



Vagaries & Violence in V for Vendetta

V for Vendetta (James McTeigue, 2005), based on Alan Moore and David Lloyd's graphic novel of the same name, opens with a meditation on the relationship between the political and the personal. It is 5 November 1605 and Guy Fawkes is creeping through underground tunnels with a wagon of gunpowder, when suddenly he is surrounded by armed men with dogs. Later he is taken to the scaffold to be hung. In the crowd a woman looks on. There is a strange connection between them and tears

flow from her eyes. As we witness this scene, we hear Evey Hammond's (Natalie Portman) voice-over:

Who was he really? What was he like? We are told to remember the idea, not the man. Because a man can fail. He can be caught. He can be killed and forgotten. But 400 years later, an idea can still change the world ... But you cannot kiss an idea, cannot touch it, or hold it. Ideas do not bleed. They do not feel pain. They do not love. And it is not an idea that I miss. It is a man.

Historically, Fawkes was an oppressed Catholic during the reign of King James I of England. With a group of fellow conspirators, he hired a cellar beneath Westminster Palace (also known as the Houses of Parliament), where they laid explosives. The plan was to detonate them as the King addressed both Houses of Parliament (the House of Lords and the House of Commons). Captured, Fawkes was tortured and executed (hung, drawn and quartered) for treason. This history is not investigated in *V for Vendetta*; rather,

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RJURIK
DAVIDSON



er, Fawkes is presented as a symbolic figure. The man Evey refers to in her voice-over is V (Hugo Weaving), the ambiguous hero of the futuristic and dystopian film, who wears a Guy Fawkes mask and also plans to blow up the Houses of Parliament,

as. It will be about their relationship to people. It will be about politics and the part we play in it. It will be about the moral dilemmas faced when opposing a totalitarian state. What the opening doesn't indicate, however, is that the film will also be a

British Labour Government of Tony Blair.

Fascism and its enemies

Shortly after the opening sequence, we see Evey Hammond readying herself to

avour, which suggests an anti-religious stance. The head of this government is the High Chancellor, played by John Hurt, in a direct reference to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Michael Radford, 1984) in which he played the hapless Winston Smith. The media is shown to be compliant with the government's wishes: 'We don't make up the news, that's the government's job. We just report it' says one reporter. In addition, there is constant surveillance, a curfew to maintain order and the threat of ending up in the police's 'black bags'.

VforVendettainformsusthatitwillbeafilmaboutthepowerofideas.Itwillbeabouttheirrelationshippeople.Itwillbeaboutpoliticsandthepartweplayinit.Itwillbeaboutthemoraldilemmasfacedwhenopposingatotalitarianstate.

to rouse the English masses against their powerful fascist government. Evey becomes involved in V's scheme and is transformed from a passive character into an active and powerful agent, a convert to V's ideas.

Evey's voice-over at the beginning of *V for Vendetta* thus informs us that it will be a film about the power of ide-

comment on our current political climate: on terrorism and war, on authoritarianism/fascism and political protest.¹ The film quite explicitly criticizes our contemporary neo-conservative governments (and in this it stands close to another recent dystopian film, *The Children of Men* [Alfonso Cuarón, 2006]) – especially the US Government under George Bush and the

visit a friend. In the background, 'The Voice of London', the spokesman for the fascist government, speaks on the television: 'Immigrants, Muslims, homosexuals – disease-ridden degenerates. They had to go. Strength through unity. Unity through faith. I'm a god-fearing Englishman and I'm goddamn proud of it.' Thus fascism is linked to religious fer-

