

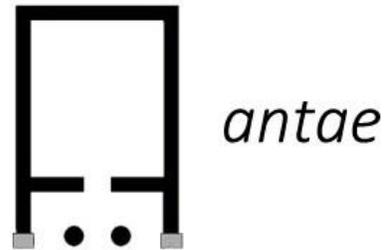
A Man, Burning: Communicative Suffering and the Ethics of Images

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antae, Vol. 2, No. 1. (Mar., 2015), 36–57

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A Man, Burning: Communicative Suffering and the Ethics of Images

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Introduction

Have you ever seen a human being burning in front of your eyes? My own answer to this question would be negative. Let me reformulate the question: have you ever seen any *image* of someone burning? In this case, my own answer would be positive insofar as we take into account the relative accessibility of such images across the many and varied media worlds available nowadays. Speaking more precisely, the initial question has to undergo yet another reformulation: have you ever seen any image of a man or a woman *suffering while setting themselves on fire*?

From a sociological viewpoint, suffering can be a source of power in at least two significant ways: by conveying information and by evoking emotions. Accordingly, social theories of protest as 'communicative suffering' distinguish dying with a cause from the one without a cause—unless the latter is related to some kind of 'pathology' (by which Biggs refers to suffering due to 'personal grievances').¹ In light of this perspective, 'suicide protest'² confronts normative (medico-juridical) viewpoints on self-destruction as the pathological form of suffering.³ Vision and visibility have an important role to play in this context. Although images of self-immolation as communicative suffering are known for exerting strong visual and emotional impact on viewers, normative discourses on self-inflicted death have rarely devoted due attention to exploring its image-based properties. This paper focuses on the gap thus provoked and aims at contributing to a greater comprehension of the issue.

In trying to understand the emotional and political power of visual records of self-sacrificial death in contemporary society, I have selected one iconic example: Malcolm Browne's photograph of a monk who burned himself to death in 1963 in Saigon (former South Vietnam)—he did so in protest against the local authoritarian regime supported by the United States of America. While having in mind some more recent cases as my points of reference for critical comparison (such as Mohammed Bouazizi's example in late 2010 in Tunisia), I focus on the visibility of mortality in strategically-staged public dramas where

¹ Michael Biggs, 'When Costs are Beneficial: Protest as Communicative Suffering', in *Sociology Working Papers*, Paper 2003-04, (Oxford: Department of Sociology, University of Oxford, 2003) <http://www.sociology.ox.ac.uk/materials/papers/2003-04.pdf> [accessed 1 June 2013]

² Michael Biggs, 'Self-Immolation in Context, 1963-2012', *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, 25 (2012a), 143-150 (p. 143).

³ Michael Biggs, 'How Repertoires Evolve: The Diffusion of Suicide Protest in the Twentieth Century', *Mobilization*, 18:4 (2013), 407-428.

human suffering—through self-sacrifice by fire—becomes an important conveyor of social, political and ethical messages via emotional impulses. The main point of such an approach lies in the thanatopolitical potentiality of self-sacrifice (or 'suicidal protest') to challenge the political *status quo* in a given local context. This occurs via the mobilisation of people who, once the thanatopolitical message is transmitted and received, are supposed to engage in a common struggle against oppression, humiliation and injustice. The study contributes to the existent body of writing dealing with the subject at hand—nonetheless, further research in social philosophy, ethics, and visual culture at large needs to be fostered in order to highlight this relatively novel, though not always instrumentally effective, politico-emotional paradigm of our times.

In this line of thought, the present study assumes that images of human suffering, regarding people who set themselves on fire in protest, can perform a political function in the contexts defined by what has come to be known as self-immolation, at least since the early 1960s.⁴ The study is based on a personal database that contains two basic formats: the theoretical sources of contemporary scholarly expertise (Andriolo 2006; Benn 2007, 2012; Biggs 2003, 2005, 2012a, 2013; Bradatan 2011; Canetto 2009; Crosby *et al.* 1977; Kelly 2011; Yang 2011; Benslama 2011; Rivera 2012) and a number of photographic and moving images collected over the period of time between 2010 and 2013 from a variety of printed and digital media sources. Both types of database revolve around the subject of self-immolation. The most notable among them are linked to the following: the case of Mohammed Bouazizi and the anti-governmental uprising of Tunisian society in the aftermath of his death by the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011; the wave of similarly induced deaths by burning across the regions of North Africa and the Middle East (2011-2012); a number of cases across Europe since the beginning of the so-called Eurozone economic crisis in 2008; and the ongoing proliferation of death among the Tibetans burning themselves in protest against the Chinese occupation and the oppressive conditions therein.

This brief selection is, however, insufficient to encompass all the varied forms of self-immolation that have characterised the last five decades of the world's history. My study is based exclusively on a 'type specimen of "self-immolation"'⁵ concerning "an act of public protest, where an individual intentionally kills him or herself—without harming anyone else—on behalf of a collective cause".⁶ This definition is centred on several fronts of analysis. The first one concerns the performative aspect of the act. It bears a distinctively political tone for at least two reasons: it is a matter of acting in protest, against someone or something, most commonly a ruling local authority; and it is also a matter of public exposure: it brings the act to others, as openly and visibly as possible. The visibility is usually conceived in terms of an open-air space, whereas the act itself must occur near a strategically targeted location of political significance. It also includes awareness about recorded visual materials or a written public message on behalf of the one who immolates him- or herself. The second aspect of the definition is about an individual eager to kill him or

⁴ Michael Biggs, 'Dying without Killing: Protest by Self-Immolation, 1963-2002', in *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, ed. by Diego Gambetta (New York and Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 173.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 2.

herself without harming anyone else, which distinguishes the act from other forms of self-immolation (such as ‘suicide attack’, for instance). The third one is centred on the results of the act: Biggs sees them as altruistic in the way that they do not aim towards achieving benefits for the sake of the individual involved in self-immolation but for the group, community or society to which the said individual belongs or identifies with. Accordingly, he introduces the notion of ‘communicative suffering’ that triggers the following question: can suffering really become a source of power?

