

# **Guy Fawkes in the 21st Century**

## *A Contribution to the Political Iconography of Revolt<sup>1</sup>*

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### ***Abstract***

The article analyzes the symbolism of the Guy Fawkes mask, which has achieved a global visibility in the protest movement “Occupy” around 2010. Being taken from the movie “V for Vendetta” (USA 2006), which adapts the comic “V for Vendetta”, the mask performs a complex interplay between pop culture and political protest. By wearing the Fawkes mask and by blowing up the British parliament, a re-appropriation of political representation for the people is demanded in the film. Thus, the Guy Fawkes mask symbolizes a genuinely democratic desire. However, the political symbolism of uprising develops a disturbing affinity towards totalitarism at the same time.

### ***Résumé***

Cet article examine la signification symbolique du masque de Guy Fawkes, qui a obtenu une visibilité globale en 2010 dans le mouvement de protestation “Occupy”. Le masque de Guy Fawkes ayant été repris au film *V for Vendetta* (USA 2006) et à la bande dessinée *V for Vendetta* dont celui-ci est l’adaptation, son usage s’inscrit dans un jeu complexe mêlant culture pop et protestation politique. Dans le film, par le port du masque et la destruction du parlement britannique, une réappropriation de la représentation politique par le peuple est demandée. Le masque de Guy Fawkes symbolise ainsi un véritable désir démocratique. En même temps, le symbolisme politique de l’insurrection présente une affinité inquiétante avec le totalitarisme.

### ***Keywords***

political revolt, visual culture, Guy Fawkes mask, politics & aesthetics of political representation, *V for Vendetta*, film

### ***1. “A Political Sign of the Times”***

Since the early modern period – as the *Handbuch der politischen Ikonographie* (Handbook of Political Iconography) informs us –, a “visual politics of revolt” has developed that “iconographically communicates” the revolt “through both emblematically or allegorically condensed programmatic images and reportage-style visual journalism” (Erben 104). A political cartoon from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (fig. 1) exemplifies both these aspects of the political iconography of revolt:

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1. An earlier German version of this article appeared in *kultuRRevolution. Zeitschrift für angewandte Diskurstheorie* 61/62 (2012): 19-26.



Fig. 1. Oliver Schopf. "Arabischer Frühling". Cartoon. Süddeutsche Zeitung 17 Oct. 2011: 4.<sup>2</sup> (fair use)

The drawing illustrates how different political revolts in 2011 are depicted through a kind of short-hand iconography – and how important visual journalism is in this process: The cartoon establishes a connection between the “Arab revolutions” in the spring of 2011, the UK “riots” in the summer of 2011, and the global protests of the “Occupy” movement in the fall of 2011 primarily through its iconographically synchronized gestures of protest. Notwithstanding the hotly debated question of whether the revolutions of the twenty-first century “would have been unthinkable” without the so-called “social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter” (Doll 64), the smartphone, triumphantly held up towards the viewer, here serves to iconographically create unity: across time (marked by specifying the seasons) and space (marked by the symbolic locations visible in the background: the pyramids, Big Ben, bank highrises), the depicted figures seem to participate in one and the same revolt. The iconography of revolt possesses identificatory potential: it can provide a common historical and ideological framework for a variety of different acts of violence.

What is striking is that the figure in the third panel – symbolizing the Occupy protests against the power of the banks – itself refers to a tradition of the “iconography of revolt” by way of wearing a Guy Fawkes mask. This symbolically charged mask has become a trademark of contemporary protest movements. Images of such emblematically disguised demonstrators from virtually all over the world can be found in large numbers in newspapers and on the Internet.<sup>3</sup>

2. The panels' captions read, from left to right: “Arab Spring,” “English Summer,” “Banking Fall,” “Social Winter.” Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the German are by the translator.