The fascist government is clear about its enemies – they are the traditional 'enemies' of the far-right wing. Homosexuals have a privileged place in the film (*The Children of Men*, by contrast, privileges refugees). Most obviously, there is a short sequence where Evey is apparently captured by the authorities, who torture her for information about V (though there is more to this scene, which I'll mention later). Locked



up in a cell, Evey discovers Valerie's life story written on a piece of toilet paper hidden in a hole in the wall. Valerie had been imprisoned in the Larkhill Detention Centre because she was a lesbian. Evey retains her strength in the face of torture by reading this letter. The two prisoners, one dead, the other alive, are united by this experience. The film asks us to have empathy for both of them. 'Even though I do not know you, and even though I may never meet you, laugh with you, cry with you, kiss you, I love you', wrote Valerie. To be truly human means not to discriminate, but also to affirm common humanity with those one has never met.² The film thus argues for a non-discriminatory attitude to sexuality and, by implication, religion and race. The Larkhill Detention Centre has obvious references to the Nazi death camps and medical experiments. Scenes of bodies, including Valerie's, lying in open graves, recall the footage during World War Two of Auschwitz and the other con-

centration camps in Poland.

How did this all come about? When V takes over the state television station, he explains, in a call to the people to rise up on the following 5 November:

How did this happen? Who's to blame? ... If you're looking for the guilty, you need only look into a mirror. I know why you did it. I know you were afraid. Who wouldn't be? War, terror, disease – there were a myriad of problems which conspired to corrupt your reason and rob you of your common sense. Fear got the best of you. And in your fear you turned to the High Chancellor, Adam Sutler. He promised you order, he promised you peace, and all he demanded in return was your silent obedient consent.

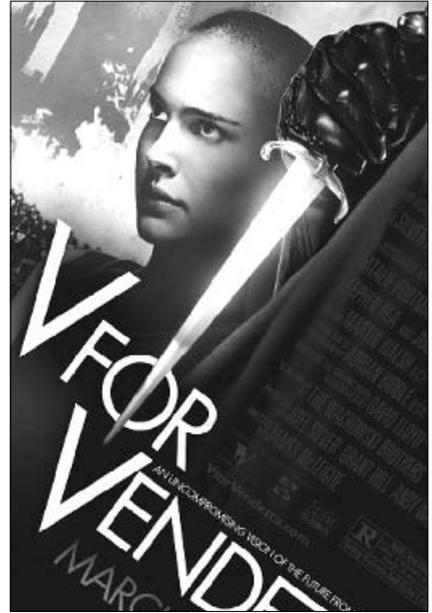
Indeed, later in the film, we discover that the government itself engineered a virus (the St Mary's virus) which it later claimed was the work of religious extremists. This vi-

rus was used to create fear amongst the population, and led to the spectacular rise of High Chancellor Sutler.

A critique of neo-conservatism

In all of this, *V for Vendetta* makes an argument about contemporary politics and events. Its critique of religiosity could be interpreted as an attack on the religiosity of the Bush government (Tony Blair is also a deeply religious man). Other references to the contemporary world abound. Events leading up to the rise of the fascist government include 'America's war' (shown with footage of the war in Iraq) and the 'black bags' of Abu Ghraib prison. The 'Voice of London', for example, previously had a military career which reads as, 'Iraq, Kurdistan, Syria – before and after – Sudan.' Later in the film, Evey's friend Gordon Deitrich (Stephen Fry) reveals a secret room where he keeps forbidden items. A poster on the wall shows a composite of American and

British Flags; in the middle of the flag is a swastika, while the writing reads: 'The Coalition of the Willing' (a reference to the Coalition of the Willing which formed the Iraq War) and 'To Power' (a reference to Nietzsche). His other banned items include the Koran – the item that ultimately brings about his execution – and gay erotica. Moreover, the argument that traditionally conservative politics has been changed by the neo-conservative governments into a politics of fear has become common (see, for example, the documentary series *The Power of Nightmares: The Rise of the Politics of Fear* [Adam Curtis, 2004]). For Teigue and the Wachowski brothers (scriptwriters of *V for Vendetta*), the neo-conservative politics dominant today are a close relative of totalitarianism. For much of the film, the parallels suggest that the kinds of neo-conservative politics today might easily lead to totalitarianism.



