‘KILL ME SENTIMENT’: V For Vendetta and comic-to-film adaptation

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Abstract
This article historicizes the emergence of the super-hero film genre, placing the recent surge in numbers of comic-to-film adaptations in the context of commercial strategy, and in relation to perceptions of comics’ artistic validity. It argues that significant differences in production and reception between the media of comic book art and film need to be addressed in processes of adaptation, and that adaptations that do not address these features can be reductive of complexity, and even censorious. A survey of the phenomena establishes the terms of investigation, which are subsequently applied to Alan Moore and David Lloyd’s V For Vendetta (1990). Analysis problematizes the model of comic-to-film adaptation which the film presents, on the basis that it rehearses and supports the limiting cultural perspectives which comic book artists have worked to escape.

Changing perceptions
For Roger Sabin, the 1990s were a ‘new era of acceptance’ in the turbulent history of comics, an acceptance facilitated by postmodernism’s questioning of long-running ‘prejudices against popular culture’ (Sabin 1996: 236). Cultural prejudices against comics partly stem from their lack of status as art, an entrenched, negative perception encapsulated in Irving Howe’s contention that comics, as part of ‘mass culture,’ lack the deep identification that ‘a genuine work of art brings into play’ (Howe 1948: 51). Importantly, this lack of status as ‘genuine’ art made the censorship of comics in the mid-twentieth century easier to impose. Frederick Wertham’s Seduction of the Innocent had argued that ‘comic-book ideology and methodology’ were part of a ‘constellation of social and individual forces that leads to [juvenile] delinquency’ (Wertham 1955: 62). Wertham’s arguments led to the adoption of ‘self-censorship’ by US publishers in the form of a ‘Comics Code’, and indirectly contributed to the ‘partial collapse of the comics industry’ (Brooker and Jermyn 2003: xiv). But comics could acquire fresh ‘cultural legitimacy’ in the 1990s, because postmodernist, paradigmatic shifts in how art is perceived support the recognition of comics as art. Postmodernism, Sabin argues, dissolves entrenched prejudices, and allows comics’ lack of artistic status to be questioned. There are ‘no longer any agreed and inviolable criteria which can serve to differentiate art from popular culture’ (Sabin 1996: 236).

Just as comics acquired greater validity as an art form in the 1990s, the status of their creators improved – albeit as the result of more direct
action. Comic creators are rarely ‘respected as “artists” and historically have been left open to exploitation’; the work-for-hire contracts creators are usually given mean that they typically remain ‘anonymous while the characters they have created [can] go on to become household names’ (Sabin 1996: 8). Acting to redress this, creator Scott McCloud introduced a ‘Bill of Rights’ at the Northampton Creator’s Summit in 1988. This helped to create both a ‘militant atmosphere’, and pressure for recognition of the artistic value of comics, from within the industry itself. McCloud’s ‘bill’ was a key moment in what has been described as a ‘50-year struggle for creators’ rights’ (Groth 2000). Contextually and creatively, the 1990s presented a moment in which comics might consolidate a new cultural status as a genuine art form.

It is in these contexts that the inter-media dynamic which comic-to-film adaptation creates needs to be positioned and interrogated. This article therefore asks how such adaptations might affect the acceptance of the artistic validity of comic books, and examines how moralistic restrictions might be rehearsed by these films. It also asks how film adaptations may impact upon creators’ rights in relation to their creations, in the context of both commercial strategy, and the artistic strategies of adaptation.

Adaptation: risks and survival strategies
Simplistically speaking, the graphic narrative might seem to offer a ready-made storyboard to the film-maker. However, while comics might resemble a storyboard, they present other challenges to the adapter. The dividing space between images – ‘the gutter’ – is functional, but it can also be seen as a metaphor for the gap where the reader enters the narrative (McCloud 1993: 66). McCloud argues that the panels of comics ‘fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, a staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality’ (McCloud 1993: 67). Where film expresses a continuous visual presence, comic book art offers the reader lacunae, through which they can possess the narrative subjectively. ‘Creator and reader are partners in the invisible, creating something out of nothing, time and time again’ (McCloud 1993: 205). In contrast to film, where ‘the closure of electronic media is continuous, largely involuntary and virtually imperceptible’ (McCloud 1993: 67–68), comics are ‘a highly participational form of expression’ (McLuhan 1964: 107). Given this almost oppositional distinction between these two media, it should be clear that the growth in films based on graphic narratives is not because they lend themselves easily to adaptation.

