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

Publication date
2019

Document Version
Other version

License
Other

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
RESEMBLANCE AND THE GROTESQUE

Resemblance

In chapter 3 “Performing Protest,” I investigate effigy protests as a cultural practice that performatively co-constitutes social reality. In this chapter I investigate the operational aspects of images active in effigy protests, concerning the effigies themselves and the media images they produce, focusing on their function in political constellations and how their aesthetics affectively shape social relations.

Protesters visible in photographs relate to effigies in different ways, using them as props in the performance or interacting with them as animated puppets with a life of their own. The images acquire a degree of agency and operate independently and out of control of any one actor—protester, spectator, photographer, editor, or news consumer. How the actors relate to the images is directed in part by the effigy’s role in the protest scenario and by the recognition of resemblance with the depicted. The recognition of resemblance also conditions the audience’s emotional response to the photographs produced from these performances.

In *The Order of Things* (1966), philosopher Michel Foucault describes the central role of resemblance in the production of knowledge in Western culture until the end of the sixteenth century.¹ The detection of resemblance between distinct objects or phenomena indicated a similarity

---

in function, mechanism, and purpose. Resemblance could also be employed rhetorically to construct relationships between objects. In this way, the knowledge of one phenomenon could be successfully transferred to another. Establishing resemblance integrated the unknown into the categories of the known, potentially creating ordering relationships between objects. Resemblance itself was, as Foucault writes, structured into intricately varied rhetorical forms. These ranged from convenience (spatial proximity), emulation through copying or mimicking, analogy (the inference of similarity from one aspect to another), to sympathy (being affected in a similar way). Ultimately, almost everything could resemble almost everything else, if one could find the right rhetoric to argue it. Only the establishment of certain conventions in how to apply resemblance’s forms and the pairing with an antinomy—for instance “sympathy” with “antipathy”—restricted how resemblance functioned.

With the invention of scientific inquiry as the primary method of knowledge production, resemblance was relegated to the margins of the sciences. A rather diffuse concept was left, which art historian Johannes Endres describes as subjective, relative, and variable, and dependent on the perspective and psychology of the judging subject. In the arts, visual resemblance became the basic condition for the portrait from the late fifteenth-

---

century until the beginning of the twentieth century.\(^3\) Recognizability became crucial in regards to the latent claim that portraits possess living presence, authenticity, and authority.\(^4\) One could assume, then, that a close visual resemblance would also be crucial to protest effigies—linking them to those they depict—and that the closer the visual likeness the more effective the effigy performance. It is indeed now the case that photos taken from media sources are regularly attached to effigies, but before computers and printers became widely available, visual resemblance was only occasionally emphasized—even recent protest effigies often do not attempt to look like the person they depict.

More important than visual resemblance is that participants and audiences might correctly identify the depicted. This is most often achieved by inscribing their name onto the effigy, and by adding other identifiers like flags, symbols, and acronyms, as detailed in previous chapters. These work through association and proximity—older forms of resemblance that as Foucault describes, enable the transfer of characteristics and qualities from one object to another, and which remain central to the function of effigies. In activating these forms, effigies are similar to the votive images (ex-voto), which art historian Georges Didi-Huberman analyzes.\(^5\) Both are types of operational images that have remained outside the usual chronology of

---


the evolution of style and aesthetics found in art history. He comes to the conclusion that different types of resemblance are operational in the ex-voto in a contaminated way. Both the ex-voto and the effigy are examples of surviving representational forms, which drag with their archaic form older epistemological figures into contemporary practices. These residual forms of resemblance do not function in the systematic way Foucault describes, but operate much more pragmatically—or haphazardly—in what Didi-Huberman calls “a heuristic of resemblances.”

