

From Screens to Streets

The Dissemination of Guy Fawkes Image in Physical and Living Media

S. Yigit Soncul

The image of Guy Fawkes seems to be transformed into a contagious entity, which is present globally, in recent years. Its vast circulation through conventional media can chronologically be first connected to 1981 comic book *V for Vendetta* and the 2005 film of the same name, where it has been utilised in the form of a mask. In this form it has been employed by the hacktivist group Anonymous, too, which signifies a further propagation by the means of screen media. However, its frequent use in the post-2010 civil protest movements around the world delineates a more complex picture. Even though these events are not organically connected to each other at all, the image of Guy Fawkes has been present in all of them: examples include the so called Arab Spring movements starting in the late 2010 in Tunisia, Occupy Movement in the United States in 2011, and the Gezi Park protests in Turkey in 2013.

This paper can be read as an attempt to discuss the underlying conditions which makes such dissemination of images possible. That being said, to do this, I will not choose to apply textual analysis to the comic book or to the film and try to locate their cultural significance or their relation to the contemporary social, political or historical actuality. Instead, this paper shall investigate the dissemination of the image of Guy Fawkes in the contemporary political context and its relation to the contemporary networked media ecology. What I will try to do is to crystallise the pervasive image in question and locate it in

the contemporary culture by tracing its history, so to say, of mediation. To put it another way; this paper can be read as a study in diagrams of propagation in visual culture. I will try to link the presences of such image in these protests to the contemporary media ecology to open up a debate on the politics of contemporary images.

I will discuss this phenomenon as an image contagion that realises itself by disseminating from one host to another. The host here stands for physical, cultural or technological media, that is to say, lifeless media: like a canvas or an LCD. But the host here stands for a living medium, too: the human body. Before going any further I would like to bring art historian and image theorist Hans Belting into discussion, to clarify what I refer to when I say the image of Guy Fawkes and with such taxonomy of media.

In his book, *An Anthropology of Images* (2011), Belting demonstrates a rather fresh perspective on the relationship between images, media and bodies. He employs an approach that bears some similarities to the works of W.J.T. Mitchell (2005) and David Freedberg (1989) on the materiality and immateriality of the visual sphere. First I want to quote Belting and then I will try to articulate his theory in order to apply it to this phenomenon. Belting says:

What in the realm of bodies and objects is their matter, in the world of pictures is their medium. As images by definition have no body, they need a medium in which they become embodied. (2011: 13)

In Belting's approach, the natures of the body and the medium resemble each other closely through their materiality. They can be both embodiements of images. Images, in a sense, travel between them. A painting, for example, is an image that is being embodied on the canvas, whereas bodies are capable of embodying images through gestures, body paintings, tattoos, masks and so on. Then, through this angle, images can be embodied by a diversity of media; and they are transmissible, since one particular image can move on to be present on different objects. Images do exist, and have a path of their own (a life of

their own as Mitchell would put it), though they are only present in the world of objects when they become embodied—like viruses which are only active within living hosts, images are only physically visible on material media (living or not). As the relations between the bodies and the media create the channel for such dissemination, the image stands as the unit of contagion, and in this case the unit seems to be the image of Guy Fawkes.

Yet, is the human body merely an embodier of this virus—like a screen? Not exactly. What is significantly different in the domain of the living body, comparing to the technological medium, is its additional capacity to perceive images and to create internal images, like dreams or awake internal visualisations. However, as Belting notes:

When external pictures are re-embodied as our own images, we substitute for their fabricated medium our own body, which, when it serves in this capacity, turns into a living or natural medium. (*Ibid.*: 16)

Then, in the interval in which we embody an image, our capacity to generate internal images is no longer at focus, as our body is reduced to be a mere physical medium: at least from the perspective of all but the subject who is embodying the particular image. So, let's take a look at the image of Guy Fawkes through this angle.



Fig 1 Crispijn van de Passe, 17th Century.

This image, and even the mask, predates the comic book, though not in an identical form. Historically, Fawkes was one of the members of a Catholic resistance movement who unsuccessfully attempted to blow up the Houses of Parliament in 1605 on the 5th of November. After this attempt the Parliament of England passed an act which rendered this date a celebration day for the failure of the plot. This date is called Guy Fawkes night or Bonfire night, which is still actively celebrated across Great Britain. In some points in history, Guy Fawkes masks have also been used in this celebration, so their origin, if there is one, is in the streets.

