Burning images
*Performing effigies as political protest*
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Violence and Laughter

In the previous chapter, I examined how the grotesque aesthetics essential to effigy protests operate in the social and political sphere through insult and denigration. Grotesque performances not only produce violent images, but contribute to declassification, antagonism, and exclusion, and exert a form of violence. At the same time, the grotesque also produces communal laughter visible in many of the photographs, and the protesters often demand a more just and inclusive society. In chapter 4, I show that the effects of effigy protests can vary substantially: affirming the existing order, suppressing resistance, or challenging the oppressive order. Here, I consider effigy protests in relation to justice, resistance, and the law, and investigate what kind of violence and what kind of laughter emerges from effigy protests and how these react to and interact with violence in the configuration of the political.

Both violence and laughter are notoriously difficult to define. Between subjective and objective, individual and collective, physical and symbolic, systemic and interpersonal, epistemic and normative forms, violence is “not reducible to a single medium of interpretation or a single academic discipline.”¹ Similarly, no one theory “really manages to comprehensively explain the phenomenon of laughter,” as literary studies scholar Stefan Horlacher observes: “THE laughter is an illusion since there are always only endlessly

proliferating forms of laughter.” Laughter can be pure, the “laugh laughing at the laugh,” or contaminated. Often laughter is associated with the affirmation of life, unifying effects, and the challenge to authority. Philosopher Hannah Arendt writes: “the greatest enemy of authority, therefore, is contempt, and the surest way to undermine it is laughter.”

Literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin describes carnival laughter as directed toward “a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders.” It is “the social consciousness of all the people” and means “the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts.” He celebrates the “victory of laughter over fear . . . defeat of divine and human power, of authoritarian commandments and prohibitions, of death and punishment after death.” But other forms of laughter have also been characterized as aggressive, bitter, derisive, or satanic. Laughter can express the superiority of the one who laughs, and be exclusionary. Riddled with ambiguity and contradictions, it cannot be reduced to a single phenomenon.

9 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 12.
There are many kinds of laughter that emerge in the performance of effigies. In some photographs, we see their makers posing with their creations. We can sense their pride in a well-executed effigy. They radiate a sense of achievement and satisfaction with the dolls they create and the messages of anger and ridicule that the grotesque figures communicate. In many other photographs of effigy protests we see cheering and laughter, and a playful engagement in the theatrical performances of the effigies’ deaths. We can detect exhilaration in the crowd and triumphant laughter in seeing the enemy being unmasked, their true nature unveiled, and the long-deserved punishment finally meted out on their substitute body.
In some images one may notice a self-conscious, ironic laughter on the faces of some protesters. These participants seem to be aware of the absurdity of their actions and the ridiculousness of engaging in a perhaps completely inconsequential performance, which one can interpret as a stubborn belief in the prevalence of subversive laughter even in the face of likely defeat by an overwhelming state power. Knowing in advance that burning an effigy might fail to effect political change does not necessarily diminish the success or the urgency of the performance.
Looking at this photograph of a demonstration against the anti-Islam film trailer for *Innocence of Muslims* in Peshawar, we face what appears to be a large crowd of angry men, assembled around an effigy of US President Barack Obama stuck on a pole. The effigy is lowered to the ground to facilitate the beating with blows administered by seven or eight protesters. The effigy is made from stuffed jeans and an orange sweater. The head is missing, but a colorful cloth is wrapped around the upper end of the pole. The protesters, mostly young men, carry green flags; many wear headbands with protest slogans and some have covered their faces. They are in a rambunctious mood, clapping, laughing, shouting, and cheering on the effigy’s beating. The photograph gives the impression of a large crowd with an abundance of energy, more celebratory than angry, and keenly aware of their power as a group in that moment. Their sense of empowerment is gained through the staging of a fantasy: the imagined violent beating of their adversary as an act towards achieving justice.
Different motifs in the photographs of effigy protests create the impression of violence. These can deeply affect the viewer and contribute to the emotional charge of the pathos formulas of protest: 1) the burning human figure triggers the imagination of cruelty and suffering, expressing excessive symbolic violence and the power of the popular sovereign to punish the individual; 2) the hanging or battered effigy exhibits the violence enacted on it and represents the violent transformation from animated being to thing—corpse—through objectification; and 3) the gestures of physical violence—punching, spitting, kicking, beating, hitting—the stick swung back, or suspended in its movement a fraction before impact on the body of the effigy evoke physical violence in action. This motif also appears in the images of the *death of Orpheus* around which art historian Aby Warburg built his famous text “Dürer und die Italienische Antike,” where he used the term pathos formulas for the first time.
The people acting together, aroused by a common goal, emit the force of communal anger—and the violence that results from its release. This can be framed positively as the righteous and productive force against injustice and oppression, or negatively, as the oppressive and destructive violence of the mob punishing a transgression of communal order. In both versions, exclusion and violent punishment are staged as the resolution to the conflict and an appeal to justice is made, but the notions of justice are markedly different. In the first version, the appeal is directed toward justice as an imagined but possibly unachievable ideal; in the second, the appeal is directed toward justice as established by the existing order and current law. Justice is revealed as a contested concept—framed by diverging discourses, contexts, and practices—that cannot be grasped outside its entanglement with power, violence, and the law.