Communicative Suffering

If suffering can be a source of power, as argued by Biggs, it can be so in at least two significant ways: by conveying information and by evoking emotions. Both ways became part of the global imaginary only fifty years ago (the early 1960s), and not before. This was due to the fact that, for the first time in history, the act of self-immolation was inscribed into the consciousness of the world by means of visual evidence. A photographic record played a crucial role in this cornerstone event that grounds my argument around the (visual) rhetoric of protest in thanatopolitical practices of self-sacrifice. This is most notable with respect to the relationship among the following three elements that are central for this part of the study: the public exposure of a *dying* body (whereas ‘dying’ does not imply the status of the victim as already and definitively dead, but rather as ‘living dead’—the in-between state closer to ‘death’ than to ‘life’); its materialisation in images of dying through the visual evidence of suffering (*before* death itself occurs); and the exchange with the viewers where one’s suffering is mirrored in the emphatic, ‘receptive gaze’ of the others.⁷ By ‘the others’ I hereby refer to spectators, an observant community of onlookers, who must encounter their own guilty conscience in front of these images in order for self-immolation to fulfil its role as properly thanatopolitical. What they all have in common is not just that which constitutes emotional and political power, but also the *ethical* power exhorted in relation to the self-sacrificial logic of thanatopolitics—or, as Stuart J. Murray says in another context, ‘the use of death for mobilizing political life’.⁸

Biggs introduced the notion of ‘communicative suffering’ into scholarly literature on self-inflicted suffering as protest by the mid-2000s.⁹ He uses it alongside some more familiar forms of political protest events, such as strikes and demonstrations and applies it to the so-called ‘global repertoire of protest’. The focus is here placed onto dimensions of protest in events where people ‘march long distances, go willingly to jail, welcome or provoke the

⁷ Costica Bradatan, ‘A Light for the Future: On the Political Uses of a Dying Body’, *Dissent*, 23 May 2011 http://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/a-light-for-the-future-on-the-political-uses-of-a-dying-body [accessed 22 April 2013]

⁸ Stuart J. Murray, ‘Thanatopolitics: On the Use of Death for Mobilizing Political Life’, *Polygraph*, 18 (2006), p. 191-215.

⁹ See Biggs, ‘When Costs are Beneficial: Protest as Communicative Suffering’ (2003) and ‘Dying without Killing: Protest by Self-Immolation, 1963-2002’ (2005).

blows of police, refuse to eat, and even kill themselves'.¹⁰ In that sense, he insists on the efficacy of the 'dramaturgy of suffering' in comparison to the effects produced by merely symbolic actions in civic protest events and, more importantly, adds that 'self-immolation—where someone kills him or herself for a cause, without harming others—reveals the various ways in which *suffering can become a source of power*' (my emphasis).¹¹ This comes about due to the fact that suffering belongs to the realm of the real (and not of the symbolic) so it imposes real-life costs, beyond dramatic symbolization. In other words, there is 'a terminological distinction between *the drama of burning a flag* and *that of burning oneself* [...] self-immolation by fire is so awful (in the archaic as well as modern sense of the word) because the suffering is real and not (merely) symbolic. Burning oneself in effigy would not have the same effect'.¹² What is the 'effect' Biggs talks about and how does it connect with the idea of power? To answer these questions, I will bring forward a visual example without ever showing it. Let us "observe" it by way of narrative description from a viewpoint that I shall call an "ignorant" gaze.

An 'Ignorant' Gaze

There is a photographic image from which my analysis departs. In its right bottom corner the morning hour (9:30AM) is indicated, most probably the moment when the image was recorded. In the foreground we can see the following: a single human being in the centre, around him or her there is something resembling fire, as well as a small object to the left. These elements are situated on what appears to be street-like terrain. In the background of the image we can see: a car (to the left), some people's faces behind the car, wreaths of smoke around, and a few more human figures to the right. The latter are recognisable only by their lower parts: their faces remain invisible due to the smoke-cover in front. This is the basic description of the image.

Let us now focus on the human presence in the picture. All the human beings share some common aspects: their features are associative of the populations of Asian origin; their dresses also look alike and seem to be homogenous, as if they are wearing some sort of uniform. The clothing of the central figure is more difficult to properly identify. The same goes for the "faceless" figures behind him or her: only their lower parts are revealed in what seems to be their long robes and sandals. To detect what the rest of the people are wearing—those behind the car—is an impossible task. Beside the human beings, the non-human elements also make a part of the image. The foreground object to the left gives an idea of a plastic canister. The canister is cut by the frame and only one part of it is exposed. We may presume that the reproduction of the image at hand is not an integral but a cropped version of the original (unless it was the photographer's intention to have this cut so disturbingly

¹⁰ Biggs, 'When Costs are Beneficial: Protest as Communicative Suffering', p. 2.

¹¹ See Michael Biggs, 'Hunger Strikes by Suffragettes and Irish Republicans, 1909-1923', University of Oxford online database, <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~sfos0060/hungerstrikes.shtml> [accessed 25 April 2013]

¹² Biggs, 'When Costs are Beneficial: Protest as Communicative Suffering', p. 6.

noticeable). The exact brand of the car in the back—evidently an ordinary, passenger type—remains unknown to us; for those who seem to be less ignorant it is crystal clear that it must be a sedan.¹³ Its hood is open: nobody is inside the car or, at least, it seems to be the case. The very last layer at the background of the image remains unidentifiable. However, a more curious observer could have already found some other versions of the image in numerous reproductions available on the Internet, with expanded views of the same scene. They show some kind of architectural setting in the background. It is composed of small, simple house-like constructions. Additionally, a traffic-light at the far right clearly indicates the street-like open-air environment. It includes the presence of some other people at the far left and behind “the people behind the car”. The casual clothes makes them look different from the aforementioned majority in their, at first instance, strange uniforms.

This rudimentary mode of analysis strips the image of its initial visual “mystery” and provides its first iconographic layer of meaning. It detects the main and the side elements of the image, their mutual positions in the overall composition within the given size and depth of the visual field, and identifies certain attributes and details as more or less recognisable with respect to the human figures and objects therein. What this level of interpretation does not do is far more complex and challenging. Suffice to say that, for the moment, nothing indicates any particular—or particularly exciting—significance in this image in comparison to any other: nothing gives us a hint that it could be turned from a mere document recording some trivial event into one of the most iconic images of the twentieth century. Given our preliminary visual experience of its current status (more or less ordinary), I propose to have our current viewpoint called the “ignorant” gaze. The “ignorance” refers to our limited capacity so that we barely understand what we are looking at apart from the basic graphic contents of the image. For a better pronounced comprehension of its more exhaustive layers of meaning, one needs to account for a better informed viewpoint, which is supplementary to the “ignorant” one. The first set of questions which arise in this regard are as follows: What is it precisely that we are looking at? Where does it come from? Who made it, when and why? For whom was it made? What does it “do” to the viewer? Finally, what is the whole purpose of our discussion about this image?

In the narrative proposed from the outset of this paper (‘Have you ever seen a human being burning in front of your eyes?’, and so on), the rigidity of certain formal criteria proper to academic papers has been intentionally avoided. Instead, I have opted for a somewhat unusual “dramaturgy” of storytelling in order to accentuate the very nature of rhetorical power behind the central subject of our concern: images of a burning human body. In other words, what plays the major role in this scenario around people setting themselves on fire is neither a *human being* engulfed in flames nor his/her *body* burning: rather, it is the *image (of suffering) itself*—the image of a publicly exposed human being who suffers in-between the states of life and death (a ‘living dead’), while his/her body is burning in front of our eyes. I will now take a less “dramatic” tone towards the phenomenon of self-immolation in order to

¹³ Michelle Murray Yang, ‘Still Burning: Self-Immolation as Photographic Protest’, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 97:1 (2011), 1-25 (p. 14).

approach it within the limits given by actual scholarship on this and related issues. This is a necessary step for any further analysis. At a later point of discussion it will bring us back, once again, to the 'mysterious' image, while allowing us to see it from another perspective: in a visually more "literate" and better "informed" manner than the "ignorant" one I have proposed at the beginning.

