of the court for gambling away the king’s tax money.25 In 1673, Johan Baron de Montbas’s

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25 _Ordinaris dingsdarghe courante_ (Amsterdam), March 1, 1667.
effigy was hanged by martial court for cowardice and treason for failure to defend the Rhine at Lobith against the French. In 1689, Capiteyn Rambac’s effigy met the same fate in Lyck, Belgium for desertion. In 1732, the effigies of eight counterfeiters were executed in Brussels. Some effigies were accorded the full pomp of real executions, like that of Kai Lykke in Denmark in 1661, while others were executed rather summarily. During the Spanish Inquisition, about two-fifths of the condemned, having fled the country, were burned in effigy instead of in person.

While this symbolic punishment did not have the same legal status as real executions—the trial was repeated if the accused was caught—they had a number of important functions. They made the crimes and sentences public, and brought the procedures of the law to a satisfying end by repairing the crime’s damage to the body politic. What is more important is that these effigy punishments had actual consequences for the delinquent. As art historian Karl Härter points out, the public punishment of the effigy blemished the honor and reputation of the perpetrator, with lasting consequences for himself and his family.

26 “De la Haye le 26 Juillet,” La gazette d’Amsterdam, July 27, 1673.
27 “Duystsant en d’aengrensende Rijcken,” Oprechte Haerlemsche courant (Netherlands), December 27, 1689.
28 “Hoe men vroeger strafte,” Bataviaasch nieuwsblad (Jakarta), March 27, 1920.
29 See chapter 7.
30 Modern estimates put the numbers of people condemned to death between 3,000 and 5,000. Wikipedia, s.v. “Spanish Inquisition.”
Similar to effigy punishment in formal justice, and possibly its precursor, is effigy punishment as a custom of popular justice. This technique of social shaming, exclusion, and punishment by a community is subsumed under the terms “rough music,” Katzenmusik (cats music) in German, Ketelmuziek (kettle music) in Dutch, and charivari (tumultuous noise) in French. Widespread throughout Europe at least since the Middle Ages and still in use in the twentieth century, it was brought over to some colonies such as New England and the West Indies. Traditionally, rough music was employed in response to violations of sexual norms and marital customs of a community, like marrying below status, adultery, wife-beating, or husband-beating.

The most common practice was the performance of a mock concert in front of the perpetrator’s house: beating on pots and pans for three consecutive nights. But the punishment could also include the parading, trial, and punishment of an effigy depicting the perpetrator or the abuse of the perpetrator themselves. In one example of

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rough music: 1727_UK ("The skimmington: rough music that mocked cuckolds, hen-pecked husbands and shrewish wives")

rough music: 1881_12_31_USKY

rough music: 1930_Netherlands (wedding couple)
rough music from Brabant in the Netherlands in 1950, the property of a farmer was barricaded with disabled carts and an effigy on a bed frame was put on the roof of the barn to humble him for breaking his marriage promise.37 Sometimes an effigy execution was preceded by a community trial or a mock trial, and concluded with a mock burial. These ritual performances ridiculed, humiliated, and ostracized the perpetrators and could affect their social standing for a long time.38

These punishing effigy practices are often popularly associated with magical practices performed with images referred to as “voodoo.”39 What is meant by “magic,” though, remains unclear, frequently alluding to the belief that a ritual enacted on a doll can affect the physical body of the target by, for instance, inflicting physical pain. In his seminal study on punishment of effigies in formal justice in early modern Europe, ethnologist and art historian Wolfgang Brückner insists that there is no magic in the punishment and states that contemporary opinion did not see these as magical either.40 Recent scholarship appears to have lost interest in magic and focuses instead on the social, political, and judicial aspects of effigy punishing practice.41

37 Rooijakkers, Eer en schande, 7–11.
40 An article from 1898 describes the political practice along witchcraft, public shaming, and customs of formal justice, dismissing the possibility of magic. “Custom of Burning Effigies,” Wichita Daily Eagle, October 25, 1898.
41 Brückner, Bildnis und Brauch, 202.
Even though a strict binary distinction between social, political, and magical practices fails to take into account the social aspects of magic, the most important aspect in the burning or hanging of effigies, especially in political protests, is their relation to the social and political realm, which determines my focus.