The mainstream comics market has traditionally been dominated by the American publishers Marvel and DC, a dominance challenged in recent years by the popularity of Manga, Japanese comics. By 1996, ‘Marvel was waiting for the guillotine to fall [. . .] it owed $600 million to several banks. Soon after, it declared bankrupt, and was on the verge of extinction’ (Hewitt et al. 2006: 86). Marvel’s near extinction opened the door for Avi Arad and Ike Perlmutter, owners of the rights to make toys of Marvel characters, to launch a takeover based on a ‘long-term vision’ of the marketability of characters – not on the marketability of comics. Their bid was
underpinned by strategic product diversification. Arad recalls the takeover; ‘I went in and said ‘Spiderman alone is worth a billion dollars. Why would you take less for the whole company?’ To Arad, ‘it was always very clear that characters like X-Men and Hulk [...] were incredibly cinematic [...] [S]o we started doing what the previous owners didn’t want to do. We started to make movies’ (Hewitt et al. 2006: 86).

Arad restored Marvel as a viable corporate concern by concentrating on the commercial power of the household names established under the aegis of Stan Lee in the 1960s. Characters like Daredevil, X-Men, Hulk, Spiderman, Iron Man and The Fantastic Four were part of Lee’s comics revolution, ‘where the personalities of the heroes [were] more of a focus than the plots,’ and those plots revealed the ‘conflicted individual behind the adjective, be it incredible, amazing or fantastic’ (Sabin 1996: 69). Box office returns affirmed Arad’s strategy: by the time of the release of Spiderman 3 (Raimi 2007), his estimate that the character was ‘worth a billion’ had been more than doubled.

Marvel have released or developed nearly thirty properties since 1998. Their film adaptations have generated ‘more than $4 billion in worldwide revenue’ (Hewitt et al. 2006: 88). Even so, in 2002 ‘the company was still staggering under a $188 million debt’; furthermore, ‘Publishing was responsible for just 22 per cent of their income for 2002’. Marvel therefore had to keep ‘plugging away in Hollywood, milking every last dollar it could squeeze from the gravy train before it ran out of tracks’ (Deppey 2004). Commercially speaking, comic-to-film adaptation seems to benefit both comic and film industries. Indeed, ‘Superhero films [have] saved many a studio’s balance sheet. Now, comic-book flicks are as close to a sure thing as you can get in Hollywood’ (Hewitt et al. 2006: 88). Unsurprisingly, comic-to-film adaptations are usually seeded with the potential for sequels and/or spin-offs. But there are other ramifications. DC was not slow to respond in licensing its own film adaptations from its stable of comic books, including Alan Moore and David Lloyd’s V For Vendetta (McTeigue 2005), re-invigorating existing franchises with Batman Begins, The Dark Knight (Nolan 2005 and 2008) and Superman Returns (Singer 2006). The superhero film genre has arrived. The flood of adaptations does not deter Arad, who says ‘I’m not worried about over-saturation. I’m worried about movies that don’t work’ (Hewitt et al. 2006: 86).

Comic-to-film adaptation has, partly, been facilitated by advances in special effects technology, particularly computer-generated imagery, or CGI. As Sabin suggests; ‘computer modeling and animation [now] mean that almost any comics’ effects can be replicated’ (Sabin 1996: 174). Even the relatively obscure character Ghost Rider, whose head explodes into flame, can now be brought to life on the screen (Johnson 2007). Special effects technology may have caught up with the imaginative register of comics’ visual conventions, but the costs – and risks – are high. In this context, Arad’s concerns about films not working seem justified. Spiderman 3 took $890,871,626 against an estimated budget of $258,000,000 (imdb 2009a), whereas Elektra – despite being the ‘most popular female character in mainstream comics’ (Sabin 1996: 160) – took only $56,681,566 at the box office against a production budget of $43,000,000 (boxofficemojo 2009).
Sustainable resources?

There is another kind of risk involved in comic-to-film adaptation – and it has implications for both media. Household-name characters are in limited supply. As a result, Hollywood has turned to adaptations based on ‘underground’ comics, an adjective which reflects their position outside the mainstream, which is acclimatized to the safeties imposed by the ‘Comics Code’. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons *Watchmen* (1986–87) spent ‘20 years in movie development hell’ (Ivan-Zadeh 2009: 28) going through ‘six Hollywood studios, five directors and hundreds of millions of dollars’ (Crocker 2009: 14). Rather than sanitize the material, director Zack Snyder delivered a film with ‘extremely graphic violence’, resulting in *Watchmen* (Snyder 2009) being the first ‘comic book movie rated as an 18 certificate’ (Anon 2009). The financial risk is high because this reduces audience range and appeal.

