

CXXXII – 'V for Vendetta'

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By Butler Shaffer

I have always been a highly-critical moviegoer. I do not attend a film without first learning as much about it as I can, particularly from a synthesis of movie reviews and opinions provided by friends and relatives whose judgments I trust. As a consequence, I am not a movie buff; I have seen only one of the films nominated for major Oscars this year, *Syriana*, a picture I highly recommend.

It is for this reason that I awaited, with skeptical enthusiasm, the opening of *V for Vendetta*. I had heard so much about it ever since one of my daughters told me, a number of months ago, of a billboard she saw at the Warner Brothers studios with the accompanying language: "People should not be afraid of their governments. Governments should be afraid of their people."

My eager anticipation of seeing this film was tempered, somewhat, by past experiences. Was this to be just another superficial anti-establishment flick, with a few libertarian one-liners thrown in for effect, and a sufficient amount of pyrotechnics to induce teenagers to attend? I have seen enough movies in which tyrannical statist brutalize innocent people, but with an heroic FBI or Justice Department official entering, at the end, to expose and rectify the wrongdoing and, in so doing, leave the audience with the assurance that the system works to correct itself.

My wife and I attended the opening day of this film and, I am happy to report, it far exceeded my expectations. Not only is this the most powerful anti-state film I have ever seen — one that makes no compromises with the system — but is, purely from a film-making perspective, one of the best movies I have seen in some time. Had the subject matter of this film been anti-vivisectionism, the depletion of the rainforests, or the sorrows of divorces, its acting, writing, direction, and other production features would have made watching it an enjoyable experience.

The story takes place in a 21st century England that is ruled by the most vicious of tyrants, played by John Hurt. In his regime, people are continually reminded that a state-imposed curfew is "for your protection" with painful consequences awaiting those who do not comply. Into this setting steps the hero, *V* — played by Hugo Weaving — a man who had been brutalized by statist functionaries, and who is intent on destroying this most inhumane, fascistic state.

I shall not spoil the movie for you by revealing more of its story. Suffice it to say that, from a libertarian/anarchistic perspective, this film is for real! It digs beneath the surface of events to reveal the psychological factors — particularly our own fears — and institutional interests that combine to make tyranny possible. Natalie Portman — who plays the heroine, Evey — does a magnificent job playing out the sense of self-liberation so essential to a free life.

Prior to my attending this film, I encountered reviews by a few statisticians who saw the film as a defense of terrorism. Such a comment reveals more about the reviewers than of the movie itself. Any kind of resistance to tyranny is bound to strike terror into the hearts of members of the established order. Thus were the American colonials and Mohandas Gandhi terrorists to the British; the Warsaw ghetto uprisings and the French underground movements actions to the German government; and the organized resistance of Algerians acts of terrorism to the French. Even today, the Iraqi resistance to the destruction and domination of their country is regarded as terrorism by the invading American state!

The openly anarchistic nature of this movie will produce shudders in well-conditioned statisticians who, in the words of F.A. Hayek, cling to their fear of trusting uncontrolled social forces. Such people will trot out historic instances in which self-proclaimed anarchists killed a few score of people, as evidence of the need for government. That states managed, in the 20th century alone, to slaughter some 200,000,000 people in wars and genocides has never provided an occasion for defenders of political systems to do a practical cost/benefit analysis of these alternative systems!

While *V for Vendetta* contains a great deal of violence, it reminds us, early on, of the social application of Newton's Third Law of Motion: for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. In a political context, it is as childish to posit the violence engaged in by one group as peacekeeping and the opposing group as terrorism, as it is to regard one side as good and the other as evil. It is the interdependent violence inherent in all political systems that is made evident in this film.

There is one poignant scene in this movie in which thousands of unarmed, peaceful individuals confront the well-armed military forces of the state. This scene, more than any other, may provide insight into how society might evolve in a world in which vertically-structured institutions are collapsing. The transformations of thinking that are arising from the study of chaos or complexity are producing changes in social behavior that make state systems obsolete. The predictability the statisticians imagine inheres in their structured apparatuses has been rendered illusory. Terry Pratchett's observation that chaos always defeats order because it is better organized, reflects a world in flux. Perhaps a film such as *V for Vendetta* will provide us an opportunity to begin exploring the orderly nature of anarchistic systems.

I have no doubt that this film will generate u201Cterroru201D in the minds of those who regard the domination of others either as some inherent right or as an inevitable necessity for social order. But it is not the fear of violence that will be their principal concern. Violence will be the fear that the media will transmit to the boobeisie to keep them huddled at the feet of their masters. The establishment's fear is not that buildings will be blown up — on the contrary, the destruction of the World Trade Center actually benefited the state — but that men and women will begin to dismantle the structures of political authority in their thinking. To paraphrase the words of Evey, it is not buildings that people need, but hope.

For those who are serious about living in a society in which peace, liberty, and the inviolability of the human spirit prevail, V for Vendetta provides an opportunity to rethink our social assumptions; to develop new ideas about our relationships to one another. And as u201CVu201D informs us, u201Cideas are bulletproof.u201D This film is a powerful antidote to the mindset that is destroying mankind. It is not for those who wish only to reform the state and confirm beliefs that the 20th century has rendered no longer suitable to the interests of humanity.

The Best of Butler Shaffer