My investigation takes up three important functions of resemblance: first, its presupposition of an observer, a judging subject who perceives a resemblance between two objects; second, that resemblance is only ever partial, an ordering principle that does not determine identity but similarity of a certain aspect, therefore at once establishing partial difference; and third, the element of surprise in its recognition triggered by a sudden shift in perception that integrates the object into an ordering relation with another—a relation not previously perceived. In the surprising simultaneous perception of similarity and difference we often find reason for laughter, which is conceptualized as “incongruity theory” in the study of

7 Endres, “Unähnliche Ähnlichkeit,” 33.
8 Endres, “Unähnliche Ähnlichkeit,” 47. Endres quotes the famous sentence by semiotist Charles Sanders Peirce: “The forms of the words similarity and dissimilarity suggest that one is the negative of the other, which is absurd, since everything is both similar and dissimilar to everything else.”
The simultaneous perception of similarity and difference points to another operation at work in certain images: the grotesque. The grotesque emphasizes not the similar aspects of two objects, but the dissimilar, dissonant, unfitting. While resemblance creates ordering relations between objects, the grotesque creates dissonance and disorder. It alienates an object from what it should resemble. The grotesque uses some of the very forms of resemblance, like analogy and proximity, to produce the contagious transference of alienating qualities. I propose then the grotesque as resemblance’s opposite, which counters the ordering operations of resemblance, without undoing the relations forged by resemblance altogether. I develop my argument synchronically with a series of images of effigy protests from different times and places across the globe showing the trans-historical and cross-cultural spread of resemblance and the grotesque.

11 Depicting President Bush as a dog would be an analogy, while hanging a shoe around the effigy of President Obama’s neck would be the contagious transference by proximity.
The effigy of the senior Indian politician Om Prakash Chautala stands in the center of a small knot of protesters in a North Indian town. The effigy is two heads taller than the protesters, supported almost tenderly by several outstretched hands. It is beautifully made from straw and cloth, wearing Chautala’s signature green turban and spectacles; his name is inscribed on its chest. Looking down benevolently, the effigy seems to be involved in an intimate exchange with the protesters. In this photograph the effigy seems animated, almost alive. The figure emanates warmth and dignified authority. I would read the event as in honor of the effigy’s prototype—were it not for the flame licking at the bottom edge of his shirt.

I would like to draw attention to the second figure in the photograph. On a pedestal behind the group stands a garlanded statue of Subhas Chandra Bose—a leading figure in the Indian independence struggle. The two figures resemble one another in many aspects—their size,
coloring, a certain kind of realism, both make present the absent personality—but their function in the social field is diametrically opposed. One is used to honor the depicted, the other to debase.

The use of two quite similar images for very different purposes confirms that a hypothesis attributed to seventeenth-century French penal scholar Pierre Ayrault still holds true today. In relation to effigy punishments (common practice in formal justice at that time, as introduced in chapter 2), he claimed one can equally honor and dishonor someone with an image. Great attention is given to pose, frame, plinth, and placement to make sure an image is honorable. Equally large effort is taken to avoid unflattering or disparaging images, like paparazzi photos, caricatures, or mugshots. Images operate in the social sphere in both honorific and defamatory ways, depending on form, context and the conduct towards them. A statue of durable material, elevated on a plinth as a framing device, ascribes status, until it is smeared or toppled. The ambiguous likeness of an effigy, created from malleable material, is especially unstable and susceptible to animation and manipulation.

12 Wolfgang Brückner, Bildnis und Brauch: Studien zur Bildfunktion der Effigies (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1966), 249.
Like other types of dolls and puppets, effigies often evoke the uncanny feeling that they are alive and dead at the same time—or neither dead nor alive, an ambiguity that makes them especially well-suited for their role in symbolic executions.\textsuperscript{13} Through a lifelike posture or accidental movement of their limbs, they can give the impression of being animated in one moment and inanimate the next. Protesters’ interactions with the unwieldy dolls tend to result in a sort of involuntary slapstick, wherein the roles of leader and follower sometimes seem reversed.\textsuperscript{14} Looking at Prime Minister of Pakistan Benazir Bhutto’s effigy in these two photographs, I find it hard to believe that her carriers could harbor any hostile feelings toward her. In the way that her movement becomes one with those of the men carrying her, the photographs suggest she is in charge, leading the people in the demonstration, and that her animators are just the skillful puppeteers who enable the \textit{grande dame} to rise to her role in the unfolding drama.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{13} Hans Belting, \textit{Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft} (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2001), 146--49.
\textsuperscript{15} Richard Schechner writes about animation of puppets: “Masks and puppets actually constitute second beings who interact with the human actors. These performing objects are suffused with a life force capable of transforming those who play with and through them.” Schechner, \textit{Performance Studies}, 203.
Another kind of lifelikeness speaks from a 1917 newspaper report in *The Milwaukee Journal*.

