ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION
Disobedient Bodies in Digital Surveillance: *V* for Vendetta as a Holy Grail of Political Agency

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Abstract— Foucault's notion of surveillance and panoptic gaze is notoriously implied in postmodernist discourse to exercise control and turn individual minds into docile automatic subjects. Both these concepts assert that power and knowledge are produced by the dominant center to demolish self-respect and promises absolute subjugation. This study aims at investigating the relevance of postmodern narratives in questioning the dictatorial as well as despotic role of capitalist powers and the repercussions it can have on individuals. The current research argues that power can also emanate from the periphery to counter the overarching hegemonic notions of authoritative control. Through a detailed analysis of visual narrative, i.e., *V* for Vendetta, the study revolves around the discursive nature of digital surveillance and the upholding of revolutionary libertarian thoughts and claims that an extreme discipline can lead to extreme forms of disobedience and resistance amongst masses. Foucault's revolutionary idealism of *V* in Guy Fawkes Mask is an epitome of universalizing proclivity for political agency and freedom of thought. By employing qualitative research methodology, the study makes an in-depth content analysis of the movie, i.e., *V* for Vendetta. The research contributes to the literary corpus by digging deep in the implications and repercussions that digitalization of everyday life may result into. The uses of e-governance, though practical, can result in suppression and totalitarian governments. Although the subversion of ideological-cum-institutional repression at the cost of life and self seems deflating, the masses all disguised in mask highlights their anonymity and collective resistance towards the attainment of a utopian world.
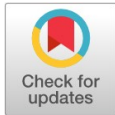
Docility and Institutionalized Bodies

It is always the body that is at issue - the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission" (Foucault, 1975, p. 25).

Michel Foucault's book Discipline and Punish (1975) is a treatise on the discursive nature of knowledge, power, and punishment. It fuses the hegemonic/counter-hegemonic interplay of all these forces in society. Foucauldian arguments lay the individual body at the center of his thesis as a prism of political ideology imposed by an array of ISAs and RSAs; leaving the body interpellated, productive and subjected, and an engrossed political field in which "power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (p. 173).

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Ideas of power and discipline are intricately linked in Foucault's arguments. It highlights "a political technology of the body" built around power discourse, and it becomes a contested field for institutions and state apparatuses. Taken in a modern context, the exercise of power over the body has two dimensions. The first pole presents the body as a machine where social and economic control results in making body a tool for hegemonic processes (Allan, 2019; Stewart, 2017; Carlile, 2011; Lysaught, 2011). As for the second, it is how the body is interpreted in terms of biological processes, i.e., bio-politics of the population. Both of these correspond to disciplinary power and activate a "microphysics of power," the system in which, instead of humans operating and "possessing" power, it is "exercised" on bodies by them (Foucault, 1975, p. 174).

In keeping with Foucault's notion, Haugaard (2020) in his article, "The Faces of Power, Resistance and Justification in a Changing World" makes a dense analysis of the protean structure of power in changing political milieu. He quotes the idea of populism and terms it as sacred "voice of the people" against the profane "voice of the elitist". The debacle between these nuanced concepts leads to a form of "political ventriloquism" (p. 1). This suppression of voice on political grounds exacerbates power politics with the aim to nurture trained docile individuals and leads to violence and resistance.

Projects of docility, Foucault argues, were initiated during the eighteenth century when through institutions of education and military organizations, certain disciplinary techniques were invented to "cover the entire social body" (p. 139) so much so that the body turned into "an object and target of power" (p. 136). It further enumerates the mechanism of this control in terms of scale, object, and controlling mode. In terms of scale, he discusses that discipline should not be taken as a master/slave binary where the subject yields to an omnipotent monarch or master; rather, it is an invisible relationship grounded in willingness of the subject, and ultimately, it "coerces the body at a mechanistic level. it works the body in its parts, details, joints, and units - "retail" rather than "wholesale" - in order to control its "movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity" (as cited in Hass, 1996, p. 62). The body is thus trained, manipulated and shaped to function ideologically, so it becomes docile and a pliable production that is "subjected, used, transformed, and improved" (Foucault, 1977, p. 136) whereas the implementation of this powerful strategy is identified as discipline.

