

Enter the Dystopian Avenger: Genre Blurring and *Détournement* in Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta*

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My work here considers Alan Moore and David Lloyd's graphic novel *V for Vendetta* ([1990] 2005, hereinafter *VfV*) to investigate the hybridization between the formulaic patterns of Anglo-American superhero comics and dystopian science fiction¹. The theoretical framework stems from Darko Suvin's study of sci-fi as "literature of cognitive estrangement" (1979: 4) characterized by the presence of a *novum*, i.e. a "totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's and implied reader's norm of reality" (64). Drawing on these analytical categories, I argue that the cross-contamination between superhero comics and dystopian fiction formulas leads to significant problematization of *VfV*'s formal structure. This radical reconfiguration is characterised by both a diegetic and metatextual strategy of creative appropriation, in which intertextual allusions and quotations are repurposed as means of political and cultural resistance.

Serialized between 1982 and 1989, and collected in a single volume the following year, *VfV* is regarded as Moore's most militant work – in his words, "the most direct expression of my political feelings at the time" (Moore and Khoury, 2001: 13). It recuperates tropes and elements from the British dystopian tradition – most notably H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley and George Orwell – to extrapolate a post-apocalyptic, nightmarish future from Thatcher-era Britain. The graphic novel filters "the anxieties of some on the left as to the trajectory of Thatcherism" (Gray, 2010: 36) through the lens of dystopian science-fiction. However, *VfV* differs from twentieth-century classic dystopias inasmuch as it suggests an effective praxis for counter-hegemonic resistance through its titular character, the anarcho-terrorist superhero V. In this regard, the graphic novel can be read as a "critical dystopia", which Sargent describes as

¹ I use here dystopia in the meaning suggested by Lyman Tower Sargent, i.e. "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived" (1994: 9). Another useful definition is provided by Suvin, who acknowledges the internal oppositions of the dystopian narrative. He in fact calls dystopia "a community where sociopolitical institutions, norms, and relationships between its individuals are organized in a *significantly less perfect way* [...] as seen by a representative of a discontented social class or fraction, whose value-system defines 'perfection'" (1998: 170, emphasis in the original).

a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society but that normally includes at least one eutopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia. (2001: 222)

Following in the tradition inaugurated by Wells's *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1898), *VfV* hence produces the superhuman as "eutopian enclave", i.e. "a foreign body within the social [offering] a space in which new wish images of the social can be elaborated and experimented on" (Jameson, 2005: 16) The character re-negotiates the narrative and ideological conflict between utopia and anti-utopia, opening the possibility of eutopian subversion within and against the imaginative framework of dystopia.

VfV's hybridization of dystopian fiction and superhero comics can be considered as a form of "genre blurring", which Baccolini and Moylan identify as one of the defining features of critical dystopias: "By self-reflexively borrowing specific conventions from other genres, critical dystopias more often blur the received boundaries of the dystopian form and thereby expand its creative potential for critical expression" (2003: 7). V is both a typically dystopian "alienated character" refusing "the dominant society" (Moylan, 2000: 147) and a comic-book superhero (see Di Liddo, 2009: 40; Carpenter: 2016, 27). He wears a caped costume, with the iconic Guy Fawkes mask; he possesses superhuman abilities, gained as a result of a government experiment; he lives in a secret hideout, the Shadow Gallery; he is aided by a sidekick, Evey, who also recalls the female companions of classic utopian romances (see Porta, 1997: 18; J. Greenblatt, 2009). The first meeting between V and Evey adheres to and simultaneously revises the conventions of superhero comics. She is a sixteen-year-old aspirant prostitute who, on her first night out, encounters agents of the Finger, the military police. The Fingermen decide to rape and then kill her, but they are interrupted and slain by a mysterious figure, V (*VfV*: 10–13). We are thus presented with a (stereo)typical "damsel in distress" being saved by a masked avenger. As even Evey acknowledges, "You... you rescued me! Like in a story! I don't believe it" (*VfV*: 13).