Political philosopher Étienne Balibar explores this entanglement in contemporary politics throughout his work. In the 2012 essay “Justice and Equality” he departs from a quote by philosopher Blaise Pascal, arguing that justice and power are necessarily linked. On the one hand, any endeavor to establish a just order or to restore justice requires force. In the process, it will take on a form of organization and inevitably risks producing injustice itself. On the other hand, political power relies on the claim to justice for its legitimation. In that process, justice is institutionalized in the “rule of law,” which creates its own contradictions.

Philosopher Walter Benjamin has argued in his 1921 essay “Zur Kritik der Gewalt” that instituting the law requires “law-making violence” and the existing order enacts “law-preserving violence” to ensure its perpetual existence. Balibar agrees with Benjamin that there is no essential difference between law-preserving and law-making violence, and that any order of society, any system of law, is imbricated with violence. Yet, Balibar thinking further in line with philosopher Jacques Derrida, observes that justice cannot be “expressed in legal terms and ‘administered’ as an object or a domain of conflictual interests in need of a mediation by the legal and especially the judiciary machine.” Justice is always in excess of the law. It can never be completely codified into law, and remains as a promise.

Even though it can never be fully achieved, justice remains the lever that can be used to transform the system of law and make it more inclusive and just.\(^{18}\)

Balibar argues that violence is associated with human experience and that some form and degree of it is unavoidable in the organization of the social. For him, “the question becomes, then: how to manage with violence under its different forms, how to choose among them and counter them.”\(^{19}\) Balibar approaches the problem from the extremes to discover when violence becomes intolerable. He posits certain criteria to distinguish violence that is unavoidable in the practice of politics, from extreme un-civil and oppressive violence. Extreme, for instance, are forms of violence that make death more tolerable than life, but also insidious and relentless forms of violence of a lower degree, which make them “appear interminable, like a fate or an end in itself.”\(^{20}\) His ultimate criterion is that extreme violence aims toward the “annihilation of the possibilities of resistance.”\(^{21}\) The annihilation of resistance through a regime of violence also annihilates the space for politics. Therefore, resistance and revolt against oppressive regimes in pursuit of justice is necessary to safeguard the possibility of politics, even if revolt is always at risk of being turned into a new regime of violence.\(^{22}\)

In a world and a history irreparably marked by the existence of relationships of domination and violence, the possibility of politics is essentially bound up with practices of resistance, not only negatively, as the contestation of the established order, the demand for justice, and so on, but also positively, as a place where active subjectivities and collective solidarities are formed.  

Balibar argues for a politics of civility and the practice of “anti-violence,” that is, the continuous work to reduce the violence of the existing order to achieve greater justice. This politics of civility is set against the manifestations of violence exerted by the sovereign, state, or law. It is the work of civility to deconstruct the existing order and make its violence critically visible and further the conditions of the political.

All effigy protest performances announce violence with the punishment of the depicted. The question remains as to whether the theatrical executions of effigies are acts of resistance and necessary to make the political possible, or oppressive in and of themselves. In chapter 4 it became clear that effigy protests in the context of the demonstrations against integration in some United States’s school systems contributed to the continued disenfranchisement and subjugation of African-Americans. Other effigy protests did not pose an actual threat to the depicted, but were

theatrical, non-violent expressions of discontent. When is the feigned violence visible in the staged executions merely symbolic, and under what conditions does it turn into actual oppressive violence? Or formulated differently: when do staged performances and images of burning effigies actually perform the violence they exhibit?

To make this distinction more clear, I turn to the notion of performativity, and consider effigy protests as speech acts. Speech is, as philosopher of language J. L. Austin shows, not just descriptive. It can, under certain conditions, become performative, meaning it can be an action and have real-life effects, like changing one’s legal status from unmarried to married.25 Philosopher Judith Butler further investigates the conditions of performativity in relation to hate speech in *Excitable Speech* (1997). She interrogates under which conditions speech becomes impermissible as actual violence. Butler reminds us here that not all performative acts are successful. She specifies that performative speech “accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices.”26 That means that only if the speech act announcing violence is “authorized” by established practices, and believably invokes future injury, does it acquire performative force and becomes actual violence.

