

Symbolic Objects in Contentious Politics

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Bodies on Fire

Self-Immolation as Spectacle in Contentious Politics

Dennis Zuev

Contention is often described as driven by mechanisms and processes, many of which involve theatrical, dramaturgical, and visually intense performances (Tilly 2008). Such acts not only include the full gamut of what is traditionally described as “collective action,” but involve single-act and monological performances. Self-immolation is one such contentious performance, perhaps one of the oldest forms of contentious politics, even as old as the act of self-sacrifice (“martyrdom”) itself. The flaming, self-immolating body is a symbolic object that appears to traverse borders of religious affiliation and geographic relation, gaining different symbolic meanings as it does so.

Self-immolations have been performed by people around the world, regardless of religious background, political affiliation, or ideological outlook. Many self-immolators subsequently became national icons of resistance, such as “the burning monk” Thích Quảng Đức in Vietnam and Romas Kalanta in Lithuania. In 2011, a significant wave of self-immolations was observed in Muslim countries, including Tunisia, Algeria, and Egypt. Mohammed Bouazizi, who self-immolated in Tunisia, consequently became a symbol of the Jasmine Revolution(s) and antigovernment protests that swept across the Middle East and North Africa in 2010–2012. While it has been recently argued that self-immolation is an act performed by the socially desperate and otherwise voiceless (Žuk and Žuk 2018), the

1960s and '70s saw it take on a novel form in contentious politics as an act performed “not out of despair but out of hope” (Cheyney 1994). By following the sociohistorical evolution of self-immolation as a contentious performance, we can observe the transformation of its meanings over time. We can thus trace the value of such individual sacrifice as a radical form of protest for collective causes, and the value, significance, and potency of the body on fire as a symbolic object in such contentious performances.

Although it is often considered an act of violence without murder (Biggs 2005), and sometimes even a mindful, meditative, or passive form of protest (Whalen-Bridge 2015), the act of self-immolation can ignite waves of riot, protest, or even revolution. Hence, understanding its performative potential and symbolic value in contentious politics is highly useful. While it is equally important to grasp the causes and outcomes of this radical performance, the elemental symbolism of fire as a pyrotechnic medium is often missing in the analysis of self-immolation. The symbolic object that is central to this performance—the “body-on-fire”—constitutes a radical transformation of the body that can, in turn, herald a call to radically transform society, or give rise to radical transformations in the broader culture of protest in its wake (Žuk and Žuk 2018). Self-immolation as a form of protest is seen differently in various sociopolitical contexts, in line with cultural and political differences in relation to (necro)politics (Makley 2015) and the moral value of the body. In some cases, the destruction of the body might represent one of the only available means through which grievances may be individually communicated on a grand scale.

Over the last 60 years, self-immolation has been a worldwide phenomenon, being seen and performed from Vietnam and South Korea to Lithuania and Tunisia. This phenomenon does not seem to be bounded by membership of any particular religious or gender category. No studies suggest that one’s religion is a predictor of self-immolation: self-immolators have come from all religious backgrounds. Neither is gender understood as a causal factor, despite the higher visibility and thus greater value often afforded to male self-immolators (Cheyney 1994).

Unpicking the symbolic meanings associated with self-immolation involves understanding the body as a site¹ and indeed sight of protest, as well as a potent and radical tool for increasing the visibility of protesters’ claims. Self-immolation can be used as a lens for grasping the material transformation that occurs in other pyrotechnical forms of contentious

1. See also Zawilski, chapter 8, this volume.

performance. Indeed, fire is used in a wide variety of protest performances, such as burning of flags, draft cards, political leader effigies, books, newspapers,² and even Christmas trees.³

In this chapter, I show how self-immolation may be seen through the lens of contentious performances and symbolic objects. Self-immolating constitutes a transformative protest ritual, with the potential to spark waves of further protests and even deep social change, via the symbolic act of “dissipating the dark” and, hence, “awakening” others. The self-immolating “body on fire” created by this high-octane, “spectacular” contentious performance takes on an important role as a symbolic object in episodes and processes of contention, alongside other objects associated with the immolator in question (such as their personal accessories or instruments of immolation). This improved understanding of self-immolation and “the body on fire” contributes to our understanding of contention by focusing specifically on self-immolating bodies as both a class of symbolic objects and a contentious performance that may lend visibility to a diverse set of sociopolitical issues in tightly controlled regimes and domains.

Theorizing the Body-on-Fire

The topic of self-immolation has seen its fair share of scholarly attention, especially among sociologists (Robbins 1986; Park 2004; Biggs 2005) and anthropologists (Andriolo 2006; Makley 2015). It has been addressed in discussions as diverse as photographic protest (Yang 2011) and the role of women in peace movements (Cheyney 1994). However, the visual aspects of self-immolation as a distinctly material kind of contentious performance—in particular, its spectacularity, visibility,⁴ and physicality—remain largely unaddressed.

