Christina Maria Koch

Occupying Popular Culture: Anonymous, Occupy Wall Street, and the Guy Fawkes Mask as a Political Icon

I Introduction

In photographs of protests over the last years – against ACTA in the Polish parliament, against the Euro Plus Pact in Spain, against the Turkish government in Istanbul’s Gezi Park, against corruption and the erosion of public services in the wake of the 2014 Soccer World Cup in Rio de Janeiro, against the Venezuelan government, in the “Blockupy” protests of Frankfurt/Main, in “Occupy” demonstrations in New York City and beyond – one image appears across the board: demonstrators wearing the same particular mask.¹ Their facial guise shows a typified white face with a slim black Van Dyke beard, the mouth shaped into a broad smirk, the eyes almost closed to slits. Its style and expression may evoke a host of labels ranging from genteel or carnivalesque to poised, sarcastic, superior, or even snobbish.²

An avid consumer of European or North American news media may correctly link this mask to the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011, and may also be able to identify it as the “face” of the collective of Anonymous “hacktivists” (a portmanteau of “hacker” and “activist”). The mask has been such a darling of press photographers and camera operators that it has become a trademark for a geographically and politically wide range of recent demonstrations denouncing inequalities of income and wealth distribution, corporate power, and governmental ills and woes, or simply any kind of protest that invokes an “us against the system” rhetoric. Academic publishers have picked up on the trend as well – Alfio Mastropaolo’s *Is Democracy a Lost Cause?* (2012) and Florian Grosser’s *Theorien der Revolution* (2013) fittingly sport the same mask on their book covers. Lastly, the wide dissemination of

¹ Parts of this article in preliminary stages were presented at the 2013 “Philosophy and Social Science” Colloquium in Prague. I wish to thank the organizers and specifically Nancy Fraser, Brian Milstein, and Christiane Wilke for their instructive feedback. My thanks also go to Carmen Birkle, Maximilian Jablonowski, Fabio Wolkenstein, and Lukas Etter for their many helpful comments on this project.

² A Wikimedia Commons image search in the category “Demonstrators and protesters wearing masks of Guy Fawkes” yields many examples from different countries. See also Nordhausen (for Turkey); Olson, “ACTA” (for Poland); “Wachsender Druck” (for Venezuela); http://www.anonymousbrasil.com/brasil/ (30 May 2014; for Brasil).
the image of this mask has provoked countless spin-offs in internet memes, YouTube video clips, comic strips or cartoons, and street art, which are then popularized on the internet yet again.

By now, the mask’s far-reaching appeal seems to render the question of its origin less and less important for those who actively engage with it. The actual historical reference for the “Guy Fawkes mask,” as it is sometimes termed in news coverage, is precisely that notorious 17th-century English Gunpowder Plot conspirator. Yet it is not so much the face of the historical person represented in paintings or engravings but rather the mask of a fictional hero, for which Fawkes is said to have been the inspiration, that has reached an unforeseen popularity: It covers the face of “V,” protagonist of the 1980s graphic novel _V for Vendetta_ and the subsequent 2005 film adaptation of the same name, until it has begun to adorn the faces or be the avatar of on- and offline protesters around the globe from around 2008 onwards. In this process the mask and its image have “traveled” from the medium of graphic narrative to film, then to the internet, until they have finally reached the streets. Although lifted from its fictional dystopian origins to become a transmedial phenomenon, this contemporary protest icon has not been entirely stripped of some historical and fictional traits and connotations its source carries – the power of anonymity, the ambivalence of political secrecy, the feeling of superiority conveyed by the appeal of vigilantism, mass agitation, and antagonistic politics, to name but a few.

It is needless to say that elements of works of (narrative) fiction can lend themselves very readily to being alluded to in political or any kind of discourse. However, the case of the Guy Fawkes mask seems unprecedented in several respects. It is used both as an image on- and offline and as a material artifact in the streets; it is increasingly detached from its narrative source and brought to a wide variety of sometimes conflicting political and/or cultural uses; it has not simply made a sporadic appearance but has had a significant impact on the public image of a network of activists and a protest movement; and, lastly, as an icon it has seen a wide transnational dissemination.

The latter point, the mask’s globalized appeal, raises interesting questions about the “identity work” (Benford and Snow) of digital activists and new social movements or protest formations with international offshoots. The Guy Fawkes mask as a readily available and highly recognizable protest icon can act as a unifying device for otherwise disparate collectives whose goals may be shared with international counterparts (e.g. attacking internet censorship) or who may adapt transnational political concerns (e.g. global corporate power or the financial crisis) to local struggles (e.g. the Spanish housing bubble). My discussion of the iconic Guy Fawkes mask as a transnational phenomenon is not founded on an in-depth empirical analysis. Rather, I will analyze its symbolic functions and effects, beginning with a close analysis of the mask, including its ties with the iconic historical figure Guy Fawkes, and a contextualization with other uses of masking and other political icons used to visually frame social movements. A retrospective of the uses and significations of the mask in its texts of origin, the graphic novel _V for Vendetta_ and
the eponymous film adaptation, will then attempt to uncover continuities and ruptures in its political implications. Finally, I will trace how the mask and its image have come to be used by the hacktivists of Anonymous and the protesters of Occupy Wall Street, and what I see as the political import and ambivalence of this protest icon.

In this endeavor, several particular problems will come into the limelight, to which I will offer some tentative conclusions. One of these issues is the gendered and raced face of the mask (among other categories) versus its surrounding rhetoric of universality and inclusiveness. Another second one is the question of whether the mask as an icon has really become a “free floating signifier” (Call) or if it rather still necessitates a core message, stripped to the bare minimum to allow for maximal usability, as it were. Linked to this is the at first slightly puzzling fact that the Guy Fawkes mask may sometimes not only be used by activists to self-identify as sympathizers of Anonymous, Occupy, or any other protest at hand. Rather, it may also appear in combination with a costume to stage an adversary (the stock figure of the greedy banker, for instance). Finally, there is the question of the revolutionary impetus of the icon in different cultural settings, or in other words, how much the mask as a transnational phenomenon may still be invested with the United States as the “motherland” of neoliberal capitalism and fear of government surveillance, or how much critical appropriation, repurposing, or iconoclasm we may suspect.

II The Mask as a Cultural Icon

The iconic status of the Guy Fawkes mask seems undisputed. “The face of Fawkes is everywhere now,” Lewis Call states, “at peace rallies and anti-nuclear demonstrations” (157).\(^3\) In 2011, it was “the top-selling mask on Amazon.com” (Bilton), available at low cost. More significantly, though, it is perceived as ubiquitous although only a minority of “offline” protesters seems to actually wear it – and if they do, not always on their faces (with the exception of occasional Anonymous street protests in which most activists are masked, I should add).\(^4\)

Further below I will disentangle why I believe the mask is used differently in the cases of Anonymous and Occupy. For now, suffice it to say that there are obvious pragmatic restrictions (in street protests and occupations, wearing a mask may be cumbersome and sometimes downright illegal) and

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3 Contrary to Call, I believe it is precisely not the “face of Fawkes” but the “mask of V” (with face-like qualities).

4 This is an impression gained from following news reports on Occupy and other anti-establishment protests from 2011 onwards in North American, British, and German mainstream media, image databases, and community news outlets such as blogs. Although this can hardly count as an empirical validation, I think the observation is not far-fetched if one compares mainstream press protest close-ups of masked protesters with wide angle shots, in which much less masks appear. The mask simply seems to make for a good shot.
that we can conclude that the mask becomes increasingly proliferated as a visual representation – from protest footage to street art or online banners. The physical engagement with the mask as an artifact seems to take a backseat. In their otherwise highly instructive analyses of the Guy Fawkes mask, Ruiz and Kohns neither make this distinction nor dwell on the significance of the circumstance that relatively few protesters conceal their faces with the mask.5

The status of the Guy Fawkes mask as a widely disseminated icon is thus apparent in three dimensions: as an iconic image constantly remediated, as a cultural icon being a material artifact (the mask being worn), and as bearing traces of iconic personhood, coalescing the figures of the fictional avenger “V” and the historical icon Guy Fawkes. The status of a cultural icon, as Günther Leypoldt explains, is related to “the production of collective memory and cultural authority” (5). The mask is an example of how cultural icons are an expression of cultural self-understanding, their meaning being constantly renegotiated as different groups attempt to re-inscribe and appropriate them for their purposes (Leypoldt; Müller). We may add that the shifts between artifact and image imply processes of “repurposing,” Bolter and Grusin’s understanding of the term as reusing and redefining “properties” of one medium in another, of “borrowing content” without a conscious interplay between media (44-45). In the case of the Guy Fawkes mask, the reciprocity of meaning-making has both journalists and activists avail themselves of the icon and simultaneously reinforce its status and re-adapt meaning. The wide usage, sustained media attention, as well as the spin-offs of the mask can moreover hardly be imagined without its low costs, reproducibility and recognition value.

From the rich cultural heritage which feeds into the cultural icon of the mask, a few examples deserve to be mentioned briefly for contextualization. In Greek (and later Roman) theater, masks de-individualized and often typified their wearer (Storey and Allan 79, 180)6, who gave voice to a dead, absent, supernatural, or inanimate being – hence the origin of the Latin term *persona* from *per-sonare*, “sound through” (Kaltenbrunner; Menke 118-19). In *V for Vendetta*, this would approximate V’s self-proclaimed position as *vox populi*. Another both aesthetically and symbolically fitting context is the tradition of *charivari* or carnival, widespread in Europe under various names from the 13th century onwards until today. The moralist vigilantism and “authorized transgression” (Eco qtd. in Rozik 212) of carnival, prominently theorized by Bakhtin, will resurface in the following discussion of masking in protest. Both carnival and politics lead us to the example of the Venetian society mask *bauta*, a white half-mask worn with cape and hat which allowed

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5 In his discussion of *V for Vendetta*, specifically the mask, as an identity-establishing text for the Occupy movement, Kane Anderson does mention that not all demonstrators wear masks. He does not assign much significance to this, arguing that the Occupiers “insert themselves into the already existent intertextuality of transmedial meanings that intentionally and unintentionally assign meanings to the larger Occupy Movement” (144).