3. Images of Guy Fawkes masks at demonstrations, including those shown in Figures 2 through 5, can be found online at: [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Demonstrators\\_and\\_protesters\\_wearing\\_masks\\_of\\_Guy\\_Fawkes](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Demonstrators_and_protesters_wearing_masks_of_Guy_Fawkes) and <http://publicintelligence.net/you-cannot-arrest-an-idea>. Web. 5 Jan. 2013.



*Fig. 2. Demonstrator in Munich, 11 Feb. 2012 (Creative Commons)*



*Fig. 3. Protesters in London, 10 Feb. 2008 (Creative Commons)*



Fig. 4. Protesters in Cadiz, 15 June 2011 (Creative Commons)



Fig. 5. Protesters in Quebec, 22 May. 2012 (Creative Commons)

As the British *Guardian* newspaper has pointed out, the Guy Fawkes mask has become “a political sign of the times” and “the en-vogue revolutionary symbol for the younger generation” (Montes). Lewis Call has noted that “the face of Fawkes is everywhere now, at peace rallies and anti-nuclear demonstrations” (157). As a “trademark of protest” (Lischka), the mask ironically functions according to the rules of a capitalist market economy that are unanimously criticized by the protesters wearing the mask (Reissmann, Stöcker and Lischka 96). From a purely functional perspective, it may suffice to leave it at that observation: The Guy Fawkes mask symbolizes, as it were, the unity of protest and thus makes the protest recognizable as such. The “iconography of revolt” therefore plays as much a part in the “reportage-style visual journalism” as it does in staging this revolt. On both levels, the Guy Fawkes mask functions as a symbol of the protest movement’s unity.

A mask performs a double gesture: By veiling one face, it makes visible another. What does it signify that a protest movement gathers under the symbol of a cartoonish, clownish mask representing the failed assassin Guy Fawkes? Or, to quote Jean Starobinski, “what does the new face mean?” (147) A hermeneutical inquiry into the meaning of the mask leads us into the realm of pop culture. The mask does not simply represent the failed assassin Guy Fawkes who was arrested on November 5, 1605, for plotting to blow up James I and his parliament with thirty-six barrels of gunpowder. It is only through complex cultural processes and mediations that Fawkes has become a key figure in today’s political iconography. Fawkes, as Lewis Call points out, was not the leader of the Catholic conspirators of November 5, 1605 – this role fell to Robert Catesby –, but the “trigger man” tasked with lighting the fuses of the powder kegs (155). Already one year after the botched assassination attempt, November 5 was declared a national holiday, and the burning of Guy Fawkes *in effigy* has since become a ritual component of “Guy Fawkes Day.” As early as the nineteenth century, Call tells us, Guy Fawkes Day was instrumentalized for local uprisings against state authority, with the perception of the Guy Fawkes figure also changing: The “Fawkes image,” ritually burned on November 5, now came to mean “resistance to the emerging disciplinary regime of modern municipal government” (155). In the course of the twentieth century, Guy Fawkes Day in England developed into a sort of carnival, an opportunity for restrained anarchy (Reissmann, Stöcker and Lischka 92 ff.). Today’s perception of the figure, however, is defined primarily through its pop-cultural mediation. It is, in fact, an idle query to debate the question of whether the historical Guy Fawkes – a “Catholic fanatic” (Lischka), a “religious terrorist” (Posener) – is a suitable symbolic figure for the protesting youth of the twenty-first century: The mask, after all, represents not so much Guy Fawkes but the avenger “V,” the title character of Alan Moore and David Lloyd’s graphic novel *V for Vendetta* (1982-1985) and of the film adaptation of the same title (2006), who dons a Guy Fawkes mask in his fight against a fascist regime.