According to Foucault:

Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body; on one hand it turns it into an 'aptitude', a 'capacity', which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of subjection. (Foucault, 1977, p. 138) In his article, "The Great Unmasking: Adaptation and the Problem of Identity in *V for Vendetta*" (2020), Tembo opines how the state-imposed identity is supported by ISAs and RSAs. This is further supplemented by problematics of autocracy and total authoritarian mechanism. This surveillance vis-à-vis "State's praxis of total control" (p. 70) results is mass manipulation and deprives individuals of their autonomy, sense of identity and confidence. The object of control implies that control is achieved not by utilizing body language or disciplined behavior; instead, the subject is interpellated, and control is internalized without resistance, leaving him an "object". Modality means the "uninterrupted, constant coercion" (Foucault, 1977, p. 137) where a human being is conditioned to the codification of behavior imposing upon him the relationship of docility-utility. Foucault sums up that "discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies" (Foucault, 1977, p. 138).

The instances of this power are scattered from strict military dimension to day-to-day life where actresses discipline their bodies to extreme skincare routine followed by dieting and maintaining an ideal figure; child-rearing as part of producing trained and disciplined kids and sports where discipline is the alpha and omega of a good athlete. In Foucault's portrayal of disciplinary procedures to create "model individuals," the defining characteristic is producing mechanized robotic behavior that is socially constructed. However, Foucault identifies the desire to control and subjugate the body as the prime motive roughly hidden from the mass understanding (Jam, 2019; Jam et al., 2014; Waheed, Kaur, & Kumar, 2016).

This infiltration or penetration of power is, thus, "quiet". Since the exercise of power is not directly imposed by the dominant authority, the "tactics" are also invisible, and the overall strategy of authoritative control results in maximum productivity i.e., the unconditional obedience from subjects (Hass, 1996, p. 63). Even the industrial and technological advancements are interpreted as a form of this multifaceted hegemony as it demanded productive and docile bodies for its expansion and growth (Foucault, 1977, p. 138), leading towards the will to punish the traitors and thus "prison" came into existence.

Power, in Foucault's claim, is sustained through manifold structures and mechanisms. Disciplinary space is the way institutions analytically distribute power and "tends to be divided into as many sections as there are bodies" (Foucault, 1977, p. 143). In his chapter on "Docile Bodies", Foucault investigates four types of disciplinary activities namely, the art of distributions, the control of activity, the organization of geneses, and the composition of forces. Foucault enquires into certain techniques used for the distribution of power within society (Khan, Shahbaz, & Jam, 2019; Khan et al., 2016).

"Enclosure", being the first technique, dictates that individuals should be spatially "closed" (e.g., Schools, Factories) to produce a "protected place of disciplinary monotony" (Foucault, 1977, p. 141). "Partitioning" implies that individual movement is curtailed, and they must work systematically and flexibly without the least traces of them being observed. It further implied that subjects must not involve in society as societal awareness can cause detrimental thoughts, becoming a problem for the power. In order to place workers

as per their tasks and skills, the third technique of "functional site" helps in workers' effective observation, comparison, and supervision. Lastly, disciplinary space allocates "ranks" to distribute and circulate individuals "in a network of relations" (Foucault, 1977, p. 146) instead of being fixed.

With the intention to control activity, "temporal elaboration of the act", Foucault (1977) emphasizes an effective relationship between body and gesture. "The body-object articulation" (p. 153) deals with body and tools, and in the last phase, its exhaustive use is repeated. Foucault's accounts of control condition individuals to organisms and, as such, makes "disciplinary power seem natural and organic" (p. 156). Later on, the organization of geneses links the individual to technology in terms of segments, plans, levels, and series. Docile bodies are also shaped by the composition of forces through which power reduces an individual body into a machine, and its functionality is preferred over the body itself as Foucault (1977) claims: "at the heart of the procedures of discipline, it manifests the subjection of those who are perceived as objects and the objectification of those who are subjected" (p. 184-85).

