“Body Politics: Unearthing an Embodied Ethics in V for Vendetta”

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In light of the oft-made allegation that superheroes are in many respects carbon copies of the fascist world that they were consciously or unconsciously intended to oppose, V for Vendetta may be Alan Moore’s most direct commentary on the superheroic body and its desires. Intimations of fascism, of course, are everywhere in Moore’s work. The German soldier who shatters Alice’s mirror in Lost Girls, William Gull’s bird-like transcendence in From Hell, Superman’s repression of the too-earthy Swamp Thing in “The Jungle Line,” Moriarty’s cavorite-fueled journey toward heaven (and death) in The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen—all speak to Moore’s critique of the superheroic tendency to marginalize the world and others. Moore and David Lloyd’s graphic novel is the most direct commentary on the superhero body if only because the body of the hero and villain are obnoxiously present, even as they strangely absent themselves. The novel appears to ground agency to an embodied totalitarian world in terms of (dis)embodiment. Agency is, of course, an issue of the body and its representation, but Moore and Lloyd get it wrong, at least on one overt level, by misunderstanding the ultimate goal of fascism and reproducing a notion of agency that merely reproduces on another level the (ontological) state that it presumably to counter. The ultimate goal in what follows is to unearth a marginal narrative which, by embodying writing, creates space for a way of being that undermines fascism in a more nuanced, ethical, and less contradictory manner.

Putting on the Face of Ideology

In Moore and Lloyd’s novel, each segment of the government is given a name denoting a part of the human body: the Eye is in charge of surveillance; the Fingermen are the enforcers; the Nose is in charge of crime detection, and so on (15). Efficient working of each of these parts creates a social body that is both coherent and effective, at least for those who are its able and willing members. The character of this power is nicely introduced in the first few pages. The opening pages show V placing a mask over his face and a desperate Evey heavily rouging her cheeks, creating what she hopes is the marketable face of a prostitute. The only words are broadcast over the radio by the Voice of Fate (9), a human voice meant to be understood as the voice of the computer Fate. The Voice describes the “face of London tonight” (my emphasis). In all of these cases, identity is being constructed, though not all constructions are created equally. In the last case, the Voice of Fate tells the population the time, date, road conditions, temperature, and information on food rationing and a “major terrorist ring.” The voice even predicts the exact time that a rain shower will begin, “12:07 A.M” (14).

There could, of course, be many differing representations of London. But what we see here is a seamless linkage of Fate’s words with reality—seamless because the text points unerringly to nature’s reality (i.e, schedule), naturalizing one particular ideological representation of London. Ideology “is the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group” (Althusser 120). Louis Althusser writes, “It is indeed a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes (without appearing to do so [. . .]), obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot fail to recognize and before which we have the inevitable and natural reaction of crying out [. . . .]: That’s obvious! That’s right! That’s true!” (original’s emphasis; 129). Nature is immortal and if a power structure can link itself to
that which is natural, it may also put on such an un-queried immortality. Power is seductive then to the degree that its construction of reality is understood to be natural, not a construct, and therefore the only “right” and “true” option available. The naturalizing effect described above then doubles back and naturalizes the notion of society as a body as well (the fact that Norsefire chooses to embody itself is a similar naturalizing move as well). This is the “voice” of Fate, after all, and if it is so in sync with nature writ large it makes sense that its representation as a self and body would also be naturalized.

Such ideological work naturalizes a very specific notion of what it means to be a social body, however. In the graphic novel’s first panel, for example, the source of the Voice of Fate’s broadcast, a skyscraper, is represented (9). In the absence of a representation of its foundation, the skyscraper—and the words that erupt spontaneously from within it—seems to transcend the earth. Similarly, the buildings around it stand back from it with the emptiness of air serving as borders. In the second panel, Lloyd draws a mass of people whose vague figures blur into one another. But, clearly, in this panel and in the two that follows, borders are being created between people. The mass of people are surveyed, separated, directed along certain routes, and molded into an individualistic social body. What these early panels suggest is that humanity’s natural ontological state is to be with others (Nancy The Inoperative Community 15), but here—through the systematic application of ideological and forceful mechanisms—individualism is naturalized. Despite the voice bubble which points to the skyscraper and encloses the words of the Voice, this building, the symbol of immanence in the opening, is not a person at all. And in the following panels, no identity seems to stands on its own. In every case, there is identity construction which is in relation to the world. Jean-Luc Nancy’s The Inoperative Community defines the traditional community (founded on the metaphysical notion of the individual) as irrational, desiring the impossible, immanence. Immanence, as Nancy describes it, is “the absolutely detached for-itself, taken as origin and as certainty” (3). Fascism, as presented in this novel, concretizes the “atom[ic]” logic of individualism which says that it is possible to exist outside of relation. The society instituted by Norsefire desires immortality naturalized in the form of an individualistic social body. It is common to think of singular persons as “individuals.” However, in terms of fascism, the exact exclusionary logic of individualism is expanded to the level of the nation, and built upon the erasure of the particularities of singular bodies.