The risk to comic book art is different. Marshall McLuhan, among others, notes comics’ potential to express an ‘authentic imaginative reaction to official action’ (McLuhan 1964: 109). One such work is *From Hell*. A co-creation of Moore’s with artist Eddie Campbell, and ten years in completion, *From Hell* is a re-imagining and ideological analysis of the ‘Ripper’ crimes. It is itself an adaptation of Stephen Knight’s original conspiracy-theory narrative, *Jack the Ripper: the Final Solution* (1976). The film *From Hell* (Hughes and Hughes 2001) takes the graphic novel’s title. Moore and Campbell’s work is constructed to interrogate the representation of violence. That the film abandons its feminist thesis that murder is a hegemonic instrument of suppression used by Western patriarchal societies against women throughout history is, perhaps, unsurprising. The film focuses instead on the conspiracy angle, that the murders were committed to protect the royal family from scandal. Moore describes the effect of the decision:

> When the film came out, inevitably they made it a ‘Whodunit’. Inevitably the prostitutes are all implausibly attractive, again. I thought it was much better to sort of say, practically from the second chapter, yeah, this is William Gull who was the person that I picked as a fictional culprit for the Jack the Ripper crimes. Then, not to talk about who did it, but to talk about what happened. Because, to a large degree, I think that murder, which is a horrible human event, it’s kind of been turned into a middle class parlor game.

*(Lee 2005)*

*From Hell* can be thought of as a commercially risky adaptation, not because it is violent, but because its thesis is a polemic against patriarchal power, arguing that it requires violence against women to sustain itself. In order to minimize perceived financial risks associated with overtly politicized material, film directors can exercise the editing power available in adaptation to remove features that may not be thought ‘entirely hygienic’ (Warshow 1954: 80). The film *From Hell* presents such a watering down of ideology, an example of adaptive practice that, because it removes or obscures explicit critiques, can be described as censorious. The graphic novel of *From Hell* shows the violence of hegemony and is therefore unacceptable to hegemony. Violence is acceptable – as evidenced in numerous
comic-to-film adaptations, including Watchmen. But the association of government with violence in From Hell is made to vanish in adaptation.

If adaptive decisions proceed on the basis of an ideological foundation, it raises the spectre of the censorship code initiated in the 1950s which it took comics so long to escape – essentially, ‘no references to sex, no excessive violence, no challenges to authority’ (Sabin 1996: 68). Art censorship is, perhaps, never far away: indeed, the violence shown in From Hell caused it to be ‘banned in a number of countries’ (Bullock 2002). The risk to comic art is that film adaptations, by conforming to a model of acceptability, may initiate a regressive phase in the comics industry. Once the existing pool of super-narratives has been drained, comic characters will not have to wait fifty years to be adapted. New and successful comics may be capitalized on far more rapidly, which will tip the precarious art-commerce balance of comics in favour of commercial concerns. The demand for morally acceptable and more readily adapted material, may eventually affect the ‘underground’ and thus the development of comics as an art form. Comic-to-film adaptation therefore needs to be analysed further, as its adaptive mechanisms may serve to undermine comics’ claims to artistic validity, by reiterating their disposability over and above their art status – thereby further devaluing the claims of comic book creators for rights in relation to their work.

This is, of course, speculative. However, the commercial dynamics that produce such conditions are already producing changes in Marvel’s most popular characters, the X-Men. After the ‘unexpected success’ of the film X-Men (Singer 2000), Marvel re-launched their X-Men comics, giving Grant Morrison the reins of a new title, New X-Men (Deppey 2004). Morrison’s ‘manifesto’ for the comic argues:

The movie wisely went sci-fi [. . .] and I think we must do the same. The X-MEN is not a story about super-heroes but a story about the ongoing evolutionary struggle between good/new and old/bad [. . .] The super-hero aspect should be seen as only a small element in the vast potential of this franchise.

(Deppey 2004)

Furthermore,

Morrison banned both thought balloons and captions from the series, letting the pictures and dialogue carry the action and giving the book a polished, almost cinematic feel [. . .] [D]oubtless in keeping with management’s expressed desire to appeal to fans of director Bryan Singer’s newly-minted movie franchise.

(Deppey 2004)

Perhaps most significantly, ‘[y]ou could see similar initiatives taking place throughout Marvel’s publishing line-up’ (Deppey 2004). Film adaptation is producing a commercial dynamic that may have an increasingly profound effect on the comics industry. Joe Quesada, head of Marvel comics, actively supports ‘ret-conning’, where a comic’s continuity is changed retroactively to relate to a film, stating that ‘When the movies come out, we want to make sure we have books out there that reflect what people
saw in the movie’ (Hewitt and O’Hara 2009: 96). Yet as early as 1984 Alan Moore had argued that artists had to make comics stand as an art form by doing things ‘with our storytelling that cannot be successfully duplicated by other media, and in the weight, depth, and moment of our stories’ (Moore 2006: 354). McCloud also noted this dynamic in the 1990s: ‘Far too many comics creators have no higher goal than to match the achievements of other media’ (McCloud 1993: 151).