This makes individuals hang on in a subject/object relationship within society. The invisibility of the disciplinary power directly impacts disciplinary space where the subject is always watched over to maximize its functionality. Foucault states: "In discipline it is the subjects [and not the power] who have to be seen. It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his [sic] subjection" (p. 187). Foucault's discourse on power, in sum, concludes that this observation and the need to keep a strict surveillance over subjects is inherently panoptic in nature, and discussed in detail in the next section (Mazhar, Jam, & Anwar, 2012; Sanni et al., 2013; Waheed & Kaur, 2016).

Panoptic Gaze, Digital Surveillance

Panopticon, the notorious prison design sketched by Jeremy Bentham in the mid-1700s became a mechanism for social control. In the Foucauldian sense, the panopticon "is a diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form and a figure of political technology" (205). It becomes a symbol of modern authoritative power, heightened surveillance, and discipline. Understood in the postmodernist sense, the whole world virtually is becoming an open-air prison (Adorno) with a saturation of technology and post 9/11 cultural means of penetrating surveillance seeping in almost every arena of daily life. This fear of being under scrutiny is dehumanizing and characteristic of a carceral society. According to Pastore, "this disciplinary power encourages dissemination of a pervasive culture of control in all other total institutions and all of society, which, in that sense, becomes a carceral or imprisoning or disciplinary society, expressions reminiscent of Weber's "iron cage" (01). As aftermath, contemporary society is turning into a microcosmic society with an invisible web of all watching eye, security alarms and CCTV cameras, and an individual is continuously under the presence of prison.

In "Surveillance, Panopticism, and Self-Discipline in the Digital Age" (2018), Manokha intervenes in the Foucauldian concept of the Panopticon and examines it in postmodern age where digitalization has also come to serve as a form of surveillance. These novel techniques of domination as a product of western society created "modern technologies of the self" (p. 219) and leads to self-restraint and self-abnegation. Taken in the context of the current study, the paper investigates as to how individuals, under the heavy hand of power" can shed off their selves and refurbish themselves in the light of needs and demands of authority.

A panopticon is a tool used by modernist society to maintain social control and power and forces individuals to indulge in self-surveillance. Foucault's power as discipline links surveillance to exert control over bodies in knowledge-based economy that results in "constructed" human agents who are at the mercy of authoritarian dictates. In such a scenario, "surveillance is ultimately conceived as the handmaiden of dominant power" (Green, 1999, p. 27) and a metaphor for dominant social forces. The large-scale fear, as well as the willingness of individuals, evolves society into a 'superpanopticon'- a system of surveillance without walls, windows, towers or guards (Poster, 1990, p. 03). The panopticon paradigm is, thus, synonymous with the asocial nature of the community.

Panoptic power is active, productive, and fluid in that through the interchangeability of dominant discourse, meanings fluctuate, subjects alternated, and a new manipulative-cum-pervasive form of knowledge is created within the social field. In such a case, Foucault claims, resistance is virtually impossible to achieve because surveillance in the form of media, army, internet, and education keep a check so as not to trigger individual objects into an active one. This echoes Gramsci's idea of the inseparable nature of state-power from society, i.e., hegemonic discourse shapes and controls public opinion. Moreover, surveillance is not perceptible; it is a subtle tool of coercion to control everyday life through institutionalized panoptic gaze embedded into subjects' unconsciousness aiming at to mold body into docility.