However, Moore and Lloyd insert a series of subversive traits that problematize the generic affiliation. V is not depicted as a hypermasculine crusader *à la* Batman, but rather as a queer, operatic, "gender-norm-violating public figure" (Frasure, 2012: 8). The opening lines are a quotation from William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* 1.2.11-21 (2008: 120–21), as an intertextual link which suggests thematic parallelism and prefigures narrative developments:

The multiplying villainies of nature do swarm upon him. And Fortune, on his damned quarrel smiling, showed like a rebel's whore. But all's too weak; For brave Macbeth... well he deserves that name... disdaining Fortune, with his brandished steel, which smoked with bloody execution, like valour's minion, carved out his passage... till he faced the slave; which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him. (11–12).

Confronting *VfV* with the original passage, two considerations can be made. First, two lines are removed, probably because of pacing issues – “from the Western Isles / Of kerns and galloglasses is supplied” (12–13). Secondly, in the original passage the first “him” refers to “the merciless Macdonald”, and not Macbeth. In the graphic novel, however, we are brought to think that the whole quotation refers to Macbeth, and thus indirectly to V, who is ‘brandishing his steel’ to ‘carve out his passage’. Here, the misattribution possibly hints to the ambiguous status of V, who is both the ‘merciless’ villain *and* the brave hero Macbeth, later revealed to be equally villainous. Like Macbeth, V is doomed to become a regicide, a creator of chaos.

V then introduces himself to Evey as “The king of the twentieth century. I’m the bogeyman. The villain... The black sheep of the family” (13), and proceeds to exploding the House of Parliament. Here, the choice of the word “villain” bears a particular significance. It indicates the absence of moral dichotomies, further stressing to the character’s ambiguous status as terrorist-hero. As Moore claims, “one of the most interesting things about [*VfV*] was that morally there was nothing *but* gray. We were asking the reader to consider some interesting questions. Is it all right for this character to kill people indiscriminately just because he is the hero?” (in Khoury, 2003: 75). Considering superhero comics’ generic formula, “villain” also hints at V’s proactive utopianism. Proactivity is in fact normally associated to comic-book opponents, who strive to alter the world according to their needs or desires, thus serving as transformative agents. Superheroes, by contrast, are reactionary forces (see Klock, 2002: 39; Gray, 2010: 40). They aim at preserving the status quo and avenge crime once it has been committed.

Shaping the *novum*: historical background, literary sources

I would argue that the hybridization of dystopian fiction and superhero comics within the narrative patterns of critical dystopia leads to the creation of second, counterhegemonic *novum*². In *VfV*, we witness the rise of another “totalizing phenomenon or relationship” which does not only differ from author and reader’s conception of reality (Suvin, 1979: 64), but also from the diegetic “norm of reality” engendered by the primary *novum*. A tripartite pyramidal structure can be thus conceptualized. At the base, we have the reader’s and author’s empirical reality (which I shall call R). One step above, there is the first *novum* (N1), i.e. the dystopian fictional setting modelled upon historical circumstances and literary models. N1 is surmounted by the second *novum* (N2), the character V, serving as a “commanding new historical idea-form” (Moylan, 2000: 125). As a utopian agent, it produces an historical hypothesis that is radically different from R and N1. Narrative cohesion

² The emergence of a secondary (tertiary, etc.) *novum*, and the possible coexistence of more than one *nova* has been dramatically understudied. Parrinder briefly considers the matter in *Revisiting Suvin’s Poetics of Science Fiction*, in which he writes “Wells’s *The Time Machine*, which is cited in ‘SF and the Novum’ as one of a group of works which are ‘primarily fairly clear analogies to processes incubating in their author’s epoch’ (78), is a non-controversial example of an SF text involving a *novum*. (But if the future degeneration of the human species in Wells’s text is both a *novum* and a reflexive analogy – that is, the Eloi and Morlocks confound Victorian expectations of progress – it is surely not the only *novum* in the story. Perhaps an extended SF narrative needs two or three *novums*? [sic])” (Parrinder 2000, 43).

between R, N1, and N2 is maintained by a net of intertextual figures – allusions, quotations, references –, which are ultimately repurposed as a means of cultural and political resistance.

