

The Fuse; Its Refusal: Notes on the Politics of Burnout

THE FRIENDS OF ATTENTION

*Writing, in its method and style, writing in its liberty, can coincide with real liberty
only when the latter enters into crisis and opens a void into history.*

—Maurice Blanchot

Large, complex, high-voltage systems are generally equipped with a “primary burnout fuse.” Its function, like that of every fuse, is to *burn out at exactly the right moment*. What moment? The moment when the load on the system exceeds its capacities; the moment when a surge in power (or a spike in demand) threatens the integrity of the apparatus. Delicate circuitry will be fried. There is a risk of fire.

If the fuse “works,” the system stops. If the fuse does not “work” (if the finely calibrated ribbon of current-bearing fusible material at the heart of the fuse does not melt, does not burn up, and in the process sever the circuit itself), the system will be *destroyed*.

In this sense, the fuse is the canary in the coal mine of every circuit.

But this is not quite right. The canary’s death is a *sign*. The canary thus represents the pure conversion of “being” into *semiosis*—without remainder. In the fuse, by contrast, burnout is a *direct intervention*, by means of disruptive nonexistence. Two revolutionary images converge: the martyr and the arsonist.

Additional terminology: “Fuse” (as in “he has a short fuse”) and “fuse” (as in “go check the fuse box”) must be distinguished. They are nevertheless closely related. Both burn. But the first (sense A) *burns to blow things up*. Whereas the other (sense B) *burns to stop things from blowing up*. They are kissing cousins, this burning rage and this sacrificial combustion.

“Refuse” (sense A') is waste. And the burnout fuse is indeed the waste component of a circuit: Its purpose is to be replaced, cheaply, when it burns out. Additional terminology: “Refuse” (sense B') also means to *replace the fuse*; literally, to “re-fuse,” to put a fuse back in the system. Hence, to start it again.

Additional terminology: “Refuse” (sense C) also means to *decline to continue*. To say “no,” in word or action.

The fuse (sense B?) is the incandescent technology of refusal (sense C?).

Incandescence: At their historical origin, the fuse (sense B) and the incandescent lamp are indistinguishable. The quest for a filament that, under load, would glow brightly—that would *provide light*—resulted in countless burnouts. Subjected to sufficient current, anything will burn. The creation of controlled electric light involved the gradual separation between circuit filaments designed to glow bright hot and burn out fast (i.e., fuses), and circuit filaments designed to glow bright hot and burn out slowly (what we call “light bulbs”). In this sense, the distinction between “that by which we see” and “that by which we are protected” is merely a matter of *duration*.

What is the difference between a fuse (sense A) and a wick? This fuse is a kind of clock—a rudimentary timed detonator. It looks like a wick, but its relationship to what it lights is, generally speaking, the inverse: The wick, by means of capillary action, draws up its fuel continuously, feeding it to the flame until there is no more; the fuse, by contrast, consumes itself, steadily, until it reaches its end, which is the “charge.” The end of the wick is thus darkness (i.e., *rest*), whereas the end of the fuse is an *explosion* (fuel performing its potlach). Duration is everything.

Those who bear the brunt of a surge—the first in line to receive the full charge of a crisis—are simultaneously *essential* and *replaceable*: They do their crucial work in being “used up” by the catastrophe. Refuse in sense A? Sense B? Sense C? *Homo nihil*? *Homo sacer*? *Homo heroicus*?

Yet in a fuse (sense B) “breaking” is an *opening up*. This is the outstretched handshake of blithe accord *in reverse*. In this sense, real care may be a retraction. Like the lizard’s tail that twitches after being severed, the fuse, in its burning, *turns and bends itself away*. We recognize in this a gesture of farewell. The fuse: a *détournement* of rupture, the affirmative gift of no.

Those deeply endowed with the capacity to refuse (sense B', sense C) are often highly *fusible* beings. They are able to refuse not because they are “strong” but because they are fragile. This act of refusal is simultaneous affirmation and negation—a crossing nexus reflected in the verb “fuse,” whereby something is created or healed (by melding), destroyed (by melting), or both at once. *Fusible beings* act as tiny yet powerful negations of the nonexistence of a better world. They are themselves both nugatory (refuse, sense A') and *transcendent*.

Additional terminology: “con-fuse,” to be *with the fuses*.

Additional terminology: “refuse” (sense D), the act of conjoining; to cease to be a/part.