17 Burning United States Presidents

Protest Effigies in Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan

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Introduction

Effigy protest is a truly visual medium of communication, a practice that uses and manipulates images for specific goals. In Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan, protesters portray the US presidents, the representatives of their country, as perpetrators who deserve to be convicted, degraded and punished. They create active and activating images that make the result of US politics – the injustice, the violence and pain inflicted on the people of Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan – visible, and demand rectification.

Because the data of this research stem largely from Western media sources, they are presented in a biased way: journalists, photographers and editors provide news in accordance with the ideological and cultural framework of Western audiences. But it is exactly these Western audiences that the protesters aim to reach, as the regular appearance of English language placards in protest scenes make clear. The photographs of the protests, distributed by Western news media can therefore be seen as instances of successful communication between communities caught on opposite sides of serious political conflicts. The analysis of these events through the perspective of the Western news media can shed light on attitudes and strategies in cross-cultural visual communication.

Before dealing with effigy-burning in Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan, it is worth looking at this form of protest as it is perceived in Europe. Effigies are a rather specific kind of image: they are usually three-dimensional, life-size representations of an individual that emphasize the social, political and judicial aspects of a person.[1] Such images can be used to celebrate figures of power – for instance on coins and monumental graves – or to denigrate.[2] Effigy punishment was also a common practice in popular justice all over Europe and in many European colonies, with mobs parading effigies to shame and ostracize fellow citizens who had transgressed community norms.[3] These practices have often been appropriated for political purposes.

It is in first instance not the private, physical body that is punished, but the public body – a person's honor, good name and social standing – that is injured through insult,

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1 Colloquial use of the English word has narrowed to the quickly made scarecrow-like dummies that are paraded, hanged and burned to denounce the person they represent. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "effigy," www.oed.com.; Florian Göttke, "Burning Images: Performing Effigies as Political Protest" (Phd Dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 2019), 39–41.

2 Image punishment was enshrined in European formal justice systems in the fifteenth century and practiced up into the nineteenth century for crimes such as treason, desertion or counterfeiting, if the perpetrator could not be apprehended.

3 Göttke, "Burning Images," 48–9.

ridicule and social exclusion. Especially in more traditional societies where honor is an important resource, this punishment can have serious consequences for the convict, because the survival and well-being of the individual and his/her family depends on the preservation of the social status.[4] While Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan have of course developed their own image cultures, their people are familiar with some aspects of Western European visual traditions and use images in comparable ways, as will be shown.

Iraq: Re-toppling the Tyrant

In Iraq, portraits of Saddam Hussein were omnipresent, on coins and paper bills, in public spaces, in public offices and private homes, in newspapers and on TV. His images were signs of sovereign power. They were quickly destroyed once that power was gone – most famously, when US soldiers and Iraqi civilians toppled Saddam's monumental statue on Firdous Square in Baghdad in front of the international news media on April 9, 2003. This event marked the end of his regime.[5] Between 2005 and 2009, the square was used for a series of protests against the US occupation, organized by followers of Muqtada al Sadr, a Shia cleric from a prominent family and one of the most influential politicians in post-Saddam Iraq.

On April 9, 2005, the second anniversary of the toppling, life-size dummies of US President George W. Bush, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Saddam Hussein were set up on a pedestal in front of the plinth on which the dictator's statue once stood.[6] They were dressed in the red prison jumpsuits that had become infamous from Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib prisons, shackled and with nooses tied around their necks. The faces were transformed into those of werewolves.

Three-and-a-half-years later, on October 18, 2008, protesters burned effigies of Bush and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in protest of the planned security agreement between Iraq and the United States. Bush was depicted wearing blue pants, a white shirt and a red tie. His head and right arm were dressed in bandages and he seemed mangled from the years of occupying Iraq. Rice was dressed in an insulting array of clothing: a skimpy skirt, long stockings and a handbag. She wore pink slippers for earrings with soles adorned with Stars of David – considered defamatory in an anti-Israel context. The faces of these figures were made from photographs of the two politicians.

A month later, on November 21, 2008, another Bush effigy appeared on Firdous Square. A photograph (Figure 17.1) shows a figure approximately four-meters high, dressed in a black suit, white shirt and a tie; the head, made of cloth, is covered with a photo of the President. The figure holds a whip in one hand, and a black briefcase featuring the Arabic text "US-Iraq security agreement" in the other. It is tied to the plinth of Saddam's statue, and a protester on the plinth can be seen hitting the effigy with a shoe, waving the Iraqi flag, and hiding from the barrage of bottles and shoes that are thrown at the effigy. At the culmination of the performance, participants pull the effigy with a rope, turning it upside down until it tumbles to the ground. In this way the protesters literally re-staged the toppling of Saddam's statue with the effigy of Bush.

