Sympathy for the Devil:  
The Hero is a Terrorist in *V for Vendetta*  

*Margarita Carretero-González*

**Abstract:** Based on the comic book series published in the eighties, co-authored by Alan Moore and David Lloyd, *V for Vendetta* did not go unnoticed when it was released on spring 2006. Whether we take the view that the film constitutes an apology for terrorism or that it offers a warning about the shape of things to come, this political thriller cannot leave the post-9/11, 3/11, 7/7 viewer indifferent, even if the central theme of the story revolves around the old tale of coldly served revenge. In this paper I will be looking at the way *V for Vendetta* problematises such a sensitive issue as terrorism in a dystopian setting that, however exaggerated, bears striking similarities with our world at the beginning of the 21st century, where fear of terror is impelling governments to take drastic measures to increase safety, while jeopardizing freedom and, on some occasions, even trespassing basic human rights. The story is not new: Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell are among those who warned us about the dangers of totalitarian regimes; their heroes, however, were only victims of the system, not terrorists who actively fought against it. V’s intentions are honourable, directed to give the power back to the people, but he is moved by a personal vendetta that prevents us from agreeing with some of his methods, especially when they involve the deaths of people who, like him, are just victims. The paper will deal with the way the film’s structure invites the characters - and the viewer - to establish a dialogical relationship with the other, while launching a series of questions, which are left for the spectator to answer.

**Key Words:** Dialogism, dystopian films, intertextuality, revenge, terrorism, *V for Vendetta*

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1. **Introduction**

In his introduction to the 1990 DC Comics compilation of the series *V for Vendetta*, co-author David Lloyd shares with the reader a personal experience that had happened at a pub a few evenings before. While he was enjoying his stout at the bar, the TV was murmuring in the distance, above the chattering people. After *Eastenders*, a re-run of the sitcom *Porridge* was screened, followed by *A Question of Sport*, a panel quiz game in which sports celebrities answered questions about other sports celebrities. Just when *The Nine o'Clock News* started, the television was switched off and its sound
The barman excused himself when Lloyd asked him about the news being turned off: “Don’t ask me - that was the wife,” he replied, in a cheeky, cheery manner, as the subject of his playful targeting bustled in a corner of the bar.” The two adjectives Lloyd uses to describe the barman’s manner are recurrent throughout the introduction: the soap opera, the sitcom and the panel quiz are all ‘cheeky, cheery’, as are the celebrities participating in it. On leaving the bar, Lloyd adds, he was certain the TV would be silent for the rest of the evening, since he knew the news was followed by *The Boys from Brazil*, ‘a film with few cheeky, cheery characters in it, which is all about a bunch of Nazis creating 94 clones of Adolf Hitler.’ These reminiscences allow him to establish a similarity between the film and the comic book series he created with Alan Moore: ‘There aren’t many cheeky, cheery characters in *V FOR VENDETTA* either; and it’s for people who don’t switch off the news.’

David Lloyd’s introduction is followed by Alan Moore’s own foreword to the original DC Comics run of *V for Vendetta* in which he depicts the political situation in Britain in 1988. According to Moore, the country had become terribly similar to the world he envisaged in 1981, the year he started writing the graphic novel:

Margaret Thatcher is entering her third term of office and talking confidently of an unbroken Conservative leadership well into the next century. My youngest daughter is seven and the tabloid press are circulating the idea of concentration camps for persons with AIDS. The new riot police wear black visors, as do their horses, and their vans have rotating video cameras mounted on top. The government has expressed a desire to eradicate homosexuality; even as an abstract concept, and one can only speculate as to which minority will be the next legislated against. I’m thinking of taking my family and getting out of this country soon, sometime over the next couple of years. It’s cold and it’s mean-spirited and I don’t like it anymore.

Lloyd’s and Moore’s statements anticipate the political content of the graphic novel: *V for Vendetta* is not mere entertainment; it raises important questions concerning the shape Britain was taking in the eighties, issues that are no less pertinent to our world in the noughties.

