

V for Visibility¹

By Stuart Elden

As an object, it is straightforward. A single piece of lightweight plastic, moulded and mass-produced. A strip of elastic with a Velcro fastening attaches to the two sides. Holes for the eyes, mouth, nostrils. A few bold black lines; a few more narrow ones around the eyes; a hint of pink on the cheeks and lips. Produced by Rubie's Costume Company, it is easily available at a toy store near you, or from a range of online retailers. And yet, the mere physical characteristics of this object cannot exhaust its meanings. It has most recently become identified with the Occupy protests, but it has a history that goes beyond this.

The mask people are wearing was made popular by the 1980s graphic novel and 2006 film *V for Vendetta*.² The graphic novel is much darker than the film, both in terms of the storyline and the overall aesthetic. The mask shows the image of Guy Fawkes, a Catholic who attempted to blow up the House of Commons on November 5, 1605 by stacking explosives in the cellar. His initial act was, then, conducted in secret. When captured, as was common at the time, Fawkes's body was exposed to torture and public execution in 1606. He was due to be hanged, but jumped first and broke his own neck. The man from the shadows was brought into the light, with the spectacle of the scaffold a very public display of the power of the king and the state. The visibility of the notorious would-be regicide continued long after his death. For reasons that may seem obscure, given the manner of his actual execution, effigies of Fawkes have long been burnt on a bonfire on November 5, accompanied by a fireworks display.³

V for Vendetta has a protagonist, known only as 'V', who wears a mask to hide his disfigurement, which, we later learn, is from a fire. His mask is a caricature of Fawkes, with goatee beard and mustache, rosy cheeks and painted eyes, accompanied with a wig, hat, and black cloak. In a piece of artwork that was used in preliminary discussions, we see V's disguise and weapons at a dressing table—the hat, cloak, and mask are hanging from a stand, gloves lie on

1 A shorter version of this article appeared on the *Society and Space* open site in November 2011, available at: <http://societyandspace.com/2011/11/21/stuart-elden-v-for-visibility>.

2 All the comic strips and some supplementary material are collected by Alan Moore and David Lloyd, with Steve Whitaker and Siobhan Dodds, in *V for Vendetta*, London: Titan Books, 2005. The film was directed by James McTeigue.

3 For a discussion, see James Sharpe, *Remember, Remember: A Cultural History of Guy Fawkes Day*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005.

the table alongside makeup, the wig sits on a mannequin head, the belt and daggers are slung across the back of a chair. V himself is absent, merely the objects that give him his identity remain.⁴

Reflecting on the series, writer Alan Moore recounts how artist David Lloyd proposed the idea:

‘I was thinking, why don’t we portray him as a resurrected Guy Fawkes, complete with one of those papier mâché masks, in a cape and conical hat? He’d look *really* bizarre *and* it would give Guy Fawkes the image he’s deserved all these years. We shouldn’t burn the chap every Nov. 5th but *celebrate* his attempt to blow up Parliament!’

Moore was captured:

... this was the best idea I’d ever heard in my entire life. All of the various fragments in my head suddenly fell into place, united behind the single image of a Guy Fawkes mask.⁵

Initially V stands out from the crowd because of this outfit, and in the novel only the lead female character Evey is additionally seen in the costume. In two striking scenes of the film, however, there are multiple people wearing this disguise. In the first, V has dressed a number of security guards and others in the mask against their will, thus making it impossible for anyone to know who he is, and who is someone disguised as him. In the other scene, toward the end of the story, thousands of ordinary people have donned the uniform to show their solidarity and opposition to the neo-fascist government that V has challenged throughout.

The graphic novel makes a deliberate choice that it will forgo explanatory descriptions or captioned sound effects, and so only dialogue remains. But a range of objects stand in for texture, sound, smell, and taste. The first object we see, after buildings, is a camera. Today that may seem unremarkable, but the strip is almost 30 years old. ‘V’, too, is an object, a symbol both of a letter and the number 5. We discover later that ‘V’ is the room number from when he was in Larkhill Resettlement Camp, but the chapter titles take it as their spur: V for ‘The Villain’, ‘The Voice’, ‘Victims’, ‘Vaudeville’, ‘Versions’, and so on. We find it painted on walls or found on the side of vans, in windows of tube trains, on the cover of a book (almost certainly Thomas Pynchon’s *V*)⁶ or in shapes and lines;

4 This can be seen in Alan Moore, “Behind the Painted Smile”, in Moore and Lloyd, *V for Vendetta*, p. 267, available at: <http://www.freewebs.com/vforvendettagallery/BehindTheSmile/behindthesmile.htm>.