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4 Karl Härter, "Images of Dishonoured Rebels and Infamous Revolts: Political Crime, Shaming Punishments and Defamation in the Early Modern Pictorial Media," in *Images of Shame. Infamy, Defamation and the Ethics of Oeconomia*, ed. Carolin Behrmann (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), ch. 1, ebook.

5 Florian Göttke, *Toppled* (Rotterdam: Post Editions, 2010), 53–5.

6 The plinth was at this moment occupied by a sculpture installed a few month after Saddam's statue fell. See Göttke, *Toppled*, 46.

The last in this series of protests was staged on April 9, 2009, on the sixth anniversary of the toppling (by this time Bush was no longer in office). Photographs indicate that this "portrait" was even bigger than the one before. The former President appears wearing a blue collared shirt with a red tie, black pants and shoes, but no jacket. The enlarged photo of a grumpy Bush is molded onto the stuffed head. Photographs taken a little later show the effigy standing upright attached to the plinth on Firdous Square engulfed in flames.

Common to these effigies is the use of photographs for the faces and an emphasis on the cultural identity of the depicted. The figures' Western attire strongly contrasts with the traditional clothes of a cleric worn by Muqtada al Sadr in the many portraits that are carried during the protests. Except for the dummies with werewolf features, these protest effigies are rather realistic. The protesters express their contempt by hitting the effigies, throwing shoes and bottles at them and finally destroying them. Appropriating the media images that shaped the memory of the Iraq war, the protesters re-interpreted the toppling of Saddam's statue, and provided the news media with new spectacular and symbolic images.

Iran: From Revolution to Commemoration

Resistance against the corrupt and brutal regime of the Shah Reza Pahlavi, who had ruled Iran since 1941, was followed by protests, which intensified from January 1978 onwards, and was supported by a wide coalition of religious and nationalist groups.[7] Iranian students abroad participated in the protests, burning effigies of the Shah in India, Italy, Germany, Great Britain, Libya and the United States. In January 1979, the Shah was forced to leave the country and Ayatollah Khomeini returned from his exile in Paris, striving for dominance in post-revolution Iran.

Building on Shia Islam's position of resistance in relation to power, Khomeini had framed the revolution in religious terms. The processions of *Ashura,* commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet, were transformed into mass protests against the Shah. A minor event in these commemorations was the "killing" of Umar, the second Caliph in Sunni tradition. At this event, people burned effigies made from wood and cloth, stuffed with straw, and filled with firecrackers and donkey turds.[8] The revolution appropriated this practice and Umar's effigy was replaced by those of US President Jimmy Carter and the Shah.[9]

The United States attempted to maintain their influence on Iranian politics after the Shah's ouster. Frustrated by the continuing interference and the refusal to extradite the exiled Shah, Iranian students stormed the US Embassy in Tehran on November 11, and took the embassy personnel hostage. The occupiers staged continuing protests in front of the international news media, who had assembled at the embassy. According to one journalist, protesters paraded and burned effigies of the Shah, President Carter or Uncle Sam almost daily.[10] The protests gained wide media coverage, especially in

7 Rouhollah K. Ramazani, "Iran's Revolution: Patterns, Problems and Prospects," *International Affairs* 56, 3 (1980): 446.

8 Michael M. J. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), 177.

9 Peter Chelkowski, "Popular Entertainment, Media and Social Change in Twentieth-Century Iran," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, eds. Peter Avery et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 7:766.

10 James Yuenger, "U.S. Embassy: Where it all started," *Chicago Tribune*, Jan. 21, 1981. I have collected photographs of seventeen effigies being paraded in Tehran in November and December 1979, six representing the Shah, seven President Carter and four Uncle Sam.

the United States, where counter-protests with effigies of Ayatollah Khomeini were staged in response.

A photograph taken on November 8 (Figure 17.2) shows a smoking effigy above a celebratory crowd. Made from cloth and paper, the figure wears a high hat with the stripes of the American flag. The Arabic language sign on the chest is undecipherable. At a November 25 protest, the portrait simply consisted of a strangely shaped cut-out figure dangling from a gallows in a crowd also carrying a portrait of Ayatollah Khomeini. The name "Carter" was written in Arabic and Latin scripts; three Stars of David, a dollar sign and a Swastika were drawn onto the figure.

