Confused, not thought through: V for Vendetta

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V for Vendetta, *directed by James McTeigue, written by the Wachowski Brothers, based on characters created by Alan Moore and David Lloyd*

V for Vendetta, directed by James McTeigue and written by the Wachowski Brothers (*The Matrix*, *Bound*), aspires presumably to be a meaningful political thriller and offer an equally meaningful warning. It is largely undone by the primitiveness of the artistic means and disoriented or wrongheaded social views.

In the near future Britain is ruled by a totalitarian regime, rooted in nationalism with overtones of Christian fundamentalism (as well as the 'Big Brother' aspects of George Orwell's *1984*). Political opponents have been jailed or executed en masse, secret police thugs rule the streets after dark, and the face of Chancellor Adam Sutler is omnipresent on the omnipresent television screens.

A young girl, Evey (Natalie Portman), wandering out at night after curfew is rescued from a trio of vicious secret policemen by a mysterious masked man, known as V (Hugo Weaving). The two join forces eventually in a campaign to bring down the regime. A third figure, Finch (Stephen Rea), a member of the political police, has his own misgivings about the course of events. As he comes closer to the truth about V's identity and history, his doubts grow.

V is driven by the desire for revenge as much as political idealism. He was mutilated in a fire at a detention center, which specialized in horrifying medical experiments, some time before. He has sworn to avenge himself on all his tormentors. His political program consists of killing government officials and blowing up public buildings. He wears a Guy Fawkes mask, to remind the British population of the early seventeenth century Catholic conspirator who plotted, along with a few others, to blow up the Parliament buildings.

The film is based on a graphic novel, i.e., a comic book, produced in the 1980s by writer (and anarchist) Alan Moore and illustrator David Lloyd. The work was directed against the Thatcher regime and the threat Moore and Lloyd felt the latter represented to British democracy. There are politically prescient and perceptive elements. The Wachowski Brothers, in adapting the graphic novel, have added obvious references to the present situation in the US. The Sutler regime is particularly hostile to Muslims and to Islam, and has used a disaster, resulting in tens of thousands of deaths, which it actually orchestrated, to eliminate elementary rights. Right-wing demagogues, in alliance with hypocritical clergymen, monopolize the airwaves.

I could possibly be convinced otherwise, but basing a serious film on a 'graphic novel' seems to me a questionable proposition. Is that not perhaps an inherently limited medium? Such an argument could be made. Almost inevitably the word 'cartoonish,' and not meant as a compliment, comes to mind. The comic book has no doubt gone beyond its simplistic origins, but, in the final analysis, it seems to me that a lowering of film standards rather than the emergence of the graphic novel as a significant art form accounts for the prevalence of films based on such works. In any event, *Ghost World, From Hell, Road to Perdition, The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, A History of Violence, Sin City* and now *V for Vendetta* do not constitute much of a persuasive argument.

No doubt many film scripts fail to transcend, and many may even seriously fall below, the level of the average graphic novel, but that is not an argument in favor of comic books, it is largely an argument against current filmmaking. To begin with a graphic novel, it seems to me, is to set oneself a ceiling, an artistic

'maximum,' that it is difficult to go beyond.

At any rate, whether Moore (who has taken his name off the film) or the Wachowski Brothers are primarily responsible, the drama and dialogue in *V for Vendetta* are often puerile (all too 'cartoonish'). At times, indeed, the film reminds one unhappily of that other recent melodrama about a masked man who inhabits an underground lair, Andrew Lloyd Webber's execrable *The Phantom of the Opera* (made into one of the most painful films of recent decades).

These samples will give some flavor of the current film.

Evey to V: "You're getting back at them for what they did to you." V replies: "What was done to me was monstrous." Evey: "Then they created a monster."

Or:

In his hideout, where he has a Wurlitzer jukebox, along with art works he has rescued from the dictatorship (including Jan van Eyck's famed "The Arnolfini Marriage"!), V absurdly invites Evey to dance on the eve of 'his' revolution. When she questions it, he answers (in a paraphrase of a comment by American anarchist Emma Goldman): "A revolution without dancing is a revolution not worth having."

Or:

Evey: Who are you?

V: Who? Who is but the form following the function of what. And what I am is a man in a mask. Evey: I can see that. V: Of course you can. I am not questioning your powers of observation. I'm merely remarking upon the paradox of asking a masked man who he is.

Or:

Evey: I don't want you to die. V: That is the most beautiful thing you could have given me.

And so forth.

It may very well be that disgust and horror at unfolding events, both at home (the growing assault on constitutional rights and civil liberties) and abroad (Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantánamo), animate the filmmakers. Warnings about the possibility of a police-state, fascistic regime are certainly in order. However, for these warnings to have a measurable impact, the artist has to have thought through political and social questions, as well as problems of dramatic plausibility and psychological realism. There is little sign of that here.

Apart from such intellectual and artistic labor, disgust and horror are not entirely reliable guides. The attitude of the protagonist V and the filmmakers toward the population is ambivalent, to say the least. The notion that an assassination campaign and the demolition of landmark buildings will provoke a social upheaval is false and, ultimately, deeply antidemocratic. V is single-handedly carrying out 'his' revolution, as Evey calls it.

Ordinary people are portrayed as zombies, glued to their television sets, who need to be galvanized by bombings. The filmmakers stack the decks by having the population respond as V would like. But what if they did not? Would his next targets be crowded underground stations or shopping centers, as part of a further effort to arouse the slumbering masses?

The choice of Guy Fawkes, a former mercenary and Catholic conspirator, as revolutionary inspiration is hardly promising. It points to the essentially apolitical and asocial (and nationalist) character of V's supposed uprising, in which personal revenge plays as large a part as any other element.

Taken at face value, the film neatly, if inadvertently, captures the bankruptcy of anarcho-terrorist ideology: the mass of the population is reduced to the role of a passive spectator while the heroic individual (and super-egoist) carries out exemplary, supposedly 'electrifying' operations. The sudden appearance on the scene of large numbers of people in the final sequence, the destruction of Parliament, in support of V's actions is both unconvincing and problematic. Since the population has taken no part in the 'revolution,' has not advanced its own social awareness in any noticeable manner, how is a new, liberated society supposed to emerge from all this?

We will be told that we are taking this all too seriously, but, as a matter of fact, these are serious matters.