After the communal effort to clear a piece of land, villagers in Wisconsin staged a ritual of cleansing, burning uprooted trees and brushes and with them an effigy of the preeminent enemy at the time. The reporter describes the last moments of an effigy of German Emperor Wilhelm II and draws special attention to the elements that signify a carnivalesque reversal of his high status: “His head consisted of a pumpkin, his helmet a tin pan, the spike of his helmet a nail covered with tinfoil, his mustache, a frayed piece of rope: the iron cross, two railroad spikes fastened together…” The article continues with a description of the effigy’s burning, and ends with: “The most spectacular feature was when the right arm, holding the sword, dropped in a most lifelike manner, the sword falling into the flames.” In this case, the moment of animation, the moment when the puppet comes alive, rests in the lifelikeness of a simple gesture. This gesture, the falling arm in the moment of the effigy’s death, symbolically expresses the acceptance of defeat. It seems to have made the performance especially satisfying as this moment of animation aligned with the audience’s imagination about the German Kaiser meeting the end he so deserved.

Nevertheless, it is a disturbing paradox that in the execution of the effigy, the notion of lifelikeness no longer relates to a living body, since the moment when lifelikeness increases the affective properties of the performance most, is also the moment of the effigy’s torture and violent death.

1917_10_17_USA-WI: German Kaiser Wilhelm II

1896_01_06_USA-ND: members of a jury

1903_00_00_USA-IL: strike breaker
2011_05_08_Libya: effigy

1918_11_11_UK: German Kaiser Wilhelm II

1939_05_03_USA-FL: African-American voter
The notion of lifelikeness is stretched to its limit when the effigy resembles not a living and dying body, but a dead human corpse mercilessly strung up from a tree or telephone pole. In fact, the resemblance here relates not so much to actual bodies as to other images that these effigy photographs evoke, namely the well-known photographs of lynchings from the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century. These horrific scenes of popular justice were distributed widely during the time in a variety of contexts: in newspapers, as postcards, described in protest songs, or as evidence in the civil rights struggle. The images became lieux de mémoire of African-American suffering and reference points in the cultural memory of the US and beyond. It is exactly these images—still active in the imagination of the South—that the effigy makers intended to evoke in order to tap into their potential for instilling fear in the African-American community. The resemblance and similar function of effigy images to lynching images in this context reveals that the practices are not categorically different—the first a purely symbolic protest sign, the second a brutal act of vigilante justice. Enacted with the intention to activate the resemblance between the two, effigy hanging or burning is in fact part of a range of practices of violent oppression.
Resemblance in the effigy executions comes in many forms. At times its close visual resemblance to the depicted is an intended aspect of the spectacle of punishment. These photographs show a tormented face and broken body—shockingly realistic. The effigy of South Korean President Lee Myung-bak is attacked by a dog, run over by a tank, and stoned to death by a group of protesters, all before a disciplined and chanting public and the cameras of North Korean State Television. The excessive drama turns the figure’s realism into an exaggerated, cinematic hyperrealism, in which one death is never enough, and the imagination must play out all possible scenarios. This symbolic excess corresponds to Foucault’s interpretation of capital punishment in the seventeenth century:

Its aim is not so much to re-establish a balance as to bring into play, as its extreme point, the dissymmetry between the subject who has dared to violate the law and the all-powerful sovereign who displays his strength. . . . , the punishment is carried out in such a way as to give a spectacle not of measure, but of imbalance and excess; in this liturgy of punishment, there must be an emphatic affirmation of power and of its intrinsic superiority.²⁰

This theatrical show of sovereign power that was integral to early modern executions was sometimes also performed

on effigies. Kai Lykke, one of the richest men in Denmark, had been involved in intrigues at the Danish court and in 1661 was convicted of lèse-majesté. Since he had fled, the punishment was carried out on an effigy that was constructed to result in a very lifelike execution.

