

THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO WAS NOT FICTION

As someone who received her PhD in Comparative Literature just months before Bush was selected and who has read maybe ten fictional books since I stopped teaching fiction, I feel obliged to point to—and comment on—Chris Bowers' post on "The Rise of the Non-Fictional Aesthetic."

This decade seems to have brought on a broad shift in the leftist aesthetic in America. Although the dates are not exact, the shift I sense is from an inward-looking, confessional, disengaged, self-reflexive aesthetic of depression of the previous decade, toward an outward-looking, highly engaged, self-creating, activism-oriented, reality based aesthetic of determination. The newfound popularity of the political documentary, and the declining popularity of self-reflexive, retro-cool films in the style of Quentin Tarantino is but one cultural example of this. The vast increase in electoral related activism is another, more obvious example. It is possible that I am just talking out of my butt on this one, and describing a personal shift in aesthetic rather than something more broadly based. Still, I think that the rise of a more pluralistic America, combined with the vastly reduced cost of information brought on by recent technological developments, and topped off with a truly reactionary regime seizing power in America against the wishes of the American populace, really did change our cultural predilections quite profoundly.

Jennifer argues that we have lost something as progressives in this shift,

and that we need to find a way to re-incorporate the fictional narrative back into our lives. While I admit that this is a sense I have often had during my five years in professional politics, I also don't think that there is any going back at this point. Some really bad shit happened—bad shit that will stay with us all and make the future difficult for a long time to come. I don't think that there is any returning to the old aesthetic until our problems of war, unsustainable and corporatized economics have been truly mitigated, and that the forces waging a war of civilizations have suffered multiple, severe setbacks. The self-reflexive, fictional, depressed aesthetic just doesn't seem relevant anymore, or at least right now. We are way past Kurt Cobain at this point. The rise of a non-fictional, engaged aesthetic probably coincides with the rise of the long, global emergency. Until that emergency has been either downgraded or deemed hopeless, I don't expect the inward-looking, the disengaged-cool, and the fictional to come back anytime soon. There is no way to ignore reality anymore, and that which shows us a way out of our problems will be very similar to that which is beautiful for a long time to come.

I don't so much disagree with what Chris has to say, except to object to his characterization of this aesthetic—non-fiction versus fiction. Human beings construct narratives. All narratives—whether they tell a story about an uppity black man running for President or about a prisoner who exacts the ultimate revenge—involve a great deal of artifice and linguistic craft. Further, the book *Factual Fictions* makes a compelling argument that the Anglo concept of "fiction" is a culturally contingent concept that arose out of a need to distinguish between "news"—that was subject to

libel laws—and "fiction"—that could say whatever it wanted about people in power, so long as those people in power were not "real." Similar legally driven formulations of "fiction" exist in other cultures, and not every culture makes the distinction between "non-fiction" and "fiction." In other words, the terms "fiction" and "non-fiction" are really just convenient classifications for stories that helps people sort out library shelves and legal battles. Fundamentally, narratives are still narratives, which are necessary tools for the human creature to make sense of and interact with her world.

And I mean it when I say, "the Count of Monte Cristo was not fiction"—even though it's one of the most compelling stories of all time and even though it gets stored in the juvenile fiction shelf of most libraries. "It's a book you read when you're fourteen," Slavoj Zizek scoffed to me once.

But the narrative was published in a newspaper. Not the kind of literary journal you think of when you thin of Dickens' serialized novels, but an honest to god daily newspaper, with each installment beginning on the bottom of the front page, just under the reports from Parliament. This story, about a guy imprisoned at least partly because he once met with Napoleon, who then goes on to become a Napoleonic figure plunked down in "modern" Paris, appeared at a time when censorship laws dictated that you couldn't use the words "Bourbon" or "Republique" if you were writing things critical of the government. Dumas wrote the story after having met Louis-Napoleon, who was sitting in prison for one of his early unsuccessful coup attempts. But he wasn't the only one writing these Napoleonic narratives. Every single major daily in Paris—every one—was printing some kind of narrative about Napoleon in this period, whether they were "fictions," memoirs from Napoleon's brothers, race track reports using a horse named "Napoleon" as an allegory for speed and skill. These stories were all different conceptualizations of a certain kind of power

that exerted tremendous influence in Paris at the time. All these narratives about Napoleon usually get described as the cultural phenomenon that was the "cult of Napoleon" but, as events would later prove, that cultural phenomenon was in no way fictional.

