Burning images

Performing effigies as political protest

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This study aimed to investigate a specific theatrical form of political protest: the execution of effigies by hanging, burning, or otherwise, and has brought together a vast number of records detailing effigy protests across time and geography. So many different conflicts, so many different iterations and variations of effigy protests, that it seems impossible to reduce effigy protests to merely one form. An archaic practice, rooted in different cultural and religious traditions, that also functions perfectly in the framework of contemporary news media for short-term political effect. A practice used in support of oppressive order by threatening violence or, contrastingly, in resistance to systemic violence.

Nonetheless, this study has shown that the hanging and burning of effigies remains recognizable across time and geography as one practice. It is consistent that it communicates anger about what the protesters deem politically unjust. It is consistent in its scenario, the theatrical performance of punishment, which lends itself to appropriation and inversion. It is consistent in the shared grotesque aesthetic and in the uneasy combination of violence and laughter these performances exhibit.

The methodology for this study developed from my artistic practice focused on image practices in relation to the public sphere and is part of a growing range of practices of artistic research investigating existing material from archives, news media or social media. Ordering and arranging the images following themes derived from a close reading, led to diverse perspectives and inroads into the fields of anthropology, history, performance studies, iconology, art history, and political philosophy. Each
perspective has been necessary to establish the framework of the study and each is crucial in understanding effigy protests—their histories and genealogies, form and aesthetics, affordances and effects.

Because the research is based on associatively organized image assemblages, it did not develop linearly in disciplinary frameworks. Instead the arguments in each chapter follow their own logic, intersect at different points of the text and complement each other. The composition of the image narrative, the size and arrangement of images in relation to each other and the text in the confines of the layout, becomes relevant. Image narrative and text are like the two voices in a musical composition, each in turn taking the lead to introduce themes, structure the work, direct the reader, set tempo and rhythm, halt the attention or accelerate the flow.

The broad trans-disciplinary approach means some potentially relevant questions were left unanswered, and further research is warranted. It would be illuminating to study effigy protest even more closely in relation to Aby Warburg’s concepts of Bilderräum (image vehicle) and pathos formula, as discussed in this text. Further in-depth case studies of single countries would be able to more clearly show the practice’s specificities. In India and Pakistan, for instance, effigy-burning is an incredibly vibrant political practice. In the Philippines, effigy protests against consecutive governments have developed into elaborate spectacles since the 1990s. In European countries, they have a very long and varied history, closely connected to formal and popular justice. A question guiding a comparative
approach could be: what are the different imaginaries of justice that underlie effigy performance in different cultural contexts? Further theoretical work would also be fruitful in relation to affect theory, in order to investigate the effects of live performances and media reports on actors and audiences. Equally promising would be an investigation from the perspective of the agency of images, since the effigies function as semi-autonomous agents in the performance of protest.

**Mobile Protest Practice**

What this study has done is confirm that the burning and hanging of effigies as political protest is widespread, active, and alive: specific genealogies, practices, purposes, and means of dissemination emerged, enabling interpretations along various trajectories. In the case studies in chapters 4 and 5, I delineated different genealogies and modes of transfer. In the United States, the practice adapted traditional social or religious ritual to fit the purposes of political protest, and during the American Revolution embraced popular justice practices and the carnivalesque from colonial Pope Day celebrations. This also happened in Iran, where the carnivalesque Ashura tradition of *Umar Kushan*, which ridiculed a past enemy, was most likely appropriated in protests against the US during the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Cross-cultural appropriation occurred at the same time with Afghani students and refugees outside of Afghanistan protesting against the Soviet invasion of their
country. Sixty years earlier, protesters in Port Said, Egypt likely copied British soldiers celebrating Guy Fawkes Day and the end of WWI by burning effigies of Kaiser Wilhelm II, appropriating it to protest British colonial rule during the Egyptian revolution from 1919.

The media’s wide reporting on effigy protests during the American Revolution lead to the form’s spread across the colonies and establishment as a common practice in US politics. Similarly, US reporting on the hostage crisis in Tehran in 1979 of Iranian protesters burning effigies of US president Carter, sparked counter-protests in the US featuring effigies of Ayatollah Khomeini. Effigy demonstrations that triumphantly celebrated the end of the Suez crisis in Egypt in 1956, were widely shared by the media and most likely contributed to the dissemination of the practice in the Middle East in relation to the conflict with Israel. During the Arab Spring in 2011, reports of effigy executions in Cairo’s Tahrir Square possibly inspired actors in Libya and Syria to do likewise with their leaders, or at least reactivated the memory of the genre from earlier iterations in the region.

While the practice is often adapted from traditional practices and celebrations, it also has a tendency to develop back into commemorative traditions: in Iran, burning Uncle Sam and US presidents in effigy became a fixed feature of the commemorations of the Iranian Revolution; and in Egypt, the first recorded effigy protest that saw British Field Marshall Lord Allenby burned became an integral part of the spring festival in Port Said. Similarly, the effigy burning on Guy Fawkes Day in the United Kingdom changed its
character over time. Initiated in 1606 as an anti-Catholic demonstration, it largely lost its political urgency and gradually transformed into a carnival tradition with political overtones. This study shows that performing an effigy as political protest is dynamically shaped by cultural and political parameters. The practice can be easily adapted to various needs in different cultural and political contexts. As a symbolic and visual practice, it affords image-based (non-language) cross-cultural communication and exchange.