Panoptic gaze "signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze" (Schroeder, 203, p. 208). It is "constant and omnipresent" and the fact that individuals are destabilized in being "an object of surveillance" and not "the subject of communication" (Webster et al. 346) makes gaze a discursive element of technological determinism. In the words of Castell, "Technology is neither good nor bad, nor is it neutral. It is instead caught up in a complex matrix of interaction in which surveillance effects and reactions are multiple and unpredictable" (as cited in Green, 1999, p. 65). From a psychological perspective, a fixated gaze robs an individual of the sense of autonomy. It relegates him to the status of an object that is watched over for the sake of pleasure i.e., voyeurism,

or for keeping a strict check, i.e., surveillance. Bart Simon (2005) in his article, "The Return of Panopticism: Supervision, Subjection and the New Surveillance", states:

The panoptic structure seems to speak to the sense of helplessness individuals often feel in the face of the overwhelming force of institutions (prisons, hospitals, schools, workplaces, families) to determine life within their confines the sense that there is nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. (p. 03)

This also lays the very idea of horror associated with the panoptic structure. Foucault's argument questions the visibility of the prisoner-the one being spied upon and the invisibility of the spy-the all-present eye that is "a source of anxiety, discomfort and terror... Who is watching? Why are they watching? What will they do?" (Simon, 2005, p. 04). The one being watched is under continuous fear and the ensuing disgust over monitoring every gesture.

The prime purpose of the panopticon, then, is the "automatic functioning of power" (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). Panopticon becomes an ordering machine that not only disseminates power, control, and absolute hegemony, but also restricts subjects from making transgression, and thus guarantees complete conformity. This links the panoptic gaze with the creation of docile bodies who are conscious volunteers in binaristic power relations. Nonetheless, the very Benthamite prison, to Foucault, is similar to the menagerie in that "the animal is replaced by man" who is "lifted from the context of (his) natural (life)" (Foucault, 1077, p. 203). The panopticon, thus, is naturalistic in its working, making the whole society normal as well as conformed beings. It is a "laboratory" and a "microscospe" (Simon, 2005, p. 12). An object is separated from the whole, isolated, and observed in a controlled environment for maximized productivity.

With its deterministic nature on the one hand and voluntaristic on the other, Foucault states that panopticon becomes automatic, perfect, and seeped into the psychology of its inmates and becomes a repressive state apparatus a machine that is responsible "for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it" (p. 201). It is within this context that the metaphor of society-as-prison gains ground, and attributes such as enclosure, isolation, and training make it an apt metaphor for surveillance in the post-modern society with its use of CCTV cameras, biometric identity, and computerized documentation. The modern surveillance delineates a marked difference between supervisor/supervisee and the Benthamite model, as Simon (2005) suggests, is shifted from the "diagram of discipline" to "the diagram of control" (p. 14).

The current study highlights similar underpinnings in the movie *V* for Vendetta based on a graphic novel published in 1988 written by Alan Moore and illustrated by David Lloyd. It is a dystopian novel set in the 1990s. It revolves around a post-apocalyptic vision of London suffering under the tyrannical rule of a fascist regime, i.e., Norsefire and Mr. Adam Susan, the chief leader of the government. The research at hand scrutinizes how panoptic power can rob individual liberty and freedom of speech using surveillance technologies. It will further point out the ideological conflicts between ruling hegemonic discourse and the counter-narrative it offers in the form of *V*, who embodies the sense of liberty and becomes symbolic of revengeful and anti-ideological public opinion. The paper argues that although in a panoptic setup, the individual body is trained, shaped, manipulated, and is agentive of proliferating imbalanced power relationships inside society; the same tyrannical oppression can lead individuals to turn into unruly, rebellious beings and make them disobedient in the face of disciplinary power.

Implications and Delimitation of the Study

The study has significant implications as it highlights the political tensions that undergirds the tussle between lower and upper strata of society. By adopting a qualitative research methodology and employing content analysis as research method, this research is delimited to only one text, i.e., *V* for Vendetta. The biopolitical realm of individual self is representative in disseminating the problematics of power as well as resistance. The future researchers can dig up this dimension further by exploring the issues inherent in the class conflict of different times through different texts. They can further investigate which factors can contribute to political unrest and how this turmoil entangles and affects all sections of the society.