A 'receptive' gaze

What is *exactly* displayed by the image of the burning human body earlier described? It is my hope that a clear-cut answer to this question will not only challenge the arguments here exposed but will also provide some less "ignorant" viewpoints onto the entire landscape of meaning where the "drama" of image-analysis needs to be grounded in order for the story to be completed as it should. My aim is to show that it is not 'death itself' (of a human being burning in front of our eyes) that we see in the image but something else, verging in-between 'life' and 'death': a very particular aspect of photography that makes the (visual) rhetoric of self-immolation not only properly thanatopolitical but also ethical, in the sense that the notion of suffering combines with what I shall call the "image ethics".

This aspect revolves around the fact that what we see is a human being (a "duplicate" of our own selves): a man, burning—no more alive but also not yet dead, caught in-between the zones of 'life' and 'death' and *suffering* in the process. What we look at is a 'living dead' suffering in front of our eyes, whose silence and stillness are not due to the state of "death" (which, for a 'living dead', has already happened in this life) but due to the liminal state of being through which he exerts his power onto the viewers: the power to confront "death itself" not by escaping it but by claiming something "unthinkable" and "unimaginable"—his own right to it. Through suffering (that comes less from the very process of burning and more from the sense of injustice, which made him set himself alight), he does not 'take his own life'—in the clinical sense of the word applicable to so-called suicides—but instead he *takes his own death back* to himself. And he does so in the face of sovereign (necro-) power that, in the given context, holds the keys to the 'death-worlds' or 'new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead' and, supposedly, also to 'death itself'.¹⁴ To take one's own death back to oneself—from sovereign necropower (and its self-proclaimed privilege to decide about the populations' lives and deaths *on the basis of human mortality*, in Mbembe's terms)—means, in the way I expose it here, to claim *one's own right to death itself*.

On one side, for a burning man who communicates his suffering from the position of a 'living dead', 'life' is but a domain already invaded, contaminated and colonised by sovereign power. For a 'living dead', life is reduced and assimilated with death to the point where "death itself" remains the only dominion to exercise personal control over one's own

¹⁴ Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture*, 15:1 (2003), 11-40 (p. 40).

self against the ultimate control of the Other (i.e., sovereign necropower). To transgress the epistemic border imposed by “death” and get access through it, which brings him closer to ‘discovering what prevents a human being from knowing himself as he is in reality’,¹⁵ makes his act tantamount to the epistemological break: he is discarding the ultimate legitimacy of epistemic sovereignty by discarding his own status of a ‘living dead’. On the other side, it is through the reproduction (re-creation) of oneself in the image-world—while burning, before the moment of ‘fiery death’ actually occurs—that a ‘living dead’ exposes the image of his suffering to the world: not his dead body but the process towards it (a process emotionally powerful though brief). Here I imply the process where the notion of suffering and the notion of ‘image’ intertwine to the extent that they invite my ‘receptive gaze’ to identify and recognise (the implication of) my own self in the scene: to look at a ‘mirror’, in empathy with the object of looking, as if it were myself—which is exactly the moment when the ethical interrupts the epistemological, as proposed, for instance, by Gayatri Spivak.¹⁶ So, for the epistemic border—imposed by “death”—to be transgressed, an ethical border needs to be dismantled through and across the image of the other as one’s own self. It is, perhaps, in this ethical instance where the effective and persuasive power of self-immolation (as a properly *thanatopolitical* regime of self-sacrifice) ultimately resides. Without it, no self-immolation and no image depicting it could claim to operate in a system that mobilises one’s own death for the sake of survivors.

The image of ‘a man, burning’, that I continuously refer to in this paper, is anything but ordinary: on the contrary, it has a very particular status both in the history of photography and in the history of self-immolation. Hence, when I talk about *the* photography of a burning man I have in mind the very precise image: the one I have seen in the recent study analysing ‘the rhetorical nature of the picture itself and the act of self-immolation’.¹⁷ It was published on page fifteen of the scholarly article written by the rhetorical critic Michelle Murray Yang (2011) and titled ‘Still Burning. Self-Immolation as a Photographic Protest’. According to the author herself, the image she uses in her study is a reproduction of a photograph taken by Malcolm Browne as it appeared in the U.S. daily newspaper *Philadelphia Inquirer* on June 12, 1963. Evidently, I pay too much attention to the issue of its exact origins. This is not without a valid reason: instead of opting for numerous and modified reproductions of the same image available across the media (including, most notably, the internet), it is Yang’s article that has provided the visual reference for my present study around a ‘burning man’. Moreover, it is her analysis that has significantly informed the very dramaturgy of my own “scenario” around the image that has been of concern to both of us (I would dare to say that this image is, even more importantly, of ethical concern to humankind as such).

There are several particular features of *that* precise image which make it valid for the present analysis. One of them consists in the fact that Yang uses, and rightfully so, the reproduction of the original version, that is, the image as it appeared in print media in the United States in 1963 only a day after it was taken. Hence, it is significant insofar as we assume that this

¹⁵ Bernard N. Schumacher, *Death and Mortality in Contemporary Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press: New York, 2010), p. 213.

¹⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Terror: A Speech Act After 9-11’, *boundary 2*, 31:2 (2004), 81–111 (p. 83).

¹⁷ Yang, p. 4.

version—printed and publicly distributed before any other variant of the same image or of the same event—is the very image imprinted into the collective memory of humankind ever since it was exposed to it for the first time. Via its reproduction in Yang’s article it is brought to light again in the way it was published and publicly distributed for the first time fifty years ago. This version corresponds to the black-and-white still photograph of the so-called ‘Burning Monk’. For the purposes of this paper I have renamed it, preferably in my view, to “A Man, Burning”, for several reasons. First, because it is considered to be a *defining* image of the burning human body in the context of self-immolation as a form of protest.¹⁸ Second, because the burning human body at hand is considered to belong to a “man” instead of exclusively to a monk, that is, to a human being (in this case male) who—beside the predominantly *religious* role that he played in one particular society (in this case South Vietnamese)—also inscribed himself into the global history of *civic* social movements by means of this photograph as a *citizen* of that society, regardless of his profession. Third, because I intend to pose one question, hopefully significant enough, by pointing out his status of a “man” (i.e., a human being) rather than of a “monk” (who is also a male): the question about humankind at large and what it means to be human for the one who *submits* him- or herself to the act of self-sacrifice by fire, but also for the ones who *observe* such an act. My assumption is that the question of our *humanness* at large intertwines with and depends upon the potential implications relating to us (as observers) within the given ethical frameworks around the image of ‘a man, burning’.