6 This typification also occurs in the *Commedia dell’Arte* tradition of masks (Tims 36).
its wearer to “save face” in the confines of Venice’s political system (Johnson xi-xii; Kotte 203), and which bears aesthetic similarities to the masked hero’s costume in *V for Vendetta*. Iconic fictional references are masked swashbucklers such as *Zorro* and the *Count of Monte Christo* (Alexander; Keller) and the “capes and masks iconography and . . . secret identity thematic” of classical U.S.-American superhero narratives (Jenkins 27). Alan Moore, the writer of *V for Vendetta*, has described his attempt to integrate, amongst others, literary associations such as Orwell, Huxley, Bradbury, and Pynchon, and heroical figures like Nightraven, Batman, and Robin Hood, before artist David Lloyd suggested the iconic historical figure of Guy Fawkes (Moore 274). Guido “Guy” Fawkes was one of the Catholic conspirators of the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 to kill King James I and instigate mass turmoil in the hopes of assuming power. Soon after the thwarted revolt and the execution of its instigators, the Fifth of November or “Bonfire Night” became a date of commemoration with public festivities still popular to this day in England (Call; Sharpe). Inspired by the reference in *V for Vendetta*, many online actions or street protests of Anonymous make use of the symbolic value of this date.

After this digression let me return to the current usage and iconic status of the Guy Fawkes mask. Since only a minority of Occupy protesters dons it and since Anonymous activities are primarily mediated visually and textually online, the iconic image of the Guy Fawkes mask is used by and attributed to both movements or collectives as an “anchor point” for their otherwise elusive nature and political stance. Oliver Kohns helpfully suggests reading the mask as part of the “visual politics of revolt” through “programmatic images” (Erben qtd. in Kohns 89). Kohns stresses the importance of visual journalism and argues that this kind of “short-hand iconography” carries significant “identificatory potential” (90). As such, we can view the mask as reciprocally both a source for and an expression of collective identity, a central concept in the study of social movements. Polletta and Jasper define it as “an individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution” (285; see also Snow). Collective identities can overlap with or contain personal identities, they may be imagined rather than experienced, brought to collectives externally and/or constructed internally, are procedural rather than fixed (Snow 2213), and they “are expressed in cultural materials – names, narratives, symbols, verbal styles, rituals, clothing, and so on” (Polletta and Jasper 285).

The mask as an icon is more than an expression of identity, it is also part of the framing processes of the collectives and movements by which it is used. This can be observed in the fact that the messages of Anonymous and Occupy Wall Street are highly self-referential. “We are Anonymous. We are legion” and “We are the 99 %” signify collective identity (or the potentiality thereof, see Kohns 94) – to adapt McLuhan’s catchphrase, “the movement is the message,” as it were. Yet, the significance of collective identity that I posit does not mean that it determines interests and structures (see Polletta and Jasper 285). I will return to this later on. The analytical perspective of framing in social movement studies emerged as part of other work on “ideational and
interpretive issues” (Benford 410) in the mid-1980s. The concept of “frame” derives from Goffman’s understanding of the term as “schemata of interpretation” (qtd. in Benford and Snow 614). In the context of social movements, Snow and Benford have established “collective action frames,” which “also perform this interpretive function by simplifying and condensing aspects of the ‘world out there,’ but in ways that are ‘intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists’” (qtd. in Benford and Snow 614). The construction of meaning becomes a key point in analyses of framing: “Whatever else social movement actors do, they seek to affect interpretations of reality among various audiences” (Benford 410).

I believe this focus on framing as the “signifying work” of activists in social movements rather than an understanding of frames as “cognitive frameworks” (Benford 416) is most applicable for the case of the Guy Fawkes mask. It is a “symbolic resourc[e],” “cultural material” for the production or amplification of interpretive frames and collective “identity work” in social movements (Benford and Snow). Specifically, the uses of the iconic mask can be understood as “visual frame amplification,” a process by which, in this case, images condense and intensify a message and allow for a faster reception, and thereby “amplify” frames of collective identity and collective action (Morrison and Isaac).

Vital aspects in these processes are the communication practices and the dissemination and remediation of images via a host of different media, especially through online “social media” and the “internet as an image machine [Bildmaschine]” in general (Bredekamp 21, my translation). Much has been speculated about the role of new media in movement mobilization, for instance in the case of the “Twitter revolutions” of the Arab Spring. This is not the place to chime in to the debate, but I think we can safely conclude that the role of social media and diversification of online new media outlets will continue to grow in the study of social movements (see Stein), not to speak of the growing attention for “cyberactivism” (see McCaughey and Ayers).

7 Another analytical perspective is Anderson’s interpretation of the Guy Fawkes mask as an example of Henry Jenkins’ “cultural activator” (qtd. in Anderson 145) and Joanne Finklestein’s take on popular culture as “toolkits for staging social identity” (Anderson 148).

8 It is important to note at this point that I am not aiming at establishing a causal relationship between the use of the iconic Guy Fawkes mask by activists and their mobilization efforts. This had been a concern of Benford in 1997 in his critical evaluation of framing approaches when he states that “we tend to work backward from successful mobilization to the framing activists proffered and then posit a casual [sic] linkage between the two” (412). Rather, similar to Oliver Kohns, my concern is to uncover symbolic functions and effects of the iconic mask through interpretation, cultural contextualization, and tracing the historical development of this iconography. Also, I am adapting this analytical framework in light of the fact that Anonymous might, strictly speaking, not constitute a “social movement” as a “social network[] that engage[s] in sustained collective actions, ha[s] a common purpose and challenge[s] the interests and beliefs of those with power” (Stein 750 referencing Tarrow).
III The Mask in Political Protest

In political protest, masks and masking obviously carry a lot of baggage from a rich cultural history of masks in performance, ritual, and play (Kotte 197-98). Depending on their specific style and usage, they can evoke connotations that range from the (para)military to the theatrical, from playful mystery to a lack of sincerity or honest intentions (Ruiz 265). Plain face coverings such as balaclavas may be called masks, while a stricter use of the term reserves it for “iconic representations . . [of] the face” (Köpping 78), which can then also express certain “character” traits (see Rozik 214). If we imagine a setting in which political actors don masks in public, the functions of masking range from “the utilitarian” to “the theatrical” (Wilsher 11-12), in other words, lie on a continuum of disguise and display (Kotte 198-209; see also Kohns 93). In contrast to disguises, “[m]asks hide a true identity in a visible way,” James Johnson asserts (qtd. in Ruiz 266). Thus, concealment and expression are two sides of the same coin (Kotte 203).

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9 The examples I mention are cases that have found their way into a North American and/or European discourse, even if their origin may lie elsewhere – in Latin America, for instance.

10 Here, Jameson omits the possible notion of mask-wearing as transformative, e.g. in Shaman rituals (Rozik 211; Tims 36), something that fed into a Christian aversion to “demonic” masking or theater altogether (Kotte 200-01). Also, Jameson’s mention of a concealed “true identity” should be taken with a grain of salt.
For cases of political masking in which pragmatic concealment is foregrounded, Ruiz lists terrorist organizations, guerrillas, and “black bloc” protesters. Scarves concealing parts of the face and particularly black balaclavas are the primary means of masking here, the “popular iconography” of which evokes secrecy, illegality, and/or military connotations (Ruiz 266). Often worn in combination with black or camouflage clothing suitable for unhindered body movement or even combat, these guises become part of a quasi-uniform (Ruiz 267) and “provide anonymity, de-individualize, and increase impenetrability” (Kohns 94). For these political actors it is paramount to hide their identity from direct opponents, e.g. from neo-Nazis eager to launch anti-leftist vendettas, or from legal persecution on behalf of the state (see Ruiz 268). In the words of the Harvard Law Review, “[m]asks can be a powerful aid to unpopular speech” (“Constitutional Law”). Especially in a time in which almost every protester, counter-protester, and member of the police forces – with obviously varying degrees of power – can employ a smartphone camera or professional surveillance equipment to render adversaries identifiable and publicize their actions, masking once again is a pragmatic response to imminent threat, something that should not be forgotten in an analysis otherwise concentrating first and foremost on symbolic dimensions.

The interests of state authorities to identify individual demonstrators have resulted in legal codification of masking as well (see Ruiz 266). Indeed, particularly the aforementioned New York City’s Mask Law of 1845 has been in the spotlight of recent protest movements up to the fact that the “legal fact sheet” of the Occupy Wall Street website provides information on mask-wearing in public (“Legal Fact Sheet”). The mid-19th century law prevents people from wearing masks in gatherings except for cases of “a masquerade party or like entertainment” (N.Y. Penal Law § 240.35(4) qtd. in “Constitutional Law” 2777). It was originally a reaction to the so-called “anti-rent movement” of poor tenant farmers, who dressed up as “Indians” and attacked police officers in protests against de facto feudal structures (Bogad 78). The “masquerade” loophole, intended to preserve upper-class entertainment (78), now encourages protesters’ attempts to circumvent the ban by emphasizing carnivalesque and performance elements. Notwithstanding the masquerade-like elements of the Occupy protests, the law seems to have been enforced quite liberally (Jilani; Hallas). In addition to the pragmatic concerns mentioned above, the mask appears to be a comment on political secrecy, “undermin[ing] the public sphere ideal of transparent communication” (Ruiz 265) and calling attention to the secrets of power jarring with “modern democracy’s ideal of transparency” (Horn 105).

I am disregarding the specific challenges of combat situations and focusing on street protests in so-called Western countries here. Due to Occupy Wall Street’s nascency in New York City, I have focused on the local anti-mask statute there. A similar law exists in parts of Washington D.C. (Freed), and Canada and the UK have seen discussions of mask bans before announced Anonymous protests on the Fifth of November (Ruiz 266; Vaas), to just name a few other examples.
Of course, the functions of plain face coverings of terrorists, guerrilleros, or black bloc protesters listed above also serve the aim of expression. Revolutionary or terrorist groups – Ruiz lists the IRA, ETA, and Hamas; one might add the visually iconic Black September Organization of the 1972 Munich Olympics attack – may calculate a particular psychological effect. Beckstette explains that the use of military symbols can simulate larger organizational structures and thus increase the perceived dangerousness (417). Likewise, masking can evidently carry “menacing undertones” (Ruiz 269). On the other hand, guerrilla attire also invites sympathies or romanticizing attitudes. A well-documented case is that of the Zapatista revolt in Chiapas, Mexico, an example which also figures prominently in Ruiz’ analysis.

