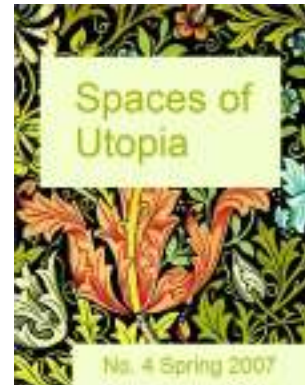# Overthrowing Vengeance:

## The Role of Visual Elements in *V for Vendetta*

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## Introduction

The emergence of the critical dystopia genre in the 1980s allowed for the appearance of a body of literature capable of both informing and prompting readers to action. The open-endess of these works, coupled with the sense of critique, becomes a key element in performing a catalyst function and maintaining hope within the text.

V for Vendetta, by Alan Moore, with illustrations by David Lloyd, first published in serial form between 1982 and 1988 and, later, in 1990, as a graphic novel is one of such works. Appearing during the political climate of Margaret Thatcher's conservative government, it became a cult classic amongst graphic novels readers and collectors. A film adaptation was released in 2006, from a screenplay by the Wachowski brothers, to different reactions from the graphic novel's creators; Moore withdrew his support and denied any involvement in the adaptation while David Lloyd publicly confessed his admiration for the movie. I first became interested in the series due to its gritty realism, and the enigmatic, cultured figure of the protagonist. In fact, *V for Vendetta*'s universe is quite distant from the comic book genre, which is dominated by God-like figures such as Superman or Spiderman. Also, the sheer scope of reference in the work, ranging from Blake and Shakespeare to the Rolling Stones and The Velvet Underground, added to my interest, making it the subject of this paper.

In this essay I will be discussing the graphic novel, focusing on identifying a "sub narrative" level composed of visual elements and its relation to the main narrative line, a relation based on the production of an ideological background that confers a wider significance to the actions of the protagonist. Ultimately the dynamics of this relation resolve themselves in an overthrow of the simpler motif of vendetta in favor of a more complex narrative about society's struggle against an oppressive regime, thus reaching a far more profound resonance and utopian function.

**Critical Dystopia and Narrative Levels**

The setting for Alan Moore and David Lloyd's graphic narrative is a near-future England, ruled by a fascist regime dubbed "Norsefire". The series' main characters are V - the protagonist – and Evey, a young girl struggling to survive in the dystopian universe of the book. I have classified *V for Vendetta* as a critical dystopia according to Lyman Tower Sargent's definition of the genre as:

> A non existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society but that normally includes at least one eutopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia. (*apud* Baccolini/Moylan 2003: 7)

I will return to this definition further ahead in the essay, in order to bring forth the points regarding the "eutopian enclave" and also in relation to the open ending of *V for Vendetta*.

In order to understand the role of visual elements, I will now focus on the two main characters, distinguishing between their positions in the narrative so as to make clear the dynamics at play between main and sub narrative levels. Raffaela Baccolini and Tom Moylan's discussion of the critical dystopia, in "Dystopias and Histories", explores the genre's narrative devices as "the construction of a narrative of the hegemonic order and a counter-narrative of alienation and resistance", identifying the protagonist as someone "unreflectively immersed in the [dystopian] society" moving "from apparent contentment into an experience of alienation and resistance" (*ibidem*). This sheds a revealing light on *V for Vendetta*'s structure, as is noticeable at the

moment of both V and Evey's introduction. In their introductory panels, both characters are shown in the process of putting on masks. Evey is presented putting on make-up, a mask of the mundane, her face exposed in the mirror. A character, then, immersed in the dystopian society, and subjected to its order, having to step down to prostitution to survive. While it cannot be said that this is a character satisfied with her existence, Evey is at most in a first stage of alienation, with no resistance coming from her part to the hegemonic order.

V's introduction is, however, quite different. We do not observe an individual putting on a mask, there is not a clear subject to be disguised. V is still a shadow, a mere silhouette. The foreground of this scene is occupied by the objects in the room. What presents itself to be embodied behind the mask – in other words, to grant content to the shadow's form – are those visual elements, amongst which the bookshelf on which *Mein Kampf, Capital* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are grouped. From the moment of his introduction onwards, V transcends individuality and is a character in a stage of open resistance, to use Baccolini and Moylan's expression. It also becomes difficult to view V as an archetypal avenger, driven exclusively by the desire of personal revenge. His position in relation to main and sub-narrative levels can be thought of as that of an agent on a meta-utopian level, a position made clearer further ahead in the book.