The notion of “spectacle,” borrowed from the philosophical work of Guy Debord (1994), presents us with a way to explore self-immolation’s emotional dimension and role as a means of unification. Debord suggested speaking of the “spectacle” in its own terms: “signs and the dominant system of production—signs which are at the same time the ultimate end-

2. During the antigovernment protest in Lisbon in 2011, the simple act of burning a newspaper ignited the protesters to move up to the Parliament building and occupy the stairs (author’s fieldwork observations).

3. Such as in the Greek protests of 2008 (Jepps 2008) and, more recently, the burning of Fox News’s self-proclaimed “All American” Christmas tree in Manhattan, 2021.

4. A notable exception in this regard is the highly emblematic and much-discussed photograph of Thích Quảng Đức’s self-immolation in Saigon, 1963, taken by Malcolm Browne.

products of that system” (1994, 2). The notion of the “spectacle” allows us to conceptualize the act of self-immolation not simply as a monological act but as an *interactive* phenomenon (Best and Douglas 1999) in which a charismatic situation of resistance is created. Unlike when Debord was writing *Society of the Spectacle* and its follow-ups (1960s–1980s), today if a self-immolation is not publicized (or media coverage is avoided due to existing media taboos), it can still be circulated in the visual sphere of the internet. In this way, self-immolation as a communicative act can gain powerful visual potential and accumulate iconic prominence in and through waves of global protest. In this vein, this chapter contends that, as a contentious performance, self-immolation’s key property is its visual potency, achieved with recourse to *both* certain performative scripts, and the symbolic objects involved in the performance—most centrally, the body on fire.

As Tilly (1986, 2008) and others have emphasized, historically speaking, participants in collective action often have limited performative options in their expressive repertoire, a “paradoxical combination of ritual and flexibility” (see also Traugott 1993). The same can be said of modern rituals of contention that have visibility as their primary goal, and that employ symbolic logic designed to convince rather than to win (Della Porta, Peterson, and Reiter 2006; Zuev 2013; see also chapter 2, this volume). Latterly, contemporary work on the visual analysis of radical politics and protest movements has focused increasingly on the spectacle of “performative violence” (Juris 2005), with intensifying clashes between protesters and police giving activists valuable symbolic resources to raise their political voices (Askanius 2013). And, as several recent works in social movement studies demonstrate, these political voices are increasingly visually articulated (McGarry et al. 2020) and draw on “visual thinking” (Mirzoeff 2020, 20).

Contentious performances such as self-immolation generate emotions. Following Jasper (2012, 25), I understand emotions as “forms of thinking, and as such [they] are a part of culture mixed together with cognitive propositions and moral principles and institutions” (Jasper 2012, 25). Our morality and cognition are saturated with emotion, and rational claims-making is thus commingled with passionate and emotional interactions such as contentious performances. In turn, while performances as methods of political expression do not necessarily carry specific demands in themselves, they may nonetheless carry some degree of individual agency (McGarry et al. 2020). Namely, contentious performances can be both outpourings and elicitations of emotion. Self-immolation performances, with their radical aesthetics of pyrotechnical spectacle, are especially potent examples.

Several scholars have suggested that self-immolation ought to be “read” as a form of suicide in terms of its agency and performance. Yang (2011), in her close visual analysis of Malcolm Browne’s photograph of the Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức (see figure 9.1), examined how appropriations of the burning monk’s image demonstrate the resonance of “about to die” moments and their potential to promote agency and civic engagement. At the same time, Jaworski (2010) offers a feminist critique of this perspective, suggesting that the suicidal act is relational, and as such never outside of discourse and power relations. Drawing on Foucault, Jaworski contends that the act of taking one’s life can be seen as an act of resistance to death that performs the limits of power. Developing this approach further, Uzzell (2012) explored the biopolitical (and necropolitical) dimensions of self-immolation, suggesting that the destruction of the body during this act is a particularly powerful political act, as the death of the body undermines biopower’s core conduit: the life and health of the body.

Drawing on the work outlined herein, this chapter demonstrates that self-immolation is best understood as a visual “speech-act” that is not reducible to simplistic interpretations as a suicidal act of self-negation, desperation, or even as a political call for an altruistic self-sacrifice. However, adopting a “symbolic objects in contentious politics” lens, this chapter extends these arguments by conceptualizing “the body-on-fire” as a symbolic object. In this sense, self-immolation has the capacity to speak many messages to multiple audiences, and can be conceptualized in terms of relational visibility.