No one familiar with the Wachowski brothers’ work could be surprised by the fact that they were eager to make a film out of this graphic novel. They are themselves authors of comic books, and started writing a draft of the script in the nineties, before embarking on *The Matrix*. The first
script turned out to be too dense and not very filmic, so the project stood idle for a decade, until they offered John McTeigue - assistant director of The Matrix trilogy - to direct the film, which they would produce. While The Matrix told the story of a group of people who decided to fight against the ‘cheeky, cheery’ simulated reality in which they lived, choosing instead a life of exile and battle for the real thing, V for Vendetta depicts the opposite: a world in which spin-doctoring and empty entertainment has left people leading anodyne, comfortable lives which they have traded for their freedom.

Every time I am confronted with a story - historical of fictional - dealing with the drastic measures some people take in desperate times, I cannot help but wonder what my choices would be, should I ever have to live in similar circumstances. Being a politically concerned person in peacetime, what would I do if my country were suddenly invaded by a foreign army? What would I have done if I had been a French citizen during the Nazi invasion? Would I have kept a low profile in order to save my life or would I have become a member of the résistance? What if the government of my country suddenly became a dictatorship? As a pacifist and a believer in the power of words and education if the world is ever really to be changed, I fail to see myself using violence to impose my view. And yet, sometimes, as in the world of V for Vendetta ‘there is no middle ground.’ In the dystopian future presented in the film, there is no room for ambiguity.

This paper is not aimed at establishing a comparison between the graphic novel and the film; instead, it will concentrate on an analysis of the way the movie deals with issues of terrorism - individual and state - and the breach of boundaries between the self and the other, in a dialogue that cannot leave the viewer indifferent.

As said above, Moore and Lloyd’s graphic novel was particularly addressed to readers concerned with issues affecting life in Thatcherite Britain, whereas McTeigue’s film has a wider audience in mind. In both texts, a war has put an end to the supremacy of the USA as world power, transforming England into a prevailing nation where any challenge to political, heterosexual and religious homogeneity is eradicated or kept under cover. A masked man who calls himself V poses a threat to this hegemony and tries to open the nation’s eyes to the oppression they have chosen to live in with a series of acts of terrorism directed to blowing up key, symbolic buildings in London.

The film’s political content stirred a lot of controversy from many different voices, some of which directly labelled it as anti-Bush, anti-Christian and pro-terrorist. For Ted Baehr, chairman of the Christian Film and Television Commission, V for Vendetta is just ‘a vile pro-terrorist piece of neo-Marxist, left-wing propaganda filled with radical sexual politics and nasty attacks on religion and Christianity.’ Moreover, the fact that at the centre of the film lies a story of homosexual love - V’s ‘muse’ is a lesbian
actress who was a victim, like V himself, of a series of experiments carried out on ethnic, sexual and political minorities - has earned the film strong attacks from other conservative Christian groups who condemn its sympathetic portrayal of homosexuality and Islam, in contrast to the negative depiction of some of the Christian leaders of the country: a power-driven dictator, a narcissistic, drug addict TV pundit, or a paedophilic bishop.

But criticism has also come from the ranks of anarchists. Alan Moore accused the Wachowski brothers’ script of watering down the original anarchist ideology present in the graphic novel. The result, according to Moore, has transformed his original work (intended to place two political extremes against each other, namely anarchism and fascism) into a story of ‘current American neo-conservatism vs. current American liberalism.’

It is not difficult to see the film attacking current international politics and the war in Iraq in the references it makes to ‘America’s war’ reaching England. Not only does the movie include footage of demonstrations against the war; more subtle commentaries can be found in Gordon Deitrich’s cellar, where this closeted homosexual with a prominent job on television hides a collection of forbidden artworks. Among homoerotic photographs, a 14th century copy of the Qur’an, valuable paintings and sculptures, the viewer can catch a glimpse of a flag, made up of the Union Jack, the Stars and Stripes, and the Nazi swastika, with the motto ‘THE COALITION OF THE WILLING TO POWER’. According to director James McTeigue, the flag ‘speaks to the present and the regime in the film, in a fairly blunt fashion,’ but the fact that the camera does not dwell on it for long transforms it into a rather elegant treat for the keen-eyed. When Deitrich is later on arrested for having transposed the ‘cheery, cheeky’ entertainment program he hosts into a piece of political mockery of High Chancellor Adam Sutler, it will be the copy of the Qur’an, which, according to V, leads to his execution.