By now the most famous figure of the Zapatista rebellion in Mexico (1994–), Subcomandante Marcos is an iconic character with interesting similarities to the trope of anonymity and universality we can observe in Anonymous contexts. Besides other iconic props Marcos is known for covering his face with a black balaclava. Despite the fact that other Zapatista rebels also hide their faces, Marcos has acquired almost mythical qualities. He regards the mask as a mirror inviting others to identify with the struggle or even the figure Marcos himself (Klein 3), thereby stressing the role of the collective (Ruiz 268). Similar to the way in which the Guy Fawkes mask purports to offer a condensed image of V as the vox populi (Moore and Lloyd 189), of Anonymous as “the people” (TheAnonMessage), or of protesters united as “the 99%,” the iconic personhood of Marcos is universal in the sense that it invites manifold re-inscriptions and significations. Marcos and the Zapatista movement appear as a modern, televised, internet-transmitted revolutionary movement, which enables them to foster transnational support networks (Olesen; Garrido and Halavais), but also to approximate images of older rebellions: Marcos meets journalists on horseback, smokes a pipe, and wears guerillero clothing – strongly reminiscent of Ernesto “Che” Guevara, transnational revolutionary icon of the Left from the 1960s and 70s until today.

At the end of May 2014, the fate of Subcomandante Marcos took a surprising twist: He announced his own disappearance. In a speech at a memorial event for the killed Zapatista “Galeano,” he explains in his characteristic rhetoric (Khasnabish 134) that the figure of Marcos was but a “carnival costume [botarga],” a “trick of terrible and marvelous magic [un truco de magia terrible y maravillosa]” conjured up for modern media. The new generation, he states, is able to fight needing neither leaders nor saviors (“ni líderes ni caudillos ni mesías ni salvadores”) (Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, my translation). Regardless of the probability that the “man behind the mask” will continue to be active in the Zapatista struggle under different pseudonyms, the statements are interesting in that they move the iconic figure Marcos closer to the case of the Guy Fawkes mask. In other words, even though they might be of a more obvious pragmatic use value in protests or combats, the iconic images of guerrilla fighters may be more carnivalesque and theatrical.

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13 See Henck for a history of “the man and the mask.”
than appears at first glance. Marcos’ identity is, in fact, not a secret, just like Anonymous’ actual technical measures for anonymity are few (Pras et al.; Mansfield-Devine). Moreover, the emphasis on a flat hierarchy and rejection of a personality cult speaks to both Anonymous and Occupy. Yet, the figure of Marcos is an example of “iconic personhood” (Leyoldt) in which the rhetoric of “everyone can be me” has never truly prevented the emergence of a single heroic figure, which stands in contrast to the Guy Fawkes mask.

As mentioned above, the fact that the Guy Fawkes mask shows a simplified “face” emphasizes the expressive function of masks. The now iconic features – “the arched eyebrows over slitted eyes; the thin mustache upturned over a mirthless grin; the long goatee dropping from the jaw; the ivory complexion of a corpse,” in Webbs’ words (543) - may be reminiscent of some of the historical drawings and engravings of Fawkes. Yet, the face is typified and shows little verisimilitude – it exhibits few details and those existing are strongly contrasted, perhaps reminiscent of the exaggerated contours of pantomime face paint (e.g. the Pierrot/Pagliaccio character of the Commedia dell’Arte). The universalization of a white male “face” connoting European cultural traditions, to some extent belying the heterogeneous image of the protesters that engage with it, provokes further investigation in a later section of this article. Arguably, the most prominent feature of the mask is the aforementioned broad grin. This is the face of a trickster, reveling in his own mysteriousness and ambiguity about his status as hero or villain. The smile is provocative because it asserts superiority, and as part of the mask it is unflinching: The challenged authority cannot “wipe the smirk off your face.” The mask’s “face” does not lose its composure and resort to plain anger; rather, any action taken by an opponent will suggest that “the joke is on them.”

The aesthetic qualities of the Guy Fawkes mask bring it close to typified “theatrical” costumes – consider the pair of “tragic” and “comic” masks which has become an iconic representation of theater. The fictional and non-fictional settings in which it appears display both “theater-like” elements as well as theatricality in the broader sense of a “culture of staging” (Fischer-Lichte, Einleitung). While the demonstrators may not view themselves as actors on a political stage, they still stage a protest and voice their resistance towards an addressee, as abstract as this latter may be. Their protest cannot be meaningful if there is no audience – Keller asserts the same for terrorism (46) – and yet the audience does not need to be bodily co-present. The presence of cameras – including the protesters’ own smartphones – inspires a confidence that there is and will be an audience, a larger online community of supporters or mediatized bystanders or opponents, which is aware of the

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14 A stronger focus on aestheticization and media appeal can be observed in the cases of the Russian performance art/activist group Pussy Riot and the U.S.-American feminist artist collective Guerilla Girls. The former satirically appropriates terrorist or guerrilla insignia in turning the knitted black balaclava into brightly colored and adorned masks, while the latter uses oversized gorilla masks in their public appearances.

15 Webbs cites a caricature by George Cruickshank of 1840; I deem an engraving by Crispijn de Passe the Elder entitled The Gunpowder Plot Conspirators (1605) even more fitting.
protest. Many demonstrations exhibit the traits of staging, or *mise en scène*, in that they require a “process of planning . . . , testing, and determining strategies which aim at bringing forth the performance’s materiality” (Fischer-Lichte, *Transformative Power* 188). This brings us back to carnival as a kind of cultural performance.

The political import of carnival is its function of “reinforcing social order by allowing its temporary subversion” (Bruner 138). Yet there is a chance for resistance when carnivalesque protest transcends the temporal and spatial limits of institutionalized carnival to become, for instance, a form of civil disobedience (138). Similar to what the figure of the trickster (or jester) symbolizes, the emancipatory potential lies in the process of breaking rules in order to render them visible and to expose their “hidden abstract dimensions” (Köpping 88): “By those transgressions, the actual, concrete violence of life in a hierarchically structured society is metaphorically put on the table” (88). Carnivalesque forms of protest can be found in activist performance art such as Carnival against Capitalism, Reclaim the Streets, Art and Revolution, The Church of Life After Shopping, The Billionaires for Bush, or the Yes Men (Bruner 139; Wiegmink). These forms of protest can, of course, also be observed in demonstrations in which participants do not regard themselves as actor-activists but still employ, for instance, satirical slogans or expressive masks. Ruiz argues that “the more frivolous, carnivalesque connotations of mask wearing” are particularly appealing to those “committed to nonviolent direct action,” but then introduces a much more convincing restriction in saying that many of these examples of masquerade are “only effective because of [the mask’s] more menacing undertones” (268-69). I think this holds especially true for the usage of the Guy Fawkes mask.

Carnivalesque protest plays with a defining aspect of theater, i.e. “reduced consequences.” By this, and by another aspect labeled “emphasis,” Kotte means the foregrounding of theatrical action by, e.g., gestus or acoustic signals, and that conflict within the role play of the scenic sequence does not entail real-world consequences (37-39). Activists “performing” acts of civil disobedience, for instance, operate precisely in this gray area of audiences’ judgment (Wiegmink 69). While political protests using masks do not promise reduced consequences, this aspect leaves a trace in the effect of the mask to veil one’s individuality and redirect responsibility to the collective – albeit symbolically rather than de facto.

Demonstrations with traits of carnival tend to test the limits of authorities in that they operate within constraints of time and space. As Bruner states, “when the window of opportunity closes carnivalesque humor, especially political consequential humor, is no longer tolerated or welcome” (140).

Employing humor for political purposes is daring in general. As Marjolein ‘t Hart summarizes, “[i]n strongly polarized settings, humour is one of the

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16 Although I think Bruner’s take on carnivalesque protest is very insightful, his frequent anthropomorphizations of the state as a being capable of displaying humor are, despite his occasional mentions of “state actors” instead, somewhat misleading and risk to obliterate complex structural relations of power.
first victims” in order not to jeopardize the righteousness of one’s claims or simply because humor gives way to anger and fear (2). The success of jokes is, of course, further complicated by their dependence on a given context and culture. Leaving the risks aside, humor can be a powerful tool to unite and empower political movements, a “true ‘weapon of the weak’” (1).

Masking can also alleviate the vulnerable position of protesters having to utter collective demands in a discursive environment that often does not work in their favor. As Ruiz very convincingly reasons, the mask may be “the coalition movement’s postmodern answer to the banner.” In contrast to the banner as “a textually prescriptive technology of communication,” the mask facilitates “an open-ended range of protesting positions.” Ruiz concludes that this can unite “activists from both idealistic and antagonistic traditions” (274) – the mask can be a statement without the wearer having to make a statement, so to speak.

IV A Point of Departure: The Guy Fawkes Mask in V for Vendetta as Graphic Novel and Film

How the Guy Fawkes mask is lifted from its fictional origins is reminiscent of Tarrow’s metaphorical “costumes of the revolution” (qtd. in Herkenrath 48) and of the ways in which movements are, in his words, “both consumers of existing cultural meanings and producers of new meanings” (qtd. in Benford and Snow 629). The texts of origin, the graphic novel and film adaptation of V for Vendetta, are already laden with complex political messages. Although the mask has become a transmedial phenomenon (Wolf) and can become a prop in protests without any recourse to its source, especially Anonymous hacktivists sometimes still appropriate the story’s rhetoric and aesthetics. I will outline some of the aspects which I believe still surface in the contemporary engagement with the mask in online activism, street protests, and popular culture in general.

Alan Moore and David Lloyd set their work V for Vendetta in the near future, a dystopian Great Britain ruled by a fascist dictatorship which persecutes and murders ethnic minorities, political opponents, and homosexuals. On the 1997 anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot, the anarchist terrorist V, the protagonist of the story, blows up the Houses of Parliament in an overt reference to Guy Fawkes. This triggers the regime’s efforts to catch him and cover up the political damage via the potent government propaganda machinery. V rescues the sixteen-year-old orphan Evey Hammond, who then lives with him in secrecy. He wears a mask at all times during the narrative – neither the reader nor the characters (except one) ever see his face. Likewise, his life story remains largely undisclosed. Evey gradually comes to support his cause but

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17 See Stein 750 for an overview of studies in which mainstream media mechanisms of distortion and exclusion of social movement positions are analyzed.
18 Whereas Ruiz’ brief discussion of the mask does not differentiate between its settings, Kohns’ more extended analysis draws on the aesthetic and political implications of both fictional narratives.
is appalled at V’s ready use of violence and nonchalance about it. V stages a hoax imprisonment as a rite of passage for Evey (Carretero-González 215), who eventually embraces her transformation. When V is tracked down and killed, she completes his plan to destroy Downing Street and publicly assumes his guise, but even in death V’s mask is not lifted once.