Resistance and morality

Opposed to this totalitarian system is V – an idea as much as a character. V rescues Evey in a typical superhero moment. Evey is about to be raped by the Finger-men, when V mysteriously arrives on the scene, a masked and caped crusader. But the scene, like the film itself, is a postmodern reworking of the superhero comic; he quotes Shakespeare and speaks in riddles. V is not just a hero in a mask, he's an embodiment of an idea, the symbol of opposition to the fascist government. As V says in a final confrontation with the head of the police, Creedy (Tim Pigott-Smith) and in a reprise of Evey's opening voice over, 'Beneath this mask there is an idea, Mr Creedy. And ideas are bulletproof.'

Here the film is perhaps at its weakest. In Moore and Lloyd's graphic novel, V is clearly an anarchist. Yet in the film, his ideals remain vague and unspecified. The concept of freedom advanced is unclear, while the

motto, 'People should not be afraid of their governments. Governments should be afraid of their people' is a 'defensive' or 'negative' conception of power. At another point, he says with some pretentiousness that 'Fairness, justice and reason are more than words – they are *perspectives*.' (This kind of pseudo-philosophical vagueness also blights the writing of the Wachowski brothers' *Matrix* trilogy).

Certainly V stands for classical liberal values. His lair, the 'Shadow Gallery' is filled with classical art and sculpture. He has a jukebox that plays soulful jazz, he treasures classic film, in particular *The Count of Monte Cristo* (Rowland V. Lee, 1934). Such valuing of knowledge is traditionally associated with the liberalism of thinkers like J.S. Mill (*On Liberty*) or Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*). In such views, education and culture is good. It enriches humanity, and will lead it upward on the path of

progress and liberation (while more radical left-wing views might see education and culture as more two-sided, more a matter of reinforcing dominant ideas. Walter Benjamin, for example, once wrote that, 'There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism').³

The film supports political activists (Evey's parents were involved in the anti-Iraq war movement). Yet most interesting, and most confused, is its attitude to V's activities. V is consistently described in the movie as a 'terrorist', or 'freedom-hating terrorist'. Generally speaking, the film supports his plan to blow up the Houses of Parliament, thus undermining contemporary political discourse about terrorism. V describes his vision: 'The building is a symbol. As is the act of destroying it. Symbols are given power by people ... with enough people, blowing up a building can change the world.'

Yet at the same time, Teigue and the Wachowski brothers are ambivalent about V's vendetta against those who were involved in running the camp at Larkhill. Over the course of the movie, V kills all those involved: The Voice, The Bishop, The State Coroner. Evey doubts the morality of this vendetta.

'Violence can be used for good,' V says. 'What are you talking about?' says Evey. 'Justice,' he replies. Later, V explains that, 'What was done to me was monstrous.' 'And they created a monster,' replies Evey.

V is a creation of the very system he opposes: his superhuman strength comes from his time in the Larkhill detention centre where he was infected with a virus (another postmodern reworking of the superhero plot, where the superhero is often created by some sort of accident, e.g. bitten by a radioactive spider). And he sug-

gests, at the end of the movie, that his place is not in the new world he has helped create, for he is a product of the old one. This recalls Terry Eagleton's words about revolutionaries:

*Since the truth, politically speaking, is usually thoroughly unpleasant, being a realist means living a vigilant, cold-eyed, soberly disenchanting sort of existence ... Since this is both the only way to live and no way to live at all, radical politics is bound to be a contradictory affair. Its more successful practitioners are likely to be the last people to embody the values of the society they are fighting for.*⁴

Particularly interesting is the sequence in which Evey is imprisoned (where she discovers the letter from Valerie). It turns out, at the end of the sequence, that her captor is not the government, but V. She is kidnapped, dehumanized, tortured. Finally she is sentenced to death and one of her captors says, 'Look, all they want is one little piece of information. Just give them something, anything.'

'Thank you, but I'd rather die behind the chemical sheds,' replies Evey.

'Then you have no fear anymore, you're completely free.'

