Burning images
Performing effigies as political protest
Göttke, F.U.

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DIALOGIC COMMUNICATION: EFFIGY PROTESTS IN IRAQ

The Plinth

In 2003, the iconoclastic act of toppling Saddam Hussein’s statue on Baghdad’s Firdos Square signaled the end of his regime. The intense media coverage of the event instantaneously elevated the square to a lieu de memoire, a site memorializing this specific moment in the Iraq War. But right from the start, the event was contested, as it elicited divergent readings at home and abroad. The site became semantically overdetermined by the varied interpretations of the falling statue.

In the decade that followed, Firdos Square remained a focus of the international news media as a vibrant public forum and site of protests against the United States’s occupation. Followers of the Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr organized protests that restaged the event, replacing Saddam’s statue with effigies of US President George W. Bush. They used this symbolic theatrical protest and the media attention to communicate their position.

I concentrate on how these acts of communication function from a Western perspective. Drawing on studies in art history and visual culture, I use Iraq under occupation as a case study to examine how different cultural traditions of mediating power influence each other. As before, I argue

2 Florian Göttke, Toppled (Rotterdam: Post Editions, 2010), 48.
3 It is unclear if the protesters appropriated Iraqi cultural traditions, like the Ta’ziyeh in Iran, for the political effigy performances in Baghdad, or if they were inspired by, for instance, the Iranian effigy protests against the United States from 1979 onwards, which I describe in chapter 5.
that communication through media builds on and further develops a shared symbolic language, leading to dialogue across cultural borders. More specifically, here I show how effigy protests, facilitated and complicated antagonistic communication between publics in the “West” and Iraq.

The statue in Firdos Square that portrayed Saddam as a statesman in Western dress, a suit and tie, was erected just a year before the war in celebration of his sixty-fifth birthday. It was one of the many visual signs of his dictatorial power and cult of personality. To bolster his regime’s legitimacy, Saddam appropriated many narratives and discourses: he projected onto himself the myth of the old Babylonian kings and the historical figure Saladin as the liberator of Jerusalem; he instrumentalized traditional tribal power structures; he accumulated military positions and political offices of the nation-state; he maintained a constant presence in the news media and followed the European tradition of manifesting power visually with statues and monuments in urban public space; and his portrait multiplied on coins, public buildings, offices and private
homes. These images became icons of absolute sovereignty—
demonstrating his omnipresence and omnipotence.

On the morning of April 9, 2003, Saddam appeared
on TV for the last time as president of Iraq. That afternoon,
when American soldiers and Iraqi citizens toppled his statue
in front of assembled international news media, Saddam’s
regime ended. As the statue was a direct expression of
his power, its fall became the visible manifestation of the
regime’s collapse.⁶

Afterwards, for a time, the square became a thriving
public forum: a place to express political positions, voice
demands, and interact with journalists of the international
news media. The plinth, a placeholder for the absent image
of power, didn’t remain empty for long; an artist’s collective
proposed a different vision of Iraqi identity and future by
erecting a sculpture on top symbolizing freedom and the
unity of Iraq.⁷

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⁷ The sculpture depicted a family of three, holding a crescent moon and a sun. It was created by Bassem Hamad al-Dawiri and erected in May 2003 on the initiative of the artist’s collective Najeen.
The square also became the site for manifestations and demonstrations against new powers in Iraq. In April 2005, on the second anniversary of the statue’s fall, Bush, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and Saddam were presented on a podium in front of the plinth as effigies, clad in red prison jumpsuits with neckties bearing their names. The effigies were shackled, nooses tied around their necks, and their faces transformed into those of werewolves. The three leaders, enemies in real life, became monsters of the same kind.  