And yet it would be most unfair to reduce the film to a commentary on our present times and the war on terror. V for Vendetta is far more than an attack on the Bush administration; it is the story of The Count of Monte Cristo, The Phantom of the Opera, Beauty and the Beast, Nineteen Eighty-Four, and of Frankenstein’s creature turned political. Our current times offer just one of the many texts with which the film establishes a dialogical relationship, in an attempt to reflect any period in which individual freedom has been completely abolished in the name of - allegedly - public good. Through a series of intertextual relationships with narratives of the Iraqi war, of Nazi Germany, of Stalin’s Russia, with literary and plastic artworks, cinema and music, the film tries to break the boundaries between the self and the other, challenging the authoritarian discourse of the one-party society with a polyphony of voices coming from many different grounds. By the end of the film, the three central characters - V, Evey and Inspector Finch - have
confronted their own identities and, enabled to step out of their limited selves, can see the world from the other’s perspective. To reinforce this idea, the film plays with the recurrent motifs of the mask and the mirror, useful tropes to deal with issues of identity and duality, together with a series of parallel narratives, which echo this dialogue.

Although V is the only character that displays a visible, tangible mask, everybody else in the film wears a metaphorical one. Behind the deep religiousness and moral concerns of the members of Norsefire - the political party ruling England - lies a tremendous terrorist attack which, although blamed on Islamist extremists, turns out to have been carried out by the leaders of the Party, an attack which enabled them to win the elections by a landslide, while making them incredibly rich thanks to the inoculation against the virus they had created. As said above, a paedophilic bishop and a drug-addict TV pundit, preserver of morality in his daily tirades against homosexuals and ethnic minorities, are among the gems of the Party, some of the villains hidden beneath the mask that advocates for ‘Strength through Unity, Unity through Faith.’

V’s first attempt to break up this hegemony, to tear off the mask covering the government’s hideous face, is to blow up the Old Bailey to music - not by accident, the music chosen is Tchaikovsky’s 1812 Overture - dedicated, as he explains to Evey, ‘to Madame Justice... in honour of the holiday she seems to have taken from these parts and in recognition of the impostor [sic] that stands in her stead.’ The following day, knowing that the government will falsify the news, V takes over the TV station and addresses the nation with an inflammatory discourse that forces spectators to confront themselves and see the part they have played in bringing about their own oppression:

The truth is, there is something terribly wrong with this country, isn’t there? Cruelty and injustice, intolerance and oppression. And where once you had the freedom to object, to think and speak as you saw fit, you now have censors and systems of surveillance, coercing your conformity and soliciting your submission. How did this happen? Who is to blame? Certainly there are those who are more responsible than others and they will be held accountable, but again, truth be told, if you are looking for the guilty, you need only to look into a mirror.10

While V addresses the nation, the camera moves from the TV set to the attentive viewers, enthralled by V’s speech which, rather than being a mere accusation, intends to awaken the citizens from their long passivity:
I know why you did it. I know you were afraid. Who wouldn’t be? War. Terror. Disease. Food and water shortages. There were a myriad of problems which conspired to corrupt your reason and rob you of your common sense. Fear got the best of you and in your panic you turned to now High Chancellor Adam Sutler, with his gleaming boots and polished leather and his garrison of goons. He promised you order. He promised you peace. And all he demanded in return was your silent, obedient, consent. Last night, I sought to end the silence. Last night, I destroyed the Old Bailey to remind this country of what it has forgotten.  

The price to pay for peace and order has proved to be too high. V’s wake-up call to remove the mask, look at the reflection in the mirror and accept a certain share of responsibility in the shape the world has taken is offered as the only solution to change it. 