In 1956, a federal court ordered the desegregation of the only high school in Mansfield, a small Texas town near Fort Worth. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had initiated the lawsuit on behalf of African-American students as their daily commute to the nearest black high school in Fort Worth consisted of a long bus ride followed by a twenty block walk each way.\(^\text{27}\) At the start of the school year, an angry mob of white residents gathered in front of the Mansfield High School and prevented the enrollment of black students. Three effigies depicting African-Americans were hanged, one on Mansfield High Street, one prominently on the flagpole of the school, and another over its main entrance. The Texas governor supported the protesters and dispatched a number of Texas Rangers to maintain order in front of the school. The protesters outside successfully prevented the African-American students from enrolling. The segregated status of the school was preserved for that year, and the federal court order was not enforced.

The collusion between town officials and the police force with the mob is visible in the photographs: the leisurely crowd in front of the school, unchallenged by the police; the local sheriff and a Texas Ranger posing for the camera under the hanging effigy, a smug smile on their faces indicative of their self-righteousness; the school girls

and boy admiringly encircling a Texas Ranger; the sheriff and the two policemen posing with two effigies for the camera; the white school girls breezily entering the school building despite the effigy hanging above them. The scenes exude an air of normalcy, even a pleasant comfort with the actors paying little heed to a situation that is so charged with the violence of exclusion. The close-up photographs of two effigies show the mark of this systemic violence: one is riddled with round holes encircled with red paint, signifying bullet holes, the other with jagged tears and red paint to signify stab wounds and spattered blood. The signs at the effigies’ feet carry threats that the white population will not tolerate the enrollment of black students and would resort to extreme physical violence to stop it.

These displays were not so much a political protest, but a forceful demonstration of existing race relations. The effigies in Mansfield and the many other “un-civil rights” effigies detailed in chapter 4 were performed in continuity with the history of subjugation of the African-American population, from slavery to lynching, from the Jim Crow laws to the continued discrimination of African-Americans up to the present day. Authorized by these established oppressive practices, effigy performances in this political context were successfully performative in Butler’s sense: they were not just symbolic expressions of violence, but violent acts themselves.

The hanging effigies displayed and enacted the exclusionary violence of US society, robbing African-American students of their status as political beings, denying their autonomy, and objectifying them—literally turning
them into things to be violated. The threats of violence were widely directed to include allied civil rights activists who challenged the unjust order. These displays represent Balibar’s extreme violence, annihilating the possibility of resistance to a regime in which life is unlivable. This violence is coupled with denigrating laughter conveying the supremacy of the white population and subjugating the “other.”

There are other examples of similarly violent and subjugating effigy protests from other countries. In 1920, amidst widespread sectarian violence during the Irish War of Independence, supporters of the Union with Britain hanged their Nationalist neighbors in effigy as warnings. An inter-title of the British Pathé newsreel reads: “Effigies dangling from windows are familiar sights in the streets of Belfast.” 29 After the vote to reintegrate the Saarland into the German Reich in 1935, Nazis celebrated and dragged effigies of Max Braun, editor of social-democratic newspaper Deutsche Freiheit, through the streets. Braun had agitated against reunification and evaded arrest and almost certain death in prison by escaping to France. In 2013, a group of students at a madrassa in Bangladesh beat and burned the effigy of an “atheist blogger.” They reacted to demonstrations demanding tougher punishments for Islamic militia leaders responsible for war crimes committed during the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971. In 2015, a number of bloggers advocating for a secular Bangladesh were killed by Islamist activists. In all these cases, effigies were performed in the context of an established oppressive order and reiterating other authoritative practices. These manifestations have to be considered as successful speech acts, and constitute extreme violence. Their grotesque aesthetics, performance of violence, and denigrating laughter work in unison to subjugate the targeted group or individual.

A group of right-wing protesters brandished crucifixes, burned an effigy of Judith Butler and shouted: „Queimam a bruxa!” (Portuguese for “Burn the Witch!”) in protest of Butler’s gender theory. The protest took place in front of the venue for the conference “The End of Democracy” in Sao Paulo, Brazil, which Butler had organized. Butler called the burning of the effigy “injurious” and “upsetting.”