In the graphic novel, the mask is a central element for the “secret identity” theme common to superhero narratives (R. Reynolds; Jenkins). The mask disguises and protects as well as empowers its wearer. We find a complex play with illusion and its disruption, with masking and unmasking on the levels of both story and discourse. This foregrounds the materiality and functions of the mask instead of allowing it to fully become V’s “face” – at one point, V even changes into the costume and mask of a vaudeville conférencier for a cruel game with one of his former tormentors (Moore and Lloyd 31; see also Anderson 146). V’s carnival and humor, his staging of the “grand illusion” (Moore and Lloyd 31) is brutal to even the person closest to him, which at first glance hardly makes him an apt candidate for veneration. However, V himself evokes self-ironically the demonic connotations of masking (Moore and Lloyd 54) and makes clear that he strives to be seen not as an irreplaceable individual but as the mere embodiment of an idea, thus rising to an “all-purpose symbol” (Moore and Lloyd 252). This universality would not be possible without his anonymity, Little explains and adds that “if anyone could be the man behind the mask, the suggestion is that anyone can stand up to fascism, anyone can make a difference” (185). The visual prominence of the mask in the graphic novel, evidence also for the eventual realization of the regime that “[p]eople need symbols” (Moore and Lloyd 252), may already foreshadow the iconic status the mask has gained after transcending page and screen.

In the highly successful film adaptation of V for Vendetta, significant changes of plot and setting shift the graphic novel’s conflict between anarchy and fascism and roots in Thatcherite Britain to a projection of U.S.-American post-9/11 neo-conservative politics of law and order and mass surveillance (Booker; Keller 34; Call). The film opens with a re-enactment of Guy Fawkes’ arrest and execution, a scene which is not part of the original narrative but makes the adaptation intelligible for a North American audience more likely to be unfamiliar with the historical event (Booker 187). The spotlight is turned on a more individualized V as an “archetypal hero – the good man wronged” (R. Reynolds 129) and the complicated intimacy between him and Evey. As such, the film invites followers to continue V’s legacy much more strongly than the graphic novel, which rather suggests that the person is exchangeable, the idea is not. Still, neither the characters nor the spectators see V’s face unmasked and his universality is repeatedly emphasized. The filmic V offers

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19 Writer Alan Moore frankly determined that the screenplay was “‘rubbish’” (qtd. in Itzkoff) and, causing a great public stir, demanded to be taken off the film credits. The anti-fascist, anarchist tenets of the original narrative are a general trait of his work that is rooted in the UK counterculture and activist art of the 1970s (see Gray, “Underground”; “Resistance”). Alan Moore’s supportive medial presence in the context of the Occupy movement (Walker) is interesting in this respect.
an approach to social upheaval quite different from the one in the graphic novel: He has developed from the sarcastic and aloof vigilante and terrorist to a carnivalesque, violent, yet sincere elite revolutionary (see Anderson 143), whose carefully orchestrated mass broadcasts supposedly enlighten the slumbering masses (see Walsh). Kohns follows Call’s analysis that both V’s mass broadcasts and his acts of terrorist destruction serve to create “a narrative about the possibility of capturing and seizing official representation” (96). Kohns connects this to Thomas Hobbes’ concept of the state as an “artificial person,” derived from the Latin *persona* for mask, which is representative of its subjects (94-95). Wearing the mask, Kohns argues, the thus anonymized individual revokes the authorization of representation once passed on to the government (97).

Towards the end of the film version, V’s public announcements encourage a massive flow of identically clad and masked citizens to confront the military, to walk past it and to stop and uncover their faces, in awe of the violent spectacle of explosion V has prepared for them. The ambivalence of this scene has been pointed out by James Reynolds, who argues that the film omits the graphic novel’s anarchist and “uneasy imperative to choose what comes next” and instead simply (and problematically) presumes “a better world” (133; cf. Anderson 149). Likewise, critic David Walsh condemns the film, arguing that it is ultimately antidemocratic to suggest that mass insurrections can be provoked by political assassinations and acts of terrorism. He asks, “[s]ince the population has taken no part in the ‘revolution,’ has not advanced its own social awareness in any noticeable manner, how is a new, liberated society supposed to emerge from all this?” Finally, Kohns makes another enlightening observation about the film’s climax. Evoking Carl Schmitt’s democracy theory, that is, his argument that “the people as such must become *visible* to be able to emerge as a political actor” (99), Kohns notes that the mass assemblage of people is staged like a river, a “steady flow” (100). This iconography is borrowed from Sergei Eisenstein’s 1925 classic *Battleship Potemkin* (100) and enforced here through present-day cinematography and the uniformity of protesters in their masks and capes. Kohns concludes that “democracy at its most theatrical moment – the moment when the people are forming themselves into a political subject – can only resort to the same visual aesthetics as totalitarian ideology” (101).

I will return to these problematic implications in the following section. For now, let me add a comment on the “other side” of the antagonistic spectacle that unfolds here. Of course, the aesthetics of the filmic protesters are also a comment on the (literal) uniformity of their opponents. With reference to Debord, Anderson reminds us that “[d]emonstrations are always theatrical events. They put real bodies on display as a spectacle of dissention” (147; see also Bruner). In a politically conservative essay from 1982 on the “staging” of German protests within the peace and environmentalist movements, the author casts the demonstrations as “open-air performances” generating their own audiences, including the anticipated appearance of the “cops” in “martial costumes like medieval warriors” (Hildebrandt 43, my translation).
Nevertheless it is evident that we as onlookers and in hindsight should not overemphasize the theatrical aspects of protests, in which costumes are also quite pragmatic protective gear and the theatrical protagonist-antagonist logic can have very real consequences for both sides.

V The Guy Fawkes Mask of Anonymous and Occupy Wall Street – “We the People” in Post-Democracy?

Now how did V’s mask enter the realm of online activism and street protests? Leypoldt, once again, regards cultural icons “as conceptual markers for the felt experiences . . . of collective forms of attraction” (12). Especially in this case, where the iconic mask is transposed from a fictional source to the context of protest and activism, the emotional investment with the mask and its significations suggest processes of fandom, e.g. the “detachability” of cult objects from a text (Hills). As quoted above, the mask as artifact was originally sold as fan gear. Anderson judges the fact that mask-wearing Occupiers reap profits for the mask-selling corporations as a sell out to their anti-capitalist agenda (161). Granted, it is ironic that Time Warner earns royalties from mask sales (Bilton), but too simplistic to infer a movement’s partial failure from this. As Call comments, “if we use consumer markets to acquire the tools we require to critique capitalism, we are only making practical use of the existing instruments in order to transcend the existing order of things – a very anarchist proposition” (171n2).

Before Occupiers in New York City sported the mask, though, it was seized by the hacker/activist collective Anonymous. From its 2003 beginnings in the online message board 4chan to its latest alliances with the Occupy Wall Street movement, the progression of Anonymous has left government officials, journalists, and scholars more or less in the dark about the inner workings of what is often misguidedly viewed as a distinct group.20 As obscure as individual “Anons” may be, their graphic representation is known all the better: A stylized figure in a suit, a question mark substituting its head, in front of a globe encircled by a laurel wreath (reminiscent of the United Nations emblem) functions as Anonymous’ logo.

The other signature sign is the Guy Fawkes mask, appearing in street protests, worn in video clips on the internet, or simply as an image in avatars or memes. The mask originally appeared in 2006 on a “subchannel” of 4chan, an online image board founded in the United States in 2003 which has become hugely popular and at the same time “widely perceived to be one of the most offensive quarters of the Internet” (Coleman, “Weirdness” 83; see also Stryker; Mendoza). 4chan requires no previous registration; consequently, the majority of posts are labeled “Anonymous.” Parts of 4chan are committed

20 Whenever I speak of unspecified Anonymous operations I refer to activities which seem to have garnered broad support in the “hive mind” (Norton, “2011”) and much media attention under the general heading “Anonymous.”
to online pranks which eventually evolved to the 2008 birth of Anonymous with anti-Scientology activities such as DDoS attacks, still one of the collective’s most broadly used “hacking” techniques.

DDoS is short for distributed denial-of-service, an attack by which large numbers of external communication requests result in the collapse of a website’s host, causing the website to be unavailable – no actual “hacking” is involved (Pras et al. 1-2). DDoS attacks can be fired using very simple programs (Mansfield-Devine 5). Hence, these “hacktivist” operations in fact do not require much technical sophistication and are, in fact, not very “anonymous” at all (Pras et al.). With DDoS attacks, everyone (presupposed basic internet skills and access) can participate, just as everyone can discuss in IRCs, tweet electronic support, and don a Guy Fawkes mask for street protests. This is not to say that internal hierarchies are absent, be it because of more time invested, more sophisticated skills in hacking or communication, or hierarchies along the lines of gender, race, and class. Yet apart from a kind of “meritocratic populism” within the hive mind, the dominant ethos is one of the “effacement of the self” (Coleman, “Weirdness” 92), an idealized collective arising from a network of interconnected individuals much in the same way that the internet exists as a server network. The loose network thrives on its image of collectivity, of being “legion,” and renders the mask’s disguising function a rhetoric rather than a reality: it “manages to achieve spectacular visibility and individual invisibility at once” (Coleman, “Weirdness” 93).

Ruiz’ somewhat similar general assertion is that “the image of the masked face has the potential to make the previously unseen majority visible and is therefore a purposeful form of presence” (264). Kohns likens this logic to Elias Canetti’s notion of power as impenetrability and convincingly relates this to the anonymously published contemporary revolutionary manifesto The Coming Insurrection, in which clandestine invisibility until the eventual onset of the revolt is prized (94).