Like the mask, the mirror is a recurrent motif all through the film, present almost from the very beginning, when a travelling of the camera connects V’s mirror in his Shadow Gallery with that of Evey in another part of London. At that time, both characters are getting ready to go out: V adjusting his wig and mask, Evey putting some make up on, the camera creating the illusion that there is only one wall separating them, perhaps suggesting that the distance between them is not that big.  

Later on in the movie, just before V kills him, Lewis Prothero takes a shower surrounded by mirrors and a TV monitor, which constantly projects his own image. The scene offers a kaleidoscopic reflection of the aggressive man known as ‘The Voice of London’, as if revealing the many facets of his personality, those hidden beneath the mask of fierce religiousness and morality Prothero uses to address TV viewers every evening. As in this case, a series of mirrors strategically placed allows us to look at an object or a person from very different perspectives. On other occasions, it can help us to look at what’s behind us without the need for us to turn ourselves. One such mirror is used in the scene where V accepts Evey’s offer to help him in his crusade. While she is polishing the mirror in question, we hear V addressing her, but we cannot see him, until a wider shot allows both Evey - turned to the camera - and V to be within the mirror, which thus reflects Evey’s back and V’s face, so that, as viewers, we share V’s position. Does he also stand for us? Evey’s offer to help V is just a trick to get away from her imprisonment but at that moment, neither V nor the spectator knows about that, thus sharing both the same limited viewpoint. 

The mirror, however, is not an easy trope to read. While it helps to look at ourselves and at reality from different angles, eventually opening up
our view, it is no less true that the vision a mirror offers is distorted. What we see is just a reflection; yet, cleverly used - as Perseus could tell - that reflection can be tremendously useful. Two paintings in V’s Shadow Gallery, Jan van Eyck’s ‘Arnolfini Marriage’ and John William Waterhouse’s ‘Lady of Shalott’ are used to reinforce these two contrasting ideas. Van Eyck’s painting displays a mirror in its centre, between Arnolfini and his wife, allowing the viewer to perceive what they are seeing, including the beholder and the beheld in the painting, as happened with V and Evey in the aforementioned scene. In Waterhouse’s painting, the mirror is absent but, as anyone familiar with Tennyson’s poem knows, is central to the story of the Lady of Shalott, cursed to look at the world through a mirror. On this occasion (Waterhouse painted different versions of the same topic), the artist chose to paint the moment when the Lady faces her death, sitting in the boat which eventually takes her to Camelot, after having dared to turn her eyes away from the mirror the moment Lancelot entered her angle of vision, choosing instead to look straight at him. As in V’s world, the price to pay for wanting to look directly at reality is death; the Lady dies, but not before having seen ‘the water lily bloom, [...] the helmet and the plume,’\textsuperscript{12} preferable to the shadows offered by the mirror. Although dead, she reaches the forbidden Camelot.

Still, unveiling the mask and looking at the mirror is just part of the process. In order to reach the truth, it is important to establish a dialogue with the other. This is what Inspector Finch learns to do while he investigates V and tries to prevent the announced bombing of the Houses of Parliament. His investigations on the terrorist lead him to unveil a different type of terrorism, hidden beneath the mask worn precisely by the government he serves. Like the Lady of Shalott, Finch has confronted reality and is not only afraid to pay the same price, but also to admit that he is part of the system that has allowed such an atrocity to happen. In the following scene, Finch does the unthinkable; he dares question the government’s version of events:

Finch: I want to ask a question, Dominic. I don’t care if you answer me or not. I just want to say this aloud but I need to know that this question will not leave this office. [...] The question I want to ask is about St. Mary’s. And Three Waters. The question that’s kept me up for the last twenty-four hours, the question I have to ask is what if the worst, most horrifying biological attack in this country’s history was not the work of religious extremists?
Dominic: What? I don’t understand. We know it was. They were caught. They confessed.
Finch: And they were executed. I know and that may be what really happened but I see this chain of events, these
coincidences, and I have to ask what if that isn’t what happened. What if someone else unleashed that virus, what if someone else killed all those people, would you want to know who it was?
Dominic: Sure.
Finch: Even if it was someone working for this government? That’s my question. If our own government was responsible for what happened at St. Mary’s and Three Waters, if our own government was responsible for the death of 80,000 people, would you really want to know?
Dominic: Honestly? [...] I don’t know.13