At the center of this society is Fate, a non-human work of artifice which Adam Susan, refers to as his “bride” (38). His narcissistic love we are told is a reaction to the chaos of modern life and to the “empty gasps and convulsions of brutish coupling.” Fate is a “god” for Susan who believes that his connection with it brings him into relation with the “whole of existence.” The fascist leader falls back on heterosexual imagery to naturalize his own monadic love. Much the same can be seen in more traditional relationships, however: Helen, who constantly uses her body to cement power relations with men, propositions Finch in the hopes of building a new army and rebuilding the state (264-265). When he refuses her, she calls him a “queer,” and he walks on alone. In this scene societal “order” and heterosexuality are directly linked. Love and sex in general are put to work for the state as bodies become mere tools in an exchange of power. The first panel of the novel represents a transcendent, phallic skyscraper because,
ultimately, that is the essential telos of fascism: to transcend the body and gain the purity of an idea (9).

**Blowing up the Parliament or V’s “Grand Opening”**

The panels depicting Evey and V’s construction of identity give the lie to the alleged immanence of identity construction; if a traditional story hides its creative process as it forms a seamless, realistic, and, hence, convincing portrait of how life “naturally” is, these panels demonstrate the denaturalizing process behind all identity construction. But they also show us, vividly, how it is the world and its others that assist in giving birth to identity (Nancy *The Birth to Presence* 13). Evey, while young and healthy, requires a literal mirror to construct her identity (9). If fascism is concerned with immanence, Evey’s need for an exterior mirror suggests a very different notion of identity in which the self finds itself by crossing borders. Evey’s identity construction is, in fact, just an indirect, yet individual, version of what we saw above in the molding and direction of the masses. She is driven toward illegal prostitution by a government, a figurative mirror perhaps, which has made it impossible for her to live without additional income. Evey’s “illegal” identity construction is then a product of the world outside of her. In the terms described above, Fate’s broadcast text describing the “body” of nature are sync; in this case, Evey uses make-up to construct a prostitute’s face, but, assuming it was well constructed, the facial representation does not accurately the body which fails to perform as her text (make-up) suggests (10-11). There is too much of a gap—or, to use V’s phrase as he blows up Parliament, a “grand opening” (13)—for her to convince anyone, especially a fingerman, of her identity. It is simply not a natural fit. For this reason, she serves as a useful foil to the naturalized identity of Norsefire.

V is more complicated. Years before, V had been rounded up with a number of other people rejected from society for reasons of race, sexual preference, or disability, and forced to undergo hormone treatments at Larkhill Resettlement Camp (80). V’s face is said to be horribly “ugly,” and his body, following the camp’s destruction, may be covered by burns (81-83). Unlike the fascist state’s foregrounding of the body, V’s body is lost behind his caped costume; and, on his face, he wears a Guy Fawkes mask with two brightly rouged cheeks. The very fact that his body is distant and possibly disabled in the conventional sense demonstrates that it will not be able to cohere with his facial construction; after all, a naturalizing representation cannot be grounded in an atypical body. The facial construction itself is also excessive; unlike the Voice of Fate or Evey’s construction which desires a version of realism, V’s costume eschews all such seriousness. His representation and his body embody, if you will, an enormous gap in signification, and this is the source of V’s agency.

Using Ferdinand de Saussure’s more precise language, fascism could be seen as an attempt to take a signifier and signified, and seamlessly naturalize them in the “body” of the sign. V’s agency amounts to a demonstration of the “arbitrary” link between signifier and signified, and the relational nature of the sign in general (Saussure 833). As V destroys one particular meaningful reality, the Voice of Fate is incapable of naturalizing a new meaning. It cannot keep up: there is an every-widening gap between what had been a naturalized, hence
seamless, connection between the Voice’s representation of reality and reality itself. As V continues puncturing this border, the population doubts the government, seeing that reality is open to change. Susan states the problem succinctly when Prothero, who voices Fate, is kidnapped—“he’s taken away the Voice of Fate. How shall I fill the gap it leaves? How shall my country fill the silence?” (my emphasis; 3. 189). As the preceding panels show, the People begin to fill the silence with anti-authoritarian graffiti. They write back to the Empire.