The distinction between successful and unsuccessful speech acts, violent and symbolic effigy protests, is not always so clear, since it requires the evaluation of their “authorization.” Furthermore, the character of effigy protests can change, as the previously cited examples of protests against Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988) show. While effigy burnings of Rushdie were early on rather symbolic expressions demanding recognition of Muslim identity in British public life, Ayatollah Khomeini’s fatwa calling on Muslims worldwide to kill the author changed their character dramatically. Since the fatwa was linked to the Ayatollah Khomeini’s authority as an eminent Muslim cleric and the Supreme Leader of Iran, and incentivized by a US$ 1 million reward, the protests and effigy burnings became an imminent and believable threat against Rushdie’s life—“authorized,” they exerted oppressive violence. It is therefore necessary to carefully consider the constellation of actors in the network of power relations in each case to assess the kind of violence performed.

Liberating Laughter

In 1967, African-American students at Princeton University hanged an effigy of George Wallace, the former governor of Alabama and then a presidential candidate. With a protest sign reading: “Black Princeton in the Nation’s Service” and T-shirts with “Black Dada” written across, they protested against a representative of state power who had fiercely opposed the desegregation of public schools in Alabama. In 1968, students of Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, North Carolina, burned an effigy of South Carolina Governor Robert Evander McNair in a demonstration protesting the deaths of three students in Orangeburg, South Carolina killed by law enforcement during a demonstration against racial discrimination. In 1969, African-American students at the City College of New York burned an effigy of “racism” as part of larger student movement demanding racial parity and more participation in college and university affairs. In 1970, indigenous peoples burned an effigy of the Commissioner for Indian Affairs in Littleton, Colorado to protest the discriminatory hiring and promotion practices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. With these protests, civil rights activists appropriated earlier subjugating effigy protests and turned them upside down, contesting the existing relation of domination in order to demand change. In carnivalesque reversal, the violence inherent in the unjust order was turned back onto the figure of power and made visible on the body of the effigy. In that sense, both forms of effigy protest make the same violence visible, but in opposite constellations.
Uncivil rights demonstrations affirm and exert exclusionary violence, a form of extreme violence that according to Balibar precludes the possibility of politics. Civil rights demonstrations on the other hand denounce and resist this exclusionary violence.

While the two forms produce similar images of violence and both assume the expression of the excluded, Balibar precludes the possibility of politics. Civil rights demonstrations on the other hand denounce and exert exclusionary violence, a form of extreme violence that according to Balibar precludes the possibility of politics. Civil rights demonstrations on the other hand denounce and exert exclusionary violence, a form of extreme violence that according to Balibar precludes the possibility of politics. Civil rights demonstrations on the other hand denounce and exert exclusionary violence, a form of extreme violence that according to Balibar precludes the possibility of politics.

In traditional European carnival practices, the burning of effigies represents a symbolic punishment that produces possible social engagement through collective address. The violence in the effigy performances is less established than its symbolic function. Following Butler's criteria, they are forms of effigy performances in the established power's formative subjectivity. The effigy performances form part of the cycle of the symbolic death because death renews the symbolic life in a space as meaningful as that of the community.

To buttress criteria, they are not successful performances of effigies, since effigy performances in art are considered as equally violent in form and content. Effigy performances are considered as equally violent in form and content. Effigy performances are considered as equally violent in form and content.
embraced the literary violence of French Renaissance writer François Rabelais. In his novels, dirt and excrement, filth and excess, are all enveloped in roaring life-affirming laughter. It is an unruly laughter, characterized by bodily excess, disorder, and grotesque abundance. The laughter of carnival, expressed as bodily excess coupled with violence, becomes a resistant force against the existing order, any order. Many critics of Bakhtin point out that his analysis is based on Renaissance literature instead of existing carnival practices. Indeed, he fails to take into account the temporality and liminality of carnival, the fact that carnival ends and order is re-established at the close of the cycle.

If one does take into account its limited time frame, carnival can be seen as a corrective imaginary that uniquely combines the strategies of reversal and debasement with the aesthetics of the grotesque. This imaginary can be activated against the oppressive order. Many scholars recognize the potential of theatrical, parodic, and carnivalesque strategies in protest movements of the twentieth and twenty-first century. Literary theorists Peter Stallybrass and Allon White conceive Bakhtin’s carnival as “a mobile set of symbolic practices, images and discourses,” which can be employed in social revolts and conflicts. There are many instances in which the carnivalesque has manifested itself: in 1968, when Parisian protesters dressed in costumes taken from

a theatre wardrobe fought the police;\(^{36}\) in 1970, during the occupation of the White House lawn in Washington in a Vietnam War protest;\(^{37}\) in the 1990s exuberant Drag Marches for global social justice in New York;\(^{38}\) and in the 2011 parodic performances during Occupy Wall Street in New York.\(^ {39}\) The carnivalesque is also present in the online cartoon protests that activists in Kafr Nabl, Syria staged from 2011 until 2017 in protest against President Bashar al-Assad’s ruthless campaign against his own people.\(^ {40}\)

These protests, and most effigy performances, introduce elements of absurdity, play, and laughter in the face of state violence, which disrupts fixed divisions between protestors and police during protests and challenges the validity of the established political discourse.\(^ {41}\) It is also true that the un-civil-rights effigy protests I address before include elements of absurdity and laughter, but in their alignment with the existing dominant order, these demonstrations miss one crucial element of the carnivalesque: the reversal of order.