Dominic’s last intervention in the above passage has been quoted from the script but was removed from the film, leaving Finch’s question in the air, addressed not only to Dominic but also to the viewer. As long as an evil action is ascribed to another, differentiated from the self, knowledge is demanded, punishment sought. The self feels comfortable in its disassociation from the evil other. To know the truth becomes less palatable when the possibility exists that such differentiation is non-existent. Dominic expresses doubts about wanting to know the truth, but Finch’s actions show that his own answer is affirmative. Investigating the evil other has led the police inspector to unmask the extended self of which he is a part. The terrorist is, in fact, reacting to an act of state terrorism. Why should one be more legitimate than the other?

After seeing the self as perceived by the other, an exchange of viewpoints is the only path to mutual, complete recognition and understanding. This need for dialogue is reinforced in the movie by a series of parallel narratives, both oral and visual.

In his Shadow Gallery, V collects pieces of art taken from an Orwellian-sounding Ministry of Objectionable Material. Similarly, Gordon Deitrich keeps in his cellar an assortment of banned artworks, hidden from the public view, like his homosexuality. This is one of the many instances in which correspondences are found between these two characters: they both offer shelter to Evey, cook the same breakfast for her, make similar comments about the political situation in their country and they are given a very similar conversation with the female protagonist. Thus, to Evey’s ‘God, if they ever find this place,’ referring to the Shadow Gallery, V replies: ‘I suspect that if they do find this place a few bits of art will be the least of my worries.’14 Later, to Evey’s concern about causing Gordon any trouble by hiding in his house, he retorts: ‘If the government ever searched my house, you would be the least of my problems.’15 The masks they wear - factual in the case of V, metaphorical for Gordon - have somehow made both men forget about their real selves. Years before, Doctor Delia Surridge had
written in her diary that, after the series of experiments carried out on V ‘the subject said he could no longer remember who he was or where he was from.’ In a similar way, Gordon admits to Evey that ‘after so many years you begin to lose more than just your appetite. You wear a mask for so long, you forget who you were beneath it.’ Towards the end of the film, Evey attempts to take V’s mask, as if seeing his face would give her a complete knowledge of the person who has freed her from constant fear. V gently stops her hands, adding that ‘there is a face beneath this mask, but it is not me. I am no longer that face that I am the muscles beneath it or the bones beneath that.’ After all, any mask reveals just another one, made of the skin, the bones, the muscles, and all the fibres that give physicality to our intangible self.

Together with parallel characters and remarks, the movie also makes use of purely filmic techniques to insist on the need to establish constant dialogue between the self and the other. In a flashback to Evey’s childhood, for instance, the film shows her mother closing the bedroom door behind her and urging her daughter to hide. From her position under the bed, a young Evey can see her mother fall to the ground, beaten and black-bagged by the secret police. Virtually the same scene takes place years later, at Gordon Deitrich’s house. Like Evey’s mother did, Gordon urges Evey to hide under the bed and she, in the same fashion, sees Gordon’s beaten face and body fall to the ground before being dragged mercilessly out of the room.

From my point of view, however, the most interesting of these parallel narratives is offered by the sequence in which Evey’s present and Valerie’s past are placed in contact, with V as a mediator. The initial dialogue between the two women ends up being an exchange between three characters connected by the same letter: Evey, Valerie and V.