The Ideologem
Superhero film narratives are almost invariably concerned with the origins of characters’ special powers, a strategy necessary to prepare the unacquainted spectator for the basis of narrative fantasy. Genesis holds such a high storytelling status that the major subplots of X-Men and X2 (Singer 2000, 2003) were Wolverine and Magneto’s origins. While the ideology and surface of comics may be disavowed (black uniforms replacing coloured spandex), character origins cannot: crucially, genesis determines the characters’ reality as different and establishes them as worthy of narrative. Superheroes frequently become such by accident. They do not seek power, ensuring that the superhuman is grounded in humanity rather than demonic ego. The circumstance that places them in position for genesis is often oppressive. This is particularly the case with characters from the 1960s who are often created as hero but positioned as a victim and thus emblematic of particular social concerns. The Fantastic Four and the Hulk become such through radiation poisoning; Daredevil gains his supersenses in an industrial accident, while Wolverine and Captain America are created in government experiments. However, the reiteration of these social grounds in film creates a dialogue between the ‘real’ of the comic, the ‘real’ of the film, and the actuality of the reader/spectator. Genesis must be grounded in an acceptable ‘real’, or the heroic fantasy becomes ridiculous and lacks credibility. Comic-to-film adaptations therefore direct significant resources to meeting this imperative.

A useful idea here is the ‘ideologem,’ which Patrice Pavis describes as a ‘textual and ideological unit that functions within a social, ideological and discursive formation’. One function of the ideologem is as a ‘conceptual unit’ (Pavis 1998: 84). This unit ‘can be perceived as a very particular type of discourse and plays the role of an empty enigmatic element, that the reader keeps being invited to define’ (Pavis 2007: 25). Applying this term to comics may demonstrate the significance of their frameworks in the creation of coherent meaning, and their importance in adaptation. In doing so, it is not my intention to either challenge or affirm the reader as the ‘sufficient principle of the text’s unity’ (Burke 1995: 69), but to theorize the ideologem as a mechanism in comic-to-film adaptation. Comic art can foreground the ideologem as it produces a participatory reading mode where closure is the reader’s prerogative. The semantic fields which comics create rely upon repetition to create cohesion, and the reader to produce individualized, coherent meanings from that information (Saraceni 2003: 36–46). For the comic reader to realize this coherence it is not enough to engage with character narrative alone; engagement with the ideologem is key to producing coherence. Crucially, adaptations that do not take the ideologem into their form thus risk a lack of coherence at their core.
Identifying the ideologem is of particular importance in comic-to-film adaptation as it can bridge the gap between real and fictional frameworks, and facilitate transference between media. It can do this by facilitating the processes Genette describes as ‘focalization’ and ‘proximation’, respectively, the selection of a narrative perspective (Govan et al. 2007: 91), and the updating or repositioning of a text ‘to bring it into greater proximity to the cultural and temporal context of readers or audiences’ (Sanders 2006: 163) – processes Zack Snyder indirectly acknowledges in a discussion about his adaptation of Watchmen:

Everyone says, “I respect the source material” but I think what Hollywood misses and what we need to think about is, what is the book about? What does it mean? It’s easy to get caught up in the mechanics of the script and the mechanics of the movie. I think the screenwriters can forget what it’s about. You have to deconstruct it and it’s more important to get to the philosophy of the book rather than the A to Bs [. . .] What does it mean for our society? What does it mean for our culture?

(Snyder 2007)

In the various X-Men titles, the dominant ideologem is mutation; in Daredevil it is justice; in V For Vendetta it is anarchy – and so on. In the X-Men adaptations, the narrative conflict revolves around the notion of mutant control. The problematic definition of ‘mutation’ and ‘normality’ haunts the conceptual landscape of X-Men comics, embodied in figure, concept, origin and frame. The ideologem establishes a conceptual base that grounds the tensions of the alternate reality within a fictional frame. But crucially, through its thematic, the reader can also ground those tensions in actuality. Although the X-Men films represent a fairly radical reworking, they are, at least in franchise terms, Marvel’s most successful adaptations, with the fourth in the series, X-Men Origins: Wolverine (Hood 2009), released in April 2009 (imdb 2009b). This can be attributed to an effective translation of both genesis and ideologem from medium to medium. They retain the painful reality of the indefinable mutant/normal dichotomy, which also continues to operate metaphorically for real oppression on the basis of difference.