V for Vendetta as a Holy Grail of Political Agency

V for Vendetta provides rich insights into the beliefs and roles of individual agency within society. The overarching panoptic structure is visible in the way the Norsefire government is divided into five main institutions collectively termed as The Head. The Nose comprises of detective police force primarily responsible for conducting investigations. The Finger is emblematic of undercover secret police i.e., "fingermen" who could function as executioner, arbiter and jury for class "H" wrongdoings. Both The Ear and The Eye monitor and record aural as well as visual information in and across London and become surveillance apparatuses to produce docile subjects. The Mouth, above all, is followed by a computer database i.e., The Fate as a repressive apparatus to supervise all the five institutions is an epitome of ideological rhetoric disseminated by the Norsefire government. Replicating the five human senses and using "Fate" is a clear-cut manifestation of multi-layered oppression and absolute control of individual perception and freedom that is omnipresent and omniscient.

Mr. Susan, the manipulative chief of the totalitarian government, believes that constant surveillance is mandatory to control people so much so that they are deprived of basic rights, including the "freedom to starve, the freedom to die, the freedom to live in a world of chaos". The curtailed social movement in the form of the institution of Fate signifies that society is taken as a political laboratory where fascists' ideologies were experimented upon subjects. In other words, "ideology is a means of understanding and explaining the goals set by the political powers" (Heywood, 2017, p. 13). The ultimate end of Norsefire's surveillance system is to attain "control", and the way *V* kills the fingermen makes the dominant class contemplate this retaliation as chaotic and "unthinkable" as Almond says they 'lost control' and seek ways to restore order.

Panoptic gaze in the form of the institution of Eye documents the denial of agency and activity to individuals as they are taken as mere "objects of power and objects of knowledge" (Foucault 14). Similarly, all other institutions reflect Athusserian ISAs and RSAs that aid in dehumanization and deindividualization, such as documentation in the Fate database is a tool of superiority, surveillance, and control over the masses. The whole society, to Foucault, is transformed into Benthamite prison where the individual is "seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication" (p. 17). Since people were continuously under watch; therefore, they were always subjected to the power of the state, which resulted in "the automatic functioning of power" (p. 18).

The panoptic world of *V for Vendetta* is replete with physical and psychological means of coercion. Throughout the plot, deviant acts were deemed punishable. The idea of freedom is mimicked, and the private zone is shrunken, leading to the hegemonic autocratic regime. The determining nature of power relations reveals the binaries of superiority and inferiority, producing the discourse of knowledge and power only by the privileged ones. The internalized gaze of the Norsefire government encompasses the whole society, not excluding even Mr. Susan, who had a surveillance camera installed in his bedroom. The reification and objectification are apparent when police function as an abstract form of institutional panopticon that is all-pervasive and restrains individual agency through violence and power. The "gaze" defines criminality as dangerous to society and taken as a part of the Norsefire state, too. Foucault's claim that "the penal law must repair the harm or prevent similar harm from being done to the social body" (p. 21) is opted by the Norsefire Head, who curbs counter-hegemonic actions by ensuring unfettered monitoring. The people are confined and deterred from entering any anti-state movement.

V for Vendetta's portrayal of the individual fight against the curbing of freedom and identity is clearly demonstrated through the protagonist *V*, who despises the dystopic disciplinary power in taming the subjects and therefore wants to recreate an "ideal" utopian society through his struggle. Norsefire government's Larkhill Resettlement Camp, where the "undesirables" were imprisoned, tortured, and exterminated, is reminiscent of Hitler's Concentration Camps as well as the panopticon that is a tool of control and surveillance *V*, amongst those undesirables, is also subjected to extreme physical and mental torture and uses explosives to escape thereby starting his freedom fight.

Alongside Winston, *V* makes efforts to take the public to his side by unleashing the oppressive propagandist ideologies of Norsefire's government, and both of them form a space to retaliate against the hegemonic order, thus, representing the common man's power and resistance. Throughout the movie, the counter-narrative that *V* employs shows his adamantine willpower, and courage not to succumb to the institutionalized rigid beliefs of the upper strata. By donning a Guy Fawkes Mask to flaunt his layman anonymity, he subverts the status quo. He hooks up with a downtrodden society that has the power of living a free independent life.

