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The Visceral Politics of V for Vendetta: On Political Affect in Cinema

Brian L. Ott

This essay concerns the role of political affect in cinema. As a case study, I analyze the 2006 film V for Vendetta as cinematic rhetoric. Adopting a multi-modal approach that focuses on the interplay of discourse, figure, and ground, I contend that the film mobilizes viewers at a visceral level to reject a politics of apathy in favor of a politics of democratic struggle. Based on the analysis, I draw conclusions related to the evaluation of cinematic rhetoric, the political import of mass art, and the character and role of affect in politics.

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On March 17, 2006, the much hyped film, V for Vendetta, opened in theaters worldwide. Although the film, which is based on Alan Moore and David Lloyd’s graphic novel of the same name, represented James McTeigue’s directorial debut, it was far from a novice enterprise. The Wachowski Brothers—whose résumé included writing and directing The Matrix (1999), which garnered academy awards for best sound, film editing, sound effects editing, and visual effects—co-wrote the screenplay for Vendetta and, along with Joel Silver of Die Hard (1988, 1990) and Lethal Weapon (1987, 1989, 1992, 1998) fame, served as the film’s producers. With such an impressive pedigree, and as the Wachowski Brothers’ first major undertaking since
completing their epic *Matrix* trilogy in 2003, *Vendetta* was highly anticipated by critics and the public alike. Despite its impressive showing at the box-office, however, critical response to *Vendetta* was decidedly split.

On one side of the aisle were critics who praised the film as stirring, calling it “bold and thought-provoking” (Puig, 2006, p. 6) and “compelling, rousing and at times strangely moving” (Kenny, 2006, p. 1). On the other side of the aisle were critics who panned it as shallow, labeling it “a piece of pulp claptrap” (Hunter, 2006, p. 4) and “a dunderheaded pop fantasia that celebrates terrorism and destruction” (Denby, 2006, p. 1). The intensely polarized response to the film was hardly surprising given its explicit political themes and inspiration. Indeed, one critic accurately predicted such a response in his own review of the film:

> It’s quite likely that *Vendetta* will split the opinions in some parts of the country. The unflinching message may be too much for some people to accept. Like it or not, this is a film that will not leave you upon exiting the theater. It sticks with you and makes you think. It brings up points that are worth thinking about. The best political films are the ones that fuel debate afterwards and *Vendetta* should do that in spades. (Otto, 2006, p. 11)

Although critics were intensely divided on the film’s merit, they were strikingly unified in their interpretation of the film’s message. *V for Vendetta*, critics agreed, was an allegory for life in George W. Bush’s America, and an unwavering critique of his administration and its policies (both domestic and foreign) surrounding the war on terror. This message was confirmed by James Mcteigue, the film’s director, who publically noted, “We felt the [graphic] novel was very prescient to how the political climate is at the moment. It really showed what can happen when society is ruled by government, rather than the government being run as a voice of the people.” But merely identifying the film’s central message tells us little about how the film works rhetorically.

My own interest in the film—following Lyotard’s lead in the opening epigraph—lies less in what the film says or means, and more in what the film does and how it does it. On that basis, I argue that *V for Vendetta* enlists and 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. In service of this argument, the essay unfolds in three parts. The first section sketches an appropriate framework for understanding how cinema marshals and moves viewers by engaging them in a fully embodied experience. The second section offers a brief overview of the film’s plot before turning to an analysis of its triptych narrative and affective development. The third and final section considers the methodological, critical, and theoretical implications suggested by the preceding analysis.

**A Multi-Modal Approach to Cinematic Rhetoric**

The notion that film functions rhetorically is hardly novel, and, indeed, there is a long tradition of film criticism within rhetorical studies. Historically, the rhetorical criticism of film has tended to focus on the representational aspects of cinema,
attending to how films compel audiences at a cognitive rather than corporeal level. But more recently, scholars in an array of fields (Kennedy, 2000; MacDougall, 2006; Massumi, 2002; Shaviro, 1993; Sobchack, 1995, 2004) have begun to consider how cinema appeals directly to the senses, how it sways viewers somatically as well as symbolically. Attention to the body corresponds closely to the affective (re)turn in rhetorical studies, for conceptualizing rhetoric as embodied necessarily “reflects a merger of reason and emotion” (McKerrow, 1998, p. 322; see also Johnson, 2007). Rhetorical appeals are, of course, always enacted by means of particular communication media. Since it is the medium that makes rhetoric material, it is vital that critics examine not just the symbolic and sensory aspects of messages, but the very technologies of communication that underlie them. Thus, in this essay, I advocate a multi-modal approach to the rhetorical study of cinema (see Figure 1), an approach that attends to the complex relations among discourse, figure, and ground.