“Expect Us!,” reads the sign of a demonstrator in Toronto (cfr. Mark Blinch’s picture at <http://publicintelligence.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/anonymous-global-protest-4.jpg>). The mask that is worn by the demonstrator can be understood as being part of this statement. The masked person does not appear to be identical with the person behind the mask, but as somebody representing something – in this case “us.” The “masks used in Greek tragedy,” writes Roland Barthes, had “a magical function: to give the voice a chthonic origin, to distort, to alienate the voice, to make it come from somewhere under the earth” (115). The Fawkes mask, too, puts its wearer into a fictional, imaginary space. The statement

“Expect Us!” does not come from somewhere under the earth, but from a collective that is expected to appear in the future. Resonant with the biblical connotations of the word “expect,” it announces the emergence of a powerful “we,” a potent political subject. Seen from this perspective, the widespread global use of the mask not only stands in ironic contrast to the anti-capitalist tendency of the protests; the photographs of Guy Fawkes masks from various world capitals rather illustrate the anticipation of a political subject that is to appear in the future.

## 2. *Anonymity vs. Authorship (Hobbes)*

The primary function of a mask is to conceal. Professional revolutionaries like to live inconspicuous lives – at least until the day when the revolution breaks out openly. They are necessarily defined by “the tactics and techniques of clandestinity” (Horn 29). “Visibility must be avoided,” states *The Coming Insurrection* (2007), an anonymously published treatise that is touted as a primer of today’s protest movements: “Our appearance as a force must be pushed back until the opportune moment. The longer we avoid visibility, the stronger we’ll be when it catches up with us” (Invisible Committee 76). This logic, according to which the mere act of remaining invisible will result in an increase in “strength,” probably derives less from the experience of revolutionary struggle than from the tradition of philosophical anthropology and ethology. “Power is impenetrable,” writes Elias Canetti in *Crowds and Power*. “The man who has it sees through other men, but does not allow them to see through him” (292).

In this sense, impenetrability is the most obvious function of political masking. It is therefore not surprising that the first protesters to wear the Guy Fawkes masks were members of the Internet-based “Anonymous” collective. At anti-Scientology protests initiated by Anonymous in February 2008 in more than a hundred cities worldwide, the Guy Fawkes mask emerged “for the first time in the public consciousness” and subsequently became the “visible trademark of Anonymous” (Reissmann, Stöcker and Lischka 63, 91). It was only when others imitated the aesthetic appearance of the marches organized by Anonymous that the Fawkes mask became a common staple of protest. The Fawkes mask may well provide anonymity, de-individualize, and increase impenetrability, but it certainly does not conceal or make invisible.

To address the question of the political meaning of masks at a more fundamental level, it might be worthwhile to look at several passages from Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (1652). For Hobbes, the creation of the state is essentially defined as the establishment of sovereignty. This happens when the subjects enter into a contract that legitimizes the sovereign as their acknowledged representative. In chapter 17 of *Leviathan*, Hobbes writes: “And in him consisteth the essence of the commonwealth; which (to define it,) is *one person, of whose acts a great multitude, by mutual covenants one with another, have made themselves every one the author*” [emphasis in the original] (114). What it means that the subjects of the state become its “author” is explained by Hobbes in his comments on “artificial persons”. According to Hobbes, artificial persons are those that have their “words and actions *owned* by those whom they represent” (107) – with the English word “*owned*” explicitly denoting the act of recognition as an appropriation. “And then,” Hobbes continues, “the person is the *actor*; and he that owneth his words and actions, is the author: in which case the actor acteth by authority” (107).

For Hobbes, the state is an “artificial person” that is essentially characterized by its power to

IMAGE [8] NARRATIVE Vol. 14, No. 1 94

*represent* its subjects. Because the subjects have to recognize the “words and actions” of the state as *their own*, every rule by the state is rule by representation. In Hobbes’ description, the state’s representation – and thus the condition for the possibility of the state’s existence –, is systematically linked with aesthetic, especially dramatic works. Hobbes explicitly elaborates on the etymology of the word “person,” which refers to the theatrical sphere: “The word person,” he writes, “is Latin instead whereof the Greeks have πρόσωπον, which signifies the *face*, as *persona* in Latin signifies the *disguise*, or *outward appearance* of a man, counterfeited on the stage … So that a *person* is the same that an *actor* is, both on the stage and in common conversation” (106). The sovereign who creates the artificial person of the state by representing the unity of his subjects is thus essentially a state actor. In order to put an end to the permanent civil war of the natural state, the subjects had to authorize the sovereign to represent them; as a result, they hear their own *persona* acting and speaking through the sovereign’s mask. In Hobbes’ conception, the subject of the state is subject to a theatrical regime of representation (Därmann 85 ff.).