These points allow me to explain the reason why this and no other image (of the same man, burning; of the same event; or of other similar events coming after June 1963) is so important for the present study. I consider the difference between the “defining” image and all the other possible versions or examples to be crucial. By “other” images I refer to three distinctive categories: numerous copies of the exact same image, available elsewhere other than the primary source of appearance—the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, ‘the first American newspaper to print the image’ (Yang 2011: 4);¹⁹ a variety of other representations within the same “family” of images and pertaining to the same burning human body (recorded numerous times, from various angles, in various positions and various states of burning during the ten-minute period of the monk’s self-immolation); and a variety of images applicable to other burning human bodies in their own acts of self-immolation, following the exemplary case which I am here discussing. Since I have excluded all the outlined categories, my preference towards a selected singular image (distinguishes it from the rest for the following reason: it was *the first one to be publicly exposed*. Moreover, unlike its consequent variations as technically and digitally modified views of the same scene, it was *the first photographic record of the act of self-immolation in history, ever*—if by the notion of ‘self-immolation’ we still understand *the act of protest executed by setting oneself alight without harming anyone else*.²⁰ In that sense, the visual impact it exerted onto the virtual community of international viewers (first and foremost in the United States, where it was

¹⁸ Biggs, ‘Dying without Killing: Protest by Self-Immolation, 1963-2002’.

¹⁹ Yang, p. 4.

²⁰ This, however, is not always the case: following Biggs, his typology introduces an important distinction between this and other types of sacrifice, such as ‘suicide attacks’, hunger strikes, and so on (Biggs 2012a, 2012b).

published) could be comparable, in a more up-to-date perspective, to the ‘unimaginable’ sights of shocking accidents or events broadcasted live over television networks—such as the explosion of the NASA Challenger Shuttle live in front of millions of television viewers in 1986 or the more recent live camera-recording of the New York’s World Trade Center collapse during the “cinematic” crash of a (second) plane into one of its buildings.²¹ Yet, unlike these two examples, what we—as observers—witness in the photography of ‘a man, burning’ is the fixation of a body in pain, the sense of suffering we immediately relate to every time we take a look at the image while presuming that his stillness and silence disclose something almost unnatural and surreal. If self-immolation, ‘the most awful example of self-inflicted suffering’,²² had hitherto been ‘unimaginable’ to humankind, that is until the appearance of Malcolm Browne’s photograph in the news in 1963, then what is it exactly that makes it still so significant, so iconic and so “defining” for the representation of suffering aligned with self-sacrifice by fire?

Browne’s photograph was published with an accompanying caption: ‘An elderly Buddhist monk, the Rev. Quang Duc, is engulfed in flames as he burns himself to death in Saigon, Vietnam, in protest against persecution’.²³ This piece of information is sufficient to disturb the preliminary “ignorant” viewpoint we used about the decontextualized contents of the image as earlier described, and now provides the very basic framework within which to situate the plot behind the scene. Yang takes this framework as a point of departure in her own article: the case of self-immolation as it was enacted on the morning of June 11, 1963, in Saigon (South Vietnam) by a local male Buddhist monk. His real name was, in a slightly Latinized transcription of its more complicated original version, Thich Quang Duc. This brief piece of textual information brings some new elements to the “visual evidence” of the recorded event. It frames the image in a way that takes the veil of anonymity off its main protagonist and makes him more familiar to the public. Once his personal name is revealed (‘Quang Duc’) we also realise that he is not an ordinary citizen. The fact that he is presented as ‘an elderly Buddhist monk’ immediately denotes his professional orientation (a priest) and his rank in the religious hierarchy to which he belongs (his honourable status, a reverend). These features ground his personality within the sphere of public responsibilities instead of identifying him as a mere layman. Besides, he is presented as a senior figure (‘elderly’). Why is this piece of information important? It is because it reveals a certain age-bound (though not officially the highest) authority within the local hierarchy of the South Vietnamese Buddhist congregation (yet, the highest authority still had to be asked for an official endorsement so that Quang Duc’s act could be formally sanctioned). This was a necessary institutional provision in order for his desire and decision to be finally fulfilled: ‘In 1963 Buddhist leaders explicitly sanctioned two deaths: those of Quang Duc and Thich Tieu Dieu. Both were elderly, while there is evidence that younger novices were refused permission. This is understandable: the elderly had less life to sacrifice and had presumably attained sufficient wisdom to make a responsible choice’.²⁴ It is therefore worth repeating

²¹ Paul Virilio, *Art and Fear* (London and New York: Continuum, 2003), p. 83.

²² Biggs, ‘When Costs are Beneficial: Protest as Communicative Suffering’, p. 14.

²³ Yang., p. 14.

²⁴ Biggs, ‘Dying without Killing: Protest by Self-Immolation’, 1963-2002’, p. 192.

that the main protagonist of the image was a mature, sixty-seven year-old male, who was also the representative of a local clerical order. These basic facts weave a thread of complex meanings, and sometimes also confusions, into the motivations surrounding Quang Duc's readiness to offer his life in the act of self-immolation 'in protest against persecution'. This is where we find out the inextricable *connection between the ideas of self-immolation and protest for the first time*. The next questions are: what kind of persecution and what kind of protest are here announced? To come to this point, let us briefly consider, first of all, the role played by the photographer himself.

The image is considered to be iconic of the context defined by the Vietnam War (1956–1975), the conflict between North and South Vietnam where both parties were respectively supported by their communist and non-communist allies (China and the United States, most notably). The so-called 'Burning Monk' belongs to a series of photographs recorded in South Vietnam by the same author, recently deceased, Malcolm Browne (1931–2012). Browne was a U.S. citizen and appointed chief of the Associated Press (AP) office in Saigon during the war. The biographical note from a British newspaper's obituary on the occasion of his death gives some basic ideas about Browne's early days. There we learn about his appointment to the AP 'which sent him to Saigon in 1961'.²⁵ As a news correspondent and photojournalist, he distinguished himself for several reasons. By having photographed Thich Quang Duc burning in 1963, he won, together with David Halberstam of the *New York Times*, the 1964 Pulitzer Prize for 'their individual reporting of the Vietnam war and the overthrow of the Diem regime'.²⁶ What made him popular even before this occasion was, first and foremost, his ethical position: he was known for his sceptical and critical stance towards the Vietnam war, something which was also shared by his closest colleagues. As he was 'extremely critical of how the war was being fought, [it] had an immense influence on opinion back home' (my emphasis).²⁷ The 'encounter' between Browne and Quang Duc took place in this context, heavily charged with local and international tensions. This is also the context in which two ethical stances positively merged with each other: Browne's disapproval of *his own country's military* intervention in South Vietnam, and Quang Duc's disapproval of *his own country's militant* intervention against the Buddhists in South Vietnam (that is, the part of Vietnam supported by Browne's country). This regime was represented by the president Ngo Dinh Diem, who enjoyed the support of the United States at the time and was known for favouring the Catholic minority in the country while pursuing an extreme anti-Buddhist position.²⁸