Immediately following this exchange, Evey walks from the cell through the abandoned corridor and into V's Shadow Gallery, realizing the identity of her captor. She is transformed in exactly the same way that V was transformed at Larkhill. This is directly indicated by cross-cutting between V's emergence from the fire that destroyed the Larkhill camp and Evey's emergence into

the rain at the end of the sequence. Both raise their arms to the sky, like phoenix from the ashes. Following Evey's transformation, she becomes a powerful, self-directing agent, and indeed finally sets the train in motion, loaded with explosives, to destroy the Houses of Parliament.

Radical lineage and contradictions

Politically speaking, the structure of thought employed in *V for Vendetta* recalls that of a number of radical groups during the 1960s and early 1970s. The idea of the 'propaganda of the deed' has been an anarchist staple since the nineteenth century. Peter Kropotkin, for example, wrote that:

*By actions which compel general attention, the new idea seeps into people's minds and wins converts. One such act may, in a few days, make more propaganda than thousands of pamphlets.*⁵

But *V for Vendetta's* lineage

is more likely those ideas that arose in the 1960s among the New Left, such as the Yippies (great proponents of 'guerilla theatre'), or various Maoist groups. Like *V for Vendetta*, the political theory of these groups revolved around a number of key concepts: a totalitarian state; an apathetic population controlled by various state and civil systems of control (the police, the media); and symbolic action, designed to rouse the masses from their apathy. Historically, as social change seemed to become increasingly difficult to attain, these groups tended towards more and more extreme actions, though no doubt under different conditions, the groups may have evolved in other directions.⁶ Those who took the ideas to their most extreme included the Weathermen (for a good documentary, see *The Weather Underground* [Sam Green and Bill Siegel, 2002]) and the Symbionese Liberation Army (the documentary *Guerilla: The Taking of Patty Hearst* [Robert Stone, 2004] covers their famous kidnapping of Patty

Hearst) in America, the Red Brigade in Italy and Baader-Meinhof in Germany.

Yet, in a significant contradiction to the general line of thought in *V for Vendetta*, the revolution at the end of the film ends up occurring peacefully. There are a number of intimations that this will not be the case such as Inspector Finch's portentous words, 'With so much chaos, someone will do something stupid, and when they do, things will turn nasty'. Just prior to the climax, Finch's assistant says, 'Went by Parliament. Never seen anything like it: tanks, anti-aircraft, infantry. Makes you wish that no one will show up tonight. If they do, what do you think will happen?' Finch implies a massacre: 'What usually happens when people without guns stand up to people with guns.' But at the climax of the movie, nothing 'nasty' in fact occurs. Verisimilitude is jettisoned (the other moment this occurs in the film is the strange sequence referencing Benny Hill). When earlier in the film the po-

WHAT IS A GRAPHIC NOVEL?

Graphic novels are essentially comic books for adults. The graphic novel was born during the eighties, as a new generation of comic book writers sought to raise the form to the status of art. These include Frank Miller, whose graphic novels are the basis of the films *Sin City* (Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez, 2005) and *300* (Zak Snyder, 2006), and Neil Gaiman. Alan Moore, author of *V for Vendetta*, is often considered the most innovative and influential of these writers. His work formed the basis of the films *From Hell* (Albert and Allan Hughes, 2001) and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (Stephen Norrington, 2003). Formally speaking, the graphic novel is closer to a TV series than a film. Usually they are composed of chapters that are published monthly, which each tell a 'short story' while maintaining a broader story arc that develops over time. This causes a great deal of difficulty for adaptations to film, as a great deal of restructuring is required. In the case of *V for Vendetta*, much of the complexity of the graphic novel was lost, while the film shows great strain under a complex plot. This may be the reason that Moore took his name off the film, and described an early draft of the script as 'imbecilic.' For more information on the graphic novelists of the 1980s, see *Dark Knights: the New Comics in Context* by Greg S. McCue with Clive Bloom, Pluto Press, London, 1993 and *Comic Book Rebels* by Stanley Wiater and Stephen R. Bissette, Primus (Donald I. Fine Inc), New York, 1993.

lice and military were shown breaking up demonstrations, now they simply buckle under the weight of popular pressure.