The revolutionary spirit of *V* is emphasized in the very opening of the movie when he refers to the historical event of "The Gunpowder Plot" on 5th November, 1605. On this day, Guy Fawkes tried to blow up the parliament to rid people of the tyranny of the government. He was a fiasco in his attempt and tortured subsequently. *V*, however, celebrates the idea and says:

Remember, remember The 5th of November The Gunpowder treason and plot I know of no reason Why the gunpowder treason Should ever be forgot (VfV)

The ground for *V*'s vendetta is all set from the opening. He believes that justice and freedom will not be served until and unless people would not resist. For this purpose, he avenges upon the members of the Norsefire Party and tells the people:

Fear got the best of you. And in your panic you turned to the now High Chancellor Adam Sutler. He promised you order and he promised you peace. And all he demanded in return was your silent obedient consent. Last night I started to end that silence. Last night I destroyed the Old Bailey to remind this country what it has forgotten.

The monopolizing and disciplinary tendencies of the Norsefire government are well-elaborated in their elitist condescending attitude towards the masses throughout the movie. They perpetuate the ideology of moral uprightness and promise a bright future in barter for "silenced" obedience. Evey also highlights how through silence, "order was imposed" and defines order as requiring "rigorous discipline". Dascombe's words where he asserts the resurrection of old traditional values is all-inclusive (i.e., Foucault's disciplinary power and panopticon). The fact that only "a true and righteous leader with the strength of his moral convictions" from the dominated center can bind the society together is deluding to produce docile subjects.

V's persona as opposed to the Foucauldian concept of docile body is apparent all through the plot. He confirms it to the people of London saying: "People should not be afraid of their governments. Governments should be afraid of their people." He believes in the supremacy of freedom of thought and is willing to go to any limit to uphold that. The idea of society as prison is established in *V*'s discussion with Evey when *V* tells her that: "You're in a prison, Evey. You were born in a prison. You've been in a prison so long, you no longer believe

there's a world outside". This sparks the transformational process in Evey as through her, *V* encourages the masses to realize the web of power surveillance in the form of ISAs and RSAs. Within London, prison is a symbol of dominant gaze and the heavy hand of authority that is keeping a watch on people for the sake of manipulation.

Mask as veiled anonymous identity shows the universalizing tendencies of *V*'s political philosophy and villainous nature. *V*'s mask stands as a space where everyone can put on Guy Fawkes mask and become the part of resistance movement. He breaks loose the chains of the hegemonic order and reforms consciousness-raising process "within the ruins of society". He tells the people about how "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". Mask, therefore, is counter-narrative and counter-hegemonic ideology of self-expression. It is a rich tapestry where radical beliefs and resistance are carved against the foul play of the Norsefire's oppressive institutions and initiates his quest for redemption and deliverance. He takes pride in his identity and tells the Leader:

You cannot kill me. There is no flesh and blood within this cloak to kill. There is only an idea. And ideas are bulletproof.

V's promise to offer a fear-free independent life to the suppressed people of London is fulfilled by the end when he kills all the Norsefire Party members and the central surveillance system. He hands down his mask to Evey as a legacy of free thought and self-sufficiency. He becomes the symbol of resistance hidden inside every individual as Evey claims that: "He was you and me. He was all of us."

Conclusion

V for Vendetta dexterously paints the vision of a utopian world against the gloomy backdrop of a fascist society where individuals had to bow to slavery for the sake of their lives. But the exception, in the form of *V*, proved the rule that although panoptic gaze can be burdensome and lead people astray from their individuality and sense of 'self', this gaze can be subverted and re-established constructively. The idealism and essentialism that *V* signifies is the denial of conformist beliefs. He instills hope in people to stand up for their better future and foregrounds anti-disciplinary attitude to thwart Benthamite's model prison. The awareness and knowledge can make the society go topsy-turvy and dig up their own way irrespective of hegemony perpetuated by the dominating state.

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