This chapter proposes a set of overarching scripts of self-immolation in relation to the visual potency of the self-immolating body. While all self-immolators make some kind of symbolic statement or message, I suggest that three overarching scripts can be read from the visual and performative symbolism of the body-on-fire:

1. The most extreme form is the *suicidal script*, where the ultimate direction is unconditional, nonnegotiable self-annihilation, staged to elicit a strong emotive response from audiences. The form of visibility involved here is, in a Foucauldian sense, deeply empowering, and hence a highly symbolically loaded act. It is aimed at relations of power, as the death of the self-immolating subject is the ultimate and terminal aim.
2. The *sovereign script* aims at attaining visibility for the social grievance rather than simply the termination of life. I define “sovereign” here in similarly Foucauldian terms, as relating to the

capacity for an individual to performatively attain the power over life and death. In this case, death need not necessarily be the ultimate end of the act; rather, the transformation of the individual into the performative artifact of the flaming body symbolically represents sovereign power through the performance of their own death. In other words, sovereignty is attained through the symbolic transformation of the performer's body into a body-on-fire.

3. In *the scenographic script*, the spectacle of the self-immolating body is *invoked* through a contentious performance performed, but is *achieved* through a depiction of the act only. The spectacle of death or self-destruction is simply staged. This can be serious or playful, and staged by a variety of different actors ranging from protesters themselves to the very authorities being protested.

Needless to say, categorizing specific acts of self-immolation into these three scripts poses numerous challenges, especially in light of the divergent stories and cultural meanings associated with each such performance. Nevertheless, doing so is conceptually productive for the visual sociology of self-immolation specifically and spectacular forms of protest more generally. On an ontological level, acts of spectacular suicide and violence against the self reveal a range of insights into relationship between the body and the self, and expose the problematic agency of the body in political protest.

In the following section, I outline a range of episodes of self-immolation with respect to the three scripts listed above: suicidal, sovereign, and scenographic. Having done so, the final substantive section focuses on the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi in Tunisia in 2010, which, despite the lack of an immediate visual record, was nevertheless captured, reproduced, and memorialized in the form of cartoons, caricatures, stamps, and other materials. This analysis demonstrates how certain “ordinary” bodies can become symbols of heroism in contentious politics through performative sacrifice and their transformation into “bodies on fire.”

Gaining Visibility: Scripts of Self-Immolation

The Suicidal Script

Suicidal self-immolation is often associated with East Asia, in part due to the hypervisibility and reportage of self-immolations by Buddhist monks in mid-twentieth-century Vietnam. The association is also a product of

its place in Buddhist and Hindu theology and practice, in which it is considered the highest form of religious devotion. One of the most notable references to self-immolation we can find is in the Hindu tradition of *Sati*, the practice of self-immolation by a widow on the death of her husband, meant to signify spiritual salvation for the deceased spouse. The act of self-immolation by the widow thus leads to a sacralization of the woman, and the act itself stands for the extreme expression of marital valor. Although *sati* is not an act of protest per se, but rather a religious ritual, it has a deep symbolic meaning as it allows the widow to reach a higher status and signifies an equalization of wife and husband after death.

Similarly, some Buddhist texts openly glorify self-immolation. In the twelfth chapter of the *Saddharma-Pundarika Sutra*, we find perhaps the clearest description of the sacrificial burning of the human body as a means of worship:

Sacrificing one's own body, young man of good family, is the most distinguished, the chiefest, the best, the very best, the most sublime worship of the law. (*Saddharma Pundarika*, Kern 2012)

The act of burning the body is understood to result in supreme and perfect enlightenment, the production of a “pious merit” that, unlike the human body itself, cannot be burned by fire or swept away by water. The person who destines their body to be burned is characterized by the achievement of the highest stage of enlightenment.

However, historically it is not only Hinduism and Buddhism that valorized self-immolation as an act of worship. In sixteenth-century Russia, Russian Orthodox Raskolniks (or “Old Believers”) immolated themselves on a mass scale, earning them a reputation as overzealous religious dissenters. Tens of thousands of people burned themselves, at times even whole families in their homes, or whole villages. Raskolniks’ acts of suicide can be considered an expression of violent struggle aimed at defending and preserving traditional Orthodox values (such as the ritual structure of the liturgy). The dissenters’ belief at the time involved the imminent coming of the “antichrist” and the end of the world, in light of which self-immolation—understood to be a purifying act—was considered the only means of salvation (Robbins 1986). In some cases, attacks on the Old Believers were deliberately provoked by the clergy to hasten confrontation and, hence, wider involvement in martyrdom. As Robbins (1986, 8) explains, the great wave of mass suicide among Raskolniks resulted from

interactions among escalating persecution, intensifying alienation, and deviant protest. Despite their spectacular acts of mass suicide and violent confrontations, the sect survived and lived on as a religious movement (Robbins 1986, 9). However, the act of protest has also lived on: Raskolnik immolations also made claims against the tsar, and so may be considered simultaneously religious and political. These bodies on fire found visual representation and memorialization in an 1882 painting by Grigoriy Myasoyedov entitled *Samoszbigatelye* (“self-immolators”), which is understood to be one of the first visualizations of self-immolation as a political act.