Before discussing each of these modes in greater depth, I wish to stress that I take them up separately for purposes of conceptual clarity only; they are, in practice, intensely interwoven and interdependent.

**Discourse**

Discourse and figure, the first two dimensions of a multi-modal approach to cinematic rhetoric, are derived from Lyotard’s Discours, figure (1971), in which he probes the stabilizing structures and destabilizing energies that animate art. In the case of cinema, discourse describes those rule-governed movements or elements, namely narrative and language (i.e., shot selection, sequencing, and editing), that compose an orderly whole. “Cinematography,” observes Lyotard (1989a), “is ... conceived and practised as an incessant organizing of movements following the rules of representation” (p. 170) in which any movements that do not make “sense” are excluded or cut. In psychoanalytic terms, cinematic discourse is a “secondary” process or activity because it presupposes an all-perceiving subject (already constituted in/through language), the spectator, who is separate(d) from the cinematic spectacle (Metz, 1986, p. 46).

In classical narrative cinema, or for Lyotard (1989a) any mainstream, realist cinema, the spectator is always on the side of perceiving (subject), not the perceived

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**Figure 1.** A multi-modal approach to cinematic rhetoric
(object), thus making signification and identification possible. It is the spectator who constitutes the “imaginary signifier,” and creates the film, in effect, by organizing its fragments into a coherent and unified narrative (Metz, 1986, p. 48). Moreover, the spectator, motivated by narcissistic tendencies of the ego, seeks to identify with the object(s)—characters and stories—on the screen (Mulvey, 2006, p. 346). Since the spectator is absent from the screen, however, she identifies not with herself as an object (as in Lacan’s mirror stage), but with the process of viewing itself (and the look of the camera). Consequently, identification determines “the audience member’s basic position vis-à-vis the text, a position ... from which his or her emotional and cognitive disposition toward the characters and the text develop” (Cohen, 2001, p. 250). Discursive structures involving narrative and identification are but one mode by which cinema moves audiences, however.

**Figure**

For Lyotard, discourse is always accompanied by figure—the unbounded energies and forces expressed and experienced through the aesthetic and erotic dimensions of art (Lash, 1990, p. 176; Rodowick, 2001, p. 18). Whereas discourse closes down or fixes meaning, the figural explodes it, exceeding both rationality and representation. As Tomiche (1994) explains, “The figural is the name of an unspeakable other necessarily at work within and against discourse” (p. 48). Although both are always present (the figure infecting discourse and discourse colonizing the figure), the ratio of discourse to figure varies according to art form and iteration. Because of its hybridized mode of expression involving music, sound, speech, and moving images, cinema is among the most figural and thus sensual of the arts (Lash, 1990, p. 186; Rodowick, 2001, p. 82; Sobchack, 1994, p. 37). “Films,” elaborates MacDougall (2006), “appeal in an even more direct way [than writing] to the human sensorium, in part because of the senses they address and the fact that they address them simultaneously” (p. 57). Unlike discourse, which entails distance and separation, the figural involves immersion and immediacy, appealing directly to the senses.

Because the figural operates at the level of the unconscious, which Lyotard insists is not (contrary to Lacan) structured like a language (Rodowick, 2001, p. 9; Tomiche, 1994, p. 48), it is a primary process and therefore does not signify. The responses it evokes from audiences, then, are not easily quantifiable. Since the figural can only be felt or experienced, rather than read or interpreted (like discourse), the rhetoricity of cinematic figures is best approached on an affective register. Affect has variously been defined as “the intensity that allows us to feel” (DeChaine, 2002, p. 86) and the “immediate modes of sensual responsiveness to the world characterized by an accompanying imaginative dimension” (Altieri, 2003, p. 2). In keeping with these definitions, I understand affect as direct sensory experiences (of color, light, sound, movement, rhythm, and texture), along with the feelings, moods, emotions, and/or passions they elicit. Together, discourse and figure allow the critic to approach film as a “mind/body/machine meld” (Kennedy, 2000, p. 5) in which “[t]here is a continuous
interplay among its varied forms of address—the aural with the visual, the sensory with the verbal, the narrative with the pictorial” (MacDougall, 2006, p. 52).