8 The protesters seem to build on the theme of King Nebuchadnezzar, to whom Saddam Hussein had often compared himself as the builder of Babylon. As a punishment from god, the king went mad, living like an animal—according to some, a werewolf—for seven years. Reading this story through Giorgio Agamben’s “homo sacer,” the monster also represents bare life, the other side of the absolute sovereign, who is outside the law: the man, “who may be killed and yet not sacrificed.” See Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 12.
Three years later, in October 2008, the effigies of Bush and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice were burned in protest of the planned security agreement between Iraq and the US during a rally organized by al-Sadr, the Iran-backed Shia cleric who was one of the most influential politicians in post-Saddam Iraq. Rice’s effigy is dressed in black and grey, in an insulting array of clothing: a skimpy skirt, long stockings, and a handbag, with pink slippers for earrings with soles adorned by Stars of David (considered defamatory in an anti-Israel context). Bush’s effigy wears a white shirt and red tie. Holding a popsicle, he seems mangled from the years of occupying Iraq, his head and right arm dressed in bandages. Most photographs from the effigy performance show two figures burning intensely, in front of a crowd. A wide-angle photograph of the scene shows people handling the burning effigies separated from the mass of protesters behind them. The left lower corner of the photograph shows the real public for whom the effigies are performed: a throng of photo- and video-journalists recording the event. The effigy burning could not have been highly visible to the assembled crowd, many barred from participating. Rather than a means to channel communal sentiment and aggression during protest, this performance appears to have been first and foremost a media spectacle, staged to spread images of the violated bodies of detested US American leaders.
A month later, another Bush effigy was attached to Saddam’s plinth on the square, this time doubled in size, increasing the spectacle’s visibility for the assembled crowd. It is dressed in a Western suit and tie, just like Saddam’s destroyed statue. The suit stands in marked contrast to the turban and cleric’s robe al-Sadr usually wears. Bush’s effigy holds a whip in its right hand and in its left a suitcase with the inscription reading: “US-Iraq security pact” in Arabic. The toppling of the former Iraqi sovereign was restaged with that of his successor now wielding power over Iraq.
Six months later, for the sixth anniversary of Saddam’s fall, yet another Bush effigy was prepared: a towering figure, at least three times the size of the former president was burned on the same plinth. This time the maker did not bother to fabricate a jacket—Bush was retired after all—but the light-blue shirt and red tie clearly identify him as a Western official. The sheer size of the effigy, as well as the attention to detail including neat tailoring reveals considerable effort. The photograph of a grumpy Bush is molded around the effigy’s head. A strange doubling of the collar and the tailored shirt occurs, but instead of disturbing the overall image, this detail somehow confirms the veracity of the effigy. In one photograph, the maker adds what appears to be an unraveled piece of a woven plastic bag to the head, apparently meant to depict Bush’s hair. I interpret this as an attempt to hide the abrupt transition between the photograph and the formless rest of the head, and to breach the excessive smoothness of the silhouette and shiny surface of the stuffed plastic bag: an effort to increase the verisimilitude of the effigy by rendering the two-dimensional photographic face, which ensures recognizability, more functional as a sculpted part of the body. The effigy was attached to the plinth and set alight during a demonstration against the occupation by the US-led coalition with around 10,000 participants organized by al-Sadr followers. In the photographs, a large crowd in the oval square carry a sea of Iraqi flags. In addition to Bush, a similarly sculpted head of Saddam is carried around and eventually torn to pieces.
Mediated Presence

As I elaborate in chapter 2 “Double Bodies,” Christianity’s early awareness of the power of visual representation led to a complex, contested, and highly theorized understanding of images in relation to truth and power. In due course, Western image and media culture form the basis on which contemporary global media developed. In Islam, the insistence on an-iconicity of the sacred led to a different configuration of the image in relation to truth and power. God’s intentions were revealed through the Quran, and the body that hears, memorizes, and recites the text becomes the medium that transmits the word of God. Authority is transferred not through the visual, but through the unadulterated word. Privileging the word, Islamic culture developed non-representational media, like the Friday sermon and calligraphy, and employed media like the cassette tape, used extensively to spread the sermons of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in the 1970s. The cultural difference in attitudes and traditions regarding the mediation of power is clear in photographs from the protests in Baghdad staged by al-Sadr’s followers.

10 For instance, while Muslim rulers initially adopted Byzantine iconography on their coins, the images were later replaced by text from the Quran. Oleg Grabar, “From the Icon to Aniconism: Islam and the Image,” *Museum International* 55, no. 2 (2003): 47–49.
11 Grabar, “From the Icon to Aniconism,” 51–52.
Al-Sadr is the scion of one of the most important Shia houses and the son of the widely respected Iraqi Shia cleric Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr. From the beginning of the Iraq War he positioned himself against the US-led war and occupation as well as the conservative Shia establishment around Ayatollah Ali al Sistani. Al-Sadr positions himself not in sectarian but in Arab nationalist terms against the US occupation as well as against Iranian influence. Initially excluded from the political establishment, he organized his followers into a powerful political movement and has robust support among Iraq’s impoverished Shia population. In the areas under his control, he established a police force, local courts following Sharia law, and a militia, the Mahdi Army, with some 60,000 members. In 2003 and 2004, his militia engaged in operations against coalition forces, at one time effectively controlling the seven southern provinces of Iraq. After a US military backlash, he negotiated acceptance into the political establishment. In December 2005, his coalition won 35 percent of votes for parliament, becoming a pivotal force in Iraqi politics.  

Al-Sadr cultivates his image as an eminent figure, using the pulpit as his stage and the Friday sermon as his moment of enunciation. In his role as a Shia cleric, he is obliged to stay out of the fray of daily politics, but his ambition to play a role in Iraqi politics is evident. Maneuvering between the two, he limits his appearances in order to increase his impact in the moments he does present

himself to his public. Although absent from the rally, he is its guiding spirit: his photographic images, carried by the protesters are omnipresent.

Very often in these photographs, Al-Sadr is depicted preaching, voicing, and transmitting the word of God, the source of his theocratic authority.\textsuperscript{14} He has become an image that speaks in front of microphones wielded by the media. Assuming the voice of the protesters, the effigy burning becomes al-Sadr’s speech, made explicit by a protester presenting a portrait of a speaking al-Sadr in front of the burning effigy. The image extends the reach of his voice through his doubly mediated presence.