Similar to Hindu or Buddhist traditions, the mass suicide among Raskolniks was also viewed as a way to reach a higher status through the ecstatic act of collective self-immolation. Priests often led the procession, but would allegedly exit through a secret door in the church or house, and thus demonstrate the magic of rebirth through their ability to lead another batch of dissenters in the performance of self-immolation. The notions of community salvation through individual sacrifice and purification through fire are key to understanding the deep symbolism of self-immolation. Alongside the Abrahamic and South Asian faiths already mentioned, the symbolism of fire as a purifying force is also found in Zoroastrianism, an association that is important for understanding self-immolation and protest culture (and its gendered associations) in the Middle East and Central Asia (Rasool and Payton 2014). From the analysis of its roots across multifarious religious traditions, we can conclude that many of the core ideas found in modern contentious self-immolation have precursors in these form of theological ideas, symbols, and iconography.

If the preeminent representation of self-immolation in fine art is found in Grigoriy Myasoyedov’s 1882 depiction of the Raskolniks, its photographic history begins with the iconic image of Thích Quảng Đức, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk photographed by Malcolm Browne in June 1963. This was the first recorded photographic image of self-immolation as an expression of protest, where the human body became a visceral contentious, political, symbolic object. Self-immolations are prepared rituals, and hence include an element of staging: at the least, a place has to be chosen, and that can have a symbolic meaning as well; often, preliminary notes or manifestos are written and disseminated, and photographers invited. The example of Thích Quảng Đức was copied during US protests against the Vietnam war by Quakers (see Cheyney 1994) and by radical youth in 1960s and ’70s Eastern Europe during protests against the Soviet military (e.g., Jan Palach in 1968).



Fig. 9.1. Self-immolation of Thích Quảng Đức, South Vietnam, 1963.
(Photograph by Malcolm Browne.)

In 1972, Lithuanian student Romas Kalanta left a note in his diary stating “No one is to blame for my death but political system” before self-immolating in the small town of Kaunas, a municipality that had experienced two days of the largest riots experienced in postwar Lithuania. The news of his self-immolation did not spread across the borders of the USSR, but it became an important symbol of the anti-Soviet resistance in Lithuania. Nevertheless, Kalanta remained a key figure in the national “culture of protest,” with annual commemorations occurring since Lithuanian independence in 1990 and a monument in his memory erected in Kaunas in 2002 (LRT 2019).

For Thích Quảng Đức, however, commemoration and memorialization have spread considerably further. Across the world, Malcolm Browne’s photograph of Duc’s burning body has been reprinted on posters, postcards, and placards; it has been recreated as artworks, and symbolically cross-referenced in modern acts of protest. A memorial statue to Thích Quảng Đức enveloped in flames now stands in Ho Chi Minh City. The extent of its reach is demonstrated by the appropriation of Browne’s image on the cover of the eponymous album of the band Rage Against the Machine,

which sold over a million copies. The band's cropped version of the photo is used to convey the ideology of the album, inspiring a new generation of rebellious youth. The rhetorical power of the original image that documented the act was amplified through this mechanical reproduction and repackaging of its impact.

The band's modified, cropped image of the burning monk carries a slightly different message, enhanced by the dramatic font used for "rage against the machine," which mimics a ransom note by using individual letters cut from newspapers to allow the author to evade identification. The image is lifted out of its immediate sociohistorical context: in place of the meditative and mindful public-spirited self-sacrifice of the immolating monk, the album cover connotes the anarchistic rage of youth rebellion, the fire of Molotov cocktails and arson. Nevertheless, the dissemination of the image on the album cover and the associated Facebook page evoked a public memory of Thích Quảng Đức's act and reactivated its potency in a new spatial, temporal, and political context (Yang 2011).

In the history of self-immolation, relatively few performances have been captured by visual media. Staged and photographically captured performances such as the one documented by Browne in Vietnam have been rare. However, with the rising ubiquity of video and photo recording devices since the latter half of the twentieth century, documenting self-immolation is easier than ever before. For example, many of the numerous self-immolations by Tibetans over the last decade have been captured on cellphones and disseminated to members of Tibetan diaspora abroad, and subsequently circulated further.

Another publicly available image of self-immolation that follows the *suicidal script* is that of Tibetan student Jamphel Yeshe, who self-immolated in New Delhi in 2012. The act was photographed by Manish Swarup and subsequently published in *National Geographic* on November 30, 2012 (see Bartholet 2012). One of the most striking features Yeshe's immolation was the significant number of onlookers who were taking photos rather than interfering and helping to extinguish the fire.

