

Damnatio Memoriae: Why Mobs Pull Down Statues

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For hours the TV cameras played on the efforts to topple the statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad's Al-Fardos ("Paradise") Square last week, and we all watched, fascinated. It seemed an epochal event. Yet the crowd that tried to tear the statue down was a smallish one, its efforts mostly futile. Every now and then it all seemed slightly amusing, as if offering a kind of light relief beside the real horrors of war.

Some men try to tie a noose round the neck of the statue, but nothing happens. The gestures seem more symbolic than practical, however strenuous. The same for the scuffles that ensue, when a few men fight to grab a hammer that they swing ineffectually at the plinth. They produce a dent or two. Still nothing happens. Finally an M88 Tank Removal Vehicle, aptly named a Hercules, rolls up to the statue, and U.S. Marines tie chains of iron round the statue and bring it down. Everyone is jubilant.

What is it about a dead and really poor statue -- a boring one indeed -- that rouses such personal antipathy? And why did we who were not there stay so gripped throughout the whole business?

All of us are aware of the symbolic freight of statues like this one. Their toppling clearly symbolizes the end of the overthrown regime. Often the pent-up resentments against a now-absent leader are taken out on his images. But is this enough to explain the intensity of feeling in Paradise Square -- and the efforts to sully the statue once it was down?

People spat on it, and smacked its face with their shoes as it was dragged through the streets of the city. Even the children joined in the frenzy of insult. But it was not the once-proud and arrogant Saddam himself. It was simply a statue of Saddam, one of many. Why should we ourselves have been so engaged? Is it just that the statue is the symbol of a hated leader, or is it more?

The history of art and the history of all images is punctuated by events of this kind. It happened in the French Revolution, in the Russian Revolution, in the wake of the fall of Nazism, in the months following the expulsion of the Shah of Iran, and at the time of the dismantling of the regimes of Eastern Europe in 1989-92. It happened long before too, over and over again: repeatedly with regime change in Ancient Egypt, and often enough during the Roman Empire.

Throughout the Roman Empire statues were erected in cities and colonies, and held to be stand-ins for the emperor himself; they had to be treated with respect. One had to respond to the image of the emperor as if the emperor himself were present. Images of Roman emperors were submitted to the insult known as the *damnatio memoriae*, the attempt to eliminate even the memory of the past by removing its symbols.

Then, of course, came the many instances of religious iconoclasm, from the Byzantine iconoclasm of the eighth and ninth centuries, through the great iconoclastic movements of the 16th and 17th centuries (when more objects of artistic value were destroyed than on any other occasion) up until the dramatic destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan last year.

Religious statues are removed not just because they are images of the infidel, not just because they are cult statues worshipped by opponents of the victors, but because some of the life of the gods they represent is believed to inhere in them. And when they are pulled down, well, are they not just pieces of dead wood and stone, powerless and ineffectual, just like the statues of Saddam?

The history of art, just like the history of image destruction, provides one example after another in which images are treated as if they are living. To pull them down is not just to exhaust them of all the life and power we habitually attribute to them -- it is to assert our own triumph over the people they represent.

Last week's events in Baghdad revealed all this, every step of the way. So does the continuing destruction of statues and ripping of photographs and posters all over Iraq. The headlines read "Saddam toppled"; the photos show the statues of Saddam toppled. Thus do the very metaphors illustrate the conflation of image and prototype. Everyone spoke of the "head of state" being treated with new indignities, as people put the boot in his face. The statue was down, and yet people felt compelled to hit and spit. They did not just tear the photographs, they stamped on them -- the ultimate Islamic indignity.

We ourselves watched compulsively not only because of glee at the toppling of the regime, but because the treatment of a statue as if it were human was in itself peculiarly compelling, as if we were watching such gruesome treatment visited upon a human being. And the covering of the face with the U.S. flag had particular force because it entailed the elimination of the very signs of vitality in an image: the features of the face, and the eyes in particular (the first thing iconoclasts often do is to take out the eyes of an image, to make clear that it has finally been drained of its supposed life). To see a face mutilated or covered is to be forced to think about the obliteration of life itself.

The lesson of all this is not just the political one. It is not only about the pleasure to be derived from the deposition of a tyrant. It is also about our relations with images in general, and about the power all images, whether good or bad, have over us.

For years it has been fashionable to claim that the modern multiplication of images by photography, by the computer, and now on the Web, have drained images of their force. The German cultural critic Walter Benjamin once implied that in the age of mechanical reproduction images lose the aura they had when they were at the center of religion and ritual.

Susan Sontag implied this too in a famous essay on photography. Not surprisingly, especially in the light of the strength of our reactions to images of atrocity, even when multiplied by the million, she has revised her views. She too has come to recognize something about images that we all know in our bones: that statues, like pictures and photographs, become compelling because of our inescapable tendency to invest images of people (and sometimes things too) with the lives of those whom they represent.

Hence our fascination with the events of last week. Such images may be reproduced a thousand times over, and still we will be moved, because we see the being in the image. This fundamental

response to sculptures, paintings and photographs could not be better exemplified than by our reactions to the transformation of the once proud and arrogant statue of Saddam Hussein into a forlorn heap of twisted metal and stone.

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