

The Iconography and Ethos of Anonymous and Their Disconnect

By Iris Rouschop

The hacktivist collective Anonymous is well known for its use of the Guy Fawkes masks and the empty black suit as visual representations of themselves and their work. While these are images that connote anonymity, they also say something about the public stance Anonymous has on many issues as well as the place they have taken in pop culture. It can be argued that their iconography of black and white images and decisive language represents their public sociopolitical stance and their hacktivist ethos. However, there is also a disconnect between the pop culture imagery of the group and their ethos. While the colour scheme does indeed seem to represent the black and white way they seem to see the world, the images themselves have more meanings that are not to the advantage of the cause.

While Coleman states that “beyond a foundational commitment to the maintenance of anonymity and a broad dedication to the free flow of information, Anonymous has no consistent philosophy or political program,”⁽³⁾ Anonymous seems to be in agreement with Levy on ‘Hacker Ethics’, which he describes for the earlier hacker group TX-0: “All information should be free...Mistrust Authority - Promote Decentralization... Hackers should be judged by their hacking, not bogus criteria such as degrees, age, race, or position...Computers can change your life for the better” (40-45). These ‘ethics’ were originally written in 1984, long before 4chan and Anonymous came into being. It can thus be said that the creation of the ethos of Anonymous is not a singular event, but something that has grown from the earlier hackers. The contrast with the TX-0 is that the iconography and linguistics of their videos are such an intrinsic part of the Anonymous brand. But as much as Anonymous is represented as a brand, “no single group or individual can claim legal ownership of the name ‘Anonymous,’ much less its icons and imagery... It now has become the quintessential anti-brand brand, assuming various configurations and meanings, even as it has also become the popular face of unrest around the globe” (Coleman, 16). The neutrality of the name Anonymous is also a way of branding the collective. “Neutrality ends up functioning as a sign of neutrality, and if you really wished to go unnoticed, you would be back where you started” (Barthes, 47). In this case, where Anonymous started is an unbranded community with people who predominantly used ‘anonymous’ as a username on 4chan.

While it has been stated in *We are Legion* that Anonymous is more mixed than people would expect, Coleman states in her book that there is an imbalance of female and male hackers which is “likely the combined result of structural forces, the legal riskiness of the activity, and the insular, braggadocious boys’ club mentality within the established community” (175). While it has been stated that Anonymous is neutral when it comes to race, age, gender and sexuality, the iconography is decidedly not. The branding of Anonymous can be observed in the iconography used to represent the group, which is skewed towards the depiction of white males. The two predominant images of Guy Fawkes and the empty man in a suit are both intrinsically male, with the mask having facial hair and the suit and tie cut to be worn by a man. The colour scheme of both these icons is primarily black and white, with a red tie and cheeks in certain publications.

“The group’s bold, Hollywood-style aesthetics strike a familiar chord in the society of the spectacle” (Coleman, 17). This Hollywood aesthetic is not only part of the visual representation of Anonymous, but also the linguistics used within their images and videos. As Mendoza states: “Anonymous defines itself using tone and vocabulary that closely resemble the description of the Terminator in Cameron’s 1983 film. [This] is not a coincidence but a sign of the epistemic coincidence of two post-apocalyptic entities” (Mendoza, par. 7) Phrases such as “We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us” and the use of “Legion” to describe the collective (Lyons, 2015) are reminiscent of the short one-liners spoken in action movies.

The powers of the Mask and the one-liners are accompanied by another icon of the movement to incite protests. “Certain Anons began using the name [Anonymous] and some associated iconography - headless men in black suits, in particular - to coordinate political protests” (Coleman, 5). These headless men, while unclear in origin, has many connotations and is interesting within a cultural context. The combination of the sign of the suit, and the signified of Anonymous create the sign of one anonymous man as the responsible party for Anonymous. This is not the case, but it is how the original conception of Anonymous happened on 4Chan (*We are Legion*). Next to that there are the cultural connotations of *The Invisible Man* from the Universal Horror movies, as well as the character of the Invisible man in the comic *League of the Extraordinary Gentlemen* (Moore). In both these media, the invisible man is unethical and immoral, not being afraid of hurting and sometimes even killing people. Both are also captured for their bad deeds at the end of their stories and neither make it out alive. While this is in all probability not the message Anonymous is trying to convey by choosing the empty suit, it is the cultural context in which it resides. It can also be stated that the suit itself (no matter who occupies it) connotes serious business and money. Neither of these are intrinsic parts of Anonymous. It can thus be argued that the iconography might be leading the audience one way, while the actions and purpose of the icon are intended differently. However, the black and white colour scheme does indicate a strict line between what is seen as morally right and morally wrong.

The anti hero of *V for Vendetta* wears a Guy Fawkes mask throughout the movie and the audiences is never shown his real face. Instead the person we see on screen uses the iconographic image of Guy Fawkes overlaid with the rebel actions that he feels are necessary, which shares some of the ideology of the original Fawkes. The connotation of anonymity within the character V was the reason that the stylised mask worn in the film became the mask of choice for those in Anonymous who protested against the Church of Scientology. The church of Scientology has been known to take record and harass those whom they perceive as opponents to their ideology, and thus anonymity was needed. Regarding the mask in *V for Vendetta*, Mike Vitale states in *We are Legion*: “the end scene, where everybody is wearing the Guy Fawkes mask is very reminiscent of what Anonymous thinks Anonymous is.” The image of the Guy Fawkes mask was taken from the 4chan's /b/ forum, where it was “a symbol of failure (the mask was first worn by ‘Epic Fail Guy’) and then a symbol of lulz... was now a rallying cry for social justice. Furthermore, it was something anyone could pick up, put on, and use to challenge existing systems of inequity” (Phillips, 150). There is a conflict within the use of Guy Fawkes and V as ways to identify and the ethos of Anonymous. According to Coleman “endangering human lives has never been a topic of discussion among members, even during the most helter-skelter of chat room and message board conversations” (7). This is however not the case with Guy Fawkes or V, who were both out to explode parliament and thus kill hundreds of people. There is thus an irony in the use of the mask as a symbol for relatively peaceful online activism. No-one is

physically hurt by the actions of Anonymous, yet they use two character who were out to commit a crime that would have physically destroyed many.

There is an inherent conflict within the branding of Anonymous and the actions they take. While originally not political it would not have continued to exist without evolving into an ethical and moral force. "Anonymous distinguishes itself from previous political phenomena by its ability to coordinate mass direct actions that are global in scope within minutes purely using the Internet and without any pre-existing organizational structure: a phenomenon of real-time politics still not grasped by current institutions whose foundations were constructed before the advent of the Internet" (Halpin, 19). This political force is however poorly represented within the images and linguistics which are used to present Anonymous to the world. The use of pop culture imagery has its origin in the 'lulz' which were the original intent, but the iconography has not grown along with the political and activist aspirations of the collective. Instead, the Guy Fawkes mask has gained a new connotation as a hackers mask.

Jordan states that "Activism finds itself resisting through symbols," (103) however, when the symbols do not match up with the political goals anymore, can there still be resistance? When there is a clash between the iconography and thus the branding and the ethos of a collective, is it not time to find new symbols and signs to represent the evolved Anonymous? "Hacktivism is perhaps the first, widespread social and political movement of the new millennium" (Jordan & Taylor, 43) and should thus be represented in a way that indicates its importance in society and culture, which will mean letting go of the pop culture symbols which are currently attached to serious political activism.

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