In *V for Vendetta*, the title character of V is defined by his struggle against this regime of representation. In the fictional world of both the graphic novel and the movie, England is ruled by a fascist regime that brutally persecutes dissidents, ethnic minorities, and homosexuals, detaining them in concentration camp-like prisons. The graphic novel and the movie differ, however, when it comes to the backstory. In the graphic novel, a flashback by Evey provides readers with information about the events leading up to the fascist regime: Following a nuclear war, revolts had led to the collapse of the central government, which was subsequently re-established by the fascists. In the movie, a deadly plague – apparently spread by the fascists themselves – and an ensuing collective panic take the place of the nuclear war. Both graphic novel and film are rooted in the political situation of their times: While the graphic novel, originally published in 1981, reflects the Cold War-era fears of a nuclear apocalypse, the 2006 movie portrays a ruthless government that rules through manipulations, lies, and fear-mongering – and thus can be interpreted as an allegorical representation of the Bush administration (Call 160, 165). In both versions, the fascist state has implemented a comprehensive surveillance and propaganda system reminiscent of George Orwell’s *1984* in order to control, monitor, and manipulate its population.

V’s fight against the regime has a dual motivation: while leading a personal vendetta against the guards and doctors at the concentration camp where he was imprisoned, he also fights against the state’s entire regime of representation and wants to topple the fascist government. While the fascist propaganda system favors the key mass media of the twentieth century – radio and television foremost among them –, V utilizes the “old” media. As it turns out, he is a member of the educated middle classes who knows how to put his symbolic capital to good use. His hideout resembles a library, he quotes Shakespeare and is shown reading Thomas Pynchon’s novel *V*. By exchanging the centrally broadcast images for the decentrally archived written words and thus opting out of the state media system, V exposes official representation as illusionary and is ready to fight it: “It’s everything, Evey,” he says in one scene, “the perfect entrance, the grand illusion. It’s everything. And I’m going to bring the house down” (Moore and Lloyd 31).

Which V means literally. At the beginning of the graphic novel (and towards the end of the film), he blows up the British Parliament – the iconic tower of Big Ben is blown to smithereens (Moore and Lloyd, 14) –, thus destroying the central site of parliamentary representation. By blowing up the



Fig. 6. Revolutionary media guerilla: Screenshot from *V for Vendetta* (00:18:17) (fair use)

parliament building, V becomes the legitimate successor of the Catholic terrorist Guy Fawkes, whose attempt to do so in 1605 had failed. Yet whereas Fawkes wanted to physically kill the members of parliament and the king and thus the representatives of the state, V blows up the empty parliament building in the middle of the night: V's attack is not directed against the representatives of the system but against the state's system of representation as such.

The state's system of representation is also the target of V's hijacking of the central television station. By interrupting the regular programming with his own video message, he expropriates the state's propaganda channels and turns them against their authors. Fully in keeping with the tradition of European revolutions, V's television address is directed at *all* recipients – in the graphic novel version, it is explicitly addressed to all of humanity. “The democracy of every European revolution always appeals to all, in Luther’s case through the printing press, in Lenin’s case through his famous radio telegrams to all,” wrote Eugen Rosenstock (219). “Any revolution ... deserving of its name wants to come into the world and communicate to the entire world a new beginning and a new order” (5). The possibility of *communicating* the revolutionary idea to the *entire world* paradoxically is provided by the state’s culture of communication and representation: Because the radio and TV channels of fascist England have literally been synchronized (*gleichgeschaltet*), V’s television address reaches all viewers in the country. “You designed it, wanted it foolproof. You said every television in London!,” propaganda chief Dascomb justifies himself to the angry chancellor (*V for Vendetta*, 00:19:09).