Anonymous’ origins on 4chan are significant because they point towards the special kind of hacktivism espoused by the nascent collective, namely, of “doing it for the lulz.” Lulz, derived from the acronym LOL for “laugh(ing) out loud,” is scathing humor, ridicule, schadenfreude (Norton, “Introduction”), and the pursuit thereof sparked the first Anonymous “operations.” Soon, however, more serious objectives arose – e.g. activism against internet censorship and government surveillance – and caused internal dispute “about whether they should protest in earnest or remain faithful to Anonymous’ madcap roots” (Coleman, “Weirdness” 88). Anonymous (and V, I might add) might be likened to the figure of the trickster, as Coleman proposes and Norton elaborates in rather 4chan-esque terms:

The trickster isn’t the good guy or the bad guy, it’s the character that exposes contradictions, initiates change and moves the plot forward. One minute, the loving and heroic trickster is saving civilization. A few minutes later the same trickster is cruel, kicking your ass and eating babies as a snack. (Norton, “Introduction”)
This is an ongoing struggle and an instructive example of the inherent ambivalences of carnivalesque activism. As in the case of charivari, the rogue pursuit of lulz requires at least the illusion of anonymity under a collective guise. Anonymous’ lulzmaking is coupled with strong moral convictions and legitimized as vigilante justice. Here I agree with Anderson’s argument that the mask’s fictional associations “generate a sense of truth in the form of emotional capital” (150), something that I think loses force outside of Anonymous, where *V for Vendetta* references are scarce.

The connection of the hacktivist collective and Occupy Wall Street may not be obvious at first. Yet Anonymous “began acting as a crucial, though informal, public relations wing for Occupy Wall Street in the Fall” of 2011, and masked Anons personally attended the protests (Coleman, “Weirdness” 94; see also Norton, “2011”). An Anonymous YouTube video (xen0nymous) spread the call for mass protests which had originated from the editors of the anti-consumerist magazine *Adbusters* (Kraushaar). These and other videos (TheAnonPress; TheAnonMessage) appropriate the *V for Vendetta* film version’s aesthetics of revolutionary broadcasts “to all people.” Speakers alternatingly present themselves as elite revolutionaries who speak from outside of politics and the law on behalf of the people or cast themselves as the people themselves: “United we stand, divided we fall. We are the people. We are the only system. We are Anonymous” (TheAnonMessage). These, “the people” in theory, began to assemble publicly in the summer of 2011 and eventually established a squatter camp in Zuccotti Park near Wall Street. Two relatively violent police operations against Occupy demonstrations in New York City sparked media attention and the rapid diffusion of similar actions across the United States and hundreds of cities abroad (Kraushaar; Costanza-Chock).

Soon after the squatters had established themselves, observers of the protests commented on the alleged nebulosity of OWS’s causes (Kraushaar 77; Butler qtd. in Anderson 145) – they were demanding demands, so to speak. Indeed, OWS’s most prolific catchphrase was – and is – not a request for or rejection of something, but a self-referential assertion: “We are the 99%.” This phrase sets off the allegedly powerful 1% of the population from the large majority and, thus, implicitly comments on the U.S. society’s stark inequalities in income and wealth distribution (see Stiglitz). In connection with the highly symbolic nucleus of the protest movement at “Wall Street,” epitome of global financial capitalism, this is a more sophisticated political statement than the common moralistic condemnation of bankers’ “greed” (Solty 13). Arguably, the most important political agenda of OWS are “formal” features of the movement: Dissatisfaction with the state of democratic politics led them to experiment with a form of protest without charismatic leaders and with a radically democratic decision-making process. As Slavoj Žižek optimistically wrote in October 2011, the protest’s vigor but unintelligibility was one of its greatest political assets:
What one should resist at this stage is precisely such a quick translation of the energy of the protest into a set of concrete pragmatic demands. Yes, the protests did create a vacuum – a vacuum in the field of hegemonic ideology, and time is needed to fill this vacuum in a proper way, as it is a pregnant vacuum, an opening for the truly new.

The Occupiers thereby avoided to be “co-opted by existing political parties” or to “recognise the legitimacy of the state as an agent capable of or willing to implement policy” (Pickerill and Krinsky 283).

Both Anonymous and Occupy employ the iconic mask to signal an inclusive collective. Occupy does not follow Anonymous’ rhetoric of secrecy and complete de-individualization, however. Rather, the use of the mask signals the protesters’ association or solidarity with a diverse movement. For a movement without membership, carrying a Guy Fawkes mask can make supporters mutually identifiable (although appearing in the same space with or without mask suffices), and it unifies dispersed protests especially for an audience which perceives the events via news media images. The mask alone makes for a theatrical image. Slavoj Žižek has labeled OWS as a carnival, a commentator has designated one of Anonymous’ street protests a “dress rehearsal revolution” (Norton, “2011”), and demonstrations on the Fifth of November are staged as re-enactments of V for Vendetta.21 The film character V has accordingly staged “his” revolution, mailing costumes to the mass of intended actors, who then comply with his wishes. As such, the characteristic of masking that Rozik lists as a “main disadvantage” in theater, namely “that it diverts expression from face to body and hinders vocal communication” (214; see also Alström 134), becomes a benefit in protests that stage (bodily and symbolic) presence (see Ruiz) rather than concretely verbalized demands.

Let me delve deeper into the political implications of the Guy Fawkes mask as a protest icon for Anonymous and Occupy, starting with a widely transmitted on-site address of Judith Butler to Occupy Wall Street activists. She asserts that “as bodies, we arrive together in public . . . enacting the phrase ‘We the People’” (Butler), and legitimizes the protests’ contentual vagueness or void by shifting the focus from “we demand something” to “we demand.” Regardless of whether or not it holds true empirically, the efforts of OWS are to live up in public perception to their dictum “we are the 99%.” This is similar to Anonymous’ self-presentation “we are legion,” but references more strongly the democratic promise of the demos as sovereign. As Butler’s formulation “enacting ‘We the People’” intimates, the demos is something that on the one hand needs to be performatively constituted, and on the other hand requires representation. The Guy Fawkes mask is iconic for this production of “a shared sense of ‘one-ness’ or ‘we-ness’” (Snow 2213). Oliver Kohns employs the term “democratic desire” for this wish for a formation of the people as a political subject outside of representation by the state (101). Yet if we shift our perspective, as Warren and Mansbridge suggest, away from the demos to the significance of kratein as the other central

element of democracy, we are led to wonder about the potency of Occupy’s democratizing impulse, as furthering “the capacity to act and implement decisions” (87) has not been the movement’s initial focus.

It appears that in the cases of *V for Vendetta* (the film much more strongly than the anarchy vs. fascism-themed graphic novel), Anonymous, and Occupy, we find a popular analysis of the current state of democracy which chimes with Colin Crouch’s topical diagnosis of politics in the “Western” (post-)industrialized world as increasingly post-democratic. Crouch explains that

> [u]nder this model [of post-democracy], while elections certainly exist and can change governments, public electoral debate is a tightly controlled spectacle, managed by rival teams of professionals expert in the techniques of persuasion, and considering a small range of issues selected by those teams. The mass of citizens plays a passive, quiescent, even apathetic part, responding only to the signals given them. . . . [P]olitics is really shaped in private by interaction between elected governments and elites that overwhelmingly represent business interests. (4)

This model, Crouch concedes, is as much an exaggeration as the “maximal ideal” of democracy as a situation in which a great majority of informed citizens participates actively in the processes of agenda-setting and decision-making (2-4). However, he sees the balance tipping strongly in favor of post-democracy. Crouch’s model, very briefly sketched here, may be a top-down analysis which misconstrues the politicization and resistance of people beside the official channels. Furthermore, we might observe a clash between two models of democracy in parts of the rhetoric of the film version of *V for Vendetta* and Anonymous: The emphasis on the protection of citizens from a powerful state represents the ideal of negative rights, characteristic for a U.S.-American model of liberal democracy. An amendment of a post-democratic situation might, however, precisely call for the opposite – a focus on positive rights, i.e., citizens’ participation, in the republican model of democracy (Crouch 13). This comes closer to the model of Occupy Wall Street, which has “revived the classical image of the nation as *res-publica*, the nation as a public thing” (Brown, “Return”), albeit without much capacity to act upon it.

Nonetheless, relevant here is not so much an empirical reality check of Crouch’s proposition, but rather a more or less prevalent perception of “western” politics as post-democratic. The common ground of both versions of *V for Vendetta*, Anonymous, and Occupy Wall Street seems to be the stance that “[t]here is something terribly wrong with this country,” as the character V states (*V for Vendetta*), and that ultimately only “the people” can fix it. Masking themselves, political “actors” mirror and simultaneously “unmask”

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22 Other theoretical objections may be that a distinction between “staged” public and “real” backdoor politics is simplistic (Warstat 177-78), or that Crouch’s analysis is based on an idealization of democracy during Fordism which neglects the many mechanisms of exclusion, e.g., of women and minorities.

23 I should note that obviously, *V for Vendetta* presents us with an authoritarian or even fascist state, not a democracy in whichever shape. The arguments still hold for both if we accept that the graphic novel can very well be read as a commentary on the Thatcher government (as the author and the artist suggest in their preface), and that the film bears obvious parallels to the Bush administration’s policies.
the invisibility and anonymity of political, economic, and media elites which appear to manipulate and constrain the actual political sovereign, the *demos*. In Ruiz’ words, “the refusal to be seen and categorized by the state is empowering in that it exposes, and then unsettles, the power dynamics that structure public space” (264).

*Demos*, as well as democracy, are floating signifiers in a discourse in which agents perpetually contend for the power to (re)define and represent them (Brown, “Demokraten” 55). Moreover, if V’s followers, Anons, and Occupy activists voice an “us,” there is an implied “them” – the vague notion of the 1%, for instance, and/or “the government” in the case of *V for Vendetta*. They revoke a relationship of political representation with their legislators (Kohns), who can no longer claim this “we” for themselves.24 With their voicing of dissent, the revocation of hegemonic consensus, the fictional and non-fictional protesters may be perceived as opening up spaces for counterpublics (Fraser; see also Wiegmink 79) or antagonistically bringing forth an accessible public space (Marchart).

This does indeed bear an emancipatory potential, but not without some pitfalls.25 Occupy Wall Street’s denial of legitimization of the political representatives, undiluted by overt thematic demands, is a forceful statement indeed. However, since it remains unclear how democratic collective action is supposed to emerge, political elites can continue to benefit from their as yet unharmed capacity to act. With their emphasis of “the people” and the consequent “us versus them” accusations against “the elite,” the onset of the Occupy protests can very justifiably be met with the verdict of populism (see Mudde). I agree that with these rather simplistic tenets the movement or collective has seemed ill-equipped to develop solutions to the pressing political concerns at hand. Yet this particular version of a populist agenda, which comes with the intention to deliberate the state of democratic decision-making, appears to be among the best of its kind, to put it crudely.