Ground

Attending to cinema as a fully embodied experience necessitates looking not only at discourse and figure, but also at ground. The term ground comes from the work of Marshall McLuhan, who argued that media create the very contexts in and through which people process their world (both cognitively and sensorily). McLuhan’s recognition that media are environments was based his observation that different media produce different kinds of space. In Laws of Media, for instance, McLuhan (1988) distinguishes between the “visual space” of print media and the “acoustic space” of electronic media. He, then, proceeds to demonstrate how visual space, which is fixed, uniform, and sequential/linear, produces an experiential environment that is detached, objective, analytic, and individualistic, while acoustic space, which is dynamic, discontinuous, and simultaneous, creates an experience that is involving, resonant, intuitive, and communal. For McLuhan, visual space favors a world of observation and reflection, while acoustic space favors one of immersion and sensation (Schafer, 2007, p. 84).

Though it may seem strange to suggest that cinema—a medium so obviously visual—produces acoustic space, McLuhan is using the term “acoustic” in a very particular way. For him, it designates an experiential environment that is simultaneously penetrated by multiple senses: auditory, visual, and tactile (McLuhan, 1988, p. 33). The acoustic space fashioned by cinema is characterized first and foremost by presence, which Lee (2004) defines as, “a psychological state in which the virtuality of experience is unnoticed” (p. 32). Given the strong sense of presence elicited by cinema, spectators lose sight of their physical surrounding (i.e., the theater) and are transported into the world of the film (Green & Brock, 2002, p. 317). Films, in other words, invite audiences to forget they are watching a film. This means that one’s cognitive and sensory processes are responding to the world within the film as though its objects and entities were immediate and unmediated (Lombard et al., 2000, p. 77; see also Shaviro, 1993, p. 54). In addition to its obvious visual and auditory aspects, cinema is a highly tactile medium in which the eyes, perceiving haptically, function as organs of touch (Marks, 2002, pp. 2, 3, 9; see also MacDougall, 2006, pp. 22, 57). The (acoustic) space of cinema, then, requires that critics explore how films “touch” as well as move us.

There is, unfortunately, no precise procedure, no proper proportion, for analyzing the interplay of discourse, figure, and ground. The fact is—and it is a fact too frequently forgotten or ignored—that rhetorical criticism is an art, not a science. Criticism is, like the objects it studies, process and performance. At its worst, it rather flatly describes that which it engages; at its best, it creatively (re)creates a compelling sense of that which inspires it. So, discourse, figure, and ground are not so much a method for uncovering some essential “textual truth,” as they are a set of critical prompts for appreciating cinematic rhetoric as embodied experience. In the
following section, I draw upon them in an effort to (re)produce a general “sense” of V for Vendetta.

A Film in Three A(ffe)cts

Set in Britain in the not-too-distant future, V for Vendetta tells the story of a masked vigilante known as “V,” who seeks to inspire the country’s citizens to rebel against their fascist government. Near the outset of the film, V (Hugo Weaving) rescues Evey Hammond (Natalie Portman) from several Fingermen (secret police) intent on raping her. Later that evening (with Evey by his side), V blows up the Old Bailey courtrooms to commemorate Guy Fawkes Day and awaken the local citizenry from their political stupor. Not wanting to appear vulnerable or lacking control, the government attempts to spin V’s terrorist act as a planned demolition. But V commandeers the BTN (London’s sole TV network), claims responsibility for the bombing, and promises the city’s dispirited citizens that he will destroy the Houses of Parliament in exactly one year. V then begins to systematically exact revenge against various government officials who had tortured him or authorized his torture during his imprisonment at the Larkhill Medical Research Institute years earlier. A somewhat reluctant ally in these acts of retribution, Evey is captured and repeatedly tortured for information about V. But she remains defiant even under the threat of death, at which point V reveals himself as her captor and torturer, a role he assumed to help her overcome her fears. The film concludes with the citizens marching defiantly against the totalitarian government, and Evey carrying out V’s plan to destroy Parliament.