In this sense, *V for Vendetta* develops a narrative about the possibility of capturing and seizing official representation. Lewis Call comments:

If power in the postmodern world is based largely upon illusion and the creative manipulation of reality, then revolutionaries have a clear and effective strategy available to them. They need only seize the engines of simulation, puncture the veil of illusion, and replace the official discourse with a radical alternative narrative. (163)

If the state's representation is not only the communication of power via the mass media, but an essential precondition of rule, representation logically becomes a potential arena for revolutionary activities. In Call's words, "the face of Fawkes stands ready to engage capital and the state in the place where they are weakest, the terrain of representation" (157).

### **3. Masks and Masses**

There is no single, consistent explanation for the appropriation of the Guy Fawkes mask by today's globalized protest movements. We can, however, identify motives and connections. In a political context, masks are not simply a means of achieving impenetrability and escaping from surveillance. As a political symbol, the Fawkes mask competes with official iconography – and thus, through its mere public presence, puts an end to the state's monopoly of representation. The anonymity of the mask annuls the individual's *authorship* of the state's representation as described by Hobbes: By putting on the theatrical Guy Fawkes mask, the individual directly competes with the sovereign who, for Hobbes, was to be the sole *actor* of the body politic. Authorizing only *him- or herself*, the protesting individual demands the sovereignty that, in Hobbes' narrative, has been taken from the people once and for all and given over to the government. "Sabotage every representative authority," states *The Coming Insurrection* (Invisible Committee 80).

The self-masking and self-installation of a competing political representation stands in the tradition of V's revolutionary strategy in *V for Vendetta*. In the film version, V explains to Evey his theory of political symbolism – which aims to erect political symbols that compete against the state's policy of representation. On blowing up the parliament, V says: "The building is a symbol, as is the act of destroying it. Symbols are given power by people. Alone, a symbol is meaningless, but with enough people, blowing up a building can change the world" (*V for Vendetta* 00:31:10). V's political symbolism appears to be in direct opposition to the regime's techniques of manipulation: While the fascist propaganda creates symbols *for* the people – in order to declare their own truth to be true –, V insists that political symbols become meaningful and true only *through* the people. V's battle against the state's regime of representation is rooted in the conviction that the *people* must be the sole authority of symbolic truth.

In the graphic novel, this authority is personalized. V here names the *voice* of the people, the *vox populi*, as a countervailing force to the illusions and manipulations of official representation. "It does not do to rely too much on silent majorities, Evey, for silence is a fragile thing ... one loud noise, and it's gone," he lectures his accomplice Evey (Moore and Lloyd 193). In the graphic novel, this proposition is illustrated in three consecutive panels: by depicting the beginning of the *revolt* against the regime



*Figs. 7 and 8. Panels from V for Vendetta (Moore and Lloyd 194)*  
(fair use)

entirely without speech bubbles, they speak all the more eloquently about the power and force of the *voice* (Moore and Lloyd 194). The three panels show a crowd that, as the reader learns on the previous page, is witnessing a woman's arbitrary execution by the regime's henchmen. The first panel shows the



*Fig. 9. Panel from V for Vendetta (Moore and Lloyd 194)*  
(fair use)

people in the front row looking aghast, presumably at the scene of the killed woman. At the center, we see a young man whose face is distorted with rage and who seems to be shouting something. Two other people in the panel turn their heads to look at the shouting man.

The second panel shows the infectious power of the man's shouting: at its center, we see the same angry young man, but now two more people – a man to his left and a woman to his right – have joined in the shouting, as is signaled by their angry faces and gestures (the clenched fists).

The third panel shows no full faces (or spectators, for that matter), but only four shouting mouths and a clenched fist. In a commentary inserted between the second and the third panel, V explains the political symbolism of the images: "Noise is relative to the silence *preceding* it. The more absolute the *hush*, the more shocking the *thunderclap*. Our masters have not heard the people's voice for *generations*, Evey ..." (Moore and Lloyd 194). In as little as three panels, *V for Vendetta* narrates how easily the voice of the people can become so strong that it can no longer be ignored. The section of the graphic novel that

contains these panels is entitled “*Vox populi*” – the phrase alliterating with V, the pseudonym of the main protagonist.

