5.3 Objects as stimuli

Speaking of words rather than objects, Tarrow (2013, p. 116) argues that "contentious language not only expresses mobilization, but also stimulates emotions and guides episodes of conflict and protest." Similarly, according to Abrams and Gardner (2023), symbolic objects can reflect and transmit the ways in which emotions and affect shape, influence, and structure the dynamics of collective action, impacting both mobilization processes and the formation of subjectivities. In particular, bodies, and in some cases, the bodies of the dead, often take on this role.

A paradigmatic example is that of George Floyd: the image of his lifeless body, pinned beneath the knee of a U.S. law enforcement officer, circulated globally, fueling and amplifying the struggle of the anti-racist movement both locally and internationally. Similarly, Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation served as the spark that ignited the so-called Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, triggering a wave of protests that transcended national borders and spread throughout the entire North African region.

In both cases, symbolic objects acquired a corporeal dimension, functioning not merely as artifacts but as active elements in the production of meaning and the construction of collective subjectivities. Their role went beyond the simple representation of preexisting meanings; rather, they operated as catalysts of affect, perception, and latent social dynamics. Through their materiality and capacity to evoke shared meanings, these objects activated political and experiential potentialities that, though embedded within the social fabric, surfaced and materialized in collective practices and mobilization processes.

In summary, as Abrams and Gardner (2023) emphasize, symbolic objects have acted as stimuli, awakening, eliciting, and facilitating dynamics of mobilization and acts of resistance and protest. However, their role as stimuli in contentious politics is not confined to representing death, vulnerability, or bodily suffering (Biggs 2005; Whalen-Bridge 2015).

The protests staged by *Ultima Generazione* offer an opportunity to deepen the analysis of this dimension and to expand its boundaries. Their actions and demonstrations belong to a broader tradition of nonviolent movements that have made the body the core of their political strategy, transforming it into a symbol, a tool of struggle, and a medium for constructing social conflict. As the literature suggests (Butler 2003; 2017; Cornish, Saunders 2013), the strategic use of the body as an element of resistance, vulnerability, and denunciation generates an aesthetic of mobilization capable of arousing strong emotions and making visible the urgency of a particular issue.

Yet the corporeal language of protest is never univocal: it is subject to interpretation, contestation, and resignification within the field of affective politics, where emotions become crucial variables for both mobilization and demobilization (Jasper 1998, 2014; Goodwin et al. 2001).

From this perspective, the road blockades carried out by *Ultima Generazione* activists are particularly useful for exploring this dilemmatic and polysemous dimension of emotion-driven collective action. The following image captures one of the many road blockades organized by the movement on the *Grande Raccordo Anulare* in Rome.

Figure n.7: Activists engage in discussion with motorists and motorcyclists during a road blockade, Rome.

The geometry of the image is very clear: four activists from the movement are present, one standing on the left and three seated in the middle of the road holding a banner, while visibly irritated motorists and motorcyclists attempt to understand what is happening. One activist is engaged in conversation with a motorcyclist, while the other three use their bodies as physical barriers by sitting in the center of the roadway, disrupting the normal flow of traffic.

In this context, the body becomes a physical obstacle, a material presence that halts a functional system, namely the logistical system, causing a disruption perceived as annoying and destabilizing, but which simultaneously fosters direct confrontation and generates contentious interaction between protesters and drivers.

The drivers' irritation is clearly visible, both in their facial expressions, such as the woman on the scooter, and in their gestures, like the red-haired woman attempting to speak with an activist at the center of the scene. In the background, other motorists can be seen having exited their vehicles and engaged in discussion, seemingly trying to make sense of what is unfolding.

However, the irritation extends beyond individual reactions; it reflects a broader social dynamic in which the protest action is perceived as a violation of everyday order and normalcy. This dynamic mirrors the tension between the urgency felt by the activists, who view the climate crisis as an immediate priority, and the indifference or alternative priorities of a segment of the population focused on immediate needs.

The activists' goal in this case is to provoke a strong emotional response, whether of support or opposition, in order to create a communicative flashpoint. The scene highlights the gap between the perspectives of activists and those of the motorists: the former regard the climate crisis as an absolute emergency, while the latter appear more preoccupied with the immediate routines and trivialities that shape and give meaning to their daily lives.

