

# V FOR VENDETTA (2005) AND THE SOCIOPOLITICAL IMPACT OF A SHAKESPEAREAN DYSTOPIAN AVENGER

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## ABSTRACT

The use of science and technology as tools for political domination is a recurrent topic in dystopian films. James McTeigue and the Wachowski sisters' film adaptation (2005) of Alan Moore and David Lloyd's cult graphic novel *V for Vendetta* (1982-89) is a unique example of this kind, as the film has enhanced its impact on a wider audience and has spread its influence over the sociopolitical arena. After 18 years since its release, the film's criticism is still in force and it may be applied to analyze recent political events in the United States. Far from being a work circumscribed to a specific time, nowadays the film highlights issues that are still relevant and problematic, such as resettlement camps, pandemics, manipulated information and massive surveillance. The film adaptation has become a global hit and V's mask has been claimed and reproduced in all kinds of protests. Therefore, this masked avenger—inspired by Guy Fawkes and created forty years ago—has succeeded to become a tragic hero in the fashion of revenge tragedy characters, combining Shakespearean references with radical political ideas. Thus, people have identified with V through the years, bringing his mask to the streets in social and political struggles such as Anonymous or Occupy Wall Street.

*Keywords:* V for Vendetta, dystopian, Shakespeare, Anonymous, Occupy Wall Street.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

James McTeigue and the Wachowski sisters' film version of Alan Moore and David Lloyd's cult graphic novel *V for Vendetta* is a unique case of adaptation and transposition to an audiovisual medium with an increasing impact on wider global audiences through the broadcast on digital platforms, thus enhancing its growing influence and extending it to the sociopolitical arena. Both the film and the graphic novel set the story in future dystopian Britain, but the graphic novel mirrored British society under Margaret Thatcher's mandate (1979–1990), while the film version seems to reframe the widespread political criticism targeting the United States during the George W. Bush administration (2001–2009). As I will analyze in the next sections, the film focuses on violations of civil rights in the aftermath of 9/11 terrorist attacks and the changes that this has brought to American society.

The year 2022 has commemorated the 40th anniversary of *V for Vendetta* first publishing release as a serial comic (1982–1989), and 2023 is celebrating the 18th anniversary since the film version was first released in 2005. Notwithstanding, far from being a work circumscribed to a specific time, which may have brought as a result its own outdated, the film adaptation is still appealing for the audience as its message remains profoundly valid nowadays, and gives us the chance to apply its critical dystopian analysis to current circumstances, focusing on the present sociopolitical situations.

In fact, the masked avenger V created forty years ago, inspired by the Catholic conspirator Guy Fawkes in the Gunpowder Plot (1605), has gone beyond the framework of fictional characters, as people have identified with him and have brought his mask to the streets in social and political struggles. Therefore, V has succeeded to become a tragic hero in the fashion of revenge tragedy characters, exceeding the mere fiction to enter reality thanks to the combination of Shakespearean references and radical political ideas.

## 2. THE COMIC AND THE FILM ADAPTATION

In 1982 Alan Moore and David Lloyd had the idea to draw a political graphic novel against Thatcher's administration using as the main character a reincarnation of Guy Fawkes, officially considered a culprit in the attempt to blow up the Parliament in 1605 in what is known as the Gunpowder Plot. Moore was responsible for the script and Lloyd was in charge of drawings, so creating their protagonist called V, disguised with a mask, a cape and a hat, evoking the image of the British Catholic conspirator. This choice was especially provocative in the time as heavy IRA bombings were taking place, demanding freedom from the British domination over Northern Ireland Catholic population, and thus Moore thought the historical figure of Fawkes was the appropriate to build up his hero, someone that acted outside the boundaries of legality, but committed to a greater ideological cause.

Moore and Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* was first published by British magazine *Warrior* in black and white, as a serial comic from 1982 until the publication's ending in 1985, when the magazine closed. In 1988 American publisher DC Comics acquired the rights to reprint and continue the series until 1989, and finally they collected and edited the whole series as a complete graphic novel in 2008. In the interesting foreword "Behind the Painted Smile", which accompanies the collected edition by DC Comics, Alan Moore acknowledges a long and varied list of influences. In this list there is a prominent role for classical dystopian references, as it was reflected in the graphic novel, which is indeed clearly a dystopian narrative itself, full of influences from the classical works of dystopian fiction, mainly from George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), among others.