As the replications and memorializations of bodies on fire described above illustrate, self-immolation is a potent act. Browne's photograph depicts the monk seated in a meditative posture, his body engulfed in flames. The picture of the Jamphel Yeshe depicts him running down the street, leaving a trail of fire in his wake, his face half-smiling, half transfixed in an agony of pain. Both images hold the rhetorical power of the "about to die moment" (Zelizer 2010), yet their dissemination has been

carefully curated by the media to not disturb the public eye. The relative absence of such images in state media illustrates the tendency for the latter to limit depictions of charismatic political acts of self-destruction or death in the public visual sphere (Malkowski 2017). We may occasionally encounter images of burned bodies (such as miners or car-accident victims) and, through this observation, be able to imagine the pain of immolation (Boltanski 2005; Chouliaraki 2008).

However, contentious self-immolation achieves something even more potent. When we encounter not a burned body, but a body *on fire*, viewers are much more readily invited to transition from passive audience into active observers, able to symbolically interact with the body of a live, suffering person. Browne's image of Thích Quảng Đức, where the monk's performance is preserved by the audience and carefully guarded in order to be watched, documented, and absorbed by the foreign eye, captures the transformation of the body into a symbolic object, a visual message destined for a global audience. The self-immolator's body is not confronted or opposed, nor is anybody attempting to extinguish the fire; he is found in a serene sitting position, conveying power, belief, and detachment. In terms of the actions of the observers in the photograph, the picture of Jamphel Yeshe, the Tibetan self-immolator printed in a 2012 copy of *National Geographic*, achieves a similar effect. As Yeshe runs down the street, numerous bystanders are seen holding cameras pointed at his burning body. In terms of the depiction of political self-immolation, neither the about-to-burn nor the disfigured and burned immolated body have become the key visual representation of the act; rather, it is the body-on-fire—the “about to die” moment—that has taken center stage (Zelizer 2010). In this sense, the photographic capture of the self-immolating body has come to (re)present the suicidal script to its audience as a potent and emotive artifact of protest.

So far, I have demonstrated that political self-immolation, from its earliest meanings, has its roots in extreme forms of religious devotion, grounded in notions of public ritual and the sacrality of fire as a purifying medium. As a result of this lineage, when applied to political protest the act came already charged with radical and poignant meaning. This suicidal script renders self-immolation all the more powerful.

In the following two sections, self-immolation is viewed from the perspective of the *sovereign* and *scenographic scripts*, both of which elucidate the complexity of cultural understanding of the individual body as an agent in performance. The *sovereign script* is enacted out of desperation by Afghan and Kurdish women, and the *scenographic* self-destruction is produced by

the feminist activist group Femen. Both scripts deal specifically with women's self-immolations in which the body-on-fire can be conceived of as a pyrotechnical manifesto. In the cases discussed through these sections, it is not always true that the act of self-immolation aims for the terminal cessation of life; in some cases, it is the body-on-fire—or a scarred body—rather than immanent death that becomes the medium of contentious political symbolism.

The Sovereign Script

The sovereign script of self-immolation involves the theatrical representation and aesthetic of self-annihilation. It may involve the death of the performer, but this is not a necessity; it can complement or replace the suicidal script. At its core, this script involves conferring sovereign power on the immolating protester. Sovereign power, according to Foucault (2003, 241), relates to the “right to take life or let live.” By symbolically transforming the body into a body-on-fire, this form of contentious performance exhibits, and hence fleetingly claims, this form of power.

As Rasool and Payton (2014) have noted, self-immolation signifies different things depending on cultural context. In Afghanistan, self-immolation became a frequent “last resort” in women's nonviolent resistance against domestic violence and abusive marriage⁵ (Aziz 2011). According to Lebni et al. (2019), self-immolation is a very frequent mode of suicide among women in societies such as Iran, Iraq, India, and Sri Lanka, in some cases constituting more than a quarter of all female suicides. While the authors cite a variety of motives for women's self-immolation, protest was found to be a common rationale, a method of manifesting ongoing injustices and a form of defiance—a method of breaking the silence.

Thus, oppressed women in certain societies have used self-immolation as a radical communication strategy to convey contentious political messages beyond the walls of the house, breaking a silence enforced by cultural taboos, thereby gaining greater valence for their voices. In the Afghan context the use of fire in suicide symbolizes eternal destruction or the elimination of one's legacy; hence this form of public struggle is perhaps all the more radical (Aziz 2011). Among Kurdish women, self-immolation has been similarly used to protest against diverse forms of injustice and marital

5. The Ministry of Women's Affairs has documented a total of 103 women who set themselves on fire between March 2009 and March 2010 (Hauslohner 2010).

conflicts. In both contexts, the symbolic destruction of the body becomes a last resort for exercising sovereign subjectivity in the context of patriarchal subordination; it is a final means of attaining power and agency (Rasool and Payton 2014; Lebni et al. 2019).