The bodily aspects that carnivalesque violence and laughter emphasize are also important in Butler’s reworking

37 Kershaw, “Fighting in the Streets,” 262.
of philosopher Hannah Arendt’s “space of appearance” during political protest. Butler stresses the importance of bodily presence in political protests as “political claims are made by bodies as they appear and act.” Critiquing Arendt, she points out that the space of appearance cannot be taken for granted for beings excluded from political recognition. It is the pre-political, private body with its material needs for food, defecation, sleep, and protection from violence that conditions the social and political body. It is the presence of the “bodies with needs, desires and requirements” that are able to create a new space of appearance. The unruly carnivalesque laughter at a protest accentuates the bodily presence of protesters, and it is especially these corporeal aspects that grant laughter its liberating potential. Performance theorist Allen S. Weiss writes that “laughter is one of the modes of sovereign conduct, a moment in which rationality is exceeded by a gratuitous affirmation of life, of contingency, of the body.” This corporeal laughter is mirrored in the corporeal violence enacted on the effigies whose power is contested. In the performative presence of bodies laughing and acting together, acting bodily with and on other bodies, a new space of appearance is created, constituted by inclusive alliances and a claim of equality. This kind of laughter is indeed liberating—even if only for the short time-space of the protest. Butler emphasizes the transitory character of the time of protest:  

44 Butler, “Bodies in Alliances.”
Perhaps these are anarchist moments or anarchist passages, when the legitimacy of a regime is called into question, but when no new regime has yet come to take its place. This time of the interval is the time of the popular will, not a single will, not a unitary will, but one that is characterized by an alliance with the performative power to lay claim to the public in a way that is not yet codified into law, and that can never be fully codified into law.\(^5\)

This liminal “time of the popular will” is in parallel to the liminal time of carnival. Both carry the revolutionary potential to challenge existing power constellations, time-spaces that have the potential to be transformative, even if never realized. Carnivalesque protests do not directly effect change; they can only show the possibility of a different order.

Not all effigy protests, however, divide neatly into subjugating demonstrations that enforce exclusionary order and liberating protest performances that aim to reconfigure social and political formation. Many effigy demonstrations don’t operate in either side of this binary but work inside the accepted space of politics. On numerous occasions politicians are criticized and ridiculed with effigy protests in partisan politics. These performances do not propose a new constellation of the political formations, or a necessarily more just society, but only aim to shift dominance from one established group to another.

\(^5\) Butler, “Bodies in Alliances.”
This is often true for effigy protests that denounce the leader of a foreign country. The demonstrations in Iraq against Bush were protests against the invasion of Iraqi politics and life by a foreign superpower, but the organizing political group of Muqtada al-Sadr was already a powerful faction in Iraqi politics, who staged demonstrations to consolidate its position. Equally, effigy protests that target government officials in a country are not necessarily a form of protest that seeks to make society more just. Even though Obama effigies hanged in the US between 2008 and 2016 were not a believable threat to the President, they could be considered hate speech that performed actual violence toward the African-American population. As these repeated earlier, subjugating practices and were connected to the “birther movement” aimed at delegitimizing the first African-American president, they exhibited and enacted pervasive discriminatory attitudes in US society.

In all cases the grotesque performance of an effigy is demeaning and insulting to whomever is depicted. The relation between laughter and violence is often an uneasy and unstable alliance, complicated and painful. In the best cases, effigy protest performances present the possibility for a different order and open up the space for change and greater justice. In the worst cases, they are tools for continued oppression. In between, they are distastefully crude or appropriately rude spectacles, ridiculing public figures who abuse their authority. It is therefore necessary to evaluate the social and political formation in which an effigy is performed in order to judge: how it affects social relations; the kind of violence; if the violence is permissible
because necessary to ensure the conditions of the political or impermissible as an extreme form of subjugation; and if it is accompanied by the cruel laughter that assumes supremacy, or the liberating laughter of resistance that creates the very possibility of politics.