In a world in which Jack Bauer has greater influence over our detainee policies than all the FBI's best experts on interrogation methods, we would do well to avoid the trap of "fiction" and "non-fiction."

So I would describe what has happened somewhat differently than Chris. If the Clinton wars and the Iraq War did anything, they demonstrated that the Right had a sophisticated and effective narrative industry, one that was having a dramatic effect on our governance. While we leftists were all playing with a-utilitarian postmodernism in the academy and fiction workshops, the Right was implementing a philosophy of utilitarian postmodernism—deliberately mobilizing narratives to accrue power into the hands of corporations and those who guard them. So it's not so much our aesthetic that has changed, I think, as our understanding of the battlefield.

That doesn't mean there's not a place for narratives that focus on emotion and personal relationships and everyday life. What it means is that we have to—and should always have been—engaging actively in the contest over dominant narratives. The Left has long had an abundance of people skilled in the construction of narratives—it's just we didn't see the need to mobilize those skills on a large scale, or at least not outside of the realm deemed "fiction." Once we recognize that narratives have the same power, whether they're labeled "fiction" or "non-fiction," those of us trained in the field can better use our skills to good end.

TIME TO THROW THE PAYDAY MONEYLENDERS OUT OF THE CHRISTIAN CONSERVATIVE TEMPLES



I can't vouch for their underlying research, but two professors just completed a study showing a strong correlation between the number of payday lenders in localities in the US and the prominence of Christian Conservatives (h/t The Consumerist).

Payday lenders, creditors that charge interest rates averaging about 450 percent, are more prevalent in Conservative Christian states, according to a new study coauthored by University of Utah law professor Christopher Peterson. The study, which is based on the most comprehensive database of payday lender locations yet compiled, maps a surprising relationship between populations of Christian conservatives and the proliferation of payday lenders.

"We started this project hoping to find out more about the spatial location of payday lenders and were surprised when a pattern reflecting a correlation with the American Bible Belt and Mormon Mountain West emerged," said Peterson, who conducted the research and coauthored the article with Steven M. Graves, an associate professor of geography at California State University, Northridge. "The natural hypothesis would be to assume that given Biblical condemnation of usury there

would be aggressive regulation and less demand for payday loans in these states, but ironically, the numbers show the opposite is true. It's sad that states with a pious and honorable religious heritage now disproportionately host predatory lenders."

Peterson and Graves' article, titled "Usury Law and the Christian Right," is forthcoming this Spring in the Catholic University Law Review. It profiles states all around the nation examining the unprecedented spread of payday lenders during a time of growing Christian engagement in the political process. "A generation ago, populist Christian leaders were among the most aggressive opponents of usurious lending. But today many Christian leaders take large campaign contributions from the credit industry and no longer support the Biblical injunction against usury in public life," Peterson said. [my emphasis]

In the context of primary discussions about how President Hillary or President Obama will fix Bush's clusterfuck economy without turning the US into Argentina, I find this detail really fascinating. The people preying on the financial insecurity of working people are also some of the people bank-rolling the preachers who give Republicans moral cover for their immoral ways.

All the more reason to make this kind of predatory lending illegal.

Update: Here's what PastorDan has to say about this (see his h/t to selise, too):

Now, correlation is not causation, of course. Even if it were, none of these are perfect correlations. But my hunch is that with a little investigation, we'll discover this study describes the cultural creep of Southern mores hitting

a roadblock in the Northeast and in a few other places with effective usury laws on the books.

To the "faith and politics" point, though, it seems to me that the best use of these maps might be to suggest places for local reform of lending practices. There's no reason why states like Michigan or Wisconsin should have anywhere near as many payday operations as they do. We have the political *and* religious resources to put an end to that form of predation. It's the right thing to do, and it's a great springboard into a broader progressive economic agenda.

Speaking from MI (and PastorDan is speaking from WI), I'd love to see us have the resources to put an end to predatory lending...

MUKASEY, ORWELL, AND BRADBURY

Keith Olbermann notes, with great dismay, that Michael Mukasey chose to hang a portrait of George Orwell in his office (the other portrait is Chief Justice Robert Jackson, which makes me quite happy).

This would be the original Reuters story. The operative part would seem to be the AG's insistence that he esteems Eric Blair, AKA Orwell, for the clarity, not the subject, of his writing.