Do Ideas Copulate?

V loosens up the significatory process and reveals the meaningful play of existence. Bound up in one particular naturalized meaning of reality, fascists would, arguably, be less in touch with reality and others, leading to the alienation of love and sex. Everything, after all, in such lockstep framework is grist for the fascist mill—in such a society, “reality” would be even less likely to be encountered, if it ever is, unclouded by representation. For V, the play of the sign should, therefore, logically lead to a greater degree of bodily encounter with the world and with others, to a love and experience of sexuality without the degree of alienation seen above. But to what degree is this true?

To begin with the obvious: V’s agency against a body-hating state is contradictorily grounded in his own body’s destruction. Since his body’s destruction begins with the fascist state, this instance could be overlooked; however, the overt story of agency, really, is that of Evey and she only achieves agency at the expense of her body as V (in the guise of the state) starves, tortures, and humiliates her toward freedom. V, in other words, reproduces the alienating nature of the fascist state, but takes it to such a degree that this objectification tips over into something allegedly antithetical to the state. Freedom only happens at the moment that the body and its desire for permanence and love are overcome; freedom only happens when Evey marginalizes her love of Gordon. This reads like the age-old distrust of the body found in any number of texts from Plato’s Phaedo on: once the body and its desires are marginalized, the spirit, soul, or mind, is free from its specific body but also, in this context, the national body as well. When V tells Evey that she was in a “prison” (when she was with Gordon) which “deformed” her (170), he is using an ableist metaphor to speak not of the body but of the soul’s perversion. The body does not matter to him; in fact, the body may be tortured because it is the body that is partly at fault. The body is weak and wants comfort and it cannot be trusted.

If fascism is really a desire for immanence, for permanence and immortality, then V’s erasure of his own body becomes questionable. While, yes, he may confront fascism with the artificiality of the representational process, V also ends up implying that, yes, it is possible to reach immortality. When Finch fatally shoots him, V says, “Did you think to kill me? There’s no flesh or blood within this cloak to kill. There’s only an idea. Ideas are bullet-proof” (236). His transfiguration into the badass “idea” that cannot be killed occurs at the moment that V escapes from prison with his body covered by burns. In the figurative erasure of his mutable, finite body, he ends up reproducing the sort of fixity that he supposedly fights against—a body that is not a body, but is superhuman, god-like in its disembodiment.
Arguably, V is engaging in a version of strategic essentialism ("Essentialism"). V uses the fixity of ideas—despite his alleged aversion to fixity of all sorts—as a short term tactic on the way to a world in which any such fixity can be eliminated. In a specific sense this “essentialism” is undeniable. To bring Evey to her body-denying freedom, V must put on the essentializing body of the nation, only to dispose of it when a particular empowering work has been achieved. This remarkable process begs many questions. Not the least of which is the question of how can one find this experience apart from a totalitarian regime? Even V, after all, requires the system to transform the young woman in his hands. And it is important to note that she found this freedom (162) before V’s charade was unmasked; it was not, in other words, a confrontation with a naturalized fascist structure alongside V’s lie (i.e., his unveiling of the playful nature of the signifying process) that changed her. Evey became free primarily through the brute naturalizing force of power.

However, the above needs to be immediately complicated by those pages dealing with Ruth and Valerie’s narrative. But even in this instance in which something other than fascist force intrudes on Evey experience, there is an essentializing moment. Valerie writes, “I know every inch of this cell. This cell knows every inch of me. Except one” (160). This “inch” of personal “integrity” (156), this kernel of her essence, is that which must not be “deformed,” to repeat V’s predicate (170). While V’s strategic essence (as a fascist actor) is anathema to that of Valerie, they both remain akin as essences; they both deny the body and the play of existence. They both, for that reason, do not find a way outside of the closure of the fascist state which also denies the body on its way to some iteration of the “Thousand Year Reich.”