The comic and its later film adaptation create a future imaginary world that is an evident parallel of a present reality, in an attempt to make people think about issues characterizing their own society and compel them to act in order to improve it. The film

adaptation was produced and written by the Wachowski sisters, Lily and Lana, for Warner Bros, and it was directed by James McTeigue. It was conceived as a Hollywood blockbuster based on Moore and Lloyd's original comic, with a big budget to create an action movie for the entertainment of young demographics.

The film has also proved to have a quite revolutionary political core, retaking the original content and reframing some scenes to infuse an extra-violent charge to the adaptation, conveniently exploited in the promotional campaign and the merchandising produced by Warner Bros. Although the film adaptation is quite respectful of the essence of the graphic novel, the film integrates crucial modifications, so contributing to highlight the critical aspects that were present in the graphic novel, through a deep political charge aimed to shake people's consciousness, widening its impact and influence.

Certainly, the film version proves to be more radical than the original comic in several aspects, especially in the final apotheosis destroying the Parliament, which is central in the film plot while it was secondary in the graphic novel. Moreover, in the film there are real images taken from TV news which show riots, demonstrations, and police charges. Thus, the film resorts to documentary images taken from the news to give credibility to the story, but curiously, some years since its release, people deployed the film's imagery and fictional elements to shape their claims and vindications.

Through its visual iconography, the film provides mainstream vocabulary of post-modern anarchism (Call 2008, 154), which has been appropriated by protesters as a way to give support to their causes. Furthermore, it seems that demonstrators have transposed the film's last scene into reality, with a mass of masked citizens marching in the streets (Fig.1), imitating or replicating V's acts as an inspiring revolutionary image which may be considered as a new icon of popular culture.



Figure 1 People marching towards the Parliament in the last scene of the film version © Warner Bros.

Thus, there are some changes in the plot and also in the characters, which contribute to update the story and to make it more powerful through audiovisual devices. Therefore, I could argue that the story and the characters of the original graphic novel are enhanced by the power of cinema as audiovisual media. As an example, the first scene of the film introduces V (Hugo Weaving) as an action hero using his fists and his characteristic daggers to rescue Evey (Natalie Portman), shown as a more independent and resolute young woman, from a group of corrupt policemen. On the other hand, the character of inspector Finch (Stephen Rea) becomes the main narrator in the film, and we the viewers discover V's plans through his investigation, adding a thrilling noir mode to the story while he is unraveling the clues to pursue, thus unfolding the case and Finch's pursuit of V's trail.

The release of the film was met by polemics because it showed a violent hero fighting against the system, reviving the specter of the 9/11 radical Muslim terrorist attacks of 2001 in the United States; and also the London bombings of public transport of July 7, 2005. In fact, the film's release was planned for November of that year, but it was first shown in the Butt-Numb-A-Thon film festival of Austin (Texas) in December 2005. Finally, the film's world release was postponed until March 2006, even though Warner Bros studios official statement said that this had nothing to do with the recent world political climate.

### 3. V AS A SHAKESPEAREAN AVENGER

I argue that *V for Vendetta* can be positioned between the dystopian contemporary fiction and the revenge tragedy, creating a modern hybrid form of narrative that is deeply indebted to Shakespeare's tragedies, since the structures of the comic and especially the film adaptation are based upon them. The narrative framework of the story deploys the typical patterns of dystopian fiction, but it also combines the devices of revenge plays in the unfolding of the narration and the characterization of the hero which is defined according to Shakespearean traits, being *Hamlet* one of the main sources of inspiration to build up the story and the character of V. My contention is that the combination of radical political ideas with the critical use of Shakespearean references is one of the key elements for the success of *V for Vendetta*, especially in the film version which makes people identify with the masked avenger V.

In order to study this impact, I understand Shakespeare as cultural capital, in the sense Pierre Bourdieu coined the term in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979), and as Douglas Lanier has developed the concept in *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture* (2002), questioning the cultural politics involved in popular adaptations of Shakespeare. I also agree with Julie Sanders when she points out that Shakespearean revisions are "a cultural barometer for the practice and politics of adaptation and appropriation" (2015, 51). Therefore, these practices also give a record of the political and economic circumstances affecting these revisions, as it is the case of *V for Vendetta*.

The idea of Shakespeare as cultural capital connects directly with the theories of cultural materialism explained by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield in *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism* (1994), as they argue that “culture is not simply a reflection of the economic and political system, but nor can it be independent of it. Cultural materialism therefore studies the implication of literary texts in history” (1994, vii). Thus, culture is directly connected to the historical events, being not only a reflection of social and political circumstances of a concrete time, but also a creative product which can intervene on them.