Equating lifelikeness with truth, the makers of both effigies—even though 360 years and continents apart—apparently strived for a similar spectacular realism to make the spectacle more effective. The effigy in North Korea was staged to counter and possibly exceed the irreverence exhibited by South Korean protesters towards North Korean leaders in earlier demonstrations.

The effigy Kai Lykke’s imitated his person as closely as possible. It was fabricated in the style of the wax state portraits of the time, life-size, mounted on a wooden core with movable limbs, dressed in a complete outfit including wig and white gloves. The effigy was dragged from the state prison, the so-called Blue Tower, to the place of execution, where 400 musketeers and 200 horsemen stood guard. The executioner’s assistant arranged the figure to kneel in the sand, loosened its collar, tied a piece of cloth over its eyes and tucked its hair in from the neck, all according to the rules. At first, the executioner cut off the effigy’s oath hand, then with two strokes its head, while his assistant held up the delinquent’s head at the hair in the usual way. The individual parts of the executed were dragged further and were presented to King Frederik and his court under a window of the palace, whereafter the hand and head were nailed to the pillory on the old market. For a few days, the effigy’s torso was shown to the people in the executioners house for a fee and finally buried under the gallows.  

21 Brückner, Bildnis und Brauch, 303 (my translation).
The Grotesque

The South Korean protesters, however, seemed unconcerned with lifelikeness or any kind of realism. Their effigy performances were rather characterized by caricature and parody. They used photographic representations of their enemies to ensure correct identification, while their effigies had malformed anatomies, absurd bulges, dangling limbs, and distorted expressions—grotesque bodies that invited mockery and derision.

Most effigies look nothing like the depicted. Nonetheless, once identified in the pretend play as “the enemy,” protesters interact with them as if they really are those they substitute. In assessing my collection of images, the aesthetic that characterizes most effigies across the globe is the grotesque. I argue that this is no accident and that the grotesque is unavoidable in the performance of protest that uses effigies to debase and insult an adversary.

Usually, effigies are made—like scarecrows—by amateurs in a do-it-yourself manner. Those who take up the task seem to find great pleasure in the making, visible
in pictorial inventions and a creative use of materials. Nevertheless, the makers often lack the necessary skills to create life-size dolls, and the figures turn out grotesque, out of shape, indeed, out of their makers’ control. Their lack of defined form is not just due to the lack of skill since visual resemblance is often not even attempted. Instead, effigies are intentionally deformed. Exposed to mockery and derision, they become laughingstocks. The lack of form expressed as excess, makes the figures disturbing and unfitting; their deformation induces disgust. The unwieldy dolls, made from disjointed elements and too big to handle, are the monsters from our nightmares who engage with their makers in a performance of denigration, characterized by slapstick and laughter, cruelty and repulsion.
Effigies make the physical private body, which, according to political philosopher Judith Butler, conditions the public body, but never appears as such, open to public scrutiny and violation.\(^22\) The effigies are associated with everything that is considered low: excrement, filth, the soles of shoes, bodily functions, fluids, and excess. Through contagious association, the depicted is defiled and debased. The effigies reduce the person to the material conditions of bare life.

In this photograph from 1945, the most powerful and most despised enemy of humankind, Adolf Hitler, who had dragged half of the world into a brutal six-year war, ended up a powerless empty shell, as in numerous effigy performances at the end of WWII. “Wanted dead or alive for millions of murders,” Hitler is a puppet in the hands of the people, who have overcome his rule. The people, now in charge, manhandle the effigy’s body, beat it, tear at it, insult it, and distort its face. Through the bodily abuse of the effigy, deformation, and symbolic debasement, Hitler is stripped of rank and honor, depersonalized, degraded to the level he had previously attributed to his enemies.