V’s theatricality and playful use of representation do, of course, also connect to a stereotypical gay identity, though his desire, if he has any, is never shown. Along with the Valerie and Ruth’s romance mentioned above, non-straight sex appears to be privileged; however, this privileging is almost in passing and there is no clear link between an embodied sexuality and agency which would truly counter fascism. It is possible that gay sexuality offers an answer to the fascist coupling of men and women in part because such sex is less easily yoked to biological reproduction. But, if so, this has not, really, been thematized. V’s idea-driven agency does not make room for an agency, or an ontology of love, a way of being that would allows to humans to meet as the finite figures open to the world. Ideas do not love, and they do not copulate.

David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder’s work on the representation of disability demonstrates how ideas, political and otherwise, are grounded in bodies to “help[...] secure a knowledge that would otherwise drift away of its own insubstantiality” (214-215). Norsefire, then, uses a metaphorical body to “materialize” and stabilize its social idea (which would, otherwise, be mere “textual effect[s].” V’s obliterated body, similarly, operates as a metaphor for the idea of anarchy because, after all, nothing fascist can be naturalised on such a body. Moore's text suggests that this opposition of a national body and a non-body is a real opposition when, contradictorily, Norsefire’s obsession with the body masks an ultimate desire to leave the body behind and become unadulterated idea. To the degree that they discard the body and reach for the fixity of ideas, Norsefire and V are essentially the same: they create a
world of binary oppositions and exclusions and an endless cycle of violent repetitions. Ultimately, by formally posing this battle of idea-bodies, Moore could be said to be falling into the same impasse.

**V for Vagina: Toward an Embodied Vendetta**

There are gestures toward an embodied agency that are, arguably, not coherently brought within the fold of V's own theorization of freedom. What follows constructs a theory of agency around Valerie and Finch rather than V and Evey. This is helpful for two reasons: First, in light of power's link to representation and to men, Valerie embodies a different style of writing which does not reproduce the violence of fascism. Second, V and Evey's agential process is self-oriented, even if it is focused around the erasure of the self's ideological desires. A focus on Valerie and Finch, allows for a theory of agency which begins, not with a focus on the self, but with the world outside.

The new spatiality and grounding for agency that follows is triply hidden--within the body of Valerie, in a wall, and in the novel at large. Though the word boxes do not provide the text, the toilet paper that Evey rescues from a crack in her cell wall does (154). Valerie writes, “I am me, and I don’t know who you are but I love you. I have a pencil. A little one they did not find. I am a woman. I hid it inside me.” This obscure text yokes together love, sex, and identity in complex ways. Her letter identifies fascism as an issue of the phallus and writing (pencil), transforming the phallus by framing all writing by (unproductive) sex, and the shit and piss of mortality. Valerie’s writing represents a deeply embodied and, hence, mortal agency as opposed to the fascist world around her. Due to the location of this pencil, the “invaginated” (Derrida 97) writing and identities that follow operate according to a new notion of spatiality. Nancy, in an interview, states:

> Sex doesn’t cut the body any more than the mouth or the anus, or any bodily orifice cuts the body. It is an opening, which is something different. This is why, regarding eroticism, I like to say there is no penetration, that penetration in a certain way has no proper meaning. To penetrate is to enter into the internal structure of the matter, but in physical love as well as in spiritual, it is the same—there is no penetration into, there is everywhere only a touching. (original's emphasis; “Love and Community”)

A fascist state understands sex as a “penetration” between an inside and an outside, as an assimilation of the other, and would require such a binary notion of space to orient its identity and its literal and ideological work. Nancy shows how the vagina is not something that is penetrated, as if it were a wound, but that it is a constant exposure of the inside to the outside. It is, to use his metaphor from another text, like a glove “turned inside out” (*Inoperative Community* 33). The self in such a spatial understanding would find itself spaced out and into the other. Valerie’s love would not make sense within an individualistic world in which the self finds itself through its othering and objectification of others. Valerie writes “I am me, and I don’t know who you are but I love you” (154). While she lacks knowledge of the
other, she retains a sense of “self,” and puts forward an unthinkable love. In a fascist ontology knowledge and representation are forms of closure and assimilation, but not for Valerie who denies knowledge any purchase on her lover; love is for her merely “touching.” Interestingly, love is central to the representational work of Valerie, who underwent precisely the same experience as V. In V’s case, however, love is the first thing that he challenges in his conversations with Evey.