Given that Quang Duc, a Buddhist, set himself alight in protest against the local, religiously oppressive political regime, what needs to be addressed with regard to his motivations to 'die for a cause' is the connection between their political and religious dimensions as perceived together. Although it has not been rare to consider them separately, and with due reasons (given the historical background of the phenomenon, as I have earlier described), Biggs

²⁵ Godfrey Hodgson, 'Malcolm Browne obituary', *The Guardian*, 29 August 2012

<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/aug/29/malcolm-browne> [accessed 15 April 2013]

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ The conflict between the Buddhists and the Diem regime is described in detail by Biggs (2005: 179).

insists on the combination of the two: when coupled with technological innovations (photography in the first place), this allowed for the emergence of a fundamentally novel concept (Biggs calls it a ‘cultural invention’) and impact produced therein. In that regard, he explains that ‘we can certainly find examples of self-immolation before 1963, but these were isolated incidents or episodes; they did not inspire people elsewhere to sacrifice themselves’.²⁹ So what is it exactly that makes Quang Duc’s case of self-immolation a cornerstone event in the history of this act? According to Biggs, it closely relates to his historical impact on self-immolation worldwide in relation to the following facts: ‘Quang Duc was the *progenitor of the great majority of these acts* including almost every case in which fire was used; they were modelled either directly on his action or indirectly on another’s action that can in turn be traced back to him’ (my emphasis).³⁰ This means that with Quang Duc (and Malcolm Browne) originated ‘the modern lineage of self-immolation [...] subsequently diffused to dozens of countries’ (Biggs 2005: 175).³¹ This also proves, though not always but only under certain conditions, that ‘the clustering of self-immolation in waves reveals how one individual’s action tends to inspire others to imitate it’,³² most notably for explicitly *political* reasons—which makes a big difference in comparison to strictly religious/spiritual motivations pertaining to the earlier cases of self-immolation informed by the Buddhist tradition.³³ As Bradatan (2011) points out, ‘self-immolation in the Buddhist tradition is not the same thing as political self-immolation: the mindsets and motivations involved are different, and so is the societal impact. Yet even though the importance of religious-cultural background is undeniable in the case of the Vietnamese monks, *political self-immolations* in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have become a major symbolic gesture in their own right’ (my emphasis).³⁴ If the 1963 action did indeed inspire many others (whose cases of ‘fiery death’ were unrelated to Buddhist causes in South Vietnam, even though they were related to Quang Duc’s method) to imitate it elsewhere, one thing is certain: this would have been impossible, “unimaginable”, and “unthinkable” without what Biggs calls the ‘cultural innovation’ of Quang Duc. In his own words, ‘like any cultural innovation, this was a creative mutation of pre-existing elements [or] creative redeployment of religious tradition in political struggle’.³⁵ In that sense, his arguments give high priority to the presence of the photographer, the photographic medium itself and the

²⁹ Biggs, ‘Dying without Killing: Protest by Self-Immolation’, 1963-2002’, p. 178.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 174.

³¹ In Biggs’s estimate, ‘there have been between 800 and 3,000 individual acts of self-immolation, including non-fatal attempts, in the four decades since 1963’ (Biggs 2005: 174). In his more updated estimate, from a perspective focused on the ongoing waves of self-immolating protests among the Tibetans in China, Biggs claims that, since the period 1963-1970, ‘suicide protest was now indelibly associated with burning. Suicide protests before 1963 had not used fire, but other means of death. Since 1963, 85% of individuals have chosen burning. The imprint of Quang Duc’s action endures’ (Biggs 2012a: 146). Furthermore, the novel method has paralleled the increase of the annual rate of suicide protests: ‘Compared to the period 1919-1962, [it] was seventeen times higher in the period 1963-1970. Even excluding South Vietnam, the annual rate was eight times higher’ (Biggs 2012a: 146).

³² Biggs, ‘Dying without Killing: Protest by Self-Immolation’, 1963-2002’, p. 175.

³³ See Crosby *et al.*, ‘Suicide By Fire: a Contemporary Method of Political Protest’ (1977); James A. Benn., *Burning for the Buddha: Self-Immolation in Chinese Buddhism* (2007); and Biggs ‘Self-Immolation in Context, 1963-2012’ (2012a).

³⁴ Bradatan, ‘A Light for the Future: On the Political Uses of a Dying Body’.

³⁵ Biggs, ‘Dying without Killing: Protest by Self-Immolation’, 1963-2002’, p. 321.

role it played around Quang Duc. Hence, the *religious* and *political* dimensions of the event here mutated into a configuration that allowed for the act of self-immolation to have *itself transformed* before inducing a transforming (thanatopolitical) effect in the observers. With Quang Duc, self-immolation entered a properly *civic* context due to the communication of protest (through suffering) mediated by a single photography in a manner so far unprecedented:

Quang Duc's death by fire in 1963 was different because it inspired many others. As a result of his act, within a few years self-immolation entered the global 'repertoire' of protest (Tilly 1986). His act was an unexpected combination of modern technology and religious tradition. The availability of flammable liquids like petrol and kerosene made it feasible to burn oneself in a public space; without instant ignition, police could thwart any attempt. *The advent of photography—and technologies for the rapid transmission and cheap reproduction of images—made it possible for a single sacrifice to have a dramatic impact on a huge audience.* These potentialities, however, were discovered only in 1963 (my emphasis).³⁶

Biggs here points out the significance of photography, and the development of 'technologies for the rapid transmission and cheap reproduction of images' as crucial for the dissemination of Quang Duc's message to the world *in the aftermath* of the event. But this also relates to another significant decision *preceding* the event itself, because 'when Quang Duc offered his life for the cause, the movement leaders initially spurned the idea'.³⁷ If the issue of age played an important role for Quang Duc's community of fellow Buddhists to sanction his decision to 'die for a cause', the photographic element was even more significant. It was precisely the Buddhist leaders' awareness about the role that images could play, especially in the diffused manner of media impact that turned their preliminary negative stance in another direction. In that sense, the issue of gaining this formal sanction would probably not have been that easily resolved without the support expressed by a single monk in favour of Quang Duc's proposal. His name was Thich Duc Nghiep; he was 'fluent in English [and] in charge of relations with foreign journalists. Did he grasp the potential impact on the American audience? After several days of prayer and fast, Quang Duc eventually won approval' (Biggs 2005: 179).³⁸ In the scenario of little steps leading towards a potentially huge event, it was also Thich Duc Nghiep from whom 'on the evening of June 10, 1963, American news correspondent Malcolm Browne received a cryptic phone call [to be informed of] a large protest planned for the following day by South Vietnamese Buddhists. Nghiep mysteriously added, 'I would advise you to come. Something very important may happen'.³⁹ And something very important happened, indeed. Yet, the importance of the local event (that had an unprecedented global impact) would have never been achieved or correctly comprehended without the *complex* (and, to a certain extent, unforeseeable) *configuration of meanings* that shaped the process around the event—before it took place, while it was taking place and, consequently, in its aftermath.