Beyond Hollywood's usual inability to imagine social change, this ending doesn't ring true. Partly, it relates to the individualistic nature of the totalitarianism that the Wachowski brothers have created in the script. Indeed, though the film suggests the government is fascist, through its iconography and through its references to the police, the death-camps and so on, there are some reasons to think of it more as simply authoritarian: a police state. Fascism traditionally mobilized the populace, it was a populist political program relying, in fact, on the populace's activity. Whereas it's clear in *V for Vendetta* that actually it is the population's apathy, their inactivity, that allows the rise of the High Chancellor and his government. Thus the conclusion is imaginable: remove the High Chancellor and the head of the State Police (Creedy) and everything falls apart. This is also a departure from Moore and Lloyd's graphic novel, which sought to investigate two political extremes: anarchism and fascism. Indeed Moore criticized the film as being 'current American neo-conservatism vs. current American liberalism.'¹⁷

Yet there may be more to it. Teigue and the Wachowski brothers argue that violence can change the world, yet want to pull back from the idea at the end. One can almost sense the internal and industry pressures on them to renounce violence

and depict the transformation peacefully. Do they really want to depict some kind of sustained revolutionary struggle? In such a struggle, isn't it likely that the state will crush the insurgency, seeing as there's been no preparation or organization? How will this affect the stories of V and Evey? Would this all suggest that V's symbolic action is, in fact, unnecessary; how will such a potentially downbeat ending affect the film's reception? In other words, other visions of peaceful and non-peaceful social change are available, but they cannot be reduced to the simple composite of ideas (totalitarian state, apathetic masses, symbolic action) that *V for Vendetta* is based on. Those visions would include various forms of political action and organization, well beyond the scope of an individual superhero and his symbolic actions.

Rjurik Davidson is a freelance writer and editor. He has taught at Victoria University, RMIT and La Trobe University.

Endnotes

- ¹ Moore and Lloyd's graphic novel, on the other hand, is a critique of Thatcherite Britain.
- ² This idea stands behind Norman Geras' book *The Contract of Mutual Indifference*, Verso, London, 2000.
- ³ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Fontana Press (HarperCollins), London, 1992, p.248.
- ⁴ Terry Eagleton, *The Gatekeeper: A Memoir*, Penguin, London, 2003, p.85.
- ⁵ Peter Kropotkin, 'The Spirit of Revolt', [http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/An-](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/An-archist_Archives/kropotkin/spiritofrevolt.html)



OTHER CRITICISMS OF *V FOR VENDETTA*

As a film, *V for Vendetta* is flawed. Narratively, the film suffers from a number of problems. Its plot is driven by a large number of coincidences (though it tries to cover this by a few philosophical asides to do with the nature of chance, such as V's comment in the scene where he meets Evey that 'God doesn't play dice'), and there is some plot confusion. For example, why does one of the characters decide to defuse the bomb that V has placed in the state television centre when he knows *nothing* about defusing bombs? The answer, surely, is to artificially ratchet up the suspense; his final choice is to simply guess between two wires with no rationale. Another such moment is when Finch warns the Chancellor that a train could be used to transport the explosives beneath Parliament. Rather than face this threat, Suttler simply dismisses it. But the worst case is the fortuitous appearance of Inspector Finch immediately after V's death, and immediately prior to Evey sending the explosive-filled train towards Parliament. Behind these problems with character motivation and action surely lies the Wachowski brothers' desire for the plot to turn out in certain ways. That is, the film is plot- rather than character-driven. Equally weak in places is the dialogue, most notably Evey's, which Natalie Portman cannot quite make convincing. There are also a number of clumsy scenes of an 'average' family and the elderly in a retirement village, as they respond to events as representatives of 'the people'.

archist_Archives/kropotkin/spiritofrevolt.html Accessed 4 April 2007.

⁶ The best history of this period is Todd Gitlin's *The Sixties: Years Of Hope*

Days Of Rage, Bantam Books, New York, 1987.

⁷ Quoted at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/V_for_Vendetta_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/V_for_Vendetta_(film)) Accessed 7 April 2007.