In the case of Anonymous, to continue the list of pitfalls, what is evoked is not so much the *demos* but rather an elite network that acts on behalf of “the people.” The rogue lulzmaking and avenging collective has seemed to feel sympathetic towards the filmic figure of V as a tyrannicide, noble avenger, and vigilante hero who indulges in and jokes about his murders (see Jung 29-33) – and yet, his courtly sophistication and politeness is so successfully set apart from the regime’s crudeness that it suggests righteousness. The trouble

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24 See also Ruiz 273 on Occupy’s us/them negotiations.
25 Anderson does not see a progressive potential here, putting forth that “[i]n hiding their identities under the guise of a character so linked to violence and civil unrest, [the protesters] challenge the professed aims of transparency and nonviolence in the large Occupy movement” (Anderson 145-46). This negative assertion might stem from the fact that he entirely ignores the role of Anonymous as a mediator between the mask’s origin and its subsequent use in protests, and appears to assume that Occupy protesters are generally aware of the mask’s original implications (150-51). His assertion that “the mask always exists in conversation with the violence depicted” in graphic novel and film (146) oversimplifies the complex processes in which the significatory potential of cultural icons is broadened and reworked.
with transposing this concept of terrorism and vigilante justice from an authoritarian to a (however deficient) democratic system is, obviously, that both operate “outside the limits of the law, but effecting justice” (Köpping 84), thereby putting efficacy and “output” above democratic decision-making. Paradoxically, the paradigmatic vigilante hero can step outside the constraints of society with – in the case of democracies – its negotiations and interdependencies and employ violence for the creation of a community or society which is then intended to manage peacefully without it, as Köpping explains with a different fictional example (84). This transposition, without providing instead a serious anarchist alternative as does the graphic novel, undermines both constitutionality and majority rule as what may be deemed core principles of democracy. Similarly, the sympathies for a moment of decision in antagonistic confrontation, the Schmittian friend-enemy distinction, which become evident in the film version of *V for Vendetta* and Anonymous’ rhetoric and actions are haunted by an anti-democratic air, as the aforementioned positions of Kohns and Walsh elucidate. Deliberative democrats’ call for norms “that might guide a people and secure their claim to be fair and not merely powerful, ‘democratic’ and not merely majoritarian” (Honig 1) is scarcely heeded here. Still, this tendency cannot account for the multiplicity of voices springing up in the name of Anonymous, many of which subscribe to civil disobedience without the problematic connotations outlined above.26

In a different vein, Occupy’s aforementioned affinity with the rhetoric of democracy results in an emphasis to posit egalitarian diversity as unity – an idea that “anybody can don the mask and be with us” rather than “wearing the mask entails a perception of homogeneity, i.e., unity and strength.” In the case of Anonymous operations, the unifying and integrating icon of the Guy Fawkes mask is often used politically in combination with a rhetoric that idealizes the _demos_ but problematically without advocating a specified relation of _demos_ and _kratein_. This latter democratic impetus, however, is present in the case of Occupy Wall Street and may persist in other uses of the mask in progressive protests. It is another question how egalitarian and effective this ideal can be in practice.

VI Some Reflections on a Less Universalized Reading of the Guy Fawkes Mask

The case of the Guy Fawkes mask surely is a complicated affair: a faint reference to a historical iconic figure, fictional sources of differing political agendas, an appropriation by Anons (on- and offline), Occupiers (who may or may not wear masks), other protests within and beyond the United States, spin-offs in popular culture. It is tempting to establish a linear chronology of events implying an equally linear concept of a geographically broadening

26 As Hannah Arendt wrote, “‘the law cannot justify the breaking of the law,’” but civil disobedience may nevertheless (particularly in the United States) be used for “the purpose of testing [the law’s] constitutionality” (Arendt 45).
and quantitatively increasing dissemination – first Anonymous, then Occupy Wall Street, now a “global icon.” A simple Google image search reveals many masked demonstrators in non-American contexts, and we can certainly establish a chronology as shown above. Yet, it is simply not all too linear, as Occupy protests have waned and Anonymous collectives seem to have diversified, and the images stemming from gatekeeping news media sources do not inform us about how an individually worn mask in Egypt is anchored in local dissident structures. It is also compelling to posit heuristic distinctions between different settings – “Anonymous,” “the Occupy Movement” – and generalize findings and interpretations within these realms. It is, of course, not my objective, nor that of the scholars I cite (in particular Anderson; Kohns; Ruiz), to carry out an empirical social movement study; and needless to say, analyzing symbolic functions requires a degree of abstraction. Yet, there are some risks of misrepresentations that should be considered.

Particularly since Anonymous and Occupy activists act offline as well as dispersed online, and since they are without leaders, a clear set of demands, or a membership structure, we mostly do not know whose voices we privilege over others, and we tend to rely on those that have been successfully mediated.27 Our desire to know what’s “behind the mask” (the single most frequent collocation in news coverage and comments on the Guy Fawkes mask, I am led to believe28) poses considerable troubles even for in-depth ethnographic study (see Coleman, “Participate”; “Anonymous in Context”), hence a cautionary tone and a focus on one’s own hermeneutic reading of what is “on the mask” may be called for. There is also the risk of neglecting “frame disputes,” that is, internal struggles over “how to represent or articulate a particular version of reality (i.e., how to frame) to potential supporters, bystanders, media, and targets of change” (Benford 417) or “counterframing” and “reframing” struggles between social movement actors and their opponents (418).

Lastly (but not exhaustively), there is the “reification problem” of viewing movements and their frames as things, followed by frequent anthropomorphizations of these notions (418). As Benford says, social movements do not act, the people within them do. Social movement studies thus need to be cautious not to neglect “human agency” and “emotions” (418) and not to follow “monolithic tendencies,” meaning to “treat frames in a singular fashion as though there is a single reality” (422). Movement actors are also, as trivial as it sounds, invested in “their” movement to differing degrees. I think the pitfalls Benford indicates can be adapted to a less empirical cultural studies oriented endeavor as well. I am, to a greater or lesser extent, guilty of all of the mechanisms listed above, and I observe similar tendencies in those scholarly and journalistic analyses of the mask of which I am aware. Consequently,

27 See Benford 421 for the issue of “elite bias” in social movement studies.
28 It makes little sense to rhetorically decouple the mask from the hacktivists’ impact. Without suggesting that a majority of analyses falls prey to this idea, it should be clarified that without unifying icons and an easily recognizable style, there would be no “Anonymous” behind anything, merely dispersed individuals of small groups of hacktivists with an even less clear set of goals.
I will return to three particular questions which I have outlined at the end of my introduction, and which may provide a starting point for a yet more complicated story of the mask.

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Oliver Kohns states that the Guy Fawkes mask “symbolizes an abstinence of political heroes (who have an individual personality and belong to a specific ethnic group and gender)” (102). I agree with the sentiment of dehierarchization, but is the mask actually unmarked for gender and race? Recent reconfigurations in the context of Anonymous seem to suggest otherwise. I will spotlight the issue of gender by the example of the “Operation Anonymiss” to raise the question if the mask does not in fact suggest a white, middle- or upper-class male by default. 29

In her history of Anonymous, Parmy Olson recounts the story of “Kayla,” a young female-presenting hacker involved with the hacktivist collective. In this context Olson comments on the ambivalence of navigating hacking communities as a girl or woman: She maintains that posing as a girl may attract desired attention among the majority of heterosexual male hackers and coders (see also Schell and Martin 187). However, these communities and particularly online image boards such as Anonymous’ cradle 4chan are notorious for their rampant sexism, often leaving female users with the options to either navigate slurs or pose as default male.

While this seems to confirm the stereotype that “there are no girls on the internet,” the actual situation is more complex. Gabriella Coleman, cultural anthropologist with leading expertise on Anonymous as well as hacking and coding in general, cautions that “far more substantial research on the topic [of gender] is needed before qualified and fair judgments as to the complicated dynamics at play can be posed” (Coding Freedom 212n16). Consequently, she omits almost all mention of gender or other potential structures of discrimination from her analyses. While this is not the place for a thorough study of gender bias within hacker communities (see, for instance, Jordan and Taylor 117), the relatively recent launch of “Anonymiss” makes for an instructive exploration.

“Anonymiss” has been initiated as an operation of Anonymous. A text published on one of the central Anonymous news websites calls for “modern girls” who want “freedom,” “power,” and “fun,” and who “love the internet” to join the collective, and urges the “gentlemen” of Anonymous to support this appeal (“Operation Anonymiss”). Since its appearance around 2011, Anonymiss has appeared in blogs and on Facebook. On the latter social networking site they appear as “Anonymous & Anonymiss” and do not seem to follow a feminist, intersectional, or female-centered agenda, and the same

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29 I am indebted to Jessica Ring of Carleton University for helpful comments on Anonymiss and her assessment of the operation as an attempt to increase female and/or feminist hacktivists’ visibility and provide a safe space for them, the success of which is difficult to evaluate.
seems to hold for blog sites. Despite this proximity to the thematic range of Anonymous operations, many commenters on the AnonNews press release for Anonymiss have criticized the operation. Aside from a few casually sexist remarks, the general tendency seemed to be a concern about separatism, as one comment and two replies illustrate (“Operation Anonymiss”):

This. When do we get AnonJewmous, or AnoNegromous, and what do we do when the AnoNazimous are founded and start fighting each other. Anonymous is Anonymous. Gender, race, religion, politics have no faces here. (Anonymous commenter on AnonNews, 2011-03-21 10:46:22)

The problem with this type of thinking is the same problem as calling U.S. culture “colorblind”. By pretending we don’t “see” race or gender, we ignore the issues going on. A “faceless” anonymous becomes a white, male face by default. Freedom is a term that means different things to different people, based on race, class, and gender. In order to fight for freedom from censorship, we have to look at different standpoints. (reply to commenter 2012-09-29 02:40:48)

and turn it into a white, female face by default now? -1 (reply to above reply, n.d.)