A crowd of 300,000 saw the premier of Iraq hanged in effigy Monday. The Cairo demonstrators hanged effigies of Premier Abdul Karim Kassem alongside the bodies of dogs, cats and rats. Men and women screamed: „We shall bottle your blood, Kassem.” (Chicago Tribune, 17 Mar 1959)

1959_03_16_Egypt: Iraqi Premier Kassem
Another common strategy of debasement is association with animals. Politicians like US President George W. Bush, Russian President Putin, or French President Hollande are associated with dogs and donkeys; President Barack Obama is presented with a sign “Black Dog Obama” or depicted as monkey (both intended as racist insults). In Iraq, Bush, Saddam Hussein, and British Prime Minister Tony Blair are depicted as werewolves. In the Philippines, over the course of several years, protesters have developed a practice that includes a complex visual and theatrical language with which to debase their presidents as grotesque hybrid creatures: vultures, sharks, vampires, zombies, and pigs—even Godzilla. The presidents are dehumanized, expelled from the category of the human and made animal.
Another strategy is demonization. Imagine the demon haunting Pakistani society, the “Killer of Muslims” as a union of Bush and Obama with the face of a devil proudly presented to the camera by two young Pakistani men. Or consider the former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad through the eyes of protesters in Afghanistan: a reptilian monster in one photograph and, a blood-smeared butcher in another. Demonic signs are widely shared across cultures and consistent over time. The devil’s horns appear on effigies of traitor General Benedict Arnold 1880 in the US, Salman Rushdie effigies in Lebanon in 1989 (here as his styled hair), in Bush in India in 2011, and Obama in Russia in 2015.
demonization
In 2013, the chemical company Union Carbide, responsible for the Bhopal chemical disaster twenty-nine years earlier, is depicted as a Western businessman, white-faced in a suit, red tie, and carrying a briefcase, his head adorned with devil’s horns and pointed ears. His face is frozen in a demonic grin, eyes staring threateningly under his raised eyebrows. The body seems to have undergone a punishing ritual: pierced by nails with wounds that leak blood. Paraded through the streets and doused in a flammable liquid, it is set alight. Halfway through the burning, it transforms into an even more devilish image: completely black and framed by flickering flames. Behind the burning figure, a banner articulates the protesters’ demands for justice. The aesthetic of the effigy and the multilayered ritual reveals the true nature of the chemical company and the incapacity of existing governmental structures to address the injustice inflicted on the people by the multinational corporation.

Evil is presented not as an inherent quality, but as a sign of transgression and a category of social relations associated with injustice in the existing order that calls out for redress. This violation of justice is personified in the businessman or politician, made visible in the form of the effigy and the performance of its destruction.
contagious signs
Signs and attributes are often added to effigies, connoting evil and the abject in another form of resemblance: contagion through association. The Swastika, (derogatory treatment of) the Star of David, the dollar sign, and the CIA acronym, serve as signs of evil, greed, and duplicity. In the context of certain protests, these signs are considered offensive, often culturally specific, but through mediation in the contemporary global media environment these contagious symbols have been widely shared across cultural borders, like the Swastika from European history or the shoe as a denigrating sign from Arab cultures.

The denigrating signs are often convoluted when placed on the effigies. This ghostlike figure has Obama’s name affixed on it upside down, the Star of David drawn on its head, his second (misspelled) name “Hussain,” written on it as an indication of Muslim descent, SS written in the style of the SS-runes of Nazi Germany. Semantically, these signs do not necessarily go together, but that does not matter as long as the intent to denigrate is evident.
The operations I describe at work in the performances of effigies—deformation, debasement, dehumanization, and demonization—are all modes of the grotesque, the overarching aesthetics in effigy protests. A number of literary theorists, most notably Mikhail Bakhtin, Wolfgang Kayser, and Geoffrey Galt-Harpham, have investigated the grotesque from different perspectives in literature or art. More recently literary critics Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund presented a critical guide to the term, its forms, uses, and appearance in theory. These scholars describe the grotesque in very similar terms, as monstrous, hybrid, anatomically indeterminate, ambivalent, exaggerated, transgressive, unfinished, or outgrowing. These terms fit the description of many effigies: a man morphing into an animal, a dog with the head of a president, the double-headed monster emerging from a man, or the figure of the sovereign in the process of disintegration.

