

THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO, NAPOLEON, AND V FOR VENDETTA

I'm not a movie person. I used to be, when I lived in San Francisco and going to movies offered delightful experiences ranging from the mini-mall of the Kabuki Theater to the cozy popcorn of the Red Vic. Here in Michigan, though, the experience is not so magical. Nevertheless, because I once hung out with folks hipper than I am, I have a remarkable habit of going to the opening weekend showings of the Wachowski Brother films, including V for Vendetta.

I can't vouch for V for Vendetta's interpretation of the Alan Moore graphic novel (and I'm frankly glad that my graphic novelist friend probably won't read this post). But I can vouch for V for Vendetta's interpretation of Count of Monte Cristo. Whether intentionally or not, the movie succeeds in doing something the original serialized novel did (and few appropriations since have done well)—use a pop culture medium to meditate on the most just relationship between the state and individual. In this post, I'll explain some of the political background of the Count of Monte Cristo as a way to explain how clever V for Vendetta's appropriation of the Monte Cristo tale is. I've given a spoiler alert below, so if you want to read the bit on Monte Cristo, you'll know where you need to stop before you get to the V for Vendetta stuff.

Napoleon as a Background to Monte Cristo

Most people don't realize this about Count of Monte Cristo. But it was a remarkably politically charged book. Consider, first of all, the premise. Edmond Dantes is imprisoned, and through that process of imprisonment, becomes superhuman, the cipher that is the Count of Monte Cristo. But the reason for Dantes'

imprisonment—in a book appearing during the troubled period leading up to 1848 and soon thereafter Louis-Napoleon's Second Empire—is an association with Napoleon. That is, a perceived connection with Napoleon Bonaparte set off a process that produced a figure every bit as superhuman as Bonaparte himself, one who managed to deliver justice in the corrupt world of July Monarchy Paris.

And that was not a mistake. The Count of Monte Cristo was first published from 1844 to 1845 in the era's equivalent of the Wall Street Journal—the banker's paper, the paper most supportive of France's Orleans government. Not long before the serialization of Monte Cristo, the newspaper published another serial novel, The Mysteries of Paris, that featured another such superhuman character and also drawing an explicit connection to Bonaparte. The novels were two of the most popular and best-compensated books of the pre-1848 period. Remarkably, both used this organ of the governing party to present a challenge to it.

But it was not just this newspaper; every major paper in Paris serialized some kind of Napoleon narrative in their feuilleton section: the memoirs of one of Napoleon's relatives, the retelling of one incident from his life. Even minor, individual feuilleton essays used Napoleon's name as a means to talk about desirable characteristics. My favorite is a feuilleton reporting the results of the weekly horse race at Bois de Boulogne; the feuilleton used the description of one horse to hail the qualities of Napoleon, leaving ambiguous, of course, whether it referred to the horse named Napoleon or the man of the same name. The invocation of Napoleon was almost omnipresent in the feuilleton sections where Monte Cristo first appeared. It was as if, today, every TV channel featured series about JFK at the same time, implying a Kennedy was the only solution to our woes.

The omnipresence of Napoleon did not happen by

accident. The censorship laws of the day (enforced by Janet Jackson's boob-type fines) forbade any mention of the word Bourbon or Republic, as well as any explicit criticism of the king or a member of his government. If you wanted to complain, the legally available way to do so was to invoke Napoleon.

What many of these narratives effectively explored was the means by which a superhuman Napoleonic character could bring justice to an increasingly industrialized bourgeois society. In the earlier serial novel, *Mysteries of Paris*, the Napoleonic main character Rodolphe was basically a pop socialist, coaching the poor to visualize their dreams, then delivering those dreams. Perhaps not incidentally, Louis-Napoleon had recently published a socialist tract, every bit as dreamy as Rodolphe's promises. Alexandre Dumas went one step further, actually visiting Louis-Napoleon in jail (he had been jailed after a coup attempt) just before Dumas began writing *Monte Cristo*. And while *Monte Cristo* was not quite as popular, in its day, as *Mysteries of Paris*, the Napoleon figure depicted in it more closely resembles the benevolent dictator Louis-Napoleon would claim to be.

