

## ■ Steve McQueen

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Steve McQueen, *Hunger*, on general release, UK, October 31.

I am probably the world's worst person to write about Steve McQueen's *Hunger*. Born in Belfast and brought up in a Nationalist ghetto in the 1980s, my memories and therefore my expectations of anything concerning Bobby Sands, the IRA and the Brits (as we used to call all forces of legal authority) are overwhelming, and highly subjective.

*Hunger* is undoubtedly an important film, presenting as it does yet another shameful episode in recent British history; its significance has been vindicated in the form of international plaudits including the Camera d'Or at Cannes Film Festival, and an International Federation of Film Critics award. Not since Richard Hamilton's *The Citizen*, painted between 1981 and 1983, has the world of art (produced by non-Irish practitioners) demonstrated a direct involvement with Northern Irish politics.

McQueen is very well placed to make such a film. The level of critical interrogation that he has consistently applied to his practice over the last 15 years is extraordinarily thorough and impressively effervescent. The detailed deliberation of McQueen's eye as an artist rather than as a perhaps more conventional filmmaker, contributes to the film's fetid *mise en scène* and emotional intensity.

But there is one thing missing: politics, with a capital 'P'. For while *Hunger's* narrative is completely driven by political motivations, it is hard to read the exterior political positioning of such action from the film alone. Bobby Sands was the first of ten hunger strikers to die in quick succession between May and October 1981 in HM Prison Maze, more popularly known as the H-Blocks, a huge facility specifically built to intern and segregate the overwhelming number of political prisoners in Northern Ireland. The hunger strikers, all Republican, acted out their demands through their bodies, their aim being to regain the 'Special Category Status' as political prisoners that had been revoked in 1976. The 1981 hunger strike was the endgame of a sequence of increasingly visceral and disturbing actions by IRA prisoners, such as the 'blanket protest', where prisoners rejected prison issue uniforms, and the 'dirty protest', where they refused to slop out their cells and smeared their walls with shit. The month before his death Sands was elected a Member of Parliament at Westminster and, as a result, the law was swiftly changed to prevent convicted prisoners from being nominated as candidates in UK elections.

*Hunger* is a story in three parts, each successively decelerating the film's temporal and spatial action to a point of grim (and possibly redemptive) stillness. The first third introduces the audience to the base regime at the Maze, through the eyes of a Davey Gillen, a young IRA man who refuses to wear standard issue prison uniform. The audience is witness to the violence, the filth and the ingenuity of daily jail life (including smuggling uncensored communications to and from the outside world, in various bodily orifices) culminating with the introduction of the main character of Bobby Sands. The audience's first sight of Sands is a brusquely disturbing scene, in which Sands is forcibly shorn and scrubbed clean with a yard brush, an attempt by the authorities to erase prisoners' outward signifiers of protest.

The second third is a 20-minute centre-piece, shot almost entirely in one long take, in which Sands and Father Dominic Moran – remarkably subtle performances by Michael Fassbender and Liam Cunningham respectively – explicate the larger 'plot' of the film. Their taut banter is at a mortal pitch as they challenge each other (puzzlingly alone, where are the guards?) across the table in an empty visiting room. This scene is reminiscent of Bergman's famous chess game *The Seventh Seal* in reverse: instead of Death trying to win the Knight's life through strategy, the figure in black is trying to argue for life. Both fail.

The final third of *Hunger* concentrates on the physical deterioration of Sands's body and the authorities' palliative care for it. This refocusing of the film's narrative energy into the personal location of the Political has a metaphysical quality that operates in contrast with the rest of the film's dramatic delivery, offering the audience a much wider, more ambiguous plane of interpretation.

McQueen has said of *Hunger*, 'I want to show what it was like to see, hear, smell and touch in the H-Block in 1981. What I want to convey is something you cannot find in books or archives: the ordinary and extraordinary, of life in this prison. Yet the film is also an abstraction of what it is to die for a cause.' He largely achieves these goals by creating a filmic assault that is at once horrific and mesmerising. His penetrating handling of sound and its relationship to violence is of an order so demanding and yet so unusual that its very delivery makes the viewer at once complicit and disturbed.

When the prisoners are offered civilian clothes as partial accession to their demands, the 'clown clothes' they are given immediately motivate them into a riot; they destroy their newly disinfected cells, but their protest is quickly quashed. The ensuing scenes of soldiers in riot gear beating and bodily searching the prisoners is harrowing. The rhythm of riot batons whacking plastic shields was

a familiar army tactic in Northern Ireland (doubtless still is, elsewhere in the world) to terrify those who are about to be 'controlled'. McQueen's use of this sound is startling, reverberating within the space of the prison, to create a solid sonic environment from which there is no escape.

This scene is also a good example of McQueen's well-balanced presentation of the law-enforcing agencies at work in the film. One of the soldiers is a new recruit; he is clearly also terrified, and is represented as both victim and aggressor. Similarly, the more well-developed character of prison guard Raymond Lohan – who is himself brutalised by the Maze's regime of punishment, even though he is the one who carries it out – is sympathetically portrayed and finally 'executed' by an IRA man. These two scenes of violence are balanced against each other in close succession. At the screening I was at, the audience made audible gasps of horror when the guard was shot, but not when the prisoners were beaten: an indication perhaps of a little brutalisation of our own?

The weakness of *Hunger*, in my view, is that within the temporal space of the film, we are introduced to Sands's (and by implication the other hunger strikers') motivation as personal rather than Political. This is evidenced through Sands's recounting of a childhood memory to Father Moran of killing a badly wounded animal to save it more suffering, even though he knew he would be punished, because he believed it was the right thing to do: an obvious parallel to his own starvation and leadership of others into the same death.

As is described briefly in the film, this was the second hunger strike in the H-Blocks (the first was just a year before in 1980, and had been called off when the British government appeared to concede), so Sands knew external political support was extremely strong, and that the prisoners' actions would almost certainly yield a positive result. This is key to understanding the process of suffering and suppuration that the hunger strikers voluntarily undertook: they *knew* they would make a difference, and saw themselves as soldiers, and their bodies as weapons.

While it is understandable that *Hunger* cannot hope to represent the complexity of this period in Northern Ireland's history, this lack of the Political is a basic problem because it inadvertently plays down the national and international significance of the hunger strikers' actions, in the same way as the British-coined term 'The Troubles' does, when in other times and countries what happened in Belfast, Derry and surrounding areas would have been called 'A War'. ■

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