**Carnival Effigies**

Apart from effigy practices in social, political, and judicial contexts, burning effigies played and still plays a role in traditional holidays related to carnival. These traditions celebrate annual cycles—death and rebirth, the return of spring after winter—with the expulsion of the exhausted forces of the previous year. The adverse forces of decline and death are personalized in general figures and embodied with effigies representing *Ano Viejo* (the Old Year), Winter, Carnival, Maslenitsa, or the Witch among many others. The effigies are burned in festivals on New Year’s Eve, at the end of carnival proper, or around Easter, to mark and foster the rejuvenation of nature and the purification of the community. These festivals exist in a large variety of locally specific forms all over Europe.

In some places, these traditions have been adapted to fit changing belief systems. In Greece and Spain, the pagan carnival figures have been replaced by effigies of “Judas” and burned before Easter. The British Guy Fawkes Day was introduced to celebrate the deliverance of King James I from a Catholic conspiracy in 1605, but acquired
many carnivalesque elements like bonfires, the burning of effigies, and the sense of exuberance and festive disorder from the older celtic festival Samhain. Similar ritual festivals, which deal with the struggle between adverse and beneficial forces and that include effigy burning exist in Hindu cultures in India (Ravana, Holika, Narkasur), Pakistan (Ravana), Nepal (Ghantakarna), and Bali (Ogoh-ogoh). During the Jewish “carnival” Purim, effigies of Haman, the antagonist in the Book of Esther, are hanged
Many of these traditional practices have been taken to other countries and continents by migrating populations. European traditions, spread globally during colonial times, are still part of vibrant local cultures in the Americas and elsewhere. Guy Fawkes Day, for instance, spread to New England, Canada, South Africa, Botswana, and New Zealand. The Spanish traditions of burning “the Old Year” and Judas are celebrated all over Latin America as well as in the Philippines. The Indian festivals in which Ravana and Holika are burned in effigy take place in, for instance, Trinidad and the United Kingdom. The spread of effigy traditions across so many different cultures and their enormous variance indicates that the practice is very adaptable and migrates easily.

Over all, India and Pakistan seem to be the countries in which the practice of burning effigies in protests is most prevalent. A search in the digital archive of The Hindu resulted in 221 hits over a five-month period in 2006. A similar search in the New York Times archive over the same period yielded only 4 hits. No Pakistani newspaper archive is available online. See appendix 4.

These traditional practices are occasionally adapted to address current political conflicts. While the form and time of traditional festivals remain constant, traditional figures are replaced by contemporary politicians. In the effigy traditions of Ano Viejo and Judas in Latin America and Guy Fawkes Day in the UK, this political turn has become an established part of celebrations with effigies of contemporary politicians burned each year.

In a farther-reaching appropriation, traditional forms are often removed from the ritual context and used in explicitly political protests. This shift becomes visible in the form of protest effigies, when, for instance in India, the ten-headed demon king Ravana has come to represent the ministers of the government in a protest unrelated to the original festival.45 The personification of an abstract adversary like “Winter” or “Ravana” is replaced with the figurative image of a political representative deemed responsible for an adverse situation. The notions of evil and adversity associated with the traditional figures are activated in political effigy protests: the conspirator Guy Fawkes, the traitor Judas, the evil archenemy Haman, the scapegoat “Nubbel”—in the Cologne carnival a kind of mascot for revelers, who later blame him for their carnival transgressions and excesses. The semantic proximity between notions of purification in advancing renewal and

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punishment to demand change allows for the cross-over between traditional and political practices. The archetypal figures of exclusion, the scapegoat, the traitor, the evil archenemy are affectively used in political protest.

Protesters substitute the living private body of their enemy with the animated material body of the effigy. Through resemblance, the material body is superimposed with the abstract public body of the depicted and associated with evil and abject. These bodies are entangled in varying degrees of separation and dependence, and manipulation of either can affect the other. A punch in the physical face, even the face of the substitute effigy, humiliates, and the humiliating loss of the symbolic face can affect physical well-being. In the hands of the protesters, the effigy becomes a humble but devious medium to manipulate the entanglement of bodies: the material substitute, the private, and the public body.