As we have seen, the sovereign script involves treating the body as a tool of last resort, a means of gaining fleeting individual agency where other avenues appear to no longer be available. In the context of biopolitical domination, self-immolation gives the protester sovereign power, with the ultimate right to take life. For women living in highly repressive gender regimes, the transformation of their bodies—subjected to severe control up to the point of self-immolation—into bodies-on-fire represents a means of empowerment and agency. Moreover, these bodies-on-fire become symbolic objects in opposition to domineering patriarchal policies, practices, and figures in the family or community. The sovereign script is thus used to protest the monopoly of male authority and structural violence, as a means of moral claim-making and a symbolic and embodied form of dramatizing (dis)empowerment (Makley 2015).

The Scenographic Script

As illustrated in the prior section, through the conceptualization of the body-on-fire as a symbolic object, its substance (a flaming body) can be extracted from its end-point (death). Hence, the performative potential of self-immolation can be “played with” on a scenographic or theatrical level. Here, the notion of the body-on-fire is invoked, often without injury to the body at all. An example of this can be seen in the protest performances of the Ukrainian feminist social movement Femen, whose aims are to fight “patriarchy in its three manifestations—sexual exploitation of women, dictatorship and religion” (BBC 2013). Femen activists use the female body as a canvass in their contentious performances through topless protest, bearing words and phrases on their torsos, and through symbolic burning. In 2011, however, Femen staged a faux-self-immolation protest against prostitution in Ukraine. Surrounded by fellow bare-skinned protesters holding placards, one demonstrator held aloft a black jerry-can with a “flammable” symbol on its side, and emptied a clear liquid over her head. Self-immolation was then further invoked, with the same protester wielding a makeshift flamethrower. In this context, the partial nudity and the act of imaginary self-immolation aim at a radical reverting of corporeal

biopolitics in which the scenographic, symbolic destruction of the body functions as an effective expressive contentious performance.

The extremeness of self-immolation is only reinforced by Femen's other form of bodily protest: the public display of topless female bodies (O'Keefe 2014). The group's mock self-immolation conveys a sense of the protesters' own strength of feeling, but also calls forth notions of the voicelessness and desperation of a broader constituency of abused women on whose behalf they are protesting. The symbolic self-immolation of a bare-skinned female body invokes both the suicidal and sovereign scripts, with control of the body allegorically performed. Drawing on radical feminist repertoires of using the gendered body in contention (O'Keefe 2014), this scenographic script of self-immolation mobilizes the body as a symbolic object in order to convey multilayered narratives.

A rather different instance of the scenographic script can be observed in China, where state powers utilized the spectacular theatrics of self-immolation to denigrate and undermine Falun Gong protesters. On January 23, 2001, five Falun Gong practitioners were filmed by the Xinhua agency allegedly undertaking this radical act in Tiananmen Square; the event was subsequently narrativized in state reportage to demonstrate the violence, inhumanity, and fanaticism of the movement. Falun Gong activists gave their own response, entitled "False Fire," offering an alternative reading of what happened on that day. According to this version of events, the authorities staged the self-immolation in an attempt to taint the movement in popular opinion. In this case, the flaming bodies in Tiananmen Square became the object of meta-contention, contention over an alleged contentious performance. This case demonstrates how existing repertoires can be reversed and used against the (alleged) claim-maker to advance the political agenda of the (alleged) target of the claim, irrespective of who it was performed by or for. Either way, the government was able to utilize the scenographic script of bodies on fire to depict Falun Gong as an extremist, fanatical movement and hence depress its public support.

Beijing's Tiananmen Square is a symbolic cornerstone in China, and since 1989 has been considered its most politically sensitive area. Several notable cases of self-immolation have been attempted and performed there, the most recent being in October 2011 (BBC 2011). Since the early 2000s, fire-extinguishers have become an essential instrument of Tiananmen Square guards, who keep them close by and visible as a precautionary measure. In this way, any attempt at self-immolating protest can be quickly

Fig. 9.2. Fire extinguishers on Tiananmen Square, Beijing, China
(Credit: Photograph © Dennis Zuev, 2008.)



dealt with, decreasing the chance of such performances being enacted in this particularly symbolically important space (see figure 9.2).

Interactive Effects: The Case of Mohammad Bouazizi

The act of self-immolation can have unpredictable interactive effects. Nevertheless, its sheer intensity has the potential to instigate powerful societal responses, from emulative performances to waves of protest (see Biggs 2012 for a productive outline of waves of self-immolation). To exemplify the former, in 1990, Rajiv Goswami, a student at Delhi University, self-immolated in opposition to the government's enactment of the Mandal Commission recommendations. The commission had "advocated statutory provisions of reservations for people belonging to 'other backward classes—OBC' in the civil service and educational institutions run by the central and state governments in the country" (Singh et al. 1998, 71). However, many students and new graduates at the time viewed this new legislation as disproportionately disadvantaging them as a subset of the population. In the wake of Goswami's self-immolation, a swathe of students replicated the act. Bodies on fire can set countries and even regions alight with protest and revolution. In this section, I consider this potential further by focusing on the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi in Tunisia, at the beginning of the Arab Spring.