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 178.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 192.

³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 179.

³⁹ Yang, p. 2.

What Biggs only outlines with regard to the photographic recording of self-immolation, Yang expands much further: she places an accent on the aspect of human suffering ‘frozen in time’ by means of photographic recording. For her, the rhetorical power of the image itself would be unthinkable without the keynote element: understanding the configuration of self-sacrifice by fire vis-à-vis the image/suffering axis. This indicates that the ‘advent of photography and technologies for the rapid transmission and cheap reproduction of images’ (as Biggs maintains) were an important but not a decisive element: for the “defining” image of a burning man to exert its communicative power onto the viewers and achieve its public/political effect, the relationship between suffering and image is crucial. This condition pertains to one very particular visual property, a kind of tension occurring *within the photographic image itself*—its suspension in time, as Yang describes it, that provides the main substance to the viewer’s confrontation with the representation of a man who is not only ‘burning’ in front of our eyes, but does so *continually*. What the image of a ‘burning man’ exposes to us today is the mere fact of a continuous protest of a human being ‘not yet dead’: the self-immolator is “still burning” whenever we cast a look upon him, insofar as we have the “defining” image in front of our eyes. Let us be attentive to what Yang has to say (especially at the end of her own description of the “defining” image from an “informed” perspective), which now properly contextualizes the previously “decontextualized” contents which, as I had earlier suggested, are only from an “ignorant” perspective:

In the centre of the image, Duc sits on the street *as flames lap at half of his body and his face*. To the monk’s left sits the gasoline container used to transport the fuel, which ignited his body. Behind Duc is the sedan that he and three other monks rode in during the processional through the streets of Saigon. In the background is a line of Buddhist monks and nuns witnessing the event unfold. While one can faintly make out some of their features, it is impossible to accurately view their facial expressions. To the right of the sedan, one sees what appears to be the lower half of a monk’s body who appears to be walking away or walking towards the burning man. It is difficult to discern the direction of his movement as the upper half of the monk’s body is hidden by the cloud of smoke and flames radiating from Duc. [...] From the angle that the picture was taken, *it appears that only half of Quang Duc’s body is engulfed in flames* (my emphasis).⁴⁰

According to her description, the burning man is not represented as terminally and irrevocably dead (since ‘flames lap at half of his body and his face’). Even if we assume that death could have arrived to him while ‘*only half of Quang Duc’s body is engulfed in flames*’, we do not actually see ‘death itself’ in this image or, to be exact, we do not see the *corpse* of a human being engulfed in flames or covered in ashes. In that regard, it is worth comparing the image I keep referring to as the “defining” image with another image of the same event that Yang also takes into consideration (an interested reader might want to consult how the image looks like on page twenty-three in Yang’s article). She makes a clear distinction between—at least—*two* photographic records from the same family of images revolving around the event of interest. ‘It is important to note that while this image was shot by [the same photographer] Browne, it [the second image] is not the same one that appeared in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. In this photograph the monk is *completely* engulfed in flames, i.e., he is represented as irrevocably dead—a corpse. Beneath the picture in bold capital

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 14-16.

letters reads [a] declaration, 'We, too, protest'" (my emphasis).⁴¹ This other image appeared a bit later than the first one—namely on June 27, 1963 and September 15, 1963—and in *another* U.S. newspaper (the *New York Times*, the paper that initially refused to publish the "defining" image in the immediate aftermath of the event). As pointed out by Yang, it was 'appropriated by other Vietnam War protestors' and appeared in 'two advertisements created by the Ministers' Vietnam Committee, which used the picture to gain support for the anti-war movement'.⁴² Furthermore, Yang says:

The use of Browne's photograph in the ad *enables supporters of the campaign to rhetorically join Quang Duc's visual protest through textual discourse*. By declaring 'we, too, protest,' and including an image of the monk's immolation, the organization is rhetorically entering into Quang Duc's act of protest. Although The Ministers' Vietnam Committee takes a very different approach in expressing its protest than Quang Duc, the organization identifies its cause and its concerns with those of the burning monk and, therefore, conveys a sense of solidarity with the South Vietnamese Buddhists (my emphasis).⁴³

The existence of *another* image is here significant as it allows us to grasp the difference between the visual power of a 'burning man' who suffers and a 'burning man' who is already dead. What this difference effectuates in the eye of a spectator is the kind of impact it produces with respect to the image of a man suffering yet still alive, on the one hand, and the image of his corpse, on the other. This brings the aspect of the (in)visibility of 'death itself' and the visibility of suffering 'suspended in time', which is a crucial point for this paper. It brings to mind Mbembe's suggestion concerning the 'death worlds' of social existence, forcing a human being to engage in an act as unimaginably painful as self-sacrifice by fire in response to the conditions that created such 'death worlds' (i.e., properly necropolitical conditions). This is but a possible framework through which to observe and analyse the complexity of death's 'ambiguity' (the life-and-death's in-betweenness of the burning man, so to speak) among the varied cases of self-sacrifice as a properly *thanatopolitical response* to the necropolitical sovereignty of death. Quang Duc's case (and the "defining" image of his burning) is paradigmatic for such thanatopolitical practice, and relates to other exemplary case studies unrelated to Biggs's definition of the act (the Palestinian 'suicide bombers', the so-called economic suicides in the crisis-driven South of Europe, or even the candidates for assisted suicide in contemporary Switzerland, for instance). To complete the segment about her own account of Quang Duc's (constructive/thanatopolitical) power of burning himself in the 'defining' image, I want to point out the most significant part in Yang's description—the fact 'that there is a chance that the events which caused him to take such drastic measures can somehow be ameliorated'.⁴⁴ Yang says that:

The viewer can clearly see one of his tightly shut eyes and half of his gaunt mouth. *In this instant, the monk's death is indefinitely suspended in time*. The flames have not yet overcome his entire body; *his demise is not yet complete*. For a brief moment, captured by film, it appears that the outcome of this event can be altered. Quang Duc is *not yet*

⁴¹ Yang, p. 22.

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 21-24.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 22.

⁴⁴ Yang, p. 16.

dead; there is a chance that the events which caused him to take such drastic measures can somehow be ameliorated.⁴⁵

Yang does not speak of thanatopolitics at all—yet, her point here gets very close to this faculty of death-politics. This means that self-immolation, as an extreme form of protest, aims at raising attention for the greater cause for which one burns him or herself. By this I understand that the attention to the act—but also to the cause itself—is potentially increased through the very act of withdrawing oneself from the world, and radically so: not only by setting oneself alight in merely corporeal terms *but also by “bringing to light” the very cause, otherwise silenced or obscured, for which one decides to set oneself alight at all.* As Yang argues, for this act to make an impact it has to be ‘indefinitely suspended in time’; for the indefinite suspension to last it has to be visually recorded and turned into an image that ‘survives’ the act itself; for this kind of survival it is not the mere material existence of the visual record that counts but its public exposure in terms of hyper-visibility. Hence, to expose one’s own body to others during the act of self-immolation means to bring oneself to light (literally, while burning in flames), to bring the common cause to “public light”, and to do so in view of other people (the high-ranking officials, one’s own fellow community, and/or the anonymous mass of worldwide media observers). Again, the image of one’s own *suffering* put on public display (instead of one’s own corpse) is here crucial.