To depict future Britain as a fascist, totalitarian state, N1 draws historical and literary elements from R. In this regard, *VfV*'s historical dimension can be said to constitute, to use Wells's words, "an exaggeration of contemporary tendencies" ([1934] 1984: 645). The graphic novel reflects the socio-political context of the 1980s "to articulate a critique of a futuristically estranged Thatcherism and allegorize a dynamic contrast between fascism and anarchism" (Gray, 2010: 32). Moore's own feeling towards the Thatcher government are best explained in his introduction in the first issue of *VfV*'s American reprint:

Naiveté can [...] be detected in my supposition that it would take something as melodramatic as a near-miss nuclear conflict to nudge England towards fascism. [...]

It's 1988 now. 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 here anymore. (Moore, [1988] 2005: 6)

In the graphic novel, the 1980s are referred to as a period of "recession" (*VfV*: 26). The situation worsens in 1988, when a thermonuclear war between the URSS and the US obliterates Africa and continental Europe, and radically alters the climate. As Evey remembers, "There was no food, and the sewers were flooded and everybody got sick. [...] That how it was for four years... Not enough food, not enough money. Some of the older girls made money going with men" (28). These setting elements reflect the growing economic inequality and "widespread poverty" (Seldon and Collings, 2000: 84) of the Thatcher decade: "as government and union protection was dismantled, the bottom fifth of the workers actually became worse off compared to the rest of the workers than they had been a century earlier" (Hobsbawm, 1994: 308). In the graphic novel, the socio-political unrest of those years – the Brixton riots, the miners' strike – is mirrored in the post-apocalyptic scenario which preludes the rise of the fascist dictatorship: "There were riots, and people with guns. Nobody knew what was going on" (*VfV*: 28). After the putsch, the Norsefire strengthens its power through the systematic excision of otherness: "They got things under control. But then they started taking people away... all the black people and the Pakistanis... White people too. All the radicals and [...] the homosexuals" (*ibid.*). As government radio broadcaster Lewis Prothero points out, "We had to do what we did. All the darkies, the Nancy boys and the beatniks... It was us or them" (33). Norsefire's racial policies and chauvinism – the government motto is "England Prevail" – also allude to Thatcher's Britain, "profoundly and viscerally nationalist and distrustful of the outside world" (Hobsbawm, 1994: 412). One year before the Falkland War, the conservative government abolished

birthright citizenship (British Nationality Act 1981). In 1987, it also passed the infamous Clause 28, which prevented local authorities from promoting homosexuality and “the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship”³.

In *VfV*, the socio-political context of the 1980s is framed within the formulas of dystopian science fiction. Moore is aware of the analogical possibilities of the genre, which he employs to achieve a distancing effect: “As with most of the future worlds in science fiction you are not talking about the future. You are talking about the present. You are using the future as a way of giving a bit of room to move” (Moore 2007, my transcript). Most of the sources for *VfV* that he mentions in the essay “Behind the Painted Smile” are science fictional and/or dystopian narratives:

Orwell. Huxley. Thomas Disch. Judge Dredd. Harlan Ellison’s “‘Repent, Harlequin!’ Said the Ticktockman.” “Catman” and “Prowler in the City at the Edge of the World” by the same author. Vincent Price’s *Dr. Phibes and Theatre of Blood*. David Bowie. *The Shadow*. *Nightraven*. *Batman*. *Fahrenheit 451*. The writings of the New Worlds school of science fiction. Max Ernst’s painting “Europe After the Rains.” Thomas Pynchon. The atmosphere of British Second World War films. *The Prisoner*. *Robin Hood*. Dick Turpin... ([1983] 2005: 272)