On December 17, 2010, Mohammad Bouazizi doused himself with gasoline and set himself alight. No photographer had been organized to capture the moment, and he was not surrounded by like-minded activists

carrying placards, nor was he a leading member of a social movement. Nevertheless, the actions of the Tunisian street vendor became a crucial spark that lit the flames first of Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution and subsequently ignited a host of contentious activities in countries across the region.

Up to this point, self-immolation had been notably rare for men in the Muslim-majority societies of North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia (Khosrokhavar 2012). Outside of the Kurdish community, such ritualistic suicides were essentially practiced only by women, and even then, doing so was particularly uncommon in Tunisia. Hence, in this context, Bouazizi's actions were all the more impactful. Not only did he become a popular hero and fighter for social justice (Michelsen 2015), but his flaming body became a symbolic object that represented people power, resistance to death, and even revolution itself. In the absence of photographic evidence, alternative forms of iconography stepped in to portray Bouazizi's body-on-fire, in the form of art and popular media, specifically via cartoons and drawings.

The suicide script involved in Bouazizi self-immolation represented a significant rupture with orthodox Islamic rhetoric relating to self-sacrifice and martyrdom, in which individual sacrifice was to be realized through an investment of corporeality in the collective political cause (Khosrokhavar 2012). While suicide is an act that is formally prohibited in Islam, and the flames of self-immolation has been portrayed as having negative associations with hell, this is not the case for self-sacrifice per se. On the contrary, the sacrifice of the body for the collective has been valorized to varying degrees in modern Islam⁶ (Khalili 2007). However, Bouazizi's self-immolation managed to transform social perceptions of the act. Indeed, copycat self-immolations spread to Morocco, Mauritania, Egypt, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere, while "at least 107 Tunisians attempted self-immolation" in the "six months following Bouazizi's self-immolation" (Khosrokhavar 2012, 175).

Bouazizi was reportedly driven by despair arising from economic inequality and feelings of powerlessness. He was not the figurehead of a particular cause, he did not call for regime change, and his act was not staged for a particular audience, yet his public act became emblematic of secular heroism and martyrdom. In many ways, his flaming body functioned as an empty signifier, the spark of the revolutions, an artifact of the scenography of radical dissent. Significantly, in the artistic representations

6. Naturally, Christianity also valorizes suffering and martyrdom, as do many other faiths.

of Bouazizi, it is not just his body or face that tends to be reproduced, but more his occupation and means of production: the fruit-seller's scales and the wheeled market cart. In many ways, this constellation of objects—the scales, the cart, and the body-on-fire—became props in a powerful visual display of revolutionary immolation.

Peace activist and artist Effer Lécébe created an installation at the Center of Contemporary Art in Paris paying tribute to Bouazizi. Open since January 22, 2011, the installation consisted of a simple wooden stall containing fresh fruit and vegetables, beside which lies a pile of ashes. Every day, the stall's stocks were renewed at 19.15, the time of Bouazizi's death. In the installation, there is no image of Bouazizi, just the cart, the produce, and the ashes. Together, these objects represent a symbolic complex inextricably bound up with the Tunisian Revolution. As discussed in the prior paragraphs, the iconography associated with self-immolation usually features the body-on-fire. In this piece, however, the body on fire is represented in its terminal form: a pile of ashes, which are not disposed of but stand in place of Bouazizi's immolating body, serving to activate memories and consciences in a more somber manner. There is some artistic license being taken here: in reality, Bouazizi was not incinerated in the street, but died from his burn wounds in a hospital bed. In Lécébe's installation, the ashes come to connote the transfiguration of the body, a transformation that is hoped to bring forth societal transfiguration. They speak of the symbolism of fire as an "ontological operator" (Peters 2015) and a relational medium: the ash that results from fire is in itself a potent symbol of repentance and renewal, of both destructive and constructive forces. The mythology of the Phoenix, which dies in flames but resurrects from ashes, is an archetypal motif in the installation. Unlike the image of Thích Quảng Đức, no image of Bouazizi's self-immolation has been made available in the global media. Indeed, the only post-immolation photograph available for reference is one taken when then-Tunisian president Ben Ali visited him in the hospital (Lageman 2020). In this sense, the ashes in Lécébe's installation speak of a flaming body that once stood by the grocery stall, but not of Bouazizi's true fate.

A comprehensive search for visual representations of Bouazizi's act found around two dozen images in the form of drawings, caricatures, and cartoons. These images show that the portrayals have been mixed, variously depicting Bouazizi as a hero, as self-sacrificial, or as a martyr for the cause of justice, but also as the subject of satire, dark comedy, or even deri-

sion. The wave of self-immolations that followed in the Middle East and North Africa have been subjected to similar treatment. From 2011, several political cartoonists used the motif.