These images do not have a consistent style, and most seem to have been made very quickly. While some of the drawn faces do attempt a visual likeness to either the Shah or President Carter, others look nothing like their prototypes. Many show names, signs or the usual distinguishing features (dollar symbol, Swastika, etc.). All effigies of Uncle Sam wear a high hat adorned with the stars and stripes.

Many photographs show large crowds carrying the effigies of the leaders on sticks or on improvised gallows made up of a few wooden beams, as well as banners and signboards with slogans such as "Down with Carter and imperialism", written in Persian and occasionally in English. On December 15, a figure made from white cloth, stuffed but rather flat, was proudly presented to the cameras by a crowd consisting of men of different ages. It featured the caricature of the Shah on one side and that of Carter on the other. Sign-boards reading "corruptor on earth" were drawn around their necks. Afterwards, the effigies were set on fire, and the photographs show crowds chanting and waiving their fists to express their anger.

In the years following the revolution, protest effigies of Uncle Sam and consecutive sitting US presidents became a fixture in Iranian memorial culture. They still feature in demonstrations celebrating the anniversaries of the Iranian revolution of February 1979 and the embassy takeover in November of that year.[11] The style of these images has not changed much during the years. The effigies are homemade, scarecrow-like figures consisting of stuffed clothes, or sculpted heads on a wooden stick with the American flag as the body. More recently, photographs have been attached to the representations of Barack Obama and Donald Trump, and clownish figures have been used to ridicule the presidents, instead of demonizing them. In the picture of a 2016 demonstration (Figure 17.3), a young woman almost hides behind a stuffed cloth effigy of President Obama that she carries on a stick: a piece of foam rubber in the shape of a rocket carrying the words "Iran's Rocket" written in Persian has been attached to the belly. The face is black and consists of a large nose, big red lips and blue eyes with a rather sheepish expression. Once props in violent performances that expressed popular anger at a time when Iranian society was being redefined, these images have been turned into harmless accessories for state-sponsored rallies that commemorate the past in order to cement current power structures.

11 Effigies of Uncle Sam and the US President are also paraded on *al Quds* Day (Jerusalem Day), a holiday instituted by Khomeini in 1979 in support of the Palestinians' claim to a homeland and their demand that Jerusalem be the capital of their state.

Afghanistan: Insult and Anger

In Afghanistan, the use of images representing power in the European tradition seems rare. Only once, in 1961, was an Afghan coin issued bearing the portrait of the ruler, Mohammed Zahir Shah. The first documented effigy protests occurred in 1999, when likenesses of President Bill Clinton were set on fire to protest his country's pressure to extradite Osama bin Laden for his involvement in the US embassy bombings in East Africa. However, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, Afghan emigrants and students in Tehran protested the invasion with life-size cut-out drawings of the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev and Afghan President Babrak Karmal dangling from improvised gallows – most likely inspired by the Iranian revolutionaries who had demonstrated with burning effigies in front of the US embassy just a few weeks earlier. Until the Soviet Union withdrew its troops from Afghanistan in 1989, Afghans held rallies in many countries they lived in, both Western and Eastern, and burned effigies of Brezhnev and his successors Yuri Andropov, Konstantin Chernenko and Mikhail Gorbachev, to remind international opinion of the ongoing war and occupation of Afghanistan.

Again, after the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 9, 2001, when the United States threatened with war if Afghanistan did not expel bin Laden, protesters burned dummies of George W. Bush. The practice became current during demonstrations that took place in Afghanistan between 2005 and 2015 to denounce the country's occupation by the US-led International Alliance and military operations that caused civilian casualties.[12] Even more effigy protests were triggered by incidents perceived as Western insults to Islam. These included Quran desecrations by American soldiers, the publication in the Western press of cartoons ridiculing the Prophet Mohammad, and the release in the West of two anti-Islamic films.[13] The conflict between Palestine and Israel also led to effigy protests featuring US presidents.

The effigies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama that were produced in Afghanistan for protest purposes were made very simply from old clothes draped over a wooden frame, and stuffed with flammable material. While a few had photographic portraits attached to the head, most faces were crudely drawn without attempting a resemblance: they were essentially caricatures with foolish expressions or monstrous features. The effigies appear as mere props in the performance of punishment, which draws the attention to the anger of the protesters, and the apparent violence of the performance. The photographs show chaotic scenes: figures engulfed in flames, angry crowds chanting and protesters hitting the burning effigies on the ground.

12 My records show nine effigies depicting President Bush between May 2005 and March 2008 and as many as 29 effigies depicting President Barack Obama between October 2009 and November 2013. Other politicians burned in effigy during these years include Israeli Premiers Olmert and Netanyahu, Geert Wilders, the Pope, Iranian President Ahmadinejad, the American Pastor Jones, French President Hollande, Pakistan's President Zardari and, on one occasion, also Afghanistan's President Karzai.