5 Ibid., p. 274.

6 Thomas Pynchon, *V*, London: Vintage, 1963. The identity of ‘V’ is ambiguous throughout.

sometimes in unadorned style, sometimes as a stylized 'V in a circle' reminiscent of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament logo or the anarchist sign.

The V masks were initially given away to promote the film, then sold as a toy, but they became popular with protest groups. Initially they were used by members of the protest group Anonymous in their campaign against the Church of Scientology, but have been picked up by other campaigns since, of which the various Occupy movements are the most visible. At the *Territorial Masquerades* blog, an originally anonymous piece tracks some of these changing uses. One of the most interesting elements of the analysis is the way that the use of the mask is related to the Zapatistas, who declare that "With our faces exposed we were invisible. We cover our faces in order to be seen".⁷

There have been criticisms of the masks as being against the ethos of the Occupy movement. Leaving aside the difficulty of defining the movement or any one ethos behind it, the criticism seems to be that by masking themselves, those people that wear them are hiding, choosing anonymity rather than being visible as a challenge to the system. Some people have taken to wearing them back-to-front, leaving their own face visible so as not to claim anonymity, but solidarity, in a very visible way, with a wider movement.

It is a curious combination of images, histories, politics and symbols—a Catholic revolutionary, executed for treason, a peculiar heritage in British popular commemoration, a right-wing blog site,⁸ a graphic novel, a Hollywood film disowned by the graphic novel's writer, a mass-produced commodity, internet hackers and a myriad of protest groups. But it is precisely this lack of tangibility that has proved to be part of its appeal. It is hard to pin-down, to locate, to detach from its multiple resonances. As V says in the graphic novel, "Did you think to *kill* me? There's no flesh or blood to kill. There's only an *idea*. Ideas are *bullet-proof*".⁹

In *The Guardian*, Jonathan Jones has suggested that the mask was a symbol of 'festive citizenship'.¹⁰ With its continual smile it makes it hard to discern mood and the intentions of its wearer can remain uncertain. What is interesting about the mask is that it plays with notions of anonymity and public display, disguise and visibility. People wearing one can send a signal of solidarity and opposition, yet, if they so choose, remain unidentified. A number of mainstream media commentators have suggested that the commercial gains

7 Teo Ballvé, "The Mask of 'Anarchy'", *Territorial Masquerades*, November 7, 2011, available at <http://territorialmasquerades.net/?p=778>.

8 See: <http://order-order.com>.

9 Moore and Lloyd, *V for Vendetta*, p. 236.

10 Jonathan Jones, "Occupy's V for Vendetta Protest Mask is a Symbol of Festive Citizenship", *The Guardian*, November 4, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/nov/04/occupy-movement-guy-fawkes-mask>.

made by the mask—Warner Bros., part of Time Warner, gets a commission for each one sold—negate the protest.¹¹ But it is precisely the use of the tools of capitalism against capitalism that is one of the most striking elements of the Occupy protests—Blackberry, Apple, and Facebook can be used for many purposes, just as tents can be used for camping or occupation. Among a range of wonderful Occupy artwork and slogans, the Guy Fawkes mask is a powerful symbol of the movement, an object beyond its physical form. It can be used to hide its wearer’s face, but it makes their protest all the more visible. As David Lloyd said of his creation, *V for Vendetta*, it is “for people who don’t switch off the news”.¹²

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11 See Nick Bilton “Masked Protesters Aid Time Warner’s Bottom Line”, *The New York Times*, August 28, 2011, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/29/technology/masked-anonymous-protesters-aid-time-warner-profits.html?_r=2&ref=technology; Nick Carbone, “How Time Warner Profits from the ‘Anonymous’ Hackers”, *Time*, August 29, 2011, at <http://newsfeed.time.com/2011/08/29/how-time-warner-profits-from-the-anonymous-hackers>; and Rosie Waits, “V for Vendetta Masks: Who’s Behind Them?” BBC News Magazine, October 20, 2011, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-15359735>.

12 David Lloyd, untitled preface, in Moore and Lloyd, *V for Vendetta*, p. 5.