Prominence is given to Orwell and Huxley, whose dystopias constitute the most immediate model for Moore’s remediation (see Chapman, 2011: 229). In particular, a parallelism can be identified between the settings of *VfV* and *Nineteenth Eighty-Four*. In both works, the world has turned into a “bare, hungry, dilapidated place” (Orwell, [1949] 2008: 196). Britain is a post-apocalyptic nightmare ruled by a totalitarian government, which emerged after years of “national wars, civil wars, revolutions and counter-revolutions” (213). The graphic novel opens with an audio dispatch from the propaganda department, the Mouth, which glorifies the industrial achievements: “Productivity reports from Herefordshire indicate a possible end to meat rationing starting from mid-February 1998... This good news follows similar announcements concerning the increased production of both eggs and potatoes” (*VfV*: 9). The first page of Orwell’s novel similarly features “a fruity voice [...] reading out a list of figures which had something to do with the production of pig-iron” ([1949] 2008: 3). *VfV*’s second panel depicts a security camera, which alludes to Oceania’s infamous telescreens. The destruction of London’s ubiquitous audio and video surveillance systems – respectively managed by the Eye and the Ear – is one of the targets of V’s later terrorist attacks (187). A further element shared by the two novels is the pervasiveness of propaganda. Norsefire’s slogan “Strength Through Purity / Purity Through Faith” (11) is somehow reminiscent of “War is Peace / Freedom is Slavery / Ignorance is Strength”, inscribed “On coins, on stamps, on the covers of books, on banners, on posters, and on the wrappings of a cigarette packet – everywhere” (Orwell, [1949] 2008: 29).

The links between *VfV* and *Brave New World* are less overt but nonetheless significant. Both works feature an alienated character who repeatedly quotes Shakespeare and strives to “make you

³ A full text of the act can be retrieved here http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/9/pdfs/ukpga_19880009_en.pdf (15 May 2017).

free whether you want to or not" (Huxley, [1932] 1994: 187, emphasis in the original). Both fictional worlds are characterized by the utter elimination of culture, and especially literature, from the citizens' life. As *Brave New World's* Resident World Controller for Western Europe Mustapha Mond explains, "that's the price we have to pay for stability. You've got to choose between happiness and what people used to call high art. We've sacrificed the high art. We have the feelies and the scent organs instead" (194). In *VfV*, we are told that the party has "eradicated culture... Tossed it away like a fistful of dead roses... All the books, all the films... all the music" (18). The new British popular culture merely serves as a tool of ideological propaganda, "to toughen nationalist fanaticism by celebrating racial and spiritual purity" (Di Liddo, 2009: 114). We catch a glimpse of a science fiction TV series, *Storm Saxon*, in which the titular character defends future Britain from "black butchers" who "rape our women [and] burn our houses, our possessions" (107). It worth noting that *Storm Saxon*, with its racial and sexual anxiety, reminds of the film described in *Brave New World*. There, a "golden-haired young brachycephalic Beta-Plus female" is rescued by "three handsome young Alphas" from "a gigantic Negro" (Huxley, [1932] 1994: 146–47).

Détournement as a counterhegemonic tactic

We have seen that N1 draws historical events and literary motifs from R to create the novel's dystopian setting. In a similar manner, the counterhegemonic narrative of N2 appropriates elements both from R and N1 and repurposes them into a strategy of political and cultural resistance. V acts as a "subversive system of signification" (Call, 2008: 159) that incorporates and remoulds both endogenous and exogenous discourses. Through this process, he develops a morally ambiguous yet effective praxis to challenge the anti-utopian outlook with a new eutopian commitment. V's practice of creative appropriation can be seen as a marker of the graphic novel's postmodernism. The text suggests that "the meaning of a given word or statement is 'local,' bound to and potentially transformed by the context within which it is uttered. Signs (words and images) are peculiarly volatile because they can always be detached from their original contexts and inserted into new ones that can radically alter their meanings" (Geyh, Leebron, and Levy, 1998: xxi). In the hybrid space of the graphic novel, V employs a tactic of *détournement*, "[inserting] already existing signs, images, and texts into new contexts in order to disrupt or reverse their established meanings" (xxi-xxii).