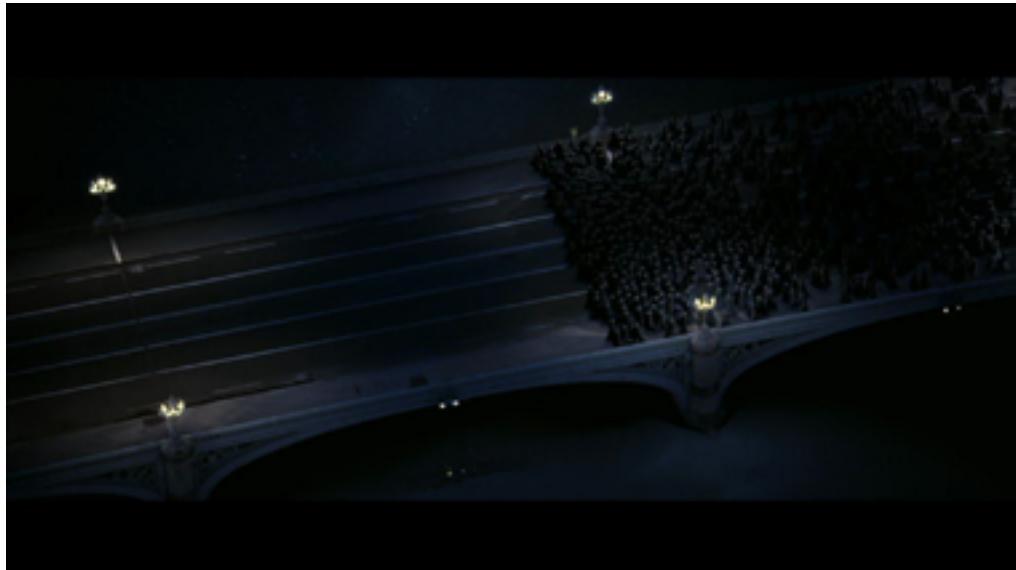
Even though the phrase *vox populi, vox dei* can be documented as early as the Early Middle Ages,<sup>4</sup> the idea of the *vox populi* is of genuinely romantic origin. For Rousseau, the basis of political decision-making is the *volonté générale* – the general will –, which he identifies with the “voice of the people.”<sup>5</sup> Positing a link between political decision-making and the will present in the “voice of the people,” Rousseau radically and consistently excludes every form of representation from his conception of politics – in contrast to Hobbes, for whom representation is the basis of politics. “Sovereignty, for the same reason as makes it inalienable, cannot be represented,” Rousseau writes apodictically in his *Social Contract*, “it lies essentially in the general will, and will does not admit of representation: It is either the same, or other; there is no intermediate possibility” (83).

This statement is emphatically endorsed by Carl Schmitt in his *Constitutional Theory* of 1928. “Only the present, truly assembled people are the people and produce the public,” writes Schmitt. “The correct idea that supports Rousseau’s famous thesis that the people cannot be represented rests on this truth. They cannot be represented because they must be *present*, and only something absent, not something present, may be represented” (272). Schmitt also cites the sentence, “the people’s voice is the voice of God,” and interprets it as “the rejection of all political influences and effects not originating from the substantial homogeneity of the people themselves” (267). For Schmitt, the people is a people only when it expresses itself as *presence*. From this interpretation, Schmitt derives a radical critique of the modern parliamentary system. Secret ballots, he writes, transform “the state citizen or *citoyen*, into a private man,” as a result of which the “gathering of those present … has become impossible” (273). According to Schmitt, the people in a parliamentary democracy – in his case, the Weimar Republic in 1928 – are no longer a people, as they are not present or truly assembled.