In *Broadcast your Shakespeare: Continuity and Change Across Media* (2018), Stephen O’Neill considers Shakespeare an ongoing cultural and ideological project, as his cultural capital is transformed through popular culture which redefines the idea of Shakespeare based on openness and difference. This idea fits well to current circumstances, taking into account that Shakespearean works may be used as a political weapon to voice a concrete ideology or make visible vindictive causes, as it has happened with *V for Vendetta*.

Through the construction of a hybrid non-canonical fiction product which blends dystopian fiction and revenge tragedies, the Shakespearean legacy is deployed to create a modern revenge tragedy, adapted to the present times, but keeping the essence of Shakespeare’s tragedies. These Shakespearean references are shown in V’s quotations and are also reinforced by symbolical elements, such as the bust of Shakespeare in V’s den, to which he addresses as an ally. These references contribute to create a new narrative space where the Bard’s plays not only offer the essential key elements to shape the personality of V as an epic antihero, but also provide the raw material to support its ideological background. Therefore, he defends along the story of *V for Vendetta* the right to pursue the revenge until the last consequences in order to redress injustice.

The most remarkable feature of V, as the main character, is his subversive and dramatic potential, as he quotes repeatedly Shakespeare’s works as a recurrent justification for his activism. As McTeigue and the Wachowskis increase and widen the scope of their Shakespearean quotations beyond those included in the original graphic novel, they also rely on them to reinforce the narrative strength of the story. For example, instead of the more extended *Macbeth*’s lines that Moore had chosen, the initial fight scene in the film is marked by a quotation from *Hamlet* (3.1.52-55): “We are oft to blame in this: ‘Tis too much prov’d, that with devotion’s visage, and pious action we do sugar o’er the devil himself.” These lines were originally spoken by Polonius to Ophelia, but here in the scene they clearly refer to the hypocrisy of government that abuses citizens instead of protecting them. As Michael D. Friedman (2010) argues, this reference also serves to compare V to Hamlet “as a revenger seeking retribution against an authority figure whose own crimes render him unfit for his office” (126). Thus, once more, the conscious reversing of Shakespeare’s words serves to structure V’s character.

Increasing its dramatic effect, V always wears a Guy Fawkes mask to cover his face, disfigured by fire when escaping from a government's resettlement camp. He is highly knowledgeable in the arts of combat and he is an expert in explosives, but he is also highly self-educated in literature, rhetoric, and politics, as the number of titles that are present on the shelves of his refuge suggest. First Moore and later the Wachowskis use V as a kind of reborn Guy Fawkes, an allegorical figure who demands justice and freedom at all costs, as it can be seen in picture 2 below from the film's promotional campaign. What is really undeniable is the use of Shakespeare's cultural authority to reinforce the position of the antihero and justify the use of violence as a means to reach a fair ending, as I will examine more in depth further on.



Figure 2 An image from the promotional campaign of the film *V for Vendetta* © Warner Bros.

#### 4. THE DYSTOPIAN ANTIHERO'S IMPACT ON AMERICAN SOCIETY

The hero of the story is an anarchist known as V, who fights against a fictional fascist state under the totalitarian rule of the Chancellor—originally a reflection of Thatcher's government in the graphic novel and later reattributed to W. Bush administration in the film version. *V for Vendetta* depicts the rise of an imaginary fascist regime, describing the access to power of far-right Norsefire party, while V argues that common people were also responsible for the success of fascism because they exchanged individual freedom for security. In the original comic, the ultimate reason for this totalitarian rise was framed by a post-nuclear war scenario. Meanwhile, in the film version the rise of fascism was due to

panic and chaos after a biological terrorist attack and the fear of other epidemic outbreaks.

Dystopian fiction reflects a distorted vision of reality and projects nowadays society's fears and nightmares into the future, exploring, and sometimes denouncing, possible or hypothetical dangerous developments in our society. As Estrella López Keller explains, it deduces a future nightmare world from the transposition of present realities (1991, 15). Therefore, the threatening future projection of our world in dystopian fiction is, in fact, a distorted reflection of our present menaces, as *V for Vendetta* shows in both formats. Thus, both the graphic novel in the 1980s and the film version adaptation produced at the beginning of the twenty-first century, reflect the threats of their present context.

Raffaella Baccolini (2004) thinks that the critical dystopias of recent decades are the product of our conflictive times which urge us to act (521). In this sense, although the graphic novel and the film version correspond to different times and countries, consequently addressing different political situations, both periods have many points in common as they represent historical moments of social confusion and political oppression. Even more interestingly, those kinds of historical periods tend to return more often than people wish, so cultural products such as the dystopian fiction represented in *V for Vendetta* serves to catalyze sensations, fears, and hopes which actually still have sociocultural whole validity nowadays.