I am obviously not implying that these comments are evidence of a widespread debate within the ranks of Anonymous. Rather, I think they are exemplary of two potential opposing paradigms within the collective: the unifying universalist agenda of a hive-mind collective on the one hand and the attentiveness to internal faultlines and structures of discrimination on the other. The second comment raises awareness for the complexities of intersectionality, yet without explicitly pointing out the racist and anti-Semitic undertones of the first. The third statement, if not altogether unsympathetic and anti-separatist, might reveal the practical obstacles on this course, i.e. referring to the fact that Anonymiss still appears to neglect, among others, the factor of race.

These tensions do not spare the emblems of Anonymous. The abovementioned press release includes a feminized suit figure instead of the “default” masculine one. In another example, the banner of an Anonymiss “cyberguerrilla” blog reworks both the figure and the mask. Here, the mask’s “face” has feminine features and wears make-up, sports a finely sketched beard reminiscent of female cross-dressing in cabaret – and it loses its prominent smile in exchange for a sincere portrait pose. The face looks young, well-proportioned to Western standards of beauty, and the accompanying hand and arm suggest the wearer of the mask is white (Anonymiss Express Cyberguerrilla). We tend to not “see” the race and gender of the Guy Fawkes mask, to adapt the second of the comments quoted above – these feminized examples expose the universalization of masculinity in the “usual” mask iconography.

30 The abovementioned Facebook site’s post history for May 2014 reveals an eclectic mixture of open data and anti-surveillance activism, U.S. and world politics, music videos, and conspiracy theories (“Anonymous and Anonymiss”). A Tumblr site named “Anonymiss Express” seems to be more explicitly left-leaning, quoting Mother Jones or antifascist websites, but states that “[t]his Anonymiss site is committed to the same ideals as some Anonymous” (Anonymiss Express).
but tend to employ a quite stereotypical visual language of femininity themselves. Beyond this, I am hesitant to hazard guesses on the question whether Anonymiss might not run the risk of becoming a “special interest” branch without changing any general directions within Anonymous, or how active female Anons actually are and want to be in this context.

We can, however, juxtapose this example with an Anonymous operation that recently garnered quite a lot of media attention: the Operation RollRedRoll. In this case from Steubenville, Ohio, and in other similar examples, Anons widely disseminated footage of jocular High School rapists assaulting unconscious female classmates, videos the assailants had themselves shared via social media. Threatening to publicize the names of perpetrators and local officials, KnightSec, a derivative of Anonymous dedicated to vigilant justice, condemned the pervasive victim blaming and demanded legal action to be taken (Kushner). Indeed, this sparked an ongoing national debate about rape culture in the USA (Friedman). Notwithstanding the due accusation of the authorities’ shameful failures, the operations exhibit a problematic tendency of saviorism (white and male, if we follow Kushner’s account). As Friedman describes, the publication of these images may help to raise awareness, but override the emotional needs and the agency of the survivor. “KnightSec,” adapted from the internet phenomenon of “white knights” striving to save damsels in distress (see Kushner), thus exemplifies another aspect of the conflictual nature of online vigilantism.

As for issues of race and ethnicity, critic Lisa Nakamura puts forth an argument similar to the second above-quoted comment on Anonymiss in that she troubles the lingering notion of the internet as an egalitarian space. She rightly reminds us that “[s]imply put, race and racism don’t disappear when bodies become virtual or electronically mediated” (“Cyberrace” 1677). When the default, non-racialized user is thought of as white and male (Nakamura, Cybertypes), this challenges what Seb Franklin critically presents as the dominant view of distributed networks “as a politically radical form” thanks to their “nonhierarchical structure” and their systems “allow[ing] groups to flexibly and spontaneously organize” (157).

Anonymous’ online activism is not the only example in which a universal white, male face clouds internal hierarchies. The political import of Occupy Wall Street’s strategy of radical democratic deliberation is de facto complicated by observed inequalities and problems of inclusion along the lines of race, class, and gender (Pickerill and Krinsky 282-83; Costanza-Chock 11). Kraushaar has called the protests an “upheaval of the educated” (my translation). Ingar Solty, too, convincingly maintains that the onset of Occupy attracted first and foremost the generation of crisis which, despite great effort, good education, and middle-class roots, finds itself threatened by social decline and unable to pay off its overwhelmingly large college debts (12). Solty calls them a “blocked elite,” a precariat that is not yet excluded and left behind, contrary to those who have felt the erosion of public welfare and increase of social inequality well before the outbreak of the subprime mortgage crisis (12-13).
Yet, the common adversary, the richest 1% that have emerged unscathed (and richer) from the by now almost permanent condition of crisis, seems to unite the 99% despite their internal differences. Michael Kazin, for instance, eagerly welcomes the inclusive breadth the movement suggests. He tellingly states that “[g]ender equality, multiculturalism, opposition to military intervention, and global warming are all worthy causes,” but that “each represented the passions of discrete groups whose opponents were able to belittle them as ‘special interests’” (69). The inherent risk he sees now is merely the difficulty of sustaining a broad movement without introducing structures (69-70). The question is, though, if this “main versus side contradiction” resembling line of thought really is a progressive move for all those with grievances, or if, once again, the bracketing of difference conceals and perpetuates the privileges of a select group.

In some respect, the issue has a point of contact with Nancy Fraser’s oft-cited instructive critique and revaluation of Habermas’ model of rational deliberation in the public sphere, whose conceptual “bracketing . . . of social inequality” (136) she denounces and instead conceptualizes a “plurality” of publics: “Virtually from the beginning counterpublics contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech” (116). Thus, Ruiz argues that masked protesters, who revoke the ideal of transparent deliberation, “draw the public’s attention to the structures that covertly shape political communication within the public sphere” (266; see also Wiegmink 79). Whether they are also able to address covert movement internal mechanisms of power inhibiting the ideal of democratic deliberation and decision making remains to be seen.

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A second issue that further complicates the story of the Guy Fawkes mask as an icon is the wide variety of meanings it can convey and contexts in which it is appropriated. Not only has the mask been used in protests and online activism around the world, it has also inspired countless spin-offs of which I will name just a few. It is likely that most of these artworks reach a wider audience through remediation, i.e., in this case the circulation of photographs on the internet. Some of these images are overtly political, others humorously rework the icon with less obvious claims. In the latter category, we find, for instance, a T-shirt print showing a masked meditating figure resembling Buddha along with the slogan “Occupy Yourself” (“Occupy Yourself”). The print can be read as a witty joke, or at the same time as a more serious recourse to the self as the starting point for social change. Another more straightforwardly playful example is the photograph of a hooded and masked person in front of a supermarket dairy aisle with skim milk, holding up a sign that reads “We are the 2%” (spacelaces). Finally, on the more serious side is an artwork by Shepard Fairey which combines the aesthetics of President Obama’s campaign images with an image of the mask donned by someone wearing a hoodie. One of Obama’s slogans, “Hope,” is altered to read “We are the 99%
Mr. President, we hope you’re on our side.” Anderson reads this as a promising democratic gesture (164-65), which it may be. On the other hand, there is a menacing “us versus them” dynamics which leaves unanswered what would happen if the President was considered an adversary, i.e. how much legitimization is attributed to the political system.

While these were examples in which the mask appears only as an iconic image, its usage in protests would appear to be quite unambiguous. Yet, the mask can adopt contrary significations even within the same space: A news agency image from demonstrations in Germany against the inequality of wealth distribution, an almost “natural environment” of the Guy Fawkes mask, shows a person wearing the mask restyled as a blood-sucking capitalist vampire (“Demonstranten”). I am not insinuating that these role reversals (Leach qtd. in Bruner 139) are more than just exceptions from the general rule that protesters use the mask to signal “us,” not “them.” Nevertheless it is instructive and puzzling to see that this twist of meaning is possible (and appears to be coherent).

I believe the smile of the mask’s “face” plays an important role in this oscillation of meanings. To start with, it empowers the activists. Anonymous supporters can entertain the thought of seeing through their opponents while being impenetrable (Kohns 96), and letting them know with a smirk which befits the spirit of carnivalesque lulzmaking. The mask’s figure is so elusive, the smile so self-assured that it seems to suggest that a hacktivist’s failure might just have been a joke. In the case of Occupy and other demonstrations, the usage of the mask may at first glance seem surprising, given that the crisis-related anti-austerity protests of the last years thrive on righteous indignation (epitomized by the “Indignados” of Spain). Anderson would perhaps not see a contradiction at all, seeing that he maintains the use of the mask “serves as an expression of rage hidden behind a disconcertingly sinister smile” (158). Even though the smile does not seem particularly grim, there might be some truth to this. The expression of David Lloyd’s original drawing seems to be able to convey lighthearted and violent humor as an end itself as well as the determined and knowing smile of the revolutionary. This first characteristic is connected to another effect of the mask which I outlined above, i.e. the impression that wearing the grinning face of the mask, an activist never loses his or her composure and thus asserts superiority and fearlessness even in precarious situations.

From the wide range of pop-cultural adaptations and from the usage of the Guy Fawkes mask for protagonists as well as antagonists, we might conclude that this icon has become a blank space of potential meaning. Lewis Call’s reading comes close to this when he states that the mask “became a truly nomadic, perpetually mutating postmodern symbol” (156), a “free floating signifie[r] . . . liberated from all permanent meaning” (154). I will call this position into question by a recourse to another protest icon, which is more well-known and has been surprisingly persistent: the image of Ernesto “Che” Guevara, subject to similar evaluations of being a free floating signifier.
The iconic status of Che is a powerful combination of iconic personhood and an iconic image which is largely detached from the biography of its subject. The *Guerrillero Heroico*, a 1960s photograph of the Cuban revolutionary that is best known as a two-tone image, became the face of the 1968 student revolts in Europe (Cambre 340-41). Scorer asserts that “Che continues to be one of the world’s most widely-reproduced faces and his multiplication on t-shirts, posters and stencil art has, more often than not, bypassed biography and mythology to spiral into a wry, self-referential postmodern joke” (137). On top of that, the anti-capitalist icon’s ironical commercial success seems to suggest its complete arbitrariness. Charlton, however, offers another perspective which I find more convincing:

The Che face, more than any other icon, can keep accruing new application without relinquishing its essence – a generic and positive version of anti-status quo and liberation from any oppressive force, and a general, romantic, non-specific fantasy about change and revolution. (Charlton qtd. in Scorer 138)

I believe that this interpretation can be transferred to the case of the Guy Fawkes mask. Those who use the mask take advantage of its by now iconic status and, in doing so, reinforce it. In order for this reciprocity to function, the mask cannot be the entirely “free floating signifier” as Call (157) suggests. Instead, its status as a political icon hinges on a residuum of systemic critique and resistance with a tinge of outlaw attitude, a vague essence of counter-hegemonic struggle. The aforementioned puzzling version of the masked adversary may be reconciled with this when we accredit the role reversal to the enigmatic trickster figure suggested by the mask, and if we concede that this reversal would be unlikely to work without the use of additional signifying props. Still, the tension persists. Much of the mask’s appeal lies in its power to unify and integrate, and yet, the more significations it can purport, the more arbitrary it becomes. This process is complex, as cultural icons develop a momentum of their own, and time and more thorough analyses will be needed to assess the route this icon will take.