In contrast, the Daredevil film does not adapt the comic book’s ideologem of justice. Instead, it offers a sentimental re-versioning of Daredevil’s romance with Elektra, which it brings into the present by making it an event within the film. However, the Frank Miller narratives the film is based on presents their relationship in flashback, as a first love which takes place while they study law at college. When her father is assassinated, Elektra abandons law and her lover to become vigilante. The comic Daredevil narrative relies upon the challenge to the ideologem, as Daredevil has to face inner conflict over bringing Elektra to justice, despite his feelings. Elektra (but not Daredevil) was created by Frank Miller, an invention he inserted into the back-story. Emotionally crippled by the trauma of her father’s murder, the character had such appeal that Marvel sanctioned a film adaptation, even though the character never had its own monthly title. The character Elektra reinvigorated Daredevil’s often dry ideologem of justice by pursuing an extreme vigilante agenda. Daredevil does not translate into film the moral complexities that Elektra’s vigilante killings added
to the comic’s original ideologem of justice. The Daredevil comic presented Elektra as a fully paid up killing machine, a remorseless-yet-somehow-vulnerable, orphaned, hunted, ex-ninja, and vigilante assassin-for-hire. In addition, it presented Daredevil as a deeply ethical man, motivated by his principles, and agonizingly torn apart by the return of his first love as his nemesis. By contrast, the Daredevil film presents him sentimentally as a man driven by love, and Elektra as the daughter of a wealthy businessman, expert in martial arts. Prioritizing sentiment negates the ideologem by banning or reducing its conceptual function in favour of affect, producing adaptations which are marketable on the basis of spectacular surface, but lacking in the complex meanings of the source material.

V For Vendetta

It is with the significance of the ideologem in mind, that we now turn our attention to a case study. V For Vendetta (VFV) began its career on the pages of Warrior (1982–83), a United Kingdom comic anthology. A black and white strip aimed at ‘people who don’t switch off the news’, VFV was left in limbo when Warrior folded after 26 issues (Moore and Lloyd 1990: 5). DC engaged Alan Moore and David Lloyd to complete VFV – which was reissued and completed, significantly, with the addition of colour – under its subsidiary Vertigo (1988–1990). DC were the publishers ‘most anxious to plough ahead’ with the graphic novel form in the 1980s, and VFV helped to spearhead their campaign (Sabin 1996: 167).

Orwellian in nature, VFV tells the near-future story of an anarchist freedom fighter and/or terrorist, known only as ‘V’. Masked and dressed as Guy Fawkes, V pursues a personal vendetta while seeking the overthrow of the murderous fascist regime responsible for his torture. Imprisoned with criminals, homosexuals and other ‘undesirables’, V gains his powers as the result of government experiments of which he is the sole survivor. Thus V is partly the traditional victim-hero, produced by an oppressive social framework. However, VFV exemplifies the ‘superhero revisionist stor[y],’ hence the nature of V’s heroism is more complex than traditional dichotomies (Sabin 1996: 8). Written by Moore, and illustrated by Lloyd, VFV is itself part-adaptation, its source narrative being Guy Fawkes’ gunpowder plot against parliament. VFV spoke directly to the contemporary militarism of Thatcherite Conservatism and the state-sponsored homophobia entrenched in its ‘Clause 28’. VFV is one of the most significant comics from the period as it clearly demonstrates the potential of the graphic narrative to speak inter-generationally and communicate emotionally, without reducing the significance of the socio-political.

The original black and white instalments of VFV read like a revolutionary political pamphlet: its propaganda was forceful and seditious. This aura of subversion and polemic, however, was diluted when DC added colour to VFV to enhance its marketability. Significantly, this addition also sacrificed the iconic power of Lloyd’s artwork, which explored complex ideas through relatively simple iconography, what McCloud calls ‘amplification through simplification’ (McCloud 1993: 30). As noted, the comics industry is adept at adapting its own materials. The change to colour adapted VFV from a complex vehicle to one that emphasized surface. McCloud explains how this process can occur:
The differences between black-and-white and colour comics are vast and profound, affecting every level of the reading experience. In black and white, the ideas behind the art are communicated more directly. Meaning transcends form. Art approaches language. In flat colours forms themselves take on more significance. The world becomes a playground of shapes and space. (McCloud 1993: 192)

Whereas the film adaptation of the graphic novel Persepolis (Paronnaud and Satrapi 2008) retained its source’s iconic black and white art, the film VFV was adapted from the colour version of the comic (McTeigue 2005). Colouring and collation into the long-form graphic novel format facilitated the film adaptation of VFV. Despite this facilitation there were other obstacles to overcome.