V for Vendetta is more than just a story, however; it is a multi-modal composition whose rhetoricity depends upon the distinctive interplay of its narrative content, its formal structures, its aesthetic dimensions, and its underlying technological apparatus. As with any analysis, this one will necessarily be selective and reductionistic. Hence, my critical aim is not to account for every element and aspect of the film, but to suggest how its basic tenor and temperature function rhetorically. Toward that end, my analysis proceeds in three parts, organized sequentially around what I take to be V for Vendetta’s key cognitive-emotive a(ffe)cts: repression and fear, resistance and excitation, and rebellion and release.

Repression and Fear

The general affect evoked by V for Vendetta throughout the first half of the film is one of repression and fear. This sense/sensation is expressed and stimulated through both narrative and aesthetic means. At the level of story, audiences are invited to identify principally with Evey, who serves as viewers’ proxy (DeFore, 2005, p. 6). Indeed, her transformation over the course of the film from frightened victim to engaged and emboldened citizen functions symbolically as our own. Early in the narrative, Evey is attacked and nearly raped by government Fingermen for being out after curfew, itself a signifier of government repression. In watching Evey terrorized, quite literally at the
“hands” of the government, the audience participates in her fear, a fear that is infused with disgust and revulsion by close-up shots of one Fingerman’s black-stained teeth and the unbuckling and dropping of his pants. The chilling character of the scene is heightened by its location in a dark, shadowy, and confining London alleyway. Importantly, audiences are not invited to identify with V, who dramatically rescues her. Thus, the audience is as helpless as Evey to stop the attack, and indeed, her rescue by V (who viewers are repeatedly reminded represents an idea) constitutes our rescue as well. The audience is, like Evey, ultimately freed by this idea, an idea succinctly stated by the film’s tagline, “People should not be afraid of their governments. Governments should be afraid of their people.”

But this freedom from fear does not come until much later in the narrative. At the outset, Evey is reluctant to become involved, to stand up to the government, for she has been disciplined by its repressive regime to suffer in silence and consequently to conform. Aesthetically, *Vendetta* works to produce a similar experience in viewers. Much of the film, for instance, takes place in V’s underground hideout and other cramped subterranean spaces. Thus, through its consistent framing of tight spaces, the film fosters a sense of confinement, restriction, and repression. As McTeigue explained in an interview, “a lot of *Vendetta* was filmed to feel completely interior: to give a sense of claustrophobia” (quoted in Lamm, 2006, p. 172). This aesthetic of confinement is often combined with one of surveillance in the film. Shots of Chancellor Sutler (John Hurt), for instance, typically show him on an over-sized video screen from an extreme low angle; this has the dual effect/affect of associating him with power and subjecting the audience to his panoptic gaze. As Barry (1997) explains, “The language of camera angles is ... highly manipulative emotionally ... If the angle is extreme, the attitude becomes emphatic. Low angles (shot from beneath with the camera looking up at a subject) give the subject a sense of importance, power” (p. 134). The low-angle shots of the Chancellor are also shot in extreme close-up, making his worn, wrinkled face unnervingly immediate. “In exaggerating proximity,” MacDougall (2006) observes, “the close-up brings to cinema a quasi-tactility absent in ordinary human relations. When we meet others in daytoday exchanges we do not explore their faces with our fingertips, but in the cinema we come close to doing this” (p. 22). Because of Sutler’s visual framing, which is made possible by a uniquely cinematic ground, the audience can virtually touch the sweat oozing from his pores, which reinforces viewers’ earlier disgust at the teeth of the Fingerman and hence the government.