At one point in the film, Evey is also arrested and black-bagged while trying to escape from the secret police who have taken Gordon Deitrich. Both Evey and the viewers believe that it is this same secret force that is torturing her in order to get information about V. However, her incarceration and torture turn out to be a rite of passage perpetrated by V as a necessary suffering for her complete liberation. While in her cell, she accesses a letter hidden in a hole, apparently addressed to her. In that letter, both Evey and the film-viewer learn the story of Valerie, a beautiful lesbian actress, arrested by the Party and transformed into a guinea pig for their scientific experimentation. A series of flashbacks accompany Valerie’s narrative, showing her head being shaved in the same way as we have previously seen Evey lose her hair, hiding the letter in a toilet, the piece of paper which Evey recovers from the same source, or writing in the same position as Evey is reading, both wearing the same red clothing, imprisoned in a similar cell. Valerie’s letter becomes Evey’s only source of comfort, and is the item which connects the three lives. The sequencing of the images
creates the illusion that the action is taking place simultaneously, that Evey and Valerie take turns in the same cell and in writing and reading the letter. In fact, the two women are separated by many years; Valerie was in fact the prisoner staying in the cell next to V’s and it was to him that the letter was originally addressed. V has used it on Evey so that it could have on her the same effect it once caused in him.

Following Evey’s initial explosion of anger towards V once she learns that he has been her torturer, she truly experiences a rebirth. After an asthma attack, V takes her up to the terrace. It’s raining but Evey, disregarding V’s offer of his coat to protect her, steps out of the shelter and into the rain, which she welcomes as a blessing while raising her arms in a victorious V. The camera then transports the viewer again to V’s past, holding his arms in a similar V position, while emerging from the flames. The two images quickly and repeatedly follow each other, joining the two characters together.

Three viewpoints become interchanged at the end of the story: those of Evey, V and Inspector Finch. Evey has truly stepped out of herself and is capable of looking at life from V’s perspective. That at the beginning she is centred in herself is clear from the way she responds to V’s favourite film, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Despite its happy ending, Evey feels ‘sorry for Mercedes […] Because he cared more about revenge then [sic] he did about her.’\(^{19}\) Later, Evey’s reconsideration of the film, voiced shortly before V’s final act, reveals that she is now able to see the world from his perspective: ‘You know,’ she says to V, ‘I found a copy of ‘The Count of Monte Cristo.’ I think of you every time I watch it. It’s funny though, I never feel as sad for Mercedes as I do for the Count.’\(^{20}\)

Nevertheless, Evey is not the only character who has undertaken this successful journeying towards an understanding of the other. So has V, as it emerges from the reasons he gives to make Evey his heir:

This is my gift to you, Evey. Everything that I have, my home, my books, the gallery, this train I am leaving to you to do what you will. […] The truth is that you made me understand that I was wrong. That the choice to pull this lever is not mine to make. […] Because this world, the world I am a part of and that I helped shape will end tonight. Tomorrow a different world will begin, that different people will shape and this choice belongs to them.\(^{21}\)

Like Evey, V has been capable of abandoning his own self and, once his personal vendetta is almost over, understands that it is only fair to leave to other people - represented then and there by Evey - to make the choices about
their future. As she explains to Finch, she chooses to pull the lever, because ‘he was right [about] that this country needs more than a building right now. It needs hope.’

At this point in the film, Finch, who has become an external observer, not emotionally involved with either V or Evey, also reaches the end of his journey towards an appreciation of the other, a journey which he started with the intention of preventing the terrorist from destroying the Houses of Parliament but which he ends by lowering his gun and allowing Evey to pull the lever that activates the train which blows up the emblematic building. We, the film viewers, have made the same journey as Finch, possibly reaching the same conclusion. We find our rational mind questioning the protagonist’s methods, but feel the urge to see him triumph and mentally encourage Evey to pull the lever. This should not, however, convince us that the film condones terrorism. As I hope to have explained in this paper, it rather invites us to understand the reasons why, on some occasions, some people may resort to abhorrent violence before easily labelling them and making every effort to distance ourselves from theirs. It is not a case of sympathising with the devil, but of carefully looking for where he really hides and not take the simple answer for the correct one.

Notes

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., p. 6.
9 Ibid., p. 21.
11 Ibid., pp. 39-41.
14 Ibid., p. 50.
15 Ibid., p. 84.
16 Ibid., p. 95.
17 Ibid., p. 86.
18 Ibid., pp. 151-152.
19 Ibid., p. 65.
20 Ibid., p. 152.
21 Ibid., pp. 153-154.
22 Ibid., p. 166.

Bibliography