Actions of this kind, precisely because of their highly polarizing nature, spark public debate and challenge existing regimes of normalcy and attention, as well as the relationship between climate urgency and social

resistance to change (Norgaard 2006; Zerubavel 2002; Foucault 1977; 2009). The scene thus becomes a visual representation of the difficulties of collectively mobilizing a fragmented society, where not only space but also time emerges as a peculiar arena of conflict.

Spatially, the tension manifests between global and local dimensions, with claims seeking to connect systemic issues like the climate crisis to daily life priorities – such as arriving at work on time. Temporally, the conflict lies between a present dominated by urgency, risk, and danger, and a future perceived as abstract, distant, and uncertain, making it difficult to develop a collective vision that reconciles the short and long term.

Visually, the contrast between the small number of activists – four – and the much larger group of drivers offers a striking representation of the ongoing conflict around the climate issue. This scenario symbolizes an engaged and concerned minority opposed to an apparently indifferent and disengaged majority.

Another particularly meaningful and emblematic image that concludes this section on symbolic objects as stimuli portrays five activists during a protest action at the *Pinacoteca* of Bologna. In this case, the action was a response to a tragic event directly tied to the effects of the climate crisis: the landslide that struck the community of Casamicciola on the island of Ischia, resulting in several fatalities, including children.

Figure n.8: Five activists stage a theatrical protest at the *Pinacoteca* of Bologna by pouring red paint over their bodies, Bologna.

Figure n.8 shows five activists: three in the background writing messages of denunciation against the Italian government, and two in the foreground, heads bowed, pouring red paint onto their bodies a symbolic gesture representing the blood and death caused by the landslide.

The protest action was accompanied by an official statement, reported by several news outlets, as well as by a spontaneous comment from one of the participants, interviewed by journalists present at the scene. Here are his words:

> «We chose the wall where Guido Reni's *The Massacre of the Innocents* is displayed, explains Andrea, one of the activists who took part in the action together with his father. By placing the photo of the children who died in Ischia, we wanted to create a dialogue with the artwork itself […] Ours is not an act of vandalism, but the alarmed cry of desperate citizens who refuse to resign themselves to the destruction of the planet, and, with it, their own lives».
> (fanpage.it – 3.12.2022)

The activist's words add further nuance and depth to an image already rich in symbolic and performative meaning. The act of self-immolation, albeit in theatrical terms, enables the activists to render the trauma of the climate crisis visible through the language of the body, while simultaneously suggesting that the crisis is not solely an environmental issue, but a collective wound that affects human bodies and lives. Their bodies, covered in red paint, both stimulate and embody the connection between climate policy and loss of life, transforming an abstract issue into an immediate and tangible concern.

In this context, the activists move beyond verbal denunciation to symbolically incorporate the crisis into their own bodies, producing an image capable of capturing public attention and eliciting an emotional response.

These final two images are particularly significant because they underscore another key characteristic of symbolic objects: their dynamism and non-exclusivity. An object may serve, either simultaneously or sequentially, as a target, a tool, and a stimulus in a protest action. Its role depends on context and interpretation. This illustrates a high degree of polysemy, making symbolic objects not only powerful communicative devices but also ideal instruments for conveying complex meanings through multiple perspectives.

6. Conclusions

The analysis conducted in this study has highlighted the significant role that symbolic objects play in contentious politics, confirming their capacity to function as targets, tools, and stimuli within collective action. Through the examination of the protests carried out by the *Ultima Generazione* movement, it has been possible to observe how activists have employed a wide range of material objects to amplify their message, create powerful visual impacts, and generate communicative flashpoints aimed at mobilizing public attention to the climate crisis.

The images analyzed demonstrate that symbolic objects are not merely material artifacts, but genuine narrative devices that, within conflict contexts, become imbued with multiple and shifting meanings. From the use of orange paint and the defacement of artworks and monuments to the employment of the body as both stimulus and instrument of protest, each of the movement's actions has been conceived with a precise communicative strategy, designed to spark public debate and render the ecological crisis visible. This study has shown that symbolic objects do not merely convey messages; they influence mobilization dynamics and processes of political subjectivation, constructing collective imaginaries and redefining the boundaries of protest.

Another key finding concerns the dialectical nature of symbolic objects, which can be interpreted in varying ways depending on the perceptions and responses of the actors involved. For activists, these objects represent tools of denunciation and awareness-raising; for institutions and segments of public opinion, they may instead