V's *détournement* is both material and textual. Drawing upon N1, he hijacks the party's techniques of dominations. At the same time, he calls upon residual cultural elements from R, endowing them with new subversive meanings. The former appropriative strategy characterizes his revenge against his former jailers at Larkhill, the party's "Resettlement Camp" in which he was experimented on and eventually gained his powers. In this phase, V appropriates the regime's mechanisms of subjugation to use them against his enemies. First, he kidnaps Lewis Prothero, the Camp commander, and puts him into a Larkhill full-size diorama, in which the inmates have been replaced by Prothero's beloved dolls. This simulation serves an historicizing purpose. V has him

relive the experience of his previous employment to re-create a suppressed historical event: “Do you remember, commander? Do you remember when it was people gathered in the sordid little enclosure? People half dead with starvation and dysentery?” (*VfV*: 33). V uses a similar *modus operandi* with Bishop Lilliman and Delia Surridge, respectively the chaplain and the doctor of Larkill concentration camp. The former dies from a poisoned wafer, handed out by V in a grotesque parody of the Communion Rite. “I am the devil, and I come to do the devil’s work”, says V quoting Charles Manson’s follower Tex Watson⁴. As Chief of Scotland Yard Eric Finch points, out, “That’s a dreadful, degrading way for a man like that to die. But you can see a sort of black poetry there, can’t you? A sort of gallows humour?” (84). Doctor Surridge is slain in her sleep with a lethal injection. V gives her a painless death because she is the only one showing remorse, “What we did, what I did at Larkhill... That terrible knowledge it’s been with me for so long. That I could do things like that (73).

V’s subversive appropriation of the tools of subjugation also extends to mass media and technological apparatuses. First, he breaks into the studios of NTV (BBC’s fictional replacement) to broadcast his televised message (*VfV*: 112–118). Then he hacks the super-computer Fate, which regulates the government’s surveillance systems, and with which Susan has a morbid relationship (201). V manages to hijack the signal of the city’s monitor cameras to his control room, which is similar to Susan’s, and is furnished with numerous screens from which he “can see all London” (220). The masked avenger is aware of the opportunities offered by computer hacking to his subversive, utopian project: “Fate is linked to everything. In a bureaucracy, file cards are reality. Punching new holes, we recreate the world” (218). However, he is also conscious that technology is a double-edged sword: “Unlike T.V., we cannot have too much of science, despite its nuclear quirks. With science, ideas can germinate within a bed of theory, form, and practice that assists their growth... But we, as gardeners, must beware... for some seeds are the seeds of ruin... and the most iridescent blooms are often the most dangerous” (220). *VfV* thus ultimately expresses a Wellsian ambivalence about the “liberating possibilities of technology” (Huntington, 1982: 125). Like the aëreopiles seen in *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1898), the technical improvements that ameliorate people’s life conditions can easily turn into instruments of oppression and domination, and vice versa.

The most morally questionable application of V’s appropriative strategy takes place when he kidnaps and imprisons Evey (see Call, 2008: 164). Impersonating a squad of Finger agents, he locks her in a simulation of Norsefire detention centre (148–162). In this instance, V uses the techniques of the regime not against its member, i.e. his enemies, but against an ally. To test Evey’s loyalty and liberate her from her socially-constructed notion of femininity, he subjects her to physical and psychological torture. In a cell that evokes *Nineteenth Eighty-Four*’s infamous Room 101 – the rat –, he makes her endure the experience of his own incarceration. He also has her find the letter he received from Valerie, a gay actress who was incarcerated in the room next to V’s: “I delivered it to you as it was delivered to me. The words you wept over were those than transformed me. Five years earlier” (175). Posing as a police officer, V eventually tries to make her sign a forged confession that serves as a commentary on the ethical implications of his actions, “On the fifth of November, 1997, I was abducted by the terrorist known as codename ‘V’ and then taken against my will to an

⁴ An exhaustive list of *VfV*’s cultural references can be found online (Boudreaux 1994).

unknown location. Once there, I was systematically brainwashed by means of drugs and torture, both physical and psychological. I was frequently subjected to sexual abuse during this period" (161). The confession literally describes what has been happening. Despite the alleged good cause, he is torturing and brainwashing her. After her liberation, when she protests, "You nearly drove me mad, V", the man replies, "If that's what it takes, Evey" (168).