The character V embodies the branch of anarchist politics that proposes revolution by any means, expressed fully in violent action against a fascist dictatorship. V’s tactics are terrorist tactics: propaganda, assassination, and assaults upon government buildings, media figures, use of travel networks, and the detonation of symbolic targets. But ‘Anarchy wears two faces, both creator and destroyer’ (Moore and Lloyd 1990: 248). It is, therefore, also evidenced in Evey’s anarchist pacifism, which exists at a polar opposite to V’s approach. These two faces are seen together when V gives Evey the opportunity for revenge. He asks her to pick a rose and pass it to him – on the understanding that if she does so, he will murder Alistair Harper, the man who killed her lover Gordon. Evey refuses the offer and instructs V to let the rose grow (Moore and Lloyd 1996: 177). V represents the destructive force of anarchism; his compatriot Evey embodies pacifist, creative anarchism. Thus the ideologem of anarchism saturates the comic: its twin emphases on destruction and creativity as political forces are specific, sustained and explored from multiple perspectives. The ideologem of anarchism informs the graphic novel’s semantic field, helping to produce the cohesion Saraceni identifies as a major factor in coherence (Saraceni 2003: 36–46). Moore and Lloyd rely upon the ideologem and the conceptual play it provides between individual and frame to create complexity, because V’s revenge narrative alone does not produce complex meaning.

The adaptation, however, emphasizes V as a character and archetypal hero – the good man wronged. By foregrounding character and emotion from the beginning, the film-makers replace V’s anarchism as motivational grounds. This is partly accomplished by the psychologizing of V as an avenging angel, but also by the foregrounding of V’s relationship with Evey. The latter establishes a primary and emotional focalization from the film’s opening moments. Evey’s political convictions thus undergo the same process of erasure as V’s. In a voice-over to an historical re-enactment of the gunpowder plot, Evey, played by Natalie Portman, says ‘it is not an idea that I miss. It is a man. A man that made me remember the fifth of November. A man that I will never forget’ (McTeigue et al. 2006: 168). In contrast, it is only at the end of the graphic novel, after V is dead, that the emotional connection is fully acknowledged, when Evey says goodbye to ‘my love’ (Moore and Lloyd 1990: 260). The film proclaims V, played by Hugo Weaving, as the bulletproof ‘idea’ in order to provide a rationale for his actions. But the emphasis upon character psychology
negates the exploration of that idea and requires its removal to function uninterrupted (McTeigue et al. 2006: 160). Indeed, the only mention of anarchy in the film is when a shop is robbed, and a gun-toting thug shouts 'Anarchy in the UK' at a terrified shopkeeper. 1970’s punk culture and the Sex Pistols' song of the same title are the referent here, showing, ironically, how little of the graphic novel’s ideologem was transferred from medium to medium. Rather, the film repositions the material, moving across McCloud’s representational scale from the iconic to the realistic, but without retaining the conceptual depth available in the iconic mode (McCloud 1993: 46). The surface is enhanced, but the image is emptied.

Generalized references to ‘freedom’ and ‘justice’ fill the space left by this evacuation, and the reality of the graphic novel’s fictional space is thus recast in a framework rooted in the lexicon of the ‘War on Terror’. In a broadcast made from within the fascist government’s media control centre, V reminds propagandized viewers that ‘freedom’ and ‘justice’ are more than words, they are ‘perspectives’ (McTeigue et al. 2006: 32). V’s anarchism is thus obscured by the Bush-speak repetition of ‘freedom’. Operating at this level of generality the film of VFV never attains the complexity of the comic because it discards its political thrust. The ideologem of the comic is anarchy: reducing the ideologem to a general statement of resistance ensures both the absence of politics, and circumvents the adaptation’s ability to grasp the complexity and aesthetic potential of the source material.

Nevertheless, Lloyd seems happy with the film’s generalities, as he ‘never had a purist concept of V endetta as just a comic’. For Lloyd, VFV ‘always felt like an idea that could be transposed to other forms of media. In any of my work the only expectation and desire is that the spirit and key elements are retained and the same essential message is captured’ (Lloyd 2006). But the erasure of V and Evey’s anarchism is a significant loss of a key element, allowing the film-makers to ignore the ‘essential message’ sufficiently to bend the ideologem of anarchy into the service of freedom, justice, and the restoration of democracy. In contrast to Lloyd, Moore disowned the film of VFV, removed his name from the credits, and redirected his royalties to Lloyd (Kavanagh 2006).

The contrasting approach to the film of the work’s two key authors can be thought of as the result of Moore’s own political engagement in the 1980’s when VFV was produced. VFV attacked the homophobia of the Thatcher administration’s ‘Clause 28’, retrograde legislation which banned local authorities from providing education about homosexuality. Moore evoked this context in his introduction to the graphic novel:

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 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.