In quite condemnatory tones, the Algerian newspaper *Al Watan* downplayed the associations between Bouazizi's self-immolation and any prospective self-sacrifice, choosing rather to portray the self-immolator as a ridiculous, doubtful, and infantile character. The headline of the article was "*Je brule, donc je suis*" (I burn, therefore I am), a play on Descartes's epigrammatic expression "cogito ergo sum." The cartoonist here adopted a paternalist ideological code, again infantilizing the act. Although the fire itself is intentionally left out of the cartoon, it was signified through the presence of two associated objects: a nearby jerry-can and matches. The jerry-can itself is a particularly recurrent symbolic object in performances and depictions of self-immolation, not only as a signifier of imminent death but as a container for destructive or purifying power, to be doused on the old order. Indeed, the jerry-can features as an important substitute for immolation in numerous representations of the act: in the *Al-Watan* caricature and in the scenographic performance by Femen activists; it even features prominently in the photograph of Thích Quảng Đức (fig. 9.1).

In contrast with *al-Watan's* depiction, other cartoonists opted to amplify the contentious political character of Bouazizi's immolation. Emad Hajjaj's⁷ depiction portrays Bouazizi as a moving body-on-fire, ramming the throne of the despot with his proverbial fruit cart, carrying his fruit scales—now scales of justice—in his hand (see fig. 9.3). The act of self-burning by a powerless street vendor is depicted as a conscious act of contestation and a symbolic clash with the authorities. In another cartoon by Hajjaj, a candle burning on a wooden cart is placed beside the torch of the Statue of Liberty, with the figure of a man burning at its core. Here, notions of liberty and liberation are connected to self-sacrifice, Bouazizi, and the mediating role of the "human torch."

Conclusion

Tightly linked to self-immolation performances, the body-on-fire has the capacity to be an exceptionally powerful and potent object in contention. I have outlined three "scripts" for self-immolation performances that impute

7. Emad Hajjaj is a Ramallah-born political cartoonist (see Hajjaj 2022).

تونس : عربة الخضار تطيح بكرسي الرئاسة !

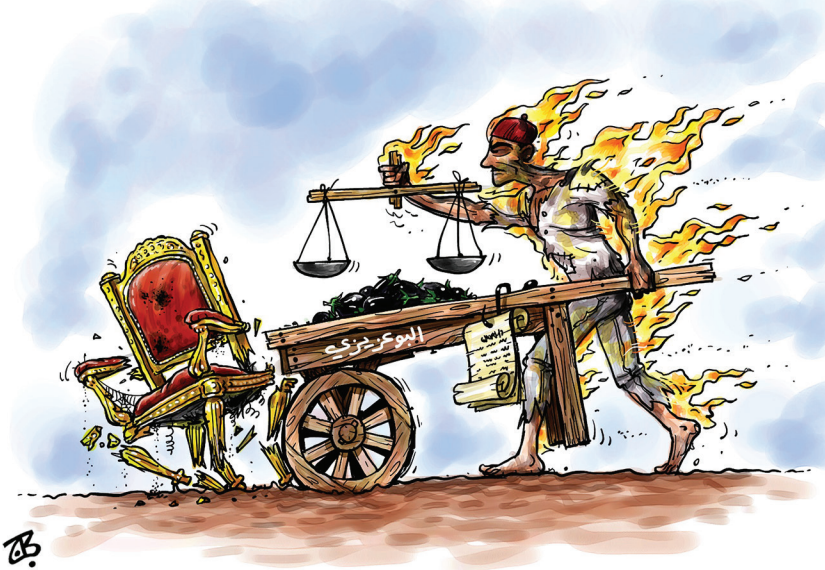


Fig. 9.3. Cartoon depiction of Mohamed Bouazizi
(Credit: © Emad Hajjaj, 2011.)

meaning to the body-on-fire and its representations: a suicidal script, a sovereign script, and a scenographic script. These are by their nature not discrete categories, but overlapping, layered aspects of self-immolation performances. Self-immolation is a spectacular form of protest ritual that can be utilized with almost no limit to the range of protest agendas, from personal grievance to the sacrifice for a nationalist or ethnic cause.

Overall, the appearance of the self-immolating body—both physically at the point of immolation and subsequently in its representation and memorialization—has the potential to draw stark attention to an issue or set of issues. It is powerfully affective, evoking a sense of horror, terror, and alarm, and generating strong reactions among its viewers. The body-on-fire is thus a powerful contentious object that can reshape public discourses, detonate waves of contention, and even communicate messages across generations and cultures. Wherever bodies-on-fire appear, their potency is immediate and lasting.

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