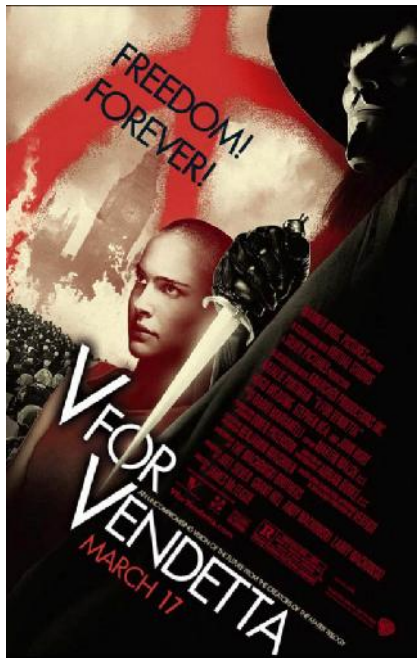


Fig 2 *V for vendetta*, 1981

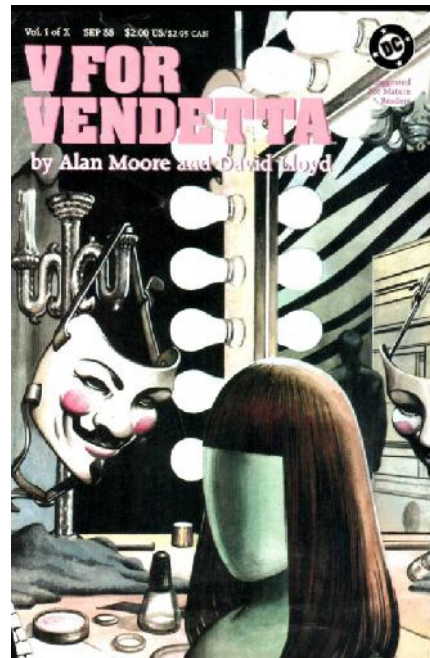


Fig 3 *V for vendetta*, 2005

With the graphic novel *V for Vendetta* and with its film adaptation, Guy Fawkes was transformed into a secular hero of positive significance—its political charge for some has changed—and the image became closer to the version that is arguably the most frequently employed today. Mostly present, mainly in the form of a mask. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, we see this image across a

variety of media: both technical and biological. The hacktivist group Anonymous, employed this image as its face, so to speak, and we can partly hold it responsible for such vast dissemination.

The turn, though, came after 2010 when this image, which is generally embodied on a mask, and therefore through people – human bodies - wearing it, started to show up in protests that are not strictly connected to each other; in Sao Paulo, New York City, Istanbul, and Cairo. Different geographical locations, different purposes or conditions: close temporalities: the same image. Even though its most common version is taken from *V for Vendetta*, we can also see this image contaminating and merging with other ones. A striking example has been posted to Twitter (2013). In this image we see the Turkish activist Ethem Sarisuluk, who was eventually shot in the head by the police and lost his life in the Gezi protests. One of the most prominent left-wing hacktivist groups of Turkey, Red Hack, posted: a combination of Ethem’s face and the mask after this incident.



Fig 4 The mask at the protests around the globe

Then, this image is of shifting signification and contaminates other images as well. So why, then, this image occupies such space in the contemporary world, where it is being embodied both on the screen and also, as we can see, on the streets through human bodies. Both by physical and living media. To restate it from another angle: this image contaminates various media, including human bodies and even other images, but what does it try to achieve? I think this should be read with the screen culture of 21st century. As the late visual culture scholar Anne Friedberg encapsulates: «Screens have become a pervasive part of the daily experience» (2009: 6) in the present century.

Whether it is the screen of a smartphone that one keeps in its pocket, moving along with its body, or a screen of a closed-circuit system that, rather literally, helps others to screen you on the street or in a train station, this entity seems omnipresent. The function of the body as embodier of images is of course not a gift of recent technology nor fundamentally related to the screen, though such global contaminations could be related to the omnipresence of such entity, as screens are the face of ever-reaching and decentralised networks and webs. Most of all, the very existence of this image in this scale emphasises the channels it has travelled. So what are these channels – using screens as their “faces” – really capable of doing?

One of the functions of global networks is that they act as channels of power relations. Even on the very surface of this case: we can see that a dissemination in such network can dictate a certain embodiment or an arrangement in real life for real bodies. Thus, it has immediate resonances with the Foucauldian conception of bio-power. As the screens reach out to our very personal spaces and stick to our bodies wherever we move, rendering our actions vulnerable to monitoring, the scale and mode of operation of both control and intervention have changed.

But the function of these channels may be at least double-edged. They can be tools for exercising power on life, but they can also be the point where resistance to such mechanisms arises. And I think the dissemination of Guy Fawkes image invokes such stance: the double quality of such connectedness. Here I want to quote two other remarks

from Belting on the nature of the image and the mask, which I think may help to illuminate our case. On the ambivalence of the nature of physical embodiments of images, Belting says:

The image is present in its medium (otherwise we could not see it), and yet it refers to the absence of that entity of which it is a representation (2011: 20)

He also evaluates a parallel nature for the mask:

[W]ith its single surface, the mask accomplishes both concealment and exposure. Like the image it draws its vitality from an absence, which it replaces with a substitute presence. (*Ibid.*: 93)

The image of Guy Fawkes materializes on both screens and streets in a time that can be seen as characterised by a strong relationship between absence and presence. Presence of bodies on the streets to claim political existence: to claim an absence. And this is also intensified with its frequent use as a mask or, to put it another way, its embodiment in the form of a mask that also refers to a relationship between absence and presence. Presence of the image refers to an absence to be fulfilled. Thus, I argue, without even leaving a need for analysing the texts and the events that may have influenced it, the dissemination of the image of Guy Fawkes, ever-propagated and masked, invokes a “revolutionary” stance. If you assume revolutionary act as an act that is present for an absence. And the masked individual as such becomes the place where image, body and medium are present at the same time: a (re)mediated image embodied by the material of the mask (medium) and the human body. A triad that is essential to the 21st century screen culture, which may be providing the spatio-temporality of change.

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The paper

Date sent: 16/02/2014

Date accepted: 30/04/2014

Date published: 30/05/2014

How to quote this paper

Soncul, S. Yigit, "From Screens to Streets: The Dissemination of Guy Fawkes Image in Physical and Living Media", *Between*, IV.7 (2014), <http://www.Between-journal.it/>