**Resistance and Excitation**

The most explicit sense of confinement, repression, and fear created by the film comes, of course, with Evey’s abduction and gruesome torture, which is visually told through alternating point-of-view and objectivist shots that suture the viewer into the narrative at a discursive level. But at the very moment in the film when Evey’s (and therefore the audience’s) distress is at its highest and most unbearable point, the viewer experiences (enjoys) several liberating acts of resistance. Since the audience’s
loyalties lie with Evey rather than V, his violent and vengeful acts earlier in the film contribute to, rather than offer symbolic relief from, the film’s mounting tension and “sense of growing dread” (Puig, 2006, p. 7). During her incarceration, Evey defiantly refuses to disclose any information about V, for which she endures even more abuse. Her resolve is sustained by an emotional bond she forms with the prisoner in the adjacent cell who passes her letters through a tiny crack in the prison’s thick concrete walls. In reading the letters, Evey learns the life story of a woman named Valerie (Natasha Wightman), a story that is told to the audience through voiceover and visual flashback. Not only do the flashbacks disrupt the temporality of the film, offering temporary affective reprieves from the graphic images of torture, they also convey a sense of hope and excitement. The scenes of Valerie’s life are the most brightly lit in the film, and they are framed to emphasize spaciousness. In one flashback, Valerie is on a film set surrounded by rolling green hills, stunningly draped by hundreds of billowing orange linens. To fully appreciate the emotional valence of this scene, it is important to consider the more figural dimension of color in the film.

The most prominent color in *Vendetta* is a dark olive, but it is repeatedly contrasted with a brilliant orange. In addition to recurring throughout the film, these two colors are featured in the original graphic novel and promotional posters for the film. The ability of color to impact mood is well established in psychological (Hemphill, 1996; Jacobs & Suess, 1975) and media scholarship (Detenber, Simons, & Reiss, 2000; Lichtlé, 2007; Valdez & Mehrabian, 1994). In fact, as Kennedy (2000) notes, “Colour functions as the main modulator of sensation” (p. 115). This is because “color tends to be a subconscious element in film. It’s strongly emotional in its appeal, expressive, and atmospheric rather than conspicuous or intellectual” (Giannetti, 1987, p. 21). The dark shades of olive and blaze oranges in *Vendetta* work not against one another, but in concert. As the olive undertones foster feelings of dismay and hopelessness, the bursts of orange stimulate and arouse excitement. Thus, in an atmosphere colored by fear, anxiety, and distress, the film also manages to incite, provoke, and call to action. Indeed, to the extent that Evey stands in for the audience, her bright orange prison garb invites strong affective identification; viewers internalize the color, its emotional texture and feel, and consequently the revolutionary politics embodied in Evey’s transformation from conformist citizen to social dissident.

**Rebellion and Release**

After weeks of torture, Evey’s captor informs her that she has been convicted by a special tribunal and that she will be executed unless she cooperates. Evey refuses and is sentenced to death by firing squad. As she is about to be escorted to her certain death, she is pressed a final time to supply just “one little piece of information . . . anything” about V. When she calmly replies that she would “rather die,” she is immediately set free. As she makes her way through the prison hallway and into V’s Shadow Gallery, Evey begins to realize that V was her captor. Stunned by this revelation, she stumbles, barely able to breathe. So, V accompanies her to the
building’s rooftop for fresh air; standing there in the cool, driving rain, Evey is reborn, her baptism by water intercut with V’s baptism by fire years earlier. In that moment, she realizes that—for the first time in her life—she is truly free because she no longer fears her government. The scene is wrenching for viewers, who learn, along with Evey, that willingly sacrificing one’s freedoms in the name of nationalism is its own kind of imprisonment. The rebellious energy that has been stirred up in Evey and, by extension, the audience must be released. To fully appreciate this desire for release, I turn finally to the film’s aural experience: its sonic affect(s).

One of Vendetta’s most compelling figural dimensions is its use of sound, for sound is particularly influential in creating an absorptive “acoustic space.” A film’s musical score, argues Donnelly (2005), “envelopes the audience, bathing it in affect” (p. 13). It carnally cues viewers how to feel about particular characters and narrative events. In the lead up to Vendetta’s final climactic scene, Tchaikowsky’s inspirational 1812 Overture—“a reminder of America’s own national origin in terrorism against the British crown” and “a traditional piece of music in the celebration of our national independence on the 4th of July” (Keller, 2008, p. 43)—blares over the city’s public broadcast system, its roaring canons rousing citizens to descend on Parliament in spite of the curfew and inviting viewers to cheer their defiance. By the time the throng of people, each donning their Fawkesian masks, has marched down Whitehall to Parliament, the audience stands (emotionally) with them eagerly awaiting its destruction. It is not music alone, however, that has brought us to the brink.