(Moore and Lloyd 1990: 6)
Moore’s scripting in VFV addresses the fascist overtones he saw in his political context. For, although ‘verbal meaning can never be limited to a unique, concrete content,’ V’s anarchist rhetoric is sufficiently specific to be determined and sharable. This extra definitiveness in language – what Hirsch calls ‘a willed type’ (Hirsch 1995: 116) – is evidenced towards the climax of the narrative:

Good evening London I would introduce myself, but truth to tell, I do not have a name. You can call me V. Since mankind’s dawn, a handful of oppressors have accepted the responsibility over our lives that we should have accepted for ourselves. By doing so, they took our power. By doing nothing, we gave it away. We’ve seen where their way leads, through camps and wars, towards the slaughter house. In Anarchy, there is another way. With Anarchy, from rubble comes new life, hope reinstated. They say Anarchy is dead but see . . . reports of my death were . . . exaggerated. Tomorrow, Downing Street will be destroyed [. . .] Tonight, you must choose what comes next. Lives of our own, or a return to chains. Choose carefully.

(Moore and Lloyd 1990: 258)

Whether such views are synonymous with their authors’ views or not, the adaptation’s evacuation of the ideologem disavows the political will of the central characters and is therefore reductive. A disavowal such as this ensures the widest possible audience and, therefore, the highest return. In doing so, it also shapes material in accordance with notions of appropriate content for audiences. Consequently, such disavowals are also judgments about acceptability, and therefore describable as censorious decisions.

‘KILL ME SENTIMENT’

The use of ‘moralistic words’ and accusations of censorious practices ‘to attack film adaptations’ is, as Linda Hutcheon notes, ubiquitous in critical responses (Hutcheon 2006: 2–3). The ‘morally loaded discourse of fidelity’ to a source work is, as Hutcheon argues, not an adequate basis from which to theorize adaptation generally (Hutcheon 2006: 7). But in the case of VFV, the lack of fidelity is critical, because it has ramifications beyond the adaptation itself. The adaptation removes the source’s ideologem, and here there is more at stake than the financial risk of a movie that ‘doesn’t work’. Sanitizing the ethics of the source material to conform to hegemony reiterates the commodity status of the comic over and above its art status. Furthermore, neglecting the ideologem risks establishing a negative model of comic-to-film adaptation which prioritizes affect.

It might be thought unsurprising that V’s anarchism was sanitized in adaptation. Indeed, as Moore put it before the adaptation was filmed: ‘There’s still been some talk about doing a film of V For Vendetta, but I don’t know whether America is ready for the terrorist hero just yet’ (Lee 2005). Opposition to a figure such as V might be thought predictable, particularly in the United States, where the morality of even Superman’s extra-legal acts of justice have been described as ‘in no way distinguishable from that of Hitler and the Ku Klux Klan’ (Legman 1948: 118). But Moore and Lloyd’s reimagining of the superhero is particularly pertinent here.
Their reworking of received notions of the comic book hero enables V to be an anarchist, a terrorist, and a fascinating character. The moral ambiguity available in the static medium of the comic book, however, seems to be problematic for the film for reasons which will become clear. The graphic novel of VFV offers a more deeply problematized view of the hero-vigilante paradox than can be seen through the generalities of fighting for ‘freedom’ and ‘justice’ as categories. V brings down a specifically political (fascist) government, and offers a specifically political (anarchist) vision to replace it, even as the validity of his cause is brought into question by the violence of his means. The film suggests terrorism is justifiable – if it seeks to reinstate the terms of Western hegemony. And so V’s terrorism is acceptable; but his anarchist beliefs are not. Ironically, by erasing the anarchist politics of Moore’s work, the film rehearses the kinds of oppression it purports to attack. The erasure of the ideologem thus has moral overtones, because it banishes a clear political stance in favour of creating a consumer-friendly product that is at best reduced, at worst censored, by adaptation. Adaptations such as this may need exception from Hutcheon’s argument, and to be evaluated using the terms of a fidelity discourse, so that criticism can recognize the ideological exchanges taking place. Otherwise, criticism risks passively endorsing reductive and/or censorious practices, and the ideologies which inform them.

VFV’s ideologem is removed and exchanged for an affective base from which narrative can proceed. The adaptation therefore emphasizes the psychological realism of character, reducing the significance of the socio-political frameworks the ideologem engages. The film presents V as a character with a traceable psychological through line. Hugo Weaving clearly absorbed this approach, embedded in the Wachowski brothers’ script. He says that V is

a very complex and ambiguous man, he’s been imprisoned and tortured, mentally and physically abused [. . .] This has created this vengeful angel if you like. He’s an assassin, but also a very cultured and educated man who believes strongly in individual freedom.