What follows from Schmitt’s theory of democracy is that the people as such must become *visible* to be able to emerge as a political actor. The film version of *V for Vendetta* presents the becoming-visible of the people in a more emotional and melodramatic way than the graphic novel upon which it is based – a fact that may be due to the medium’s fundamental affinity to crowds and masses, as has been frequently pointed out by film theorists (Brill 23, Beilenhoff 53). As a result of this affinity, every staging of a people in the process of formation, from the time the medium was invented, is a filmic quotation. *V for Vendetta* is a prime example. The people’s march at the end of the movie is the emotional climax of the film: V has finally achieved his aim of mobilizing the masses against the state. The emergence of huge numbers of people wearing V’s Guy Fawkes mask marks the appearance of the people as a political subject – and thus the end of the fascist regime. This staging of the people in the process of forming themselves into a dramatic and political actor can easily be identified as a filmic quotation from Sergei Eisenstein’s silent film *Battleship Potemkin*. A model and inspiration for all subsequent filmic stagings

4. The earliest documented evidence for the phrase *vox populi, vox dei* can be found in a letter written by the English scholar Alcuin to Charles the Great in 798: “Nec audiendi qui solent dicere: vox populi, vox dei, cum tumultuositas vulgi semper insanie proxima sit” (see Anastos 182).

5. In an article on “Political Economy,” published in the *Encyclopédie* in 1755, Rousseau writes of “an irrefutable proof that the most general will is also the most just, and that the voice of the people is truly the voice of God” (8).



*Fig. 10. Screenshot from V for Vendetta (01:56:15)  
(fair use)*



*Figs. 11 and 12. Screenshots from Battleship Potemkin (00:36:24 and 00:42:35)*

of the masses, *Battleship Potemkin* shows how the mass becomes visible and at the same time becomes a subject-as-a-people. In its depiction of the mass's formation into a political and revolutionary people, *V for Vendetta*, too, takes its visual cues from *Battleship Potemkin*.

Like in *Battleship Potemkin*, the people in *V for Vendetta* appear like a *river*: a steady flow of people moving slowly but therefore all the more unstoppably (Beilenhoff 55). The physical movement denotes both the formation (into a unity) and a projection into the future – even though no clear goal may be recognizable: “Rivers,” writes Elias Canetti, “are especially a symbol for the time when the crowd is forming, the time before it has attained what it will attain” (83). The motif of the bridge – ubiquitous in *Battleship Potemkin*, but also important in *V for Vendetta* – additionally symbolizes the connection and unity of the people as they are moving towards each other. “Mothers, sisters, brothers! Let nothing divide us!,” an insert in *Battleship Potemkin* (00:41:24) reads. The uniform movement emphasizes the intrinsic equality of the people who, in both the Soviet propaganda movie of 1925 and the Hollywood movie of 2006, explicitly dispense with leaders and thus representatives. Stressing this point with reference to *Battleship Potemkin*, Lesley Brill writes: “Besides individualizing the members of the Odessa crowd, he [Eisenstein] emphasizes their diversity, and, therefore, the mass’s inclusiveness” (30-31). If indeed

such a thing is possible, the people in *V for Vendetta* appear to be even more homogeneous because of their uniforms and their Guy Fawkes (that is, V) masks. We need not elaborate on Goebbels' enthusiasm for *Battleship Potemkin* to note the totalitarian dimension of the way the people are staged in the Soviet movie, but also in *V for Vendetta*. The slogan of the fascist party in *V for Vendetta* – “STRENGTH THROUGH UNITY / UNITY THROUGH FAITH” (00:07:24) – paradoxically could also be the slogan of the people rebelling against the regime.