I'm still not sure I haven't gotten a very specific "Your Worst Fear Suddenly Materializes In Real Life As A Matter-Of-Fact Wire Story" moment going on here. Or maybe it's some sort of "You've

Been A Good Boy: Here Is Six Weeks Worth Of Jokes, No Lifting Involved" thing.

For the record, I'm willing to take Mukasey at his word—that he esteems Orwell for the clarity of his prose and, just as importantly, for his understanding of the way politics demeans language.

In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of the political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism., question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenseless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers*. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them.

I also fancy, with absolutely no basis, that Mukasey might also value the Orwell of *Homage to Catalonia*, in which Orwell described his experience fighting fascism in Spain. The book is a narrative of how an idealistic fight

founders on the real ugliness of ideological struggle and war, how even individuals fighting a just war with good intentions will fall victim to the human failings of their allies.

I take some comfort in the notion that this Attorney General, presiding over the last year of the corrupted expression of purportedly idealist neoconservatism that is the Bush Administration, might recognize that politics corrupts language and ideological purity always cedes to corruption.

But then, I don't know how to square that understanding with the way that Mukasey answered a question I recently asked, whether or not he supports the re-nomination of Stephen Bradbury (via Marty Lederman).

He can also expect to be questioned in the hearing about the White House's renomination this week of Steven G. Bradbury to run the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel as an assistant attorney general.

The new nomination was seen as a snub to Senate Democrats who had called for the White House to find another candidate for the job after the disclosure in October that Mr. Bradbury, who is running the office without Senate confirmation, had written classified legal memorandums in 2005 that authorized the use of interrogation methods that human rights groups define as torture.

"Steve Bradbury is one of the finest lawyers I've ever met," Mr. Mukasey said when asked if he supported the White House move. "I want to continue working with him."

I mean, on its face, this is quite plain. Mukasey has no problem with the tactical or ideological implications of Bradbury's renomination, he's happy to work with Bradbury

even while he promised to review the OLC opinions Bradbury wrote justifying torture. And, as Lederman suggested to me via email, perhaps Bradbury helped Mukasey during the nomination process.

But I'm struck that this self-declared fan of the clarity of Orwell's prose didn't answer the question. Do you support the White House's nomination of Stephen Bradbury, he was asked. Rather than saying "yes" or "no," Mukasey instead asserted that "Bradbury is one of the finest lawyers I've ever met." Only marginally more clear than Mukasey's response to the question, "Is waterboarding torture?"

Mukasey apparently assigned the DOJ speechwriter to read Orwell's essay. I'd suggest to the Senate Judiciary Democrats that, if Mukasey still sounds like he hasn't reviewed his own favorite essay when he comes before them this week, they ought to remind him.

GARANACE'S HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES

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.

THE PULITZER VERSUS THE PONTIAC

Car writers don't get Pulitzer Prizes. I suspect that's because their writing is either wonky and burdened with specs or basically carpornography. Or rather, car writers *used to* not get Pulitzers, before Dan Neil got one last year, "for his one-of-a-kind reviews of automobiles, blending technical expertise with offbeat humor and astute cultural observations." I guess they liked Neil's honest, irreverent writing in passages like this:

If you ever despair that the U.S. auto industry is whirling, slowly but with gathering momentum, down the tubes of history, thesecond-generation Toyota Prius will give you no comfort. This is a car Detroit assures us cannotbe built. No way. No how. A spacious, safe and well-appointed mid-sizefour-door with practical performance while returning more than 60 miles pergallon? For \$20,000? Are you, like, high?

Well, there it sits in my driveway, looking like a set piecefrom a Kubrick film but in other respects a straightforward piece ofengineering. And it shames the domestic automakers and the Bush administration.

Well, guess what? Neil's right about the Prius

and the domestic car makers. But the car makers don't like to see such things in print, certainly not in one of this country's largest newspapers. Which became a problem when the LA Times published this slam on the Pontiac G6 the other day:

The G6 is not an awful car. It's entirely adequate. But plainly, adequate is not nearly enough.

Â

[snip]

Meanwhile, the detailing of the bodywork makes the skin of the car look eggshell-thin. I wonder how many buyers look at this car and wonder what is behind the billboard?

Interior styling: The GT comes with comfortable leather-lined bucket seats, nicely bolstered with heaters. I like the soft grip on the hand brake. That exhausts my praise for the interior.