The aural aesthetic of Vendetta is perhaps best captured by V’s voice, the very tempo, texture, and rhythm of which calls the audience to action (as much as his words). The oral dimension of speech—what Barthes (1977) would call “the grain of the voice” (p. 181)—“is powerful because of its ability to elicit a somatic response” (Lunceford, 2007, p. 83). As Puig (2006) observed in USA Today, V—despite being hidden behind an immobile mask—is “able to convey volumes [of emotion] with subtle, fluid gestures and expressive vocal cadences” (p. 8). The rhythmic grain of V’s voice, always building in intensity, always swelling in exigency, generates the desire for ecstatic release precisely because its escapes and exceeds all (rational) meaning. The sound of V’s voice does not represent anything; it simply offers the promises of explosion, of jouissance, of the coming undone of the subject and its subjugation. Vendetta propels the audience ineluctably toward this moment of total expenditure and abandon with panoramic shots of London, and, finally, the film’s visual and aural climax—the stunning and booming explosion of Parliament.

**Emotional Currents: The Implications of V for Vendetta**

In the preceding analysis, I have attempted to (re)create a general sense of how V for Vendetta moves audiences. Adopting a multi-modal approach to cinematic rhetoric that focuses on the interplay of discourse, figure, and ground, I specifically argued that Vendetta—through an array of visceral resonances, pulsations, intensities, and sensations—invises viewers to reject a politics of apathy in favor of a politics of democratic struggle. As with any film, not all viewers will respond to Vendetta’s
rhetoric—its invitations to action—in the same way. Audience responses to rhetorical experiences are as complex as those experiences themselves and are, at a minimum, influenced, constrained, and enabled by audiences’ personal politics, background, and previous (rhetorical) experiences. As reviews of the film cited in the introduction to this essay indicate, audiences did, in fact, respond variously to *V for Vendetta*. What, then, can be learned from an analysis of the sort I have undertaken? In the remainder of this essay, I probe what I see as the three primary implications of this study.

The first implication is on the order of method. That audiences can and do respond differently to particular rhetorical experiences such as a film does not in any way obviate the fact that a given rhetorical experience functions in a particular way. I can, for instance, urge readers to accept the claim made in the previous sentence (which I have already done through argument), but I cannot force them to. That some readers will choose not to accept the claim does not alter what the claim urges or how it urges it. Consequently, the task of the rhetorical critic is to show how a particular rhetorical experience works, and that requires developing and implementing critical tools appropriate to the experience under investigation. In this essay, I have proposed that to more fully understand the rhetorical experience of a film, critics should attend to cinema in all its complexity by adopting a multi-modal approach involving discourse, figure, and ground.

A second implication has to do with the relation between politics and mass or “pop” art. An analysis of *V for Vendetta* suggests that mainstream mass art can be politically progressive and counter-hegemonic. Since the Frankfurt scholars first began theorizing the “culture industry” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2001), critics have tended to regard mass culture as an instrument of ideological reproduction and hegemonic domination, locating resistance mostly in elite or avant-garde art, what Lyotard (1989a), in the case of film, has called “acinema.” In those instances in which popular cultural products have been heralded as transgressive, the emphasis has typically been on either the individual, fleeting, and tactical character of the resistance (in the tradition of de Certeau [1984]) or its relation to a specific subculture (in the tradition of Hebdige [1979]). Commenting on *Vendetta*’s politics though, Keller (2008) notes:

> Seldom do films make as heavy-handed an effort to intervene in complicated social process that have the capacity to impact the disposition, direction, and duration of political policy as does *V for Vendetta*, which warns its audience that a population should never trust its government to restore freedoms once they have been undermined in the interests of national security. (pp. 58–59)

It’s easy, even fashionable, today to retrospectively critique the Bush administration for its unilateral efforts to expand executive powers, for its use of torture (Abu Ghraib), for its program of domestic eavesdropping and surveillance (FBI and NSA wire tapping), for its infringement on personal privacy by conducting unwarranted searches and seizures, and for its trampling of basic civil liberties by denying due process and habeas corpus at detention camps (Guantánamo Bay) and secret CIA black sites. But *V for Vendetta* rendered these same critiques in early 2006 while the
vast majority of Americans held their tongues. As political rhetoric, *V for Vendetta* urged viewers not to passively sit by as their rights and liberties were being curtailed, and empowered viewers to question and speak out against their government.