The Image Character of the Ethical

If the public visibility of suffering ‘suspended in time’, rather than death itself, takes the most prominent role in the effectiveness of self-immolation in protest (as described above with regard to the ‘burning man’), this obliges us to rethink the intricate relationship between the notions of images and suffering: how they partake in what Biggs calls ‘communicative suffering’ and how, in turn, the viewers could recognize themselves in these images by responding to such a communication. By the notions of ‘communication’ and ‘response’ I do not hereby denote the moralising reaction of a bystander who possibly aims at ‘altering the outcome of this event’ by disturbing the protagonist’s decision to burn himself to death (in order to “save him” from dying, eventually). Instead, I refer to our potentiality, as observers, to empathise with the human being burning and suffering in the process and to recognise the ‘image character of the ethical’, which is a necessary precondition for the thanatopolitical power of self-immolation to occur.⁴⁶ What characterises the image-character of the ethical? The emotional and political power of visual records configured by the empathising elements of thanatopolitics is defined by Yang as an *instant (of the monk’s death) indefinitely suspended in time*. Therefore, the dimension tantamount to the issue of power in the context of ‘communicative suffering’ is not the image itself—although it pertains to the visual evidence of the image-world—but the *human condition itself*, hereby defined as “suffering

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 14-16.

⁴⁶ J.M. Bernstein, ‘Foreword’, in *Ethics and Images of Pain*, ed. by Asbjørn Grønstad and Henrik Gustafsson (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. xii.

by self-inflicted burning". Furthermore, it is the human condition under particular circumstances: caught in a timely aspect of delay. This discloses the way according to which 'images of people in pain *seem to prolong a subject's victimization by fixing situations of suffering and immobilizing a human subject as a victim*' (my emphasis).⁴⁷ Moreover, such images 'may also undermine reductionist victimization. They show that this subject is *much more than a victim: he or she is a human being with whom we, the viewers, have something in common*. Images underline the 'commonalities of being human' (my emphasis).⁴⁸

If it is the vulnerability of the others, as Möller says, that I can experience as my own (rather than their status of a victim or the violence enacted upon them therein), then my own *viewing relationship* to the subjects of suffering can be emphasised through what binds us together as properly human beings. Another argument, shaped by the philosopher J.M. Bernstein, goes more precisely along this direction: it focuses on the synthesis between two types of ontologies in charge of our reception of the idea and the meaning of vulnerability. The argument consists, namely, in that 'the ontology of the photographic image is, at least in part, an ethical ontology of the human, a framing of the meaning of the human through its singular, always vulnerable bodily appearing'.⁴⁹ Accordingly, he contends, our vulnerability to violence is what allows us to be perceived through images not as images themselves but as properly human beings, captured by photography in all our 'helplessness and vulnerability before the eyes of all others':

What makes humans vulnerable to violence is, however, equally what allows them to be seen, imaged, painted, photographed, filmed, or videoed. Photography—with its inevitable indexical moment, with that moment's attendant realist excess—has become a site of anxiety not because images of the body in pain raise intransigent ethical questions about the production, distribution, and consumption of such images, although they do, but rather *because each photographic image pins the human to its helplessness and vulnerability before the eyes of all others*. In its capture of human vulnerability, *the domain of the photographic image of the human is coextensive with the ethical claim of the human body* (my emphasis).⁵⁰

In that sense, due attention has to be paid to 'displays of suffering as formative phenomena of our experience of the visual world'.⁵¹ This is also the reason why the image of a *dying* body—and not of an *already dead* body—is more powerful in exerting the 'communicative power of suffering' onto its onlookers. This complies with Bernstein's understanding that ethics begins 'with the image of another, who already matters to me, in such pain as to require my intervention, my doing something: protecting, healing, or providing solace'.⁵² However, if the self-immolator is dead I can hardly do anything for him or her that would benefit his or her liberation from suffering—unless this person *prefers* to die. Those who immolate themselves prefer to die, and they prefer to do so in protest—for a cause which they aim to achieve through the very act of dying. So, how could "my doing something"

⁴⁷ Frank Möller, 'Associates in Crime and Guilt', in *Ethics and Images of Pain*, ed. by Asbjørn Grønstad and Henrik Gustafsson (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 24.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Bernstein, p. xii.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ Asbjørn Grønstad and Henrik Gustafsson, *Ethics and Images of Pain* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. xv.

⁵² Bernstein, p. xii.

contribute to such a preference on behalf of the self-immolator if I am expected to react by ‘protecting, healing, or providing solace’ to the one who has already submitted himself to the act of ‘dying by fiery death’? In Quang Duc’s case, for instance, such an intervention was never meant to be done, it was not even expected from the viewers. This is not due to the fact that none of the people looking at Quang Duc’s self-immolation (including the photographer himself) were unable to sufficiently empathise with the burning man, but because the intervention itself was imagined on completely different grounds: if the act was disturbed, it would have meant ‘saving one person’s life’ while allowing for the death of many others to keep occurring in the name of the necropolitical regime of power. In other words, it would have meant a tacit approval of the necropolitical regime. Contrary to that, what was necessary for the ‘intervention’ to properly occur consisted in the expected visual materialisation of the event: into a first-hand *public testimony* (the self-immolation was taking place in view of the others, who timely brought themselves around Quang Duc while he was burning), but also into a second-hand public testimony—via photographic images. In turn, the visual impact thus produced was expected to provoke a large public response (both within the given locality of South Vietnam and abroad) and to galvanise a wave of necessary political transformations—which is what actually happened. Disabling Quang Duc’s action for the sake of ‘saving his life’ would have probably provoked a different chain of public reactions while it would have, almost certainly, destroyed the initially conceived (constructive, positive, transformative) thanatopolitical potential of his engagement in the process and, consequently, the cause itself (for which he decided to fight, precisely through self-immolation).

The problem arising here consists in the following: what is the most proper question I should pose to myself in order to take an ethical stance towards the suffering of a burning man? Should I prevent him from dying? If I do so I am not making any good to the cause he is fighting for: as mentioned above, those who immolate themselves *prefer to die*, and they prefer to do so *in protest* (for a cause they aim to achieve through the very act of dying). If I want to prevent someone’s act of protest this might mean that I am instantly complying with his adversary. If I do not prevent someone’s act of dying in protest (or self-immolation in particular), do I necessarily comply with the cause he/she is fighting for? Should I merely observe the ‘burning man’ and let him burn himself to death? If I anyhow decide to intervene, should I do it immediately or should I intervene later, in the aftermath of his act, while allowing him to express himself in the way he intends to do so? Besides, what should my intervention consist of: saving someone’s life at any cost or engaging (personally and collectively) in another form of life that his burning eventually opens to me and my community, the other kind of life (previously obscured) that his death “puts to light” anew? Should I only look or take a picture of the “event” (in case I were a photographer, for instance) in order to show it to the others and to do so publicly—which would make part of my intervention in compliance with the burning man’s cause? If I want to keep my “safe” ethical position (without intervening at all in the context of the photographed event and without doing *anything but taking a look* at the photograph produced therein), does this reduction of my “distant” and merely viewing position inform my ethical concern as one

which is neutral enough? Or could it still implicate my position of an “external” observer (which is a properly *viewing position*) into the represented act itself (and if yes, how)?

