



*Burning Images: Performing Effigies as Political Protest*  
F.U. Göttke

Florian Göttke

PhD “Burning Images: Performing Effigies as Political Protest”

Universiteit van Amsterdam / Dutch Art Institute

Defense: 26 April 2019, 10:45 am, Aula, Oude Lutherse Kerk, Amsterdam.

keywords:

political protest, performance, media, image practice, grotesque aesthetics, violence

Summary



*De Volkskrant*, 22 September 2001: Pro-Taliban-demonstranten in the Pakistan capital Karachi hack away at a burning doll representing President Bush of the United States. (photo: DPA)

This dissertation investigates a specific theatrical form of political protest: the hanging and burning of effigies. It is a widely known form of protest, since the production of affective images for distribution in the news media is essential to the practice. Collecting these images and reports provided me with the material for my research. Beginning with a close reading, I ordered the images according to various criteria: geography, chronology, motifs, themes and associations and arranged them into assemblages that make the relations between images visible and legible.

As tools for the research, these image assemblages directed the inquiry into different disciplines (history, art history, anthropology, performance studies, photography theory, iconology,

image studies, and political philosophy), bridging documentary and discursive modes of artistic research with academic research. The images assemblages—in this dissertation arranged parallel to the text—are also integral part of my argumentation. This trans-disciplinary approach, I argue, made it possible to comprehensibly assess the effigy protest practice in a single study.

Effigy hanging and burning had become increasingly visible in the news media since 2001 particularly in protests against United States military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, in US domestic politics and in the Arab Spring. Taking these recent events as points of departure, I investigated the conditions of this visual genre of protest, its roots and genealogies in a number of countries, its aesthetics and politics. Hanging and burning effigies is an archaic and ritualistic form of protest, yet is effectively communicated by global news media to access trans-national public spheres.

As a theatrical performance of punishment of a perpetrator by the community, effigy protests communicate communal outrage over experienced injustice. They speak viscerally through intensely affective images that emanate both violence and laughter. The grotesque inherent to effigy protests results in insult and mockery, in violence of degradation and declassification. Prone to appropriation and inversion, effigy protests can either align with and enforce the existing order or be a form of resistance. In both ways they make exclusionary violence in the constitution of the political visible.

In the introduction, I analyze the protest practice of hanging and burning effigies as a layered object of research including image production, performance, and mediation. I explain the framework and methodology of this study, which combines forms of artistic research—collecting, reading, and writing with images—with academic research from the fields of history, art history, anthropology, performance studies, photography theory, iconology, image studies, and political philosophy.

Chapter 2, “Double Bodies,” offers a definition of the term “effigy” through a genealogy of effigy practices. Based in ancient Roman image culture, effigies were used as substitute bodies in political rituals, formal justice, popular justice, and calendrical rituals throughout the course of European history. Effigies do not represent physical private bodies, but rather their public extensions: the social and political aspects of a person, the political office and the sovereign power invested in it.

Chapter 3, “Performing Protest,” takes insights from performance and ritual studies to understand how an effigy protest unfolds as a performance of punishment of a perpetrator by a community and to what effect. I describe the stages of the performance: the making and parading of effigies, setting, execution, and mediation of the performance. Staging and embodiment have strong effects on the memory and identity of participants and create alternative imaginaries for the political sphere, while news images and reports emerge as integral and intended parts of the live performances which extend their reach. As compressed descriptions of the conflicts, the media images are pathos formulas of protest, recognizable formulaic images, which enable the communication between diverse audiences across temporal and cultural distances. Moving between

embodied performance and mediated report, the practice is activated from and re-inscribed into the social memory to become part of the political protest repertoire.

Chapter 4, “Effigy Protests in the History of the United States,” shows the development of effigy protests in one specific country over an extended period of time, from the American Revolution in 1765 until the present day. Rooted in two traditional effigy practices, effigy protest has come to address a large variety of political conflicts with varying effects on society. It can positively affirm the existing order, it can suppress resistance through violent threat, or challenge that order and demand change. Some effigy protests, staged for instance in the struggle for and against civil rights in the 1950s and ’60s, pointedly articulate the conflict that lies at the heart of modern liberal democracy, between the principles of popular sovereignty and universal human rights.

Chapter 5, “Effigy Protests in Egypt, Iran, Afghanistan and Across the Middle East,” traces the genealogies of effigy protests in Egypt, Iran, and Afghanistan and the wider region, from the perspective of Western news media. Most political effigy protests in these countries were staged in protest against Western cultural, economic, and military domination. These protests hint at the apparent lack of justice and channels for redress in international conflicts. I concentrate in this chapter on different modes of transfer, with migrating people, by appropriation, and through the news media. Lastly, I elaborate on the role and limitations of the media in cross-cultural communication, contributing to emerging transnational and cross-cultural public spheres.

Chapter 6, “Dialogic Communication: Effigy Protests in Iraq,” zooms in on a period in one country, Iraq, to inquire into a series of effigy protests staged against US military occupation in Baghdad between 2005 and 2009. From a Western perspective, I explore the communication between different populations through symbolic visual signs and how image practices from Islamic and Western cultural contexts interrelate. The communication via news media leads to a shared symbolic language developed dialogically across national and cultural borders, as described in chapter 5.

Chapter 7, “Resemblance and the Grotesque,” focuses on operational aspects of images and their aesthetics. I read effigy practice in relation to different notions of resemblance, in which resemblance is an operation that recognizes and at the same time constructs relationships between actors and objects. I then introduce the grotesque as an image operation equally relevant to effigy protests, but which disrupts the ordering principle of resemblance. The grotesque distorts the object and exposes it to ridicule and debasement. While based on the same mechanisms as resemblance, the grotesque appears as a form of exclusionary violence that ridicules and insults the political opponent and aims to influence the political sphere.

Chapter 8, “Violence and Laughter,” explores violence and laughter, which paradoxically permeate the performance of protest effigies in regard to their effect on the social and political sphere. Yet neither violence nor laughter is reducible to one form, nor do they neatly align. With that in mind, I consider the relation between effigy protest, conflicting notions of justice and the law, and the configuration of the political. I investigate how laughter figures in these different constellations as either subjugating or liberating. Relating to current discourse in political

philosophy, I differentiate between effigy protests that exert extreme subjugating violence, which destroys the possibilities of politics, and violence that is unavoidable as an aspect of resistance against an oppressive political status quo.

In the conclusion, I bring together the different strands developed in this study. I evaluate the findings in relation to each other, and indicate trajectories for further productive inquiry. Finally, I evaluate the role effigy practice can play in relation to the political as an indicator of injustice and violence and as a symptom of fundamental conflicts at the internal and external limits of contemporary liberal democracy.