The Performance of Resistance

The lens of performance introduced in chapter 3 gave insight into the effects of the practice on those involved, and the relation between live protests and reporting in the news. Staging the conflict and its resolution as a performance of punishment makes the conflict concrete and tangible. The participants step out of everyday life and take up a role in the performance, which leads to a high degree of engagement with the protest and its goals. This engagement creates embodied memories, increases the participant’s identification with the group, and strengthens group identity.

Yet the performances are staged to communicate. They are not only a form of collective action, but also one of collective speech, contributing to public discourse about matters of common concern in the public sphere, a contribution extended by the media images they generate. In 2011, images of hanging effigies from Tahrir Square
were posted on Facebook and featured in mainstream media. In 1979, images of burning effigies on the streets of Tehran found their way to the front pages of US American newspapers, effectively reaching antagonistic publics who reacted to the demonstrations with counter-demonstrations, thus establishing a dialogue through the media and a common symbolic vocabulary (as with the early examples during the American Revolution), making clear the media’s integral role in the practice.

The protesters stage the protest as a living image, a *tableau vivant* before the cameras with the explicit aim to produce photographic images for dissemination. The scenario of the protest, the social constellation, and emotional charge are inscribed in these formulaic images, spectacular and recognizable, with heightened symbolic expression. In chapter 3, I refer to them in Warburg’s terms as pathos formulas of protest. They enable a direct form of communication between diverse publics, thereby contributing to emerging transnational and cross-cultural public spheres.

**The Aesthetics of Resistance**

In chapters 7 and 8, I show that the grotesque aesthetics of the effigies and the performance of punishment is essential for this protest practice. The grotesque operates in the social and political realm by activating different forms of resemblance, associating the effigy with the one it depicts, while at the same time violently distorting the
image through deformation, debasement, dehumanization, or demonization. The grotesque makes the culprits’ transgression visible and expels them from the rightful order.

While this exaggerated and antagonistic form of protest is often used in rather ordinary political conflicts that merely aim to shift influence from one group to the other, it is more pertinent when enacted in conflicts around the basic organization of the political. In conflicts that address questions of violence, exclusion and oppression, the scenario of the effigy protest as the resolution of injustice, matches the power constellation of the political conflict at hand. In demonstrations taking cues from popular justice, the minority group or individuals who violated community rules are sanctioned by the dominant group to stabilize the status quo. The imaginary of justice is here aligned with the existing order. In protests against oppressive regimes, the existing order is identified as being in violation of the rights of the subjugated. Here, the protesters appeal to a higher form of justice and symbolically punish the political representative of the dominant order to demand change. In both forms, the experience of violence and injustice is made visible in the effigy performances, but in crucially different ways: In the first case, the insidious violence of oppression is made visible as a threat, and the violence of oppression is expressed in the grotesque body of the effigy and the violence enacted on it. In the second case, the insidious violence of oppression is turned back onto the figure of power and in carnivalesque reversal made visible in the mock-execution of the sovereign figure.
The grotesque is a sign of injustice, reflecting multiple forms of violence in society: the exclusionary force of popular sovereignty; the un-checked abuse of power; abstract oppressive phenomena like racism; the bureaucratic grotesque that produces violence through the blind application of rules; or the lawless violence of the state of exception established in contemporary wars and occupations. Accordingly, Michel Foucault describes grotesque sovereignty as “an inherent part of the mechanisms of power.”1 Foucault also famously states in *The History of Sexuality* that power and resistance are inseparable, that “points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network.”2 Foucault’s propositions correspond with Étienne Balibar’s analysis, that human existence and the organization of the social is unthinkable without some form and degree of violence.3 More strongly than Foucault, Balibar argues that resistance is necessary to continuously work against the pervasiveness of oppression, discrimination, and the normalization of violence. Resistance to the violence in the established order is, in his view, in fact essential to create and maintain the possibility of politics.4

Even though effigy demonstrations are not always practiced as resistance against the established order, they nevertheless are, at their heart, indicators of violence in

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Pro-Taliban-demonstranten in de Pakistaanse hoofdstad Karachi hakken in op een brandende pop die president Bush van de Verenigde Staten voorstellen.
the formation of the political. When they align with the
dominant power, effigy protests make the violence in society
visible and enforce it. When performed against oppression,
coupled with subversive laughter, and applied with the
carnivalesque strategy of reversal, they are acts of resistance
against the violence of grotesque power.

Looking back to the beginning of my engagement
with the topic, it is no coincidence that the first report of
an effigy protest to catch my eye took place shortly after
September 11. The attack on the World Trade Center
and the US’s reaction brought a long-simmering conflict
to the forefront of daily international politics once again
and ushered in a period of intensely violent international
conflicts that were played out militarily in the Middle East.
These conflicts were also reflected in increased numbers
of effigy protest reacting to the experience of injustice,
powerlessness and humiliation—experiences grounded
not only in Western military power, but also in Western
economic and cultural domination.

Effigy performances can effectively provide a
channel for subjugated voices in national and transnational
public spheres and create alternative imaginaries in the
constitution of the political. They do this not only in
protests against the violence of international conflicts, but
also address injustice at national levels as with the abuse
of power by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, austerity
politics imposed in several EU countries in the aftermath
of the financial crisis of 2008, or the exclusionary politics
of US President Donald Trump. In the painful combination
of violence and laughter that they exhibit, these effigy
performances point to societies’ injustices and mechanisms of exclusion, while they also demonstrate the need for the continuous work of resistance to establish and maintain the space of the political.