A Close-Up of the Stench of Urine: Steve McQueen's *Hunger*

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Long after the screen darkens, British director and screenwriter Steve McQueen's film *Hunger* (Britain, 2008) remains etched in the consciousness of the audience. *Hunger* follows Irish prisoners, members of the IRA, during the early 1980s as they wage their struggle with Margaret Thatcher's government for recognition as political prisoners. They refuse to wear prison uniforms, which they believe both represent the oppression of the system and fail to distinguish them from common criminals, and cover themselves with sheets; they refuse to bathe or shave; they smear their feces on the walls of their cells. Their so-called "blanket strike" quickly becomes a hunger strike, exacting ten deaths from among the Irish resistance prisoners.

McQueen's cinema is all-demanding. He chooses to describe developments in the Belfast prison by dividing the film into three separate sections, a type of triptych. The first section centers on the experiences of one prisoner as he begins his incarceration and is faced with the violent confrontation between the prisoners fighting for their right to carry out a "dirty" strike, and the prison guards. McQueen (in collaboration with Irish screenwriter Edna Walsh) opens this section by showing one of the guards, Ray Lohan (Stuart Graham), as he checks under his car for explosives, a now unavoidable part of his daily routine. The spectator's confusion over who is the protagonist – the guard or the prisoner – intensifies when the camera returns to a close-up of Lohan's bruised hands as he soaks them in water, trying to alleviate his pain. The focus on Lohan is unsettling; the spectator becomes uneasy about his/her reaction to these images when it becomes clear his injuries are the result of beating prisoners. Is this confusion over the protagonist and our identification with him only an artifice used to create tension and draw us into the "maze," which is also the name of this notorious prison? Or does it have a different meaning?

The struggle is framed in bodily terms. The prisoners throw their urine under the iron door of their cells into the corridor. When the guards, clothed in rubber gloves and boots, wash the floor, they make sure some of the urine flows back into the cells. The guards' bodies are sheathed in protective attire as they aim an enormous stream of water against the walls to wash away dried feces. There is no contact between the worlds. The institutional body is sterile. The body demanding freedom is disobedient: it turns internal into external, the abject into an object, eliminates the separation between private and public, compels recognition through its corporeality. Control over the material – body hair, filth, urine, feces, blood, nakedness – is kept out of hands of the regime.

When the confrontation begins the camera follows the ritual of violence with piercing realism. The guards, outfitted in black uniforms and helmets, strike their wooden truncheons against their shields in unison. This sound accompanies the violence and is the audio incarnation of the horror, especially so since the film's soundtrack is almost totally void of music. The naked prisoners are taken from their cells and kicked towards the line of guards. To the constant beat on the shields they are knocked against the iron doors and walls and pummeled with truncheons. The tom-tom beat never ceases, not even as the guards brutally shave the prisoner's long hair and beards, all the while assaulting them. It continues as the prisoners are savagely

immersed in tubs, the water flowing red with their blood. As this is taking place, McQueen again plays to the confusion of the spectator regarding who is the protagonist and during a climatic moment divides the frame in two. On the left we continue to experience the violence of the clash; on the right we witness a guard, his back to the turmoil, standing against the wall crying.

In an abrupt shift from a world dominated by violent sounds, almost free of dialogue, in the second section McQueen places us in the middle of an intimate conversation between two characters. For about twenty minutes, we observe Bobby Sands (the Irish actor Michael Fassbender), one of the most famous IRA operatives and an unflinching supporter of a united and independent Ireland, speaking with a priest (Liam Cunningham) about the hunger strike and the legitimacy of such strikes as a means of political struggle. McQueen does not follow accepted conventions in shooting the conversation: most of the time the camera is static, aimed at both of the participants without cutting between the two. We are compelled to listen closely because of the wide distance between us and the two figures.

In an interview, McQueen said that when he was eleven-years-old he had been profoundly affected by the pictures of Bobby Sands that appeared daily on British television with the number of the day of his hunger strike underneath. Sands died in prison at age twenty-seven on the sixty-sixth day of his strike; the Thatcher government never abandoned its inflexible stand.

In the third section of *Hunger*, McQueen demands the spectator make another abrupt shift, this time from ideological reflections to the experience of seeing the corporeal deterioration of Bobby Sands, who, from this moment on, is undoubtedly the protagonist. The camera follows Sand's decline in all its gory details. Hunger turns his body skeletal, pressure sores become abscesses that are impossible to cure, and the living-dead eventually dies. During this section it is clear where McQueen's sympathies lie and why he requires the spectator to bear witness, even though the continuous and almost pornographic presentation of the suffering could also have the effect of distancing the spectator and sabotaging his/her identification with Sands. These scenes (together with those from the first section) unmistakably qualify *Hunger* for inclusion in the growing body of films in the new wave of contemporary European cinema termed the "new extremism," featuring extreme and graphic representations of bodily violence.

Despite that the events chronologically develop from the first section to the last, as a result of the construct of the individual sections, each could have changed its place on the continuum. The power of the triptych is not the result of the order the sections are shown, but emanates from subverting narrative, stylistic, and audial conventions; the multiplicity of identifications, partial or complete; and the demand that the spectator alternate between cognitive and emotional participation.

McQueen, a recognized video artist, was awarded the *Camera d'Or* at the last Cannes Film festival for *Hunger*, his directing debut. He is presently involved in designing a series of hundreds of stamps, each depicting the face of a British soldier killed in the Iraq War. The series is currently on exhibit at the Royal War Museum in London, but his objective is to interject the war into the daily lives of Britons. The government has yet to agree to turn the series into official postal stamps.

In the meantime, *Hunger* has become central to British-Irish documentation of the Irish struggle, continuing the tradition of films like *In the Name of the Father* (Jim Sheridan, 1993), *Bloody Sunday* (Paul Greengrass, 2002) and *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (Ken Loach, 2006). With this, cinema with such demanding language is not meant to seal memory, but to awaken debate. Against the background of photographs of abuse at Guantanamo and Abu-Ghraib prisons, on the one hand, and how suicide terrorists exploit their own bodies, on the other, McQueen's film once more brings to the fore the issue of the use of the body as the central venue for political struggle in the extreme.