Al-Sadr skillfully manages the economy of presence in the triangle of power, image, and media. He couples his theological authority—which in Islam relies on the word of the Quran and its interpretation—with the legitimizing authority of visual media. While he is usually absent, emphasizing speech, he uses visual media to manifest and spread presence,\textsuperscript{15} positioning himself at the nexus of political authority of the state, theocratic authority of religion, and iconic authority, which political philosopher Susan Buck-Morss ascribes to the global news media.\textsuperscript{16} His influence is made apparent by the large following he is able to mobilize. The protestors in the street stand in for al-Sadr’s body; they represent a partial Iraqi Shia body politic.

The image of al-Sadr, which in the strict sense is

\textsuperscript{14} Arkoun, The Unthought, 208.
not that of a sovereign, meets another image of sovereign power: the effigy of Bush, by then no longer president. In the US, he was only the representative of the sovereign, “the people,” but in the state of exception established through war and occupation, as noted earlier, it can be argued that in Iraq he had wielded actual sovereign power over life and death.

As I describe in the chapter 2 “Double Bodies,” effigies in the political sphere have a long tradition in Christian Europe, relating to the figure of the sovereign, to the idea of the incarnation of Christ, and to earlier Roman image culture. They depict not so much the private body, but the public body of the depicted. In the square in Baghdad, attached to the plinth that once displayed the statue of former sovereign Saddam, effigies seem to act in a similar way: in the maker’s workshop, the effigy of Bush is first a material carrier of an image, onto which the likeness is attached. In front of the protesters, the image is made present in a physical medium resembling a body. Animated
as it interacts with the acting bodies of protesters in the street, the effigy substitutes Bush’s absent body, so that the ritual of reversal, debasement, and punishment can be carried out.

There are three bodies that are combined in the effigy: the physical carrier made of stuffed cloth, a likeness of Bush standing in for his private body, and a public political body, the US president. These distinctions appear in the photographs from Baghdad. The attitudes and acts of the people engaging with the effigy signal slight semantic shifts in how they address one body or another: protesters experience the physical resistance of the effigy’s material body when they beat it; the sense of physical punishment, by bombarding the effigy with plastic bottles and shoes emphasizes the vulnerability of the private body; when the effigy is attacked with denigrating signs and actions and finally set alight, protesters target the president’s political body as US sovereign, dethroned and destroyed in a ritual of carnivalesque reversal. Through these acts, the status of the image is continuously transformed, kept unstable, shifting backwards and forwards—from manufactured doll, to representative of a sovereign country, to embodiment of an individual, until in a last transformation the image and its carrier is destroyed and Bush’s substitute material body is turned into a heap of ashes.

Dialogic Communication

In each event, the site of the protest is constant, a dual site: physical space of Firdos Square, where the symbolic toppling of Saddam’s statue occurred; and virtual space of the news media, which communicates the event globally. This interlinking creates the outsized effect. In the years following, protesters and the media converged time and again at this site to stage re-enactments of the toppling. These enactments were inflections and modulations of the original event, adapting the form and message to the specific moment in time and its political requirements—reflecting, commenting, and playing with media expectations and its need for repetition as well as change.

The destruction of Saddam’s statues—in Firdos Square among many others—executed by Iraqi citizens, did not stem from an image prohibition in the religious sense. Instead, it was aimed at images representing the power of the despised ruler. This image destruction in turn led to the production of new images of destroyed statues and empty plinths. Similarly, punishing Bush’s effigies created images, which gave the protesters a presence in the media. With this image practice, they collectively contested US domination in the global news media, the sphere termed by Buck-Morss as the “visual empire.”

19 While it is widely believed that the toppling of Saddam’s statue was staged by the US Military, Iraqi citizens at least participated, and on that same day, Iraqi protesters elsewhere in Baghdad and Iraq made sure none of the many statues of Saddam survived. Göttke, Toppled, 57–68.
I would not claim that protesters in Baghdad actively had these layered image concepts in mind, but rather that they freely associated with the images present: the plinth, the statue, toppling, suit, werewolf, microphone, their leader, their adversary. Recombining these in various ways, the actors in the square were in active dialogue with these varied image concepts through referencing, appropriating, and adapting the symbolic expressions of earlier actors from their own and “Western” culture. Through repetition, the practice of burning effigies became what literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin has called “dialogic”; a shared symbolic language that dynamically develops in communication across national and cultural borders and incorporates multiple connotations.

In this last photograph, al-Sadr appears as Saddam’s successor on the plinth: an assemblage of what’s left of the legs of Saddam’s bronze statue, the protester’s living body substituting al-Sadr’s torso, and his photographic portrait as the head. The hybrid assemblage of disparate image elements is staged for the media. The image symbolically expressed al-Sadr’s rise in stature on the ruins of the old regime, supported by a popular movement. It was only made possible through the symbiotic “collaboration” of the protester on the plinth with the Iraqi photojournalist on the square. Both seized the potential of the event to create a complex, expressive, and dialogic image.

In 2011, the sculpture by Bassem Hamad al-Dawiri was removed from the plinth and the remnant feet of Saddam’s statue reemerged.