A third, and perhaps the most important, implication of this study concerns the affective dimensions of politics, how bodies are mobilized (called to action) at a material level. Reflecting on this point in relation to cinema, Shaviro (1993) writes:

Film is a vivid medium, and it is important to talk about how it arouses corporeal reactions of desire and fear, pleasure and disgust, fascination and shame. . . . Such affective experiences directly and urgently involve a politics. Power works in the depths and on the surfaces of the body, and not just in the disembodied realm of ‘representation’ or of ‘discourse’. (p. vii)

Based on an analysis *V for Vendetta*, Shaviro’s point can be extended and refined in two important ways. One way involves how we think about the relation of affect to bodies. That *Vendetta* evoked strong affective responses from viewers is certain (as even those who disliked it, disliked it *intensely*), but different bodies had different affective responses. Why? I want to suggest it is because of what those bodies brought to the film.

Affects involve a corporeal continuum, which ranges, on one end, from the experiencing body (i.e., immediate sensations of movement, color, and sound, for instance) to, on the other end, our body of experience (i.e., our body’s memory of previous sensations). Upon entering a room, one can immediately sense the mood or atmosphere because one’s body is responding directly to the sensory stimuli in that environment (the experiencing body) and to previous environments that felt similar (our body of experience). Films function much like rooms do in this example. In experiencing a film, one’s body both (1) responds to the discursive and figural elements of the film and (2) recalls previous cinematic and non-cinematic experiences, which in combination evoke affective responses.

For those who came to the film with memories of repression already inscribed on their bodies by life in George W. Bush’s America, their body of experience resonated strongly with their experiencing body in the theater. In other words, since how “feelings feel in the first place may be tied to a past history of readings, in the sense that the process of recognition (of this feeling, or that feeling) is bound up with what we already know” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 25), for some the social climate of the U.S. and the general mood of *Vendetta* could be said to participate in an affective embrace.21 It would be naïve, however, to think that everyone’s experience of Bush’s America was repressive. For many, Bush’s politics and policies made them feel safer and more comfortable, in which case there was a vast gulf between their existing body of experience and their experiencing body in the theater. In this scenario, the result would likely be more akin to an affective repulsion than embrace.

Another way to refine Shaviro’s point is to reflect on how affect operates politically. The great twentieth-century theorist of symbolic action, Kenneth Burke (1969), maintains that an “attitude” is often an incipient action, an orientation or predisposition toward the world and thus “the first step towards an act” (p. 236). And attitudes, as this study has demonstrated, entail fully embodied experiences.
Affect, as well as (and in combination with) reason, inclines us to form and adopt some attitudes and not others. “Affect,” explains Tomkins (1981), “can determine cognition” (p. 324), for “motivation itself . . . is the business of the affect system” (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 20). Thus, we might begin to think of affects, and in particular the affective dimensions of embodied experience, as incipient attitudes, as energies, intensities, and sensations that function as the first step toward an evolving attitude. Indeed, it is through the intersection of affect, attitude, and action that Vendetta moves viewers at a material, bodily level to enact a politics of resistance and revolt—a politics that is, in a word, visceral.

Notes

[1] Quoted in Seidler, 2001, p. 133. A different, though equally instructive translation of this passage appears in Driftworks: “What is important in a text is not what it means, but what it does and incites to do. What it does: the charge of affect it contains and transmits. What it incites to do: the metamorphoses of this potential energy into other things—other texts, but also . . . political actions” (Lyotard, 1984, pp. 9–10).


[4] “[E]mbodiment,” explains Sobchack (2004), “is a radically material condition of human being that necessarily entails both the body and consciousness, objectivity and subjectivity, in an irreducible ensemble. Thus we matter and mean through processes and logics of sense-making that owe as much to our carnal existence as they do to our conscious thought” (p. 4).

[5] For an overview of this scholarship, see Blakesley (2003).