There is another related question: what can the posthumous photograph of suffering tell me *about my own self* rather than only about the ‘burning man’ depicted therein? Bernstein says that ‘we have an ethical life at all not because we can reason but because we can suffer’.⁵³ Additionally, if our ethical life begins with an ‘emphatic identification with others’, then the ethics relating to images of pain is in reality a subset of the image character of the ethical: if he or she is doing it *for me* (in case I am a member of the same community persecuted by a political dictator and his regime, for example, especially if I am a member of community which does not do enough to oppose such persecution), or *against me* (in case I am that political dictator or one of his representatives), I cannot remain indifferent ‘to the recognition that the causing of pain by me in some fundamental manner would deny her, deny or suppress her intrinsic worth. Without emphatic identification with others ethical life could never begin’.⁵⁴ So, should I intervene or not, and (in case I am supposed to intervene on the basis of a single photographic record) under which conditions should I look at it or ignore it?

In their own response to this dilemma, Grønstad and Gustafsson argue that ‘in a time when some institutionalized discourses of power and the rhetoric of the mass media sanitize the reality of suffering, perhaps we need a new critical conceptology that is able to resist the euphemisms so endemic to the vocabulary of political hegemonies’.⁵⁵ In the context of the present paper the question remains: what does this new critical conceptology consist of exactly? Following the need ‘to resist the vocabulary of political hegemonies’ as necropolitical hegemonies (in their self-proclaimed right to decide who must be killed or left alive), I treat self-immolation as an act of protest that has a profoundly *counter-hegemonic* character: the strength to oppose the political hegemonies of sovereign necropowers by proposing a different *visual vocabulary of power*. Its properties lie within the visual evidence of a dying body—a human being as a ‘living dead’, no more alive but still not completely dead—whereas the expression of such evidence is fundamentally *counter-visual*. The counter-visuality of self-immolation thus resides in the victim’s position against the ruling authority while suffering, while dying (i.e., in his or her intention to look the sovereign necropower in its face, while protesting against it through his or her own ‘fiery death’, but also in the intention to be seen by the others who should themselves get mobilised, in any other possible way, for the same cause). More precisely, the counter-hegemonic vocabulary of thanatopolitical power here denotes a process through which the self-immolating protesters inscribe themselves into the ‘constitutive assemblages of countervisuality’, as pointed out by Mirzoeff:

The right to look claims autonomy from this authority, refuses to be segregated, and spontaneously *invents new forms*. It is not a right for declarations of human rights, or for advocacy, but a claim of the right to the real as the key to a democratic politics. That politics is not messianic or to come, but has a persistent genealogy [...] from the opposition to slavery of all kinds to anticolonial, anti-imperial, and anti-fascist politics.

⁵³ Bernstein, p. xi.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p. xii.

⁵⁵ Grønstad and Gustafsson, p. xv.

Claiming the right to look has come to mean moving past such spontaneous oppositional undoing toward an autonomy based on one of its first principles: ‘the right to existence’. The constitutive assemblages of countervisuality that emerged from the confrontation with visuality sought to match and overcome its complex operations.⁵⁶

The counter-hegemonic and counter-visual rationality of self-immolation is, in my view, one of the possible ways to explain how the emotion of guilt can be induced among the direct observers (i.e., the ‘observant community’, in Bradatan’s terms) whom the act itself is supposed to address. This is related to the subversive potential of self-immolation. Hence, my definition of self-immolation complies with earlier exposed arguments insofar as it contributes to our understanding of it as a gesture of a particular kind: radically and unconditionally opposed towards authority and capable of inventing new forms of power through what I shall call the *positive insults of counter-visual vocabulary*. As ‘Palden Gyatso, a Tibetan monk who spent more than 30 years in Chinese prisons and labour camps once said: ‘For those who use brute force, there is nothing more insulting than a victim’s *refusal to acknowledge their power*’ (my emphasis).⁵⁷ Hence, the power of images of suffering discloses self-immolation as a counter-visual strategy of resistance against the necropolitical hegemony *par excellence*. In conclusion, I will leave the question about self-immolation open in the following way:

On the one hand, *we should not look* at such images because to do so is to become complicit in the suffering they depict; on the other, *we must look* at them because by refusing to do so we yield our ability to respond to them. [...] *The moral double-bind* seems to be resolved only to the extent that *looking at these images can be regarded as politically empowering*, in that it—rather than encouraging any kind of political emasculation—*changes our reception and acts as a buffer against forgetting* (my emphasis).⁵⁸

Conclusion

In the contemporary visual environment, images of pain, suffering, and agony have become constitutive elements of the reality this paper intends to put into question—especially with regard to phenomena such as self-sacrifice, self-immolation by fire and assisted suicide (besides the general yet misleading context of ‘suicide’). In this paper I have discussed the ‘moral double-bind’ associated with visual materialisation of suffering preceding death in the context of self-immolation by fire, namely: how its public display changes our reception of “death” (and of our own “surviving selves” as properly human beings) without losing its politically and emotionally empowering efficiency. For some theorists—and especially those dealing with visual cultures and technologies—what really matters is *the global visualisation of suicide* (or, to be exact—since I insist on a different terminology—of the thanatopolitical self-sacrifice) through ‘media mediated images’ and their ‘migration across different media, genres, and visual practices’.⁵⁹ Therefore, I consider this research field to be in urgent need

⁵⁶ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 4.

⁵⁷ Bradatan, ‘The politics of Tibetan self-immolations’.

⁵⁸ Grønstad and Gustafsson, p. xviii.

⁵⁹ Bernstein, p. xiii.

for re-conceptualisation and critical exploration in the future, through what Grønstad and Gustafsson have named 'the ethical phenomenology of images of agony.' Thinking alongside them, I have argued that one of the most important questions to be posed in this line of thought concerns the *subjects of looking as agents of social and political transformation at large*. I defend it on the grounds of visualised suffering of the 'living dead', or suffering put into images, through which one has (or should have) a capacity to develop an empathetic relationship, regardless of the time and space in which the process of looking occurs. Therefore, instead of confirming or condemning the right to self-sacrifice by fire, I am rather standing against the obscurity of these and related social issues in order to oppose their further tabooization by inviting the reader to reconsider, for him- or herself (and without giving any immediate answer from my own side), whom those images are addressing, whose gaze they are inviting, who they are talking to, and why.

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