The film tackles topics that are still current at the start of the 2020s, such as resettlement camps, experiment on humans, biological weapons, lethal pandemics, massive surveillance camera systems, government censorship, corruption among rulers and security corps, political manipulation of information, and use of repressive tactics to control people. *V for Vendetta* gives the opportunity to analyze through the dystopian perspective the abuse of power and the attack to civil rights, as real menaces in contemporary Western societies, including the United States. Moreover, it gives the chance to study which groups have appropriated V's symbolism and ideology, and how these references have been applied into real contexts in all kinds of protests, as it has happened in the United States with the Anonymous hacktivist group or the Occupy Wall Street movement.

If the comic was a success, McTeigue and the Wachowskis' film version has increased its impact and influence until really unexpected scopes, especially after Time Warner decided to produce massively V's mask as part of the film's merchandising. From 2007 on, Anonymous has used these masks in its activist claims (Ortiz 2015), and since then demonstrators have also appropriated this popular iconography in all kind of public protests. In fact, V's mask has become a global symbol of the fight for freedom and equality since 2011, when the 15-O global mobilization widespread worldwide. After the 2008 financial crisis and the hardening of living conditions, this mobilization claimed for social justice, asking governments to take real political actions in order to improve their

citizens' standard of living. There were massive protest campaigns in more than thousand cities and about ninety countries around the world, such as Spain's 15-May movement, the Arab Spring riots in Egypt, and the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States.

In the context of those protests, participants wore Guy Fawkes mask in the streets as a symbol of their engagement and activism, while bringing V's political ideas into practice in different sociopolitical frameworks, as it happened in the United States especially during the last year of George W. Bush's mandate, with the hatching of phenomena such as Anonymous or Occupy Wall Street. Examining this widespread popularity, as Marjorie Garber (2017) explains, we can see how "a digital activist collective called Anonymous allied itself with the Occupy movement," and also how "many of the Occupy Wall Street protestors in New York Zuccotti Park wore the Guy Fawkes mask associated with Anonymous" (125). Therefore, the mask that was originally part of the capitalist merchandising of the film *V for Vendetta* has been appropriated by a diverse range of activists and has been transformed into a cultural symbol and weapon for political activism.

Anonymous was the first organized protest group which has used V's mask as part of their branding. The group originated in 2003 and it became well known in 2008 due to a series of actions against the Church of Scientology. During these protests, thousands of Anonymous followers joined around the world simultaneously and coordinately. That was the first public event where many of the protesters wore the Guy Fawkes masks popularized by the film *V for Vendetta*, so becoming a popular symbol for Anonymous. The organization has developed hacktivism and direct-action protests around the world since then, for example, it was an early supporter of the WikiLeaks, the Occupy movement, and the Arab Spring.

Anonymous describes itself as an international Internet gathering with a loose network of activist and hacktivist entities that follow some general common ideas. This group could be better described as a movement, without a clear leadership and with an open membership to anyone who wants to be part of the collective. During the first campaign launched by Anonymous, its members uploaded a series of videos on YouTube in which a masked person read a speech on behalf of the organization, which attracted hundreds of thousands of viewers. That release and the subsequent ones seem to be inspired by the aesthetic of V's speech interrupting public TV broadcast to send his own message to the nation, thus, creating a symbolical connection between the fiction character and the hacktivist organization.

In an interview for BBC, David Lloyd, the creator of the original image of the mask for the comic series, "compares its use by protesters to the way Alberto Korda's famous photograph of Argentine revolutionary Che Guevara became a fashionable symbol for young people across the world" (Waites 2011, n.p.). From this affirmation, it can be argued that V has equally been transformed by popular acclaim into a global icon of revolutionary activism in the 21st century, so replacing other popular older revolutionary



images from the past. Therefore, it is worth evidencing that in the twenty-first century, popular culture fictional heroes can replace real-life historical icons.

Reflecting about the causes why the idea of V has rooted on collective consciousness in the context of contemporary protests, it is obvious that there is a radical activist ideology inherent to the film which propels spectators to question themselves their role in society to counterbalance government's power. Notwithstanding, one of the most relevant traits of this film is the use of Shakespeare's cultural capital in order to reinforce V's actions and justify its ideology. Thus, Shakespeare's cultural power serves to support V's performance through the film and helps to project on the audience a message of superior ethical commitment that defies authoritarian politics.