13 The films in question are *Fitna* by the Dutch right-wing politician Geert Wilders (2008) and a trailer to the movie *Innocence of Muslims* (which was never produced) by the American self-proclaimed filmmaker Nakoula Basseley Nakoula (2012).

Conclusion

The protest effigies that are produced in Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan differ in style, but have common features too. The Iraqi examples have a somewhat distinct, realistic style and show that they have been made with some effort. Their sculptural form, the choice of garments, the use of photographs molded onto the heads as faces, reveal some concern with verisimilitude. In contrast, the effigies produced in Iran and Afghanistan seem more improvised, made from old clothes stuffed with flammable material. As a result, they look like grotesque figures with distorted bodies and dangling limbs.

What matters most is that the figures are clearly identifiable. This is achieved in the three countries under consideration in a number of ways. The identity of the US presidents is indicated by the names and photographs attached, drawings that attempt a visual likeness, or features such as skin color. Equally recurrent are attributes that serve as indicators of cultural identity: the Western suit, shirt and tie, and in Afghanistan the Christian cross. Symbols of political identity are also frequently added to the effigies: the American flag, the CIA acronym and the US dollar sign. In Iran in particular, the figure often depicts Uncle Sam, instead of the president. Signs are also used for disparaging purposes: the Star of David, the Swastika, shoes (considered dirty in Arab culture), vilified animals (dogs, donkeys, apes) and demonizing attributes (werewolf faces, demons' teeth). These signs and traits are transferred from the image (the effigy) to the prototype (the person depicted) for ridiculing and denigrating ends.[14] As in the European Renaissance tradition of defaming portraiture, the emphasis is very much on the public body. The images depicting the office-holders, the representatives of the US government, are punished in order to express contempt for the country.

It should be pointed out that effigy punishment is not quite the same as political iconoclasm, which is the destruction of images representing power. While the "portraits" that have been considered in this chapter mostly concern the public body, the connection with the private body is close. The presence of a vulnerable material body, together with the possibilities to manipulate and obliterate it, make effigy punishment a practice quite unlike the toppling of a statue: it is more closely aligned with the ritual of capital punishment. As Michel Foucault explains in his essay "The Spectacle of Punishment", in the seventeenth century this ritual was the theatrical enactment of violence performed on the convict to affirm and make visible the power of the sovereign.[15] The procedure served to strip the convicts of their political and social status and reduce them to a pure physical presence, to their biological state of pain and death. Effigy punishment is also a theatrical demonstration of power, expressing either the existing power – as in effigy punishments in formal law – or the rightful and righteous power that has yet to be established or re-established in protests against occurred injustices.

Because of the absence and inaccessibility of the real perpetrator, a substitute body is created for the ritual of punishment. It consists of a material body with added signs and attributes representing the figure's social and political body. The image replaces the person, in a mechanism Horst Bredekamp calls "substitutive image act", one that is particularly relevant in the social, political and judicial realm.[16] Bodies are treated

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14 For a more exhaustive account of the forms and effects of grotesque denigration, see the chapter "Resemblance and the Grotesque" in Göttke, "Burning Images," 233–68.
15 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 48–9.
16 Horst Bredekamp, *Theorie des Bildakts* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010), 173.

as images and images as bodies: the image (the effigy) takes the place of the perpetrator, so that the deserved punishment can be carried out and made public. The body of the effigy is punished – insulted, spat at, beaten, punched or hanged – to strip away the public body. Finally, the effigy is burned, in order to obliterate the effigy's material body as well, until only unrecognizable debris is left over.

The protesters communicate through the manipulated images of their enemies. In the first instance, the grotesque effigies announce the debased nature of the depicted. Then these "bodies" are subjected to further denigrating treatment as they are ridiculed, insulted, beaten, hanged and burned. These visual spectacles are staged for the benefit of the public actually present at the demonstrations, and to produce photographs to be distributed by the media to distant audiences.

Figure 17.1 An effigy of President Bush hanging on the pedestal where a statue of Saddam Hussein once stood in Firdous Square, in Baghdad, November 21, 2008. (Photo: Adam Ashton).

Figure 17.2 A scarecrow symbolizing the United States being burned during a demonstration, Tehran, November 8, 1979. (Photo: Philippe Ledru).

Figure 17.3 Effigy of President Obama at a rally held in Tehran, February 10, 2016. (Photo: Thomas Erdbrink).

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