This is not to say that *V for Vendetta* subscribes to a totalitarian ideology. The quasi-totalitarian look of the people in *V for Vendetta* rather suggests that the visual symbolism of democracy is identical with the visual language of totalitarianism. As a result, there is no specifically democratic political iconography, because democracy at its most theatrical moment – the moment when the people are forming themselves into a political subject – can only resort to the same visual aesthetics as totalitarian ideology. The reason for this linkage is far from contingent. The staging of the people at the moment of their formation into a political subject is without doubt an important component of the political iconography of democracy: it evokes the people as an entity that stands “outside of and above any constitutional norm” and that, in a democracy, as Carl Schmitt points out, has to be “directly and genuinely *present*, not mediated by previously defined normative systems, validations, and fictions” (271). In this sense, the political iconography of democracy stages a people outside of any laws, norms and limitations, in order to confirm them as a *sovereign* – to use one of Schmitt’s key terms. As an unlimited sovereign outside the law, the people need to have a *will* and a *unity* that have not come about through ballots and elections only (which would be *within* the legal norm): in the moment of their sovereignty, the people (and with them, democracy) is totalitarian. This also explains Schmitt’s otherwise potentially somewhat mysterious remark that “a dictatorship in particular is possible only on a democratic foundation” (266).

I would, therefore, disagree with political scientist Philip Manow who has proposed that the “symbolic forms of parliamentary representation” (3) constitute the specifically democratic form of political iconography. By drawing on Schmitt’s distinction between *representation* and *identity*,<sup>6</sup> I would rather argue that the specifically democratic political iconography always stages an attack on the principle of representation in the name of the identity of the people – complete with this staging’s totalitarian ambivalence. The political iconography of democracy is therefore centrally an iconography of revolt against the state, an iconography in which the people form themselves into a political subject.

The identification with Guy Fawkes, which is characteristic of the protest movements in the year 2011, is thus rooted in a specifically democratic desire. Seen from this perspective, the wish to blow up the parliament and with it the state’s entire system of representation expresses the genuinely democratic desire to install the people as sovereign outside any norms, laws or other limitations. *V for Vendetta* is essentially a staging of this desire, and the Guy Fawkes mask its iconographic symbol.

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6. “State is a condition, the particular circumstance of a people. But the people can achieve and hold the condition of political unity in two different ways. It can already be factually and directly capable of political action by virtue of a strong and conscious similarity, as a result of firm natural boundaries, or due to some other reason. In this case, a political unity is a genuinely present entity in its unmediated *self-identity*. ... The opposing principle proceeds from the idea that the political unity of the people as such can never be present in actual identity and, consequently, must always be *represented* by men personally. All distinctions of genuine state forms, whichever type they may be, monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, monarchy and republic, monarchy and democracy, etc., may be traced back to this decisive opposition of *identity* and *representation*” (Schmitt 239).

This is not to say that every single demonstrator wearing a Guy Fawkes mask is aware of these connections – and their ambivalences. The Occupy movement, which adopted Guy Fawkes as its political symbol in the fall of 2011, explicitly refuses to propose a cohesive political ideology or objective: it is a movement “with no clear goal or agenda” (Piper). No concrete political agenda, no leaders: The mask, last but not least, symbolizes an abstinence of political heroes (who have an individual personality and belong to a specific ethnic group and gender). The Occupy movement resists definition, and its identification with Guy Fawkes (or V) cannot be interpreted with full certainty. What the protest movements share, however, is a critique of representation – primarily by criticizing the system of representative democracy (via the slogan “We are the 99%”)<sup>7</sup> but also by consistently refusing to be represented politically (a stance that permeates the essay *The Coming Insurrection*), by demanding democratic control of the financial industry, and by favoring the abolition of paper money (Piper). In this context, the Guy Fawkes mask essentially symbolizes the fight against the principle of representation in the name of identity. Taking a cultural studies approach allows us to explore and call attention to the symbolism’s history and ambiguities.

*Translated by Manuela Thurner*

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7. The phrase was coined by David Graeber, who wrote in an online e-mail: “Both parties govern in the name of the 1% of Americans who have received pretty much all the proceeds of economic growth, who are the only people completely recovered from the 2008 recession, who control the political system, who control almost all financial wealth. So if both parties represent the 1%, we represent the 99% whose lives are essentially left out of the equation” (Graeber).

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