That anti-authoritarian radical ideology is especially evident in the last scene of the film, which may be considered an "image of iconoclastic anarchism which recalls the punk values that were central to youth culture until they gave away to patriotic posturing after 9/11" (Call 2008, 169). Therefore, the rebel teen spirit which characterized young generations along the last decades of the 20th century, questioning rules, defying moral criteria, and ultimately confronting power, became secondary or just pointless. Those libertarian and revolutionary values associated to youth were overcome by more conservative attitudes related to patriotism and the perceived need of increased homeland security. *V for Vendetta* foreshadows the abuse of power in governmental institutions accompanied by repressive policies justified by the need of implementing increasing self-defense measures, with the use of technology and science through propaganda and surveillance in order to exert a totalitarian power.

In that sense, after the terrorist attacks of the 9/11, it is proved that George W. Bush's Administration started a secret national surveillance program to collect records on phone calls, text messages, and emails by millions of American citizens. In 2005 that information was revealed by the press and in 2006 the Constitutional Rights Foundation published a survey with the title "The National Security Agency's Warrantless Wiretaps: Legal Terrorist Surveillance or Illegal Domestic Spying?" denouncing this abuse by Bush's Administration. Moreover, professor Tracey Maclin from Boston University, in her article "The Bush Administration's Terrorist Surveillance Program and the Fourth Amendment's Warrant Requirement: Lessons from Justice Powell and the Keith Case" (2008), refutes the claim that the President has the authority to order warrantless electronic surveillance of communications between American citizens, inside the US or abroad, under the suspicion of being related to terrorist groups.

In fact, hacktivism, surveillance, and manipulation of information have been increasingly present in American current political panorama since the beginning of the 21st century. There have been serious suspicions on attempts to manipulate 2016 US election with the intervention of Russian Internet "trolls" in the political and electoral processes, which have been proved by Kathleen Hall Jamieson in her book *Cyberwar: How Russian*

*Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President – What We Don’t, Can’t, and Do Know* (2018). Another study conducted by the professor Douglas Almond from the Columbia University, titled “Reduced Trolling on Russian Holidays and Daily U.S. Presidential Election Odds” (2022), also confirms that Russian “trolls” tried to manipulate popular opinion by creating fake American personas and disseminating false information to support Donald Trump’s campaign, thus decreasing the chances of winning of candidate Hillary Clinton.

Finally, Trump won the election and, as a consequence of the increasingly radicalized political climate and the exploitation of media bias, America got divided, exacerbating the already existing bipartisan polarization and the leveraging populist discourses. From the beginning of his campaigns, with patriotic slogans, Trump’s message has attracted all kind of conservative people from the most diverse ranks of society, appealing to their underlying discontent. Thus, the systematic manipulation of information, the use of fake news, and the radicalization of the political discourse, have deepened a social fracture in US society, which took an extreme turn on January 6, 2021, with the assault on the US Capitol by a mob of Trump supporters belonging to ultra-patriotic organizations and conspiracy movements such as QAnon. Events like this, fueled by the far-right sensationalist, populist discourses developed during Trump’s mandate to influence public opinion, in many aspects, are remindful of the Orwellian future depicted in the film *V for Vendetta*.

*V for Vendetta*’s film adaptation shows a bleak future world close to the fictional society depicted in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where people are controlled by cameras and the government gives the only “true” and acceptable information through the constant and pervasive emission of the Voice of Fate broadcast to the whole nation. In Orwell’s book, Oceania is a country ruled by the Big Brother, who is the leader of the totalitarian government and the Party. He rules through ministries with euphemistic names such as the Ministry of Truth, the Ministry of Peace, and the Ministry of Love, which exert power and control in exactly the ways opposite to what they suggest. Furthermore, the use of propaganda and technology to control the population also creates slogans like “War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, and Ignorance is Strength” (Orwell 2007, 6), which are remarkably similar to those depicted in *V for Vendetta*, such as “Strength Through Unity, Unity Through Faith,” or “England prevails,” but they are also remindful of Trump’s slogan “Make America Great Again.”

For scholars such as Brian L. Ott (2010), *V for Vendetta* represents an allegory of everyday life in George W. Bush’s America, and a critique of his administration and its policies (40), as it is reflecting the abuse of power on and violation of citizens’ rights under the pretext of providing national security. Besides, he argues that “*V for Vendetta* mobilizes viewers at a visceral level to reject political apathy and to enact a democratic politics of resistance and revolt against any state that would seek to silence dissent” (40). In this sense, the film seems to have caught the feeling of uneasiness that a great part of

American society has been experiencing since the beginning of the new millennium, after collectively traumatic events that have been documented across media and in real time as never before, as well as repeated financial crises and the subsequent recessions, and more recently the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic outbreak.