[6] As Gunn and Rice (2009) note, the “the ‘affective turn’ in communication studies is more properly described as (an) ‘about face’” (p. 215).

[7] Discourse and figure closely parallel Kristeva’s (2001) distinction between “the symbolic,” which entails signification, and “the semiotic,” which entails bodily drives and desires (pp. 36–37).


[11] According to Lyotard (1989b), “the figure dwells in discourse like a phantasm while discourse dwells in the figure like a dream” (p. 33). As Rodowick (2001) elaborates, “figure and discourse cannot be opposed. . . . in Lyotard’s view, figure and discourse are divided not by a bar but rather by only the slightest of commas. . . . Lyotard finds that the figural resides in discourse as the intractable opacity of the visible” (pp. 5, 6). For further elaboration on this point, see Lydon, 2001, p. 24; Slaughter, 2004, p. 233; Trahair, 2005, p. 177.

[12] “Lyotard’s ‘discursive’ is the Freudian secondary process, the ego operating in terms of the reality principle. The figural, by contrast, is the primary process of the unconscious which
operates according to the pleasure principle (Lyotard, 1971, 1984). Lyotard’s notion of the
figural is formulated partly as a critique of Lacan’s dictum that the unconscious is structured
like a language” (Lash, 1990, p. 177). See also Featherstone, 2007, p. 38.

[13] It is worth noting that figure and ground as I (along with Lyotard and McLuhan) am using
them differs markedly from Lakoff and Johnson’s (1999) use of them. For Lakoff and
Johnson, figure/ground concerns an observer’s cognitive perception of the spatial relation-
ship among objects in visual schemas (i.e., which one is perceived to be in front of the other).

[14] Space, according to Hall (1959), “not only communicates in the most basic sense, but . . .
also organizes virtually everything in life” (p. viii).

[15] Presence has long been recognized as an important dimension of rhetoric because it “acts
directly on our sensibility” (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 116).

[16] I am attempting to resist the crystallization of discourse, figure, and ground into a rigid
method, for as Barthes (1977) so eloquently notes, “The invariable fact is that a piece of work
which ceaselessly proclaims its determination for method is ultimately sterile: everything has
been put into the method, nothing is left for writing . . . No surer way to kill a piece of
research and send it to join the great waste of abandoned projects than Method” (p. 201).

[17] Guy Fawkes was a Catholic fanatic, who along with cabal of co-conspirators, tried to blow up
the Houses of Parliament in 1605 by placing 36 barrels of explosive beneath the building.
Although the plot, known today as the “Gunpowder Plot,” was thwarted by the British
government, the event is “commemorated” every November 5 in the U.K. with firework
displays. The film’s first spoken line is: “Remember, remember, the Fifth of November, the
Gunpowder Treason and Plot. I know of no reason why the Gunpowder Treason should ever
be forgot.”

[18] The film’s intertextual gestures alone, which range from George Orwell’s 1984 and Aldous
Huxley’s Brave New World to Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 and Rowland Lee’s 1934 film
adaptation of Alexandre Dumas’s The Count of Monte Cristo, have already been the subject of a
book-length study (Keller, 2008).

[19] As Travers (2006) observed in Rolling Stone, “Setting indelible images to a deft score by Dario
Marianelli . . . speeds us along to a thunderous climax at Parliament” (p. 10).

[20] I am strategically avoiding the word “text” here, as it brings with it the metaphorical baggage
of reading and interpretation. A film is not a text; it is an embodied, cognitive-emotive
experience arising from the unique interplay of discourse, figure, and ground at/in a
particular space and time.

[21] I am specifically thinking here of the sensation Deleuze and Guattari (1994) call “the clinch,”
which occurs “when two sensations resonate in each other by embracing each other so tightly
in a clinch of what are no more than ‘energies’” (p. 168). What I am calling an “affective
embrace” might also be thought in Burkean terms. Kimberling’s (1982) reading of Burkean
form is instructive in this regard:

If form is a set of analogs to inner states of being (Burke mentions both the
“concrete” functions such as the rhythm of the human heartbeat and the
“ineffable” ones such as love, guilt, sorrow, etc.), then the task of the critical
theorist must be to demonstrate how these analogs actually are developed in
works of art involving different media of communication. (p. 45)

References

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