**The Significance of History and Theatre**

Having explored the distinction between V and Evey as characters, I would now move to discuss *V for Vendetta*'s most featured visual object: the Guy Fawkes mask.

The mask becomes a symbol for a crucial recovery of history that not only is a key factor in the narrative as a whole but also allows for the critical aspect of the book to reach the reader with more impact. As Baccolini puts it,

> History, together with memory, figures prominently in the critical dystopia (…) and [its] recovery and knowledge (…) appear to be necessary elements to promote a utopian space. (Baccolini 2003: 116)

V's figure operates this recovery by linking history and theatre, and, playing to this role, by providing voice to the ideological currents stemming forth from the

visual elements of his universe. This accounts for his habit of speaking almost exclusively by quotation, remaining "in character" throughout the play: the first words that V speaks are from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Act I, Scene 2: "The Multiplying villainies of nature do swarm upon him…" (Lloyd/Moore 1990: 11). Also, his position as the "maestro" of a plan larger than personal revenge is also meaningfully stated by quoting William Blake: "I will not cease from mental flight/ Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand/ 'Till we have built Jerusalem/ In England's green and pleasant land" (*idem*, 48).

This specific scope of reference – history and theatre – is enhanced by the sub-narrative level. Again, it is the bookshelves in V's home, the "Shadow Gallery", that better present the importance of this bond. The presence of titles such as *Frankenstein, Gulliver's Travels, Don Quixote, Hard Times, French Revolution, Faust, The Odyssey, V, Iliad, Shakespeare, Ivanhoe, The Golden Bough, Divine Comedy* both extends and thickens the ideological cloth out of which V is formed.

**The Heterotopic Space and Process in *VfV***
Going back to Lyman Tower Sargent's words, namely the "existence of at least one eutopian enclave" and articulating them with Baccolini's mention of the need of recovery and knowledge of history to promote a utopian space, the visual objects that compose the sub-narrative level can be seen as endowing V's home with necessary elements for creating a space of resistance and the hope of overcoming the hegemonic order. This space is meaningfully a negative version of the power structure of the dominant regime. This rendering as negative, enforced by its underground location, brings it close to Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopias, the places where "all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted" (Foucault 1986: 24). The presence of these elements in a space that juxtaposes both freedom and order endows the identity formed in them with a new found power of agency, granting, as Kevin Hetherington has argued in his discussion of the concept of heterotopias, "the means for the development of new modes of social ordering that are utopian in intent" (Hetherington 1997: 53).

What has to be thought of, then, in *V for Vendetta*, is not just the presence of this heterotopic space but the processes that can take place in it, since, as Foucault reminds us, there isn't "anything that is functionally – by its very nature – absolutely liberating. Liberty is a *practice*" (Foucault 1993: 162; original italics).

Again in *V for Vendetta* this is linked to theatricality: it is through the staging of plays, in a total theatre experience, that V enables the awakening of individual consciousness in Evey, and prepares her to take his place in the new social order. When Evey enters the space of the gallery as a character unknowingly part of V's "prison play", main and sub-narrative levels merge. She is put through a "rite of passage" that will take her to the stage of resistance and to the understanding of her responsibility as a member of society. At this point vengeance is entirely overthrown and we are left with a new V, contemplating the possibility of building a new, fairer social order. This turn in the narrative is accomplished by the role of visual elements, which establish the outcome of the narrative through their influence in shaping V, the space and processes of the Shadow Gallery, and as a legacy of history and memory to Evey in her role as the new V.

**Conclusion**

As readers we are constantly brought back to this ideological frame, reminded of the supreme importance of knowing the past and the need to be historically conscious and returned to the present with a new awareness of our responsibility in shaping society. However, Moore and Lloyd are careful to show that this recovery doesn't lead strictly to violence. By presenting two V's, one that in fact chooses a more violent path, and another one that, having been brought into existence by the same ideological background, chooses to keep a positive role, one of construction and not destruction, the graphic novel's final emphasis is on *consciousness*.

*V for Vendetta* leaves us with an open ending, the total possibility for the future in the image of:

> The people stand[ing] within the ruins of society, a jail intended to outlive them all. The door is open. They can leave, or fall instead to squabbling and thence new slaveries. The choice is theirs, as ever it must be. (Lloyd/Moore 1990: 260)

This ending enables the graphic novel to maintain the hope that dystopia has indeed been overcome and will be replaced by an eutopia. By opening the reader to this hope and possibility, it states the most crucial part of any social dreaming: the choice *is ours*, as ever it must be.

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