In the film, the Larkhill resettlement camp represents the most pervert employment of science and technology put to the service of the totalitarian regime to experiment with human subjects. According to Tony Williams (2006), “*V for Vendetta* is a film explicitly involving protest and revolution,” and using popular culture to attack George W. Bush Regime for its crimes (17). Thus, for Williams, the film represents a dystopian version of contemporary US America, and he establishes clear parallelisms between Nazi Germany and American Bush Administration (18). He compares Larkhill to the Guantanamo Bay concentration camp established by Bush in 2002, in the aftermath of 9/11, where the US military has enforced extrajudicial measures of control and confinement similar to those shown in the film. This kind of extrajudicial abuse of power is not an isolated case in the recent history of US enforcement, as it can be observed even on national soil throughout the system of immigration facilities.

V, as a popular culture antihero, owes a big part of its success to the fact of being shaped under the influence of Shakespearean characters, appropriating their style, manners, and especially citing his works as a way of reinforcing his political discourse. In Marjorie Garber’s (2017) words, “To cite a term made popular by the Occupy movement, Shakespeare whether produced or read or cited is a kind of human microphone repeated and repeating, voiced and revoiced, always rippling out to new audiences both global and local” (126). Therefore, the use of Shakespearean references in current diverse contexts serves to dignify and amplify any ideological causes that dare to reclaim a link to the playwright’s legacy, thus benefiting from its cultural authority.

This proves the Shakespearean legacy is being newly appropriated in unprecedented sociopolitical contexts, while being claimed to support revolutionary causes, as it is the case of *V for Vendetta* and its influential effect on activist groups such as Anonymous. On its official web page, Anonymous shows quite dramatic slogans that follow the style of V’s eloquent mottos: “We are Anonymous. We are Legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us.” Thus, they imitate some of V’s famous taglines and reprise the film’s merchandising, which also seem to be inspired by classical self-conscious tragic characters, with mottos such as “People shouldn’t be afraid of governments, governments should be afraid of people,” “Ideas are bulletproof,” or “Freedom Forever” (Fig.3).



*Figure 3* The mask from the film merchandising with one of V's popular visual elements © Warner Bros.

In fact, V acts all the time as a stage avenger, someone who is self-conscious of being performing all his scenes as a theatre character. He recites Shakespeare recurrently, “to signal the film’s employment of the conventions of Renaissance revenge tragedy” (Friedman 2010, 118), while he is wearing his costume—a mask, a hat, a cape, a wig and a pair of gloves—as part of his role. Therefore, he appears as a revenger in the fashion of Shakespearean characters such as Hamlet, seeking retribution, but also pursuing justice at all costs.

Although V performs such a role of a revenger in a typical manner, the unfolding of the plot reveals that his ultimate cause is to claim freedom and equality, beyond revenge. In a wider sense, V applies a Shakespearean aesthetic and formality to social justice activism that is carried out partly through illicit actions. Moreover, V parallels the planning and actions developed by Hamlet in his own revenge, so accomplishing at the same time the liberation of the nation from the unfair ruler. Therefore, even pursued through not always licit actions, V’s mission is fair and has a universal appeal for diverse audiences, as universal are also the Bard’s references used as cultural capital to support his cause.

## 5. V, ACTIVISM, AND PERFORMANCE

This self-conscious Shakespearean theatrical effect which is characterizing V's performance also affects Anonymous and other protest groups that have adopted Guy Fawkes mask, as they incorporate a theatrical element that adds a dramatic twist to their own causes. For Moore, the use of V's mask turns protests into performances, because "The mask is very operatic; it creates a sense of romance and drama" (Lamont 2011, n.p.). Therefore, activists transform their protests into performances, and, to an extent, they become characters in a political representation – a shift that is quintessential to their actions. Thus, the fact of V's mask crossing the boundaries of fiction to enter into reality proves the true potential that popular culture has to influence its audience's thoughts and acts, stimulating action in real life imitating fictional heroes and replicating fictional acts.

L.M. Bogad (2005) claims that performance is a key element in the building of social movements activism (47). He considers that one of the motivations for public demonstrations "is to define collective identity for a group", serving countercultural objectives to maintain resistance, creating a "dramaturgy of the protest" with a specific use of the space and the body (2005, 51–52). Consequently, it might be argued that Anonymous and other activist groups that use V's mask understand protest as a performance, including for the first time popular culture references as a political weapon for sociopolitical struggles in the new millennium. Moreover, as L.M. Bogad (2005), A. Boyd (1997), and S. Dumcombe (2004) claim, protests that include performing creativity, with the use of symbolic elements, can more easily engage citizens to participate, and ultimately they can become mass movements.

