

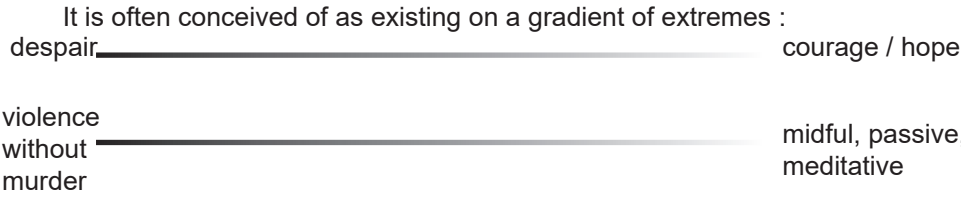
1.

Symbolic objects in contentious politics

DENNIS Zuev

The flaming, self-immolating body is a symbolic object that traverses the borders of geography. It is not bounded by religion or gender, but male cases often get far more attention.

Something to be very mindful of in the development in this research.



For me this is one of the very interesting elements in this research. There is so much tension between despair and courage. And as a ‘spectator’ it is very much tied into the difference between admiration and voyeurism. Two elements that are very present in this project. Beyond the research itself this also represents the human condition in a very frank way, on the level of the ‘spectator’ itself, beyond the content. I want to think about how to mindfully incorporate this in the results that come.

Often overlooked in analysis is the elemental **symbolism of fire as a pyrotechnical medium.**

Art is better equipped to reflect on this than any form of academics or research. This will become a very relevant thing later on.

In research & history the spectacularity, visuality and physicality of the act remain largely unaddressed. In practical terms these elements **function as a means of unification** of people.

interactive phenomenon

Very interesting observation that the ‘image’ of the body-on-fire is a means of unifying people in emotion/action/sentiment. It says a lot about the potential / nature of art in society (partially). Unless the image of a body on fire works on completely different parts of the human experience. Interesting to think about.

**Body on fire’** is a radical transformation of body that can inspire the desire to radically change the social / political body of society.

This interests me to think about in terms of Alchemy, transfiguration of one material into another, non-material substance trough fire. Philosophers stone is often portrayed as an object but in alchemical tradition it seems to have been thought about more as a state of mind. Where the material actions serve as a symbol for ‘the search’ and development of mind. That is if I am not mistaken.

**Necropolitics:** ‘Necropolitics is a sociopolitical theory of the use of social and political power to dictate how some people may live and how some must die. The deployment of necropolitics creates what Achille Mbembe calls **‘deathworlds’, or “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead.**

The term ‘deathworlds’ interests me deeply. The creation of this history is, in a sense, carving out a very particular ‘deathworld’ from classical history. The people contained in this ‘deathworld’ decided their bodies/lives were worth more as symbolic objects carrying the status of ‘living dead’. The image forms for me of a certain kind of purgatory, a deathworld to which all these individuals belong. Also an interesting connection with the etymological origin of the word ‘zombie’

sometimes the destruction of body is the only means to individually communicate on a grand, societal scale



understanding the body as a **‘site’** (of protest) and tool (for protest)

Body as a ‘site’ is an often discussed concept. I always conceived of it as in a sense being one of the ‘territories’, the conquering of which is done trough the employment of violence. In this case it seems more appropriate to imagine it as the surface on which the battle is being fought / the violence is being perpetrated. Burning this surface is in this sense akin to the strategy of ‘scorched earth’; “a military strategy of destroying everything that allows an enemy force to be able to fight a war.” The same applies when the body is the only available resource.

transforming **‘body’ into ‘body-on-fire’** generates both **outpouring and elicitation of emotion** trough *the aesthetics of pyrotechnical spectacle.*

Jaworski  
**“The act of taking ones life can be seen as an act of resistance to death that performs the limits of power”**

“Death that performs the limit of power” is one of the essential lines in this entire undertaking. I have never seen it formulated so succintly. The use of the word ‘perform’ is also remarkable. ‘Performing’ the limit to power trough death is not the same as simply dying. It is a very deliberate undertaking that asserts ones free will over the power that is excercised on them. By doing that one essentially claims that ‘I EXIST’ / ‘I AM REAL’ / ‘I AM ALIVE’ just so long as the flames that transfigure/ annul their body keep burning. *An escape from the ‘deathworld’ one has been condemned to*

Self-immolation specifically entails a **visual speech-act** not reducible to simple interpretations of suicide, self-negation, despair or self sacrifice.