(Weaving 2006)

Director James McTeigue’s vision of the character also reflects this disavowal of V’s ideology: he can thus describe V as mentally damaged, and as having a ‘bipolar nature’. Foregrounding character forms a major stepping stone towards exchanging VFV’s examination of revolutionary political action for affect (McTeigue et al. 2006: 181, 201). The characters of the graphic novel are redrawn in order to create a political thriller – but without any actual politics. Freedom cannot be killed, but it is susceptible to sentiment.

At the end of the graphic novel, V dies toppling the fascist government, and Downing Street, the official residence of the British prime minister, is destroyed. Evey reflects that V ‘gored their ideology as well’ (Moore and Lloyd 1990: 260). But at the end of the film it is the Houses of Parliament that are destroyed. The film’s tumultuous explosion sequence – Westminster is atomized – was exhilarating and brave in the context of the approaching UK Terrorism Act of 2006, which criminalized the glorification of terrorist
acts. The film can thus be read as a successful proximation which actively promotes freedom of expression in a repressive context. But by changing the end of the graphic novel, and aiming less for what McTeigue describes as a ‘destructive event’ and instead for something more celebratory, the film makers produced a final moment of exchange in the adaptation (McTeigue et al. 2006: 239). The destruction of 10 Downing Street in the graphic novel is the final assassination of a specific person at a specific address, not just upon the category of ‘politician’, or on a power centre. It not only resonates with the history of real assassinations of political leaders, but depicts one of the ultimate crimes: the murder of the highest representative of the state and its laws. Hence, in the graphic novel, the entire infrastructure of the fascist government is destroyed. It is represented as a concrete and ideological annihilation, and V offers a toast:

Anarchy wears two faces, both creator and destroyer. Thus destroyers topple empires, make a canvas of clean rubble where creators then can build a better world. Rubble, once achieved makes further ruin’s means irrelevant. Away with 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 unlovely and most unforgivable. Let’s drink their health [. . .] then meet with them no more.

(Moore and Lloyd 1990: 248)

The film, however, offers sentimentality over the killing blow that the end of the graphic novel delivers: the explosion sequence that sees the Houses of Parliament destroyed is witnessed by a large crowd all wearing copies of V’s Guy Fawkes mask. As the crowd unmask to witness the destruction, a sequence of close-ups picks out murdered characters, brought back to ‘life’ to see justice done. The emotional power of this re-animation is undeniable. It is an optimistic moment that clearly has no intention of communicating an equivalent sense of political vacuum that the graphic novel leaves the reader with, as it lacks the dialogue of Evey’s invitation to consider the utopian potential that reconstruction offers:

The people stand within the ruins of society, a jail intended to outlive them all. The door is open. They can leave, or fall instead to squabbling and thence new slaveries. The choice is theirs, as ever it must be. I will not lead them, but I’ll help them build, help them create where I’ll not help them kill. The age of killers is no more. They have no place within our better world.

(Moore and Lloyd 1990: 260)

By bringing back to life characters that lost their lives to a violent regime, the film offers a conciliatory miracle of rebirth. But neither their silence nor the accompanying emotional swell reflects the cause V dies for in the graphic novel, and neither is the uneasy imperative to choose what comes next delivered. A better world is presumed.

The graphic novel contains a gibberish sentence recorded by a surveillance team taping a conversation between V and one of his victims. It neatly summarizes what happens when complex political engagement is exchanged for emphasis upon character and affect: ‘KILL ME SENTIMENT’

‘KILL ME SENTIMENT’: V For Vendetta and comic-to-film adaptation
The lure to privilege affect may play to film’s strengths and be commercially viable. But if the reductive model identified here becomes established, it is likely to have an increasing effect upon the acceptance of comics as art. For, by foregrounding character and affect above the source’s ideologem and its supporting frameworks, this adaptive model reiterates an outdated distrust of comics’ moral capacity, producing at best reduction and at worst censorious practice. Adaptation could eventually enhance comic book creators’ claims for rights in relation to their creations, but this film does little to provide a model that signposts a brighter future beyond the industry’s conception of comic-to-film adaptation as a strategy of commercial survival. Lower budget movies focusing on individual characters, or cross-over films capitalizing on existing audiences and resources may begin to dominate as a result of the global financial crisis (Hewitt and O’Hara 2009: 93–95). But if the explicit politics of a seminal work such as VFV can be discarded in adaptation, it is unlikely that other significant art works from the comics underground will fare better in terms of retaining complexity when their turn comes around – as it surely will.

References


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