Possibly the most striking event related to massive protests by masked demonstrators is the so called Million Mask March, in connection to the popular mythology which has been spontaneously generated since the film's release. Thus, the mask of V gives symbolical power to people, keeping their individual identity while creating a compact uniform mass of performing protesters that is remindful of the last scene of the film. The protest has been organized by Anonymous to commemorate Guy Fawkes Night since 2011, but on November 5, 2013, these demonstrations acquired global relevance. The most important gatherings took place in London and Washington DC, but there were hundreds of events organized across the planet, usually outside of government buildings (Quinn 2013). In 2015, protests multiplied and widespread across more than 600 cities worldwide, showing how these marches have become a defiance phenomenon for authorities and policemen (Gayle 2016). It has proved to be a fast-growing movement that, in many cases, has caught the mainstream public's sympathies.

Anonymous has appropriated V's image and also the text from the film version to call people to join the annual Million Mask March around the world.<sup>1</sup> The marches have been coordinated mostly through social and digital media such as Facebook, Twitter or Youtube, to disseminate their message and summon the citizenship to participate in this kind of political performance. For Bogad, recent protests have emphasized creativity following the tactics of carnival, as “the events are often framed in terms of how spectators receive them, either on the streets or through the mass media” (57). Thus, the concept of protest as a performance has gained importance nowadays, as the Million Mask March has shown, thus becoming institutionalized as an annual protest occurring symbolically on November 5, celebrating the so-called Guy Fawkes Night, but also rendering tribute to the fiction character popularized in *V for Vendetta*.

In 2020, the comic book *A for Anonymous. How a Mysterious Hacker Collective Transformed the World* was published as a recount of the history of the Anonymous collective, written by David Kushner and illustrated by Koren Shadmi. Apart from the evident play of this book's title with the name of *V for Vendetta*, the aesthetics of this book reprises the visual style of Moore's complete graphic novel, as it can be appreciated in Fig. 4 below. In *A for Anonymous* the members of the hacktivist collective are transformed into fiction characters, deploying the dramatic Shakespearean style of V, to recount the adventures of the group and its evolution from a small group of hackers until its role as a concrete global menace for governments and enterprises. This book shows how Anonymous has reached a great social impact with activist performances around the world, organizing and contributing to widespread protests such as the Arab Spring or Black Lives Matter, and finally reaching its peak in the Million Mask March.

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<sup>1</sup> An extract from the social media text and the link to the video of Anonymous used in 2018 to call people to join the Million Mask March:

If you see what we see, if you feel as we feel, and if you want what we want, then I ask you to stand beside us and march with us for Justice this November the 5th, and together we shall give them a fifth of November that shall never, ever be forgot...

We Are Anonymous. We Do Not Forgive. We Do Not Forget. We Are the Voice of the voiceless. We Are the Eyes of the blind. This action was by the people for the people. Expect us.