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Finally, we are left to wonder about the implications of the Guy Fawkes mask as a transnational phenomenon. Here, I am raising questions rather than offering conclusions, even more so than in the previous two sections. At first appearance the mask does indeed seem to translate astonishingly easily to different cultural and socioeconomic settings. We could link this more generally to the process of “carnevalization” of cultural production, meaning that “the strict dichotomy between high and low has broken down and that the freedom in combining signs and discourses from different cultural realms has increased” (Fluck, “Emergence or Collapse” 65).

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31 The *Guerrillero Heroico* maintains its presence in contemporary protests (cf. Cambre 339), but this engagement with an icon differs from that of the Guy Fawkes mask in one significant respect: The face of Che appears on murals, stickers, posters, flags, T-Shirts etc., but it never “becomes” the face of a protester. It is never as much material artifact as it is an image, and it does not offer the semiotics of the mask and the same complex possibility of performative engagement with it.

32 We could link this more generally to the process of “carnevalization” of cultural production, meaning that “the strict dichotomy between high and low has broken down and that the freedom in combining signs and discourses from different cultural realms has increased” (Fluck, “Emergence or Collapse” 65).
transnational quality of this icon merely refers to the fact of its constantly re-mediatized dissemination into different nations of the world. It appears to be an example of “globalization from below” (see Voelz 357), in which local actors appropriate and repurpose an icon in an example of the easily accessible transmission of cultural goods from the United States (after an appropriation from Great Britain) to other parts of the world. The mask is available via online stores, and blogs and online image boards provide numerous film stills, logos, or memes of the mask to peruse, digitally alter, and share. However, things get more complicated if one understands the qualifier “transnational” to imply a transcendence of national boundaries in a global flow of cultures. As Donald Pease puts it, “[t]he transnational differs from the international in that it forecloses the possibility that either nation in the transaction will remain self-enclosed and unitary” (“Introduction” 5). To what extent, then, is the mask anchored in local protest cultures and relations and not merely a visual quote from abroad? How much appropriation, re-fitting it into local contexts is involved? How much significance can we attribute to the origins of the iconic mask in Hollywood and the online self-presentation of U.S-American-based Anonymous hacktivists? Would such a story of origins risk to misrepresent culture-specific significations for hasty comparisons? If the icon is globalized, how globalized is the reach of its revolutionary impetus?

Answering most of these problems would be a methodologically quite challenging endeavor. A look at news reports of protests featuring masked activists, and a consideration of the early agendas of Anonymous and Occupy Wall Street lets me hazard a guess about a general tendency. The counter-hegemonic core tenet I observe in the use of the Guy Fawkes mask, the vague idea of “us against the system,” does not necessarily imply that the “people(s) of the world unite” against a however defined global system. There seems to be an acknowledgment that the struggles elsewhere are similar to one’s own at home and a considerable solidarity among hacktivists and Occupy movements spread across many Western and occasionally non-Western countries, but it is arguable to what extent protesters united under the image of the mask strive for a kind of global justice, for instance. Anonymous’ actions in solidarity with WikiLeaks, against ACTA, or generally against the enforcement of copyright law and net neutrality perhaps come closest to a globalized online activism for a global cause. In general, we should remember that “[t]he national context remains of prime importance to movements whose collective actions are tied intimately to the political opportunities provided by reigning governance structures” (Tarrow qtd. in Stein 752). The mask may travel globally, but the contexts in which it appears, the aims and prospects of those that engage with it are influenced by local structures. In the age of globalization shaped by neoliberal forces, the role of the nation state may fundamentally change but it has not lost its significance (Voelz 364). There is no “transnational democracy” yet (Pease, “Introduction” 15) that could provide a point of reference for a globalized Occupy movement, nor is there a full-fledged globalized public sphere that could act as a discursive
area (Cammas and Audenhove; cf. Ruiz 267 for a more optimistic stance). Although Tarrow observes a “growing importance of transnational networking and mobilization, including mobilization through the Internet” (5), the “major route to the construction of transnational social movements” is “transnational coalition formation,” i.e. solidarity and cooperation of domestic actors beyond their local/national contexts (255), and this seems to characterize Anonymous and Occupy activists as well.33

What are we to make of Anonymous’ involvement with the Arab Spring, for instance? Hacktivists had launched “OpTunisia” in January of 2011 along with other operations to support revolts by “digital care packages” and attacks on government websites. At some point, the actions included the following disclaimer: “This is *your* revolution. It will neither be Twittered nor televised or IRC’ed. You *must* hit the streets or you *will* lose the fight” (qtd. in Coleman, “Weirdness” 89; see also Coleman, “Anonymous in Context” 16).34 Read in a positive light, Anons (at least those who issued the statement) seem to be conscious of the limits their hacktivism presents when it comes to broad-scale social change. Understood more critically, there is a patronizing undertone. A contrasting example, in which the iconic mask seems to have been confidently integrated by local actors into a domestic conflict over an international institution, is the activity of Anonymous Brasil against the FIFA Soccer World Cup of 2014.35

Searching further for the tensions that might lie in transnational appropriations of the Guy Fawkes mask, let me discuss another example of an artistic reworking of it. Taking a walk in Dresden in July 2012, I came across a piece of street poster art showing Mickey Mouse, one of the quintessential icons of U.S.-American popular culture, wearing a Guy Fawkes mask. The masked Mickey is directly looking at the spectator, arms akimbo. A photograph of the poster has since been disseminated online via the popular Facebook page “StreetArt in Germany.” A host of interpretations is possible here. If the mask is appropriated as a positive icon, this may show that it can “hack” simply anything, similar to the shenanigans of former Anonymous subgroup “LulzSec” (see Norton, “Introduction”). But the poster may also exhibit a more critical attitude. The transnationalization of this icon might be met with skepticism; this cultural import not seamlessly integrated and welcomed as a tool for counterhegemonic action. If the mash-up with Mickey suggests that this is an exceptionalist U.S.-American invention, this may recall Johannes Voelz’ argument to decouple the idea of (cultural) transnationalism from an implied opposition to the traditional nation state and the

33 There have been instructive analyses of transnational networks of support for the Zapatistas which might lend themselves to an interesting comparison. See Khasnabish; Olesen.

34 This appropriates Gil Scott-Heron’s civil rights poem and song “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised.”

35 See the host of activities and numerous examples of the image of the Guy Fawkes mask amalgamated with the Brazilian flag, soccer-themed images etc. on http://www.anonymousbrasil.com/brasil/ or Anonymous Brasil’s Facebook page (last accessed 30 May 2014).
forces of neoliberal globalization (357). Consider the ambivalent reception history of Carl Barks's comics characters: On the one hand, the sharp ideological critiques of Disney stories of the 1970s (Kunzle qtd. in Andrae 48-49) might linger on, on the other hand, Barks repeatedly showed himself critical of imperialism and consumerism (Andrae 52). The masked face of Mickey Mouse may thus be another example of the role reversal opportunities I described in the previous sections. As such, it might constitute a critique of Americanization or be an ironic statement on the consumerist downside of Anonymous’ and the Occupy movement’s icon. An iconoclastic attitude could signify that anti-surveillance and anti-austerity protests in different parts of the world, while invested in their local discourses and institutions, still view the United States as the “motherland” of government surveillance (cue the recent NSA intelligence affair) and the neoliberal capitalist agenda which sparked the current state of crisis.

VII Vista

This has been an attempt to uncover the uses and significations of the Guy Fawkes mask as a political icon, one that is notoriously hard to pin down and testifies to the productivity of reinscribed meanings in popular culture. The iconic mask is a transmedial phenomenon and as such partially able to break away from its origins; yet, we have seen how aesthetic-political themes from its narrative source continue to wield an influence especially in online activism. Engendering connotations from a rich cultural history of masks and masking, it lends itself to carnivalesque forms of protests. As an image, it becomes the face of loose networks which articulate dissent and prize collectivity, inclusiveness, and flat hierarchies and effectively draw on dynamics of us versus them and disguise versus display. The mask suggests an elusive trickster figure with a bent towards progressive civil disobedience as well as rogue vigilantism, and the wide range of possible meanings does not stop short of enabling role reversal. Still, a core of insurgent anti-establishment attitude is continuously perpetuated wherever the mask appears. Despite the surrounding rhetoric of inclusiveness and the diversity of activists, the universalization of a “face” suggesting whiteness, maleness, and Western cultural traditions (albeit somewhat alleviated through stylistic exaggeration) raises questions about internal mechanisms of power.

Onlookers might dismiss the mask as a piece of plastic, yet another protest fad of digital (near-)natives “in it for the lulz.” Without risking any guesses about the icon’s longevity, I think we should not underestimate said piece of plastic and the images thereof. Winfried Fluck reasons, after all, that “aesthetic experience” may be the route to restore “political solidarity” (“Resistance!” 22):
If the only way in which resistance is still possible is by temporary attachment to a discursive subject position that invites identification, then the aesthetic mode becomes the main and supreme source of resistance - and also of cultural change and cultural transformation. (23)

As we have seen, the icon of the mask is about as ambivalent as it gets. Is its quintessence of resistance, of voicing dissent better than nothing, and do masked protesters hope to bring forth democratic politics in “agonistic struggle” (Mouffe)? Can the “pregnant vacuum” (Žižek), the staged absence (Ruiz), thus the revocation of hegemonic consensus and legitimate representation by the state rather be productively used to open up spaces for counterpublics? With a currently debilitated Occupy movement and vastly diversified Anonymous agendas, we will have to see how the image of the Guy Fawkes mask fares in the future and what kind of cultural momentum will propel its significatory potential forward.

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