The grotesque creates the incongruent body, the body out of bounds, the body out of control, the body outside of reason. The hybrid figures that demonization and dehumanization create oscillate between the human and the other. These grotesque effigies exceed their own familiar species or are caught between species. Galt-Harpham writes that “our understanding is stranded in a ‘liminal’ phase, for the image appears to have an impossible split reference, and multiple forms inhabit a single image.” It is impossible to reconcile the debased, exaggerated, deformed bodies of the

effigies with a human body. Just as the figures incorporate incompatible others, they elicit conflicting responses between laughter and terror, “fascination and repugnance, compassion and disgust, sympathy and confusion.” The realization of the impossibility to reasonably grasp the sense of these bodies can evoke a laughter that bursts out from the sudden realization of incomprehension. This missing resemblance of the effigy with the figure depicted can be described as semantic incongruence, the recognition of which—according to the incongruity theory of humor—triggers laughter. But the laughter of the grotesque is ambiguous: it might be light-hearted, cathartic, and liberating, but also hysterical, bitter, and derisive.

As “a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming,” the grotesque is elusive. Even though it is constant as a phenomenon, its form varies depending on the mode of thinking predominant at the time. Galt-Harpham claims that the grotesque “cannot be defined formally, thematically, affectively, or even by relation to other concepts.” Edwards and Graulund conclude: “For if there is any one thing that defines ‘the grotesque’ it is precisely that it is hybrid, transgressive and always in

---

26 Kayser, *Das Groteske*, 201.
motion.”29 What is more, as the grotesque stands “at a margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived,” it not only defies definition but even calls “into question the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world.”30 In Kayser’s words, the grotesque figures constitute “a rebuke of any rationalism and all systematics of thought.”31 The grotesque has an immense potential to challenge the existing order.

Although impossible to define conclusively, it is possible to differentiate the forms of the grotesque, as I have done earlier, according to their transgressive operations: debasement, demonization, dehumanization, and deformation. At the edge of deformation some figures embody the most radical form of the grotesque. Suspended in an unstable state of the human toward the unknown, they verge on the “formless” (l’informe), which French intellectual Georges Bataille introduced in the “Critical Dictionary” that he published in Documents in 1929.32 In the entry “Formless” he does not attempt a definition, but recursively reflects on the dictionary in which the entry appears, fundamentally questioning the dictionary’s capacity to construct an order of things.33 While the hybridization resulting from

29 Edwards and Graulund, Grotesque, 15.
30 Galt-Harpham, On the Grotesque, 3.
31 Kayser, Das Groteske, 205 (my translation).
33 Bataille’s “Critical Dictionary” is in some sense similar to Jorge Luis Borges’s “Chinese Encyclopedia,” which Foucault writes about in the beginning of The Order of Things as an example to show the arbitrariness in any attempt to construct a coherent order of things. The formless would be the act of abstaining from the impulse to impose a classification onto the things in front of us. This abstinence would possibly open our minds to perceive things otherwise, outside
demonization or dehumanization strains our capability to order the world, the formless denies any possibility of a stable order. As art historian Didi-Huberman writes in his book *Formlose Ähnlichkeit: oder die fröhliche Wissenschaft des Visuellen nach Georges Bataille*, Bataille’s “formless” is “neither the simple negation of form nor the simple absence of form.” Instead it is “a certain capacity of forms to constantly deform themselves, to suddenly shift from resemblance to dissemblance.” In *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*, Didi-Huberman relates “dissemblance” to Adam’s original sin and the subsequent loss of man’s resemblance with God. The grotesque, then, becomes a metaphor to describe the painful dissociation from man’s true image. This aesthetics of loss is associated with the consciousness of our own death, but also with the embrace of death as a condition of life in the spirit of Bakhtin’s liberating carnival.

---

Of the usual framework, as singular entities, an outlook both exhilarating and terrifying. In the entry for “Formless,” Bataille evokes the potential of the grotesque to derail our rationality, taking the universe as an example, saying that “the universe resembles nothing at all and is only formless, amounts to saying that the universe is something akin to a spider or a gob of spittle.” In this little sentence, he forces together the most incomprehensible “object,” the universe, which is before and beyond classification, with the most debased bodily fluid, spittle. In the same dictionary, spittle becomes the symbol of the formless. Michel Leiris, who writes the entry for “Spittle,” describes it as inconsistent, undefined, imprecise, unverifiable, and non-hierarchical. Spittle is unclassifiable and with that impossible to comprehend in the system of rational thought. Bataille, “Critical Dictionary,” 51–52; and Michel Leiris, “Spittle,” in *Encyclopædia Acrphalica*, eds. Robert Lebel and Isabelle Waldberg (London: Atlas Press, 1995), 79–80.