The whole sequence also points to the centrality of legitimating narratives in political-utopian projects. V fabricates a story – the imprisonment – in which he counterpoises two conflicting substories – Valerie's letter, the forged confession – to prompt Evey to confront her situation from a different point of view. As a narrator, V applies the method of cognitive estrangement to replace the fascist representational system with his own counterhegemonic narrative. At the same time, he appropriates the regime's dystopian technologies and redeploys them into a new political praxis. The graphic novel thus mobilizes a dialectic of subversion and containment (see S. Greenblatt, 1994) to negotiate a "strategically ambiguous position" (Moylan, 2000: 147) along the eutopian-dystopian continuum. It stages the tension between the lack of metanarratives and a series of morally questionable, epistemologically precarious micronarratives.

To legitimize his revolutionary agenda, V situates his violent terrorist acts within a political, cultural, and aesthetic tradition. N2 thus appropriates and often repurposes a number of cultural discourses from R – and, by extension, from the characters' historical past⁵. One of the most prominent is anarchism, the political philosophy that V counterpoises to Norsefire's fascism. Moore defines anarchy as "a romance. It is clearly the best way and the only morally sensible way to run the world. Everybody should be the master of their own destiny. Everybody should be their own leader" (2007, my transcript). To an extent, the anarchist superhero precipitating eutopia can be seen as a twentieth-century, Cold War development of H.G. Wells's and Jack London's socialist *übermenschen*. In *VfV*, anarchism is used as a tool to overcome the customary antinomy between superhumanity and left-wing utopianism (see Vallorani, 1996: 41), and to avoid the totalitarian drift depicted in Moore's coeval graphic novel *Miracleman* (Moore et al., 1982), another meditation on the utopian implications of superhumanity. As V points out, soon before his demise,

Anarchy wears two faces, both creator and destroyer. Thus destroyers topple empires: make a canvas of clean rubble where creators can then build a better world. Rubble, once achieved, makes further ruins' means irrelevant. Away with our explosives, then. Away with our destroyers! They have no place within our better world. But let us raise a toast to all our bombers, all our bastards, most lovely and most unforgivable. Let's drink their health... then meet with them no more. (*VfV*: 222)

⁵ As Moore suggests in an interview, "The juxtaposition excited me – a creature of the past in the future. That eventually grew into V, who is an anachronism. He's into old films, all the old culture that's been eradicated. He quotes Shakespeare and Goethe. He is a lavish creature who doesn't fit these bleak backgrounds" (Lawley and Whitaker, [1984] 2012: 32).

V sees the creation his anarchist utopia as a dialectical process, in which he represents the antithesis to the fascist thesis⁶. The synthesis between the two position – thus between N1 and N2 – is achieved by Evey, who fulfils the role of the “creator”. After V’s death, she wears his mask, assumes his identity and continues the revolution: “Reports of my death were... exaggerated. Tomorrow, Downing Street will be destroyed, the head reduced to ruins, an end to what has gone before. Tonight, you must choose what comes next. Lives of our own, or a return to chains. Choose carefully” (258).

Passed on from V to Evey, the Guy Fawkes mask metatextually symbolizes *VfV*’s appropriative strategy and cultural *détournement*. The graphic novel “joins in this popular-culture recuperation of Guy Fawkes” that started in the nineteenth century (Friedman 2010, 120), when “penny dreadful writers were converting England’s most abominable traitor into a romantic hero” (Gavaler, 2015: 50–51). Moore and Lloyd hence recover the historical figure, cleanse it of its religious connotations, and turn into a visual metaphor for the idea of violent rebellion. Lloyd, in particular, believes that portraying V as “a resurrected Guy Fawkes” would give the latter “the image he’s deserved all these years. We shouldn’t burn the chap every Nov. 5th, but celebrate his attempt to blow up the Parliament!” (quoted in Moore, [1983] 2005: 274). The author here also acknowledges the reciprocal contamination between the source text and target text. The appropriation and recontextualization open the possibility for new, subversive readings, which can be employed as a form of cultural resistance.