Agency is frequently drawn as an issue of spatiality in V for Vendetta: When Evey is freed from V’s prison, she finds herself in the Shadow Gallery, drawn as a full page panel. In Evey’s case, the mobility of borders is merely represented in the absence of any thoroughgoing critique of borders. We must look to those panels representing Finch’s drug-induced experiences at Larkhill for such a radical critique: Finch states, in a direct reference to the distancing effect of ideology, that he wants to put himself in the position of V by making the experience of the camp “real” to him (210-212). While Finch does ingest L.S.D., he also says, “But they say L.S.D. only magnifies what’s already there” (212). What is already there in this scene—as it is in the pages of Thomas Pynchon Gravity’s Rainbow from which this scene was lifted (433)—is death, a voluntary confrontation with the death of the other. As he walks through the camp, ripped bags hanging on barbed wire dissolve into decapitated corpses (211-213); fences that had been spatially nearby now disappear on the horizon. Lloyd draws one panel full of dead people who, while breaking the fourth wall, look squarely at the reader. There is a strange, oscillating spatiality in these panels as these figures draw near to him (and the reader) and then, once again, Finch finds himself behind a wall. Faced with the death of the other, Finch’s (fascist) self finds itself outside of itself and with others. Nancy calls this an “inoperative community,” the experience that follows when the work and representations of a community falter and the borders between self and other are down (15 Inoperative Community).1 Brought together, Finch and Valerie’s experiences add tremendously to our understanding of an anarchic community that is not based on a monadic idea, but grounded in an exposure to the death of the other as Finch confronts the death of others at Larkhill, as Valerie loves the unknown, finite person on the other side of her prison wall, and as V and Evey confront the death of Valerie.

This interpretation, which yokes together Valerie and Finch through the spatial metaphor, is grounded in Finch’s voluntary confrontation with death and Valerie’s embodied writing. This reading also answers many of the misgivings described above, while recentering agency in the novel. Peter Paik, for instance, summarizes an online debate on James McTeigue’s 2006 film in which Evey’s transformation is understood in terms of Slavoj Žižek’s “subjective destitution” (168-170). The latter involves a “symbolic suicide, in which the act of giving up what is most precious to oneself is followed by the second renunciation whereby one recognizes that one has ‘nothing to lose in a loss.’” Evacuated, someone like Evey or V is now able to fight a system that had relied, most importantly, on their investment within society. Recentered around Valerie’s écriture féminine, the real agent of change is not V or Evey, but Finch squarely confronting the death of others, for it is Finch that freely experiences the space of Valerie’s writing, while undergoing no evacuation of the self. What remains is an identity that is not reproductive, but endlessly playing, endlessly writing, and open to the world and its
others. Destitute subjects, to say the least, do not play. In the mainstream reading, Evey assumed the position of V (easily, because after all V is not a body), and devotes herself to politics. Finch, by contrast, leaves it all behind, work, society, and sex, as he moves on to a future not predefined by the fixity of ideas.

Is V’s “idea” grounded in a graphite “inch” of “integrity” hidden in the vagina of a dying lesbian? The vast majority of young male readers, excited by V’s badass status as an un-killable idea, would find this connection to gay sexuality and body fluids disturbing, underlining to a great degree how important and how marginal this other theory of agency happens to be in the text for those most conventional readers of comics, that is, the readers of superhero comics. This reconstruction ultimately provides a reading of how *V for Vendetta* deeply questions the myth of the superhero, while complicating and extending the conventional reading of agency and love in the novel. It figures in a concrete manner a way of writing that is non-productive (homosexual), anti-binary (glove-like spatiality), and wasteful (shit and piss). Grounded in this space, V’s “idea” is only “immortal” in scare quotes as this inch of integrity, this writing drenched in the fluids of the mortal body, grants each idea only a diffident existence, absent and present, bordered and unbordered.
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Works Cited


Early draft of essay eventually published in *Sexual Ideology in the Works of Alan Moore* Comer 10


Warner Brothers, 2006. Film.
Endnote

1. Eventually, we see Finch wearing the horizontal lines of a prisoner outfit—an vivid reference to V’s pronouncement to Evey that we are all prisoners, though not all of see our bars—and then we see him naked, riffing on V’s just like V does in the opening of the novel, as he crawls into the center of Stonhenge. In what must be seen as Moore and Lloyd’s most explicit commentary on the ontotheological differences between Christianity and paganism, they depict Finch’s “epiphany” with a border, if spacious panel in the center of which is a pagan circle replete with breaks and gaps (216).