Dissemblance

While resemblance emerges as a surprise by a shift in perception that integrates the object into an ordering relation and in this way creates knowledge, the grotesque is forced upon the object. It defies, interrupts, or destroys the ordering principle of resemblance and distorts the object beyond recognizability. All the while, the grotesque uses some of the same mechanisms as resemblance, namely association, proximity, contact, and contagion. Didi-Huberman describes the “transgressive” or “excessive resemblances” as “constant contacts, which can force onto each and any form the potential of dissemblance.”

Because of its capacity to dislodge, art historian Yves-Alain Bois interprets the formless as “performative, like obscene words, the violence of which derives less from semantics than from the very act of their delivery” and concludes, that “the formless is an operation.” Bois’s characterization of the formless as an operation also applies to the other forms of the grotesque. The grotesque employed in effigies is a performative aesthetics that effects the social and political relations of the depicted. The grotesque bodies perform a declassification—they cast the depicted out from the accepted norm and present them as categorically despicable. In grotesque effigies, the unfitting, excessive, abject, unaesthetic, formless is forced

37 Didi-Huberman, Formlose Ähnlichkeit, 147 (my translation).
onto the image of the depicted through the mechanisms of resemblance.

But resemblance is not a one-way street. Resemblance, as Foucault describes, constructs a reciprocal relationship. Consequently, we project the denigrating character traits of a grotesque effigy onto the person it depicts.\(^4\) Like a contagious disease, the degrading aspects of effigies are transferred to the prototype: the person starts to resemble their caricature. Both operations, resemblance and the grotesque are integral to effigy protests and just like resemblance, the grotesque also produces knowledge. From Bakhtin’s perspective, the grotesque and the laughter it produces reveal the truth about the world and power.\(^5\) These debasing monsters that effigies depict, do not spring from their makers’ fantasy by accident—they reveal the evil traits that were once hidden behind the mask of the human being and make them visible on the surface of their representation. While resemblance affirms the association of the effigy with the depicted, the grotesque reveals their “true” nature.

\(^{5}\) Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 90–94.
The effect of grotesque aesthetics becomes clear in the following example, the effigy of John Howard Griffin already mentioned in chapter 4. In 1960, Griffin published *Black Like Me* detailing his experience of racial discrimination while traveling disguised as a black man in the Deep South in the US. While his book became a bestseller, his effigy was hanged on Main Street in his hometown, a cross burned in front of the local black school, and a neighborhood bar put up a sign reading “No albinos allowed.” The effigy’s head and face were divided into a white and a black half, the text on the shirt read: “I’M WHITE / I’M BLACK.” All of these signs connote the unacceptably ambiguous state the author had attained by transgressing the racial divide and mark his body as grotesque. The effigy characterizes him as half-black and half-white, the albino sign as black with an abnormally white appearance, while the photograph associates him with an animal rather than human. These visual and textual enunciations indicate the violation of rules of conduct and the transgression of boundaries. The makers of the effigy mark him as a traitor to his race, an abomination to be cast away into the garbage dump of his community. They not only announce the transgression but also perform the violent exclusion of the author from the dominant white community of his hometown.

The effigy performances that shame a transgressive individual, that symbolically punish a traitor, or that debase a powerful politician in order to change society, all aim to exclude the perpetrator from the community. They all employ similar forms of a grotesque aesthetics to ridicule, insult, and declassify the perpetrator. While the social and
political constellations differ, effigy protests all exert a form of violence on those constellations in support of the established dominant order that segregates a community, or else as a demand that same community be more inclusive. In the next chapter I take up this duality further, inquiring into the laughter and violence that emerges from effigy protests in divergent political constellations.