An analogous process marks the intertextual links established by V. As in the already mentioned *Macbeth* quote, the character draws on a plethora of literary and cultural sources to subvert the cultural hegemony of the ruling party. Suggesting a postmodern and productive “de-categorization of high and low culture” (Brooker, 1996: 65), V quotes Shakespeare *and* The Rolling Stones – “Please allow me to introduce myself... I’m a man of wealth... and taste” (*VfV*: 54); Yeats’s *Second Coming* (196) *and* the Velvet Underground – “I’m waiting for the man” (223); William Blake’s “And did those feet in ancient time” (48) *and* Enid Blayton’s *The Magic Faraway Tree* (68). Moore and Lloyd also employ comics’ formal hybridity to insert visual references in the panels. On the bookshelves of V’s hideout, we can identify the spines of *Frankenstein*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, *Faust*, *From Russia with Love* and several other books (18). On the walls, high art paintings like Piero del Pollaiuolo’s *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* (44) are juxtaposed to music hall bills and movie posters, as *White Heat* or *The Son of Frankenstein* (9). As Carpenter points, “the Shadow Gallery is a place that shows the outline of what was once was bathed in light but now resides in darkness. It’s a shrine to the ephemera of pop culture, a mausoleum dedicated to life before fascism” (2016: 29). I would argue that V’s hideout fulfils the same purpose of the Olympus in *Miracleman*, serving as a microcosm for the entire graphic novel. It is a container of previous works, a pastiche of high and low culture, and a superhero trope remoulded as an eutopian enclave and “alternative social matrix” (Murphy, 2008: 14).

⁶ As Call points out, “*V for Vendetta* retains the fondness for dialectical thinking which can be found in much of the ‘scientific’ anarchism of the nineteenth century” (Call, 2008: 162).

The significance of *VfV*'s appropriative strategy is twofold. First, it reinvigorates and problematizes the generic conventions of dystopian fiction, in which "the act of seeing beyond the present is at least in part an act of recovery of a lost tradition" (Huntington, 1982: 136). *V* is a postmodern, morally questionable version of Wells's *When the Sleeper Wakes*'s main character Graham, who "is a revolutionary because he retains 19th-century [*sic*] sentiments of justice which the future world claims to have outgrown" (*ibid.*). In the second place, the text applies the methods of historiographic metafiction to the history and social organization of culture. Here, the "postmodern use and abuse of convention [...] works to 'de-doxify' any sense of the seamlessness between the natural and the cultural, the world and the text, thereby making us aware of the irreducible ideological nature of every representation – of past and present" (Hutcheon, 1989: 53). *VfV* questions the very relationship between the 'world' and the cultural text. It suggests that the relationship among the elements of a cultural system – and between cultures and social groups – is ideologically and discursively constructed. The concept can be better understood through the categories devised by Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature* (1977). In *VfV*, elements of *R*'s "dominant" and "residual" (122) culture are subversively redeployed as "emergent" (123). They become "alternative or oppositional to the dominant elements" (Williams, 1977: 124) that underpin the fascist and heteronormative rule of the Norsefire. Shakespeare and Milton thus join The Rolling Stones in the countercultural toolbox for the anarchist revolution.

As a postmodern graphic novel, *VfV* employs its formal and cultural inbetweenness to raise "the question of cultural tradition and conservation in the most fundamental way as an aesthetic and a political issue". (Huyssen, 1986: 216). Drawing on the traditions of superhero comics and critical dystopias, it articulates a critique of Thatcher's Britain, while suggesting a subversive praxis of both cultural and political rebellion. It confirms that "control over the means of language, over representation and interpellation, is a crucial weapon and strategy in dystopian resistance" (Moylan, 2000: 149).

However, the ending does not reveal if *V*'s – and then Evey's – revolution succeeds. The text avoids closure, which opposes to utopian performativity and (pro)activism since it strengthens the status quo (Fitting, 1987: 33). The graphic novel does not suggest the way in which *V*'s "true order, which is to say voluntary order" (*VfV*: 195) would emerge. Nor does it explain why the chaos he has created would be different from the situation that precluded the rise of fascism. As *V* sings during musical interlude, "They say that life's a game and then they take the board away. They give you masks and costumes and an outline of the story. Then leave you all to improvise their vicious cabaret" (89).

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