<http://www.millionmaskmarch.com/map>

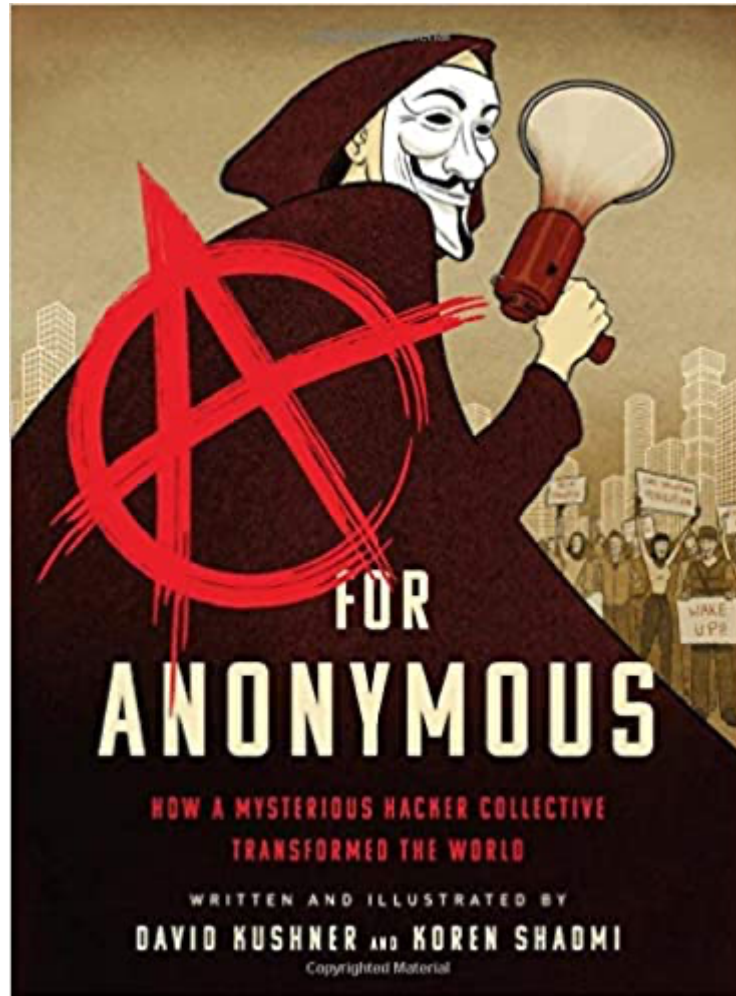


Figure 4 The history of Anonymous in a comic book imitating the *V for Vendetta*'s style.

In his dramatic appearances, and especially when addressing the bust of Shakespeare in the film version, V's soliloquies remind us those of Hamlet himself. V's eloquence and strange behavior may be easily misunderstood, as in the case of the Prince of Denmark, being taken for a mad person that vents his insane thoughts. Both characters are able to see the corrupted practices of rulers, and their acts will involve the achievement of a complete revenge as much as a change in power. The unfolding of the plot in both works, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and in *V for Vendetta*, will also bring the death of innocents as an unavoidable consequence of the fight for sociopolitical justice.

The government considers V's acts as national terrorism, but the use of violence will also eventually cause his own death, as the necessary ending to redeem him after so many innocent victims perished in the process of liberation of the nation. Likewise, Hamlet is meant to be also a tragic revenger forced by circumstances to accomplish his revenge, but eventually doomed by his acts. Shakespeare's tragedy shares some basic political aspects with *V for Vendetta*'s dystopian franchise, as their protagonists resort to violent actions and justify violence as necessary to bring deep changes in society.

Both works, *Hamlet* and *V for Vendetta*, imply that sociopolitical conditions can be changed with the direct collective action, which necessarily will include the use of violence. The justification of the use of violence is a recurrent topic throughout the plot of the film version, but it is also brought up as a constant issue in *Hamlet*. Their protagonists repeatedly argumentations, V and Hamlet, defend violence arguing that it is the only possibly useful method to reach their ideological aims, which they consider as morally higher objectives.

Like most Hollywood films, as Williams (2006) argues, *V for Vendetta* is designed to appeal to a mainstream audience mostly composed by young adults, but it also contains features that may nurture further thought, stimulate a stance of protest and even action against the system (18). The above mentioned manifestations have proved this potential, bringing people to the streets, even assaulting official buildings as V himself plans in the film. As Lewis Call (2008), says, “Thanks to Moore and Lloyd, the face of Fawkes took over newsstands in Britain and the USA during the 80’s; thanks to the Wachowskis and McTeigue, it took over billboards, cinema screens and televisions in the early twenty-first century” (156). Thus, after eighteen years since its release, the film’s influence has become global even in the political arena, and its effects are still pervading popular culture nowadays.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Eighteen years after its release in 2005, *V for Vendetta*’s symbols and messages are still referred to and used to denounce the loss of rights due to the abuse of power, through authoritarian practices that many times apply technology to subjugate the population. The film and its legacy are still compelling people to act and claim for their rights, with important precedents where it has exerted a great influence on sociopolitical protests such as those of the Occupy Wall Street movement or activist groups such as Anonymous.

Those protests have developed a dramaturgy which has been able to engage more people in its creative performance, based on the appeal of a popular culture hero. Especially the film version has been successful in this aspect, conferring the audience a popular reference to inspire them to act, and creating for the first time a powerful fictional character able to substitute real freedom fighters as leaders of protests. The Wachowskis and McTeigue have created a mirror for people to confront the political reality in which they live, showing them in the screens through a fictional character who they are and what their role can be in society and the power they can acquire, because as citizens they are the true origin of the real power.

Thus, I argue that the film in particular—due to its wider reach and the potential of audiovisual narration—has contributed, to an extent, to inspire people’s empowerment to act and fight for their rights, whenever they feel the authority is not respecting them and they do not listen to their claims. Therefore, the impact of the story and the character



of a Shakespearean dystopian avenger such as V have played a relevant role in sociopolitical protests in the first decades of the twenty-first century.

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