There's a reason why these novels used Napoleonic figures, beyond the censorship laws. The French were seeking a way to merge the individual created by the Rights of Man with the unity of Louis XIV, whose famous statement "L'Etat, C'est moi" effectively claimed the state and the sovereign to be one. The reign of Louis Phillippe, who legally ruled under the novel formulation "King of the French," just wasn't delivering (though the failure had as much to do with his embrace of bourgeois capitalism as it did with any legal basis for his power). Napoleon Bonaparte—at once a leader who embodied the nation as had Louis XIV, and the consummate individual who succeeded through merit—offered a way to achieve both unified nation and individual. The novelistic Napoleonic reincarnations were effectively meditations on how to accomplish that formula again.

V for Vendetta, the Individual, the State

That's the aspect of the Count of Monte Cristo that V for Vendetta has managed to recreate so well. The fascist nation depicted in the movie thrives on dehumanization. V is at once the product of that dehumanization and the refutation of it. He is not only stronger than the state, he cherishes all the trappings of individuality with his taste in music, movies, art. And because of these characteristics (and because he exposes the lies of power, something else that Monte Cristo did), V succeeds in having the entire nation identify with him.

The revelation of identity is central to the Count of Monte Cristo. Indeed, it is the way he metes out judgment. He has to do no more than reveal his identity to his three enemies to defeat them utterly, as he does here with Comte de Morcerf, the man who stole his fiancée, when he begs Monte Cristo to reveal his true identity:

'I admit that I am known to you, but I do not know you, you adventurer, smothered in gold and precious stones! In Paris you call yourself the Count of Monte Cristo. In Italy, Sinbad the Sailor. In Malta—who knows what? I have forgotten. What I ask from you is your real name. I want to know your true name, in the midst of these hundred false names, so that I can say it on the field of combat as I plunge my sword in your heart.'

[snip]

'Fernand!' Monte Cristo cried. 'Of my hundred names, I shall need to tell you only one to strike you down. But you can already guess that name, can't you? Or, rather, you can recall it. For in spite of all my woes, in spite of all my tortures, I can now show you a face rejuvenated by the joy of revenge, a face that you must have seen often in

your dreams since your marriage ... your marriage to my fiancée, Mercedes!’

The general, his head thrown back, his hands held out, his eyes staring, watched this dreadful spectacle in silence. Then, reaching out for the wall and leaning on it, he slid slowly along it to the door, out of which he retreated backwards, giving this one, single, lugubrious, lamentable, heart-rending cry: ‘Edmond Dantes!’

Realizing Monte-Cristo’s identity—realizing that this super-human man worthy of respect is the same ordinary man that he cheated many years earlier—is enough to make Morcerf kill himself.

[spoiler alert]

There is this aspect of identity in V’s revenge. He always makes sure his victims recognize him (though he remains nameless) before he kills them, so their last moments are the horror of realizing the creation of their own crimes has been their undoing.

But there’s another aspect of identity, “showing a face,” as Monte Cristo says, that V for Vendetta displaces. For V’s mask sets a narrative expectation in the same way a gun does; we expect a gun shown early in a movie to be shot before that movie ends, we expect a mask to be raised and the face underneath revealed. Yet V for Vendetta frustrates this expectation. Several times, the movie presents us with a moment that, traditionally, would be the unmasking. Yet even when Evey asks V to remove his mask, he refuses to do so. V never does it, he never reveals his face.

Instead, the average people do. The average people, cast to look like you and I—or like you and I would look if we were Brits. Old people, girls in coke-bottle glasses, people who are not Hollywood beauty. The narrative expectation that V will find justice at the moment of his unmasking is resolved only when the crowd of

nameless average people raise their mask and reveal themselves in all their individuality.

V for Vendetta offers neither a novel alternative to fascism nor a really well developed one, philosophically or politically. It is no more than a promise that individuals, acting in solidarity, can replace the oppressive state.

But it appropriates and overturns the tradition of the Count of Monte Cristo in a remarkable way. It removes the central Napoleon figure, making his identity secondary to the delivery of justice. It takes a narrative that has been used to lobby for the return of a dictator and flips that into an embrace of the common man.