*Body-on-fire is a symbolic object that speaks many messages to multiple audiences*

The previous paragraph is obviously not talking definitively about every single case. Sometimes, albeit rather rarely, it is done with a completely different intention, motivation and message.

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Three main scripts of self immolation in relation to the visual potency of the self immolating body.

1. Suicidal script

2. sovereign script

3. scenographic script
- Aimed at relations of power, visible *annihilation trough fire is the ultimate and terminal aim.*

goal is not termination of life, but *transformation of the individual into the symbolic artifact of the flaming body* that represents sovereign power. (power over death)

spectacle of body-on-fire is *invoked* trough per-  
formance. Spectacle achieved trough *a depiction of the act. Self-destruction is staged.*

Interesting to think about but maybe less relevant to my project. The distinction between motivations gets in the way of the basic principle being the interaction of body, fire and political system. Nonetheless it can become relevant when writing about the specifics of certain cases.

Withing Buddhism and Hinduism self immolation is often portrayed as the highest form of religious **devotion**

The link between **fire and devotion** is also present in the hindu practice of ‘*Sati*’. In which the fire functions as a means of **sacralising** the woman.

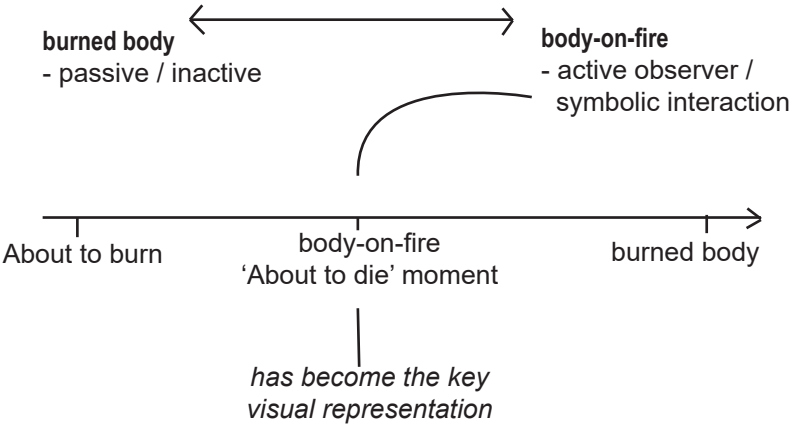
Many of the core ideas behind self immolation have their roots in the rheological ideas, symbols and iconography of early asia / middle east.

connected to *notions of community salvation trough individual sacrifice and purification trough fire.*

For Afghan and Kurdish women fire has frequently become a ‘last resort’ in the protest agains domestic violence and abuse. In both cases it is a means of excercising ‘*sovereign subjectivity*’ in the context of patriarchal subordination.

One of the reasons this phenomenon interests me so much is because I very actively wonder about the place of devotion to political cause within the current climate. Much protest and activism is ‘performed’ without much of any devotion. I must admit I am no exception in this. Social media has also evolved/been constructed to facilitate this. Self-immolation stands in stark contrast. This level of devotion without it coming at the cost of others is something I can only admire.

Even when coming from a place of desperation or ‘last resort’, it is not simply giving up. It is a clear illustration of their commitment to freedom and agency, while also being a cry for help. Could it also be a form of revenge on their spouse? I do wonder how the husbands feel after their wife self-immolates.



Within the entire process of self immolation as sketched here the ‘about to die’ moment -when flames interact with the body- is the only moment in which ‘the impossible’ happens. The only moment when the material involved becomes bigger than life itself. It goes against every rule of nature, conciousness and normalcy. It exist at the utter limit of what we can imagine. Almost too incomprehensible to wrap ones mind around. So it becomes a symbol. The same way a billion of anything is abstracted in our mind.

Also jerrycan, matches and other material remains become symbols of death & purify-  
ing power

Body to ash connotes transfiguration of the body, hoped to echo in society. Ash is sym-  
bolic for repentance and renewal (phoenix)

Algerian newspaper ‘Al Watan’

Je brule donc je suis

Insane headline from a newspaper that was meant to ridicule mohamed bouazizi, the street vendor whose self immolation sparked the Arab Spring. In a sense they could not be more correct.