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Hunger: Passion of the Militant

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Abstract

This is a study of the 2008 film *Hunger* made by the British director Steve McQueen, a film that dramatises events in the Maze Prison in the period leading up to the 1981 Irish Republican hunger strike and death of Bobby Sands. It considers the filmic and artistic practice of McQueen in conjunction with certain concepts from the work of Deleuze and Guattari to develop a productive thinking about how the film addresses this traumatic event. *Hunger* employs a series of aesthetic techniques that push at the limits of the viewer's senses and suggest new ways of thinking about the subject. McQueen's concern to go beyond the clichés of the media coverage of the Irish conflict provides a unique insight into the production of a militant subjectivity generated by the opposition to the prison regime of the Maze in Belfast. Ultimately, however, it is argued that McQueen collapses into a form of religious iconicity that reinforces the Irish Republican mythology of suffering and redemption. *Hunger*, as a work of cinematic creation, offers a powerful sense of how resistance can be made manifest on screen yet, simultaneously, can become captured by the transcendental unity of identity thinking operating through the image of the romanticised face.

Key words: *Hunger*, Steve McQueen, Bobby Sands, hunger strikes, Deleuze & Guattari, militant becoming, Kafka

Martyrs do not underrate the body, they allow it to be elevated on the cross. In this they are at one with their antagonists. (Franz Kafka, "The Third Notebook")

Description of a Struggle

Reference to Kafka opens this discussion of Steve McQueen's film *Hunger* (McQueen 2008) and runs throughout. Bobby Sands, the nominal prisoner at the heart of this film, knew that his self-sacrifice/sacrifice-of-self would become an indispensable sign of the struggle for the Irish Republican cause and located his action as one taken to inspire a new generation of activists. Yet, out of the intimidation, beatings, and brutality of the Special Category Status prisoner campaign emerged recognition by State and guerrilla army that neither could be defeated through force, even as the threshold of sacrifice was, indeed, elevated on the cross. To describe this moment is, as in its original Latin root, to write it down. But McQueen is averse to writing

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text and explication in such a process, rather, he pushes the description from words to speech, impressions, pictures, even pushing the definition as far as the tracing of a form or outline, as with a circle produced by a compass. He clearly defines the centre of his circle in this event within the film and with it a very visible boundary of the body, the unstable limit of his description.

Hunger mobilises these different symbolic systems to different degrees and one of the film's strengths is that it never adopts any singular way of representing the experience of the no-wash protest and the hunger strike of Sands. What McQueen presents on screen are bodies immersed in a struggle for endurance against domination, as each is systematically drawn into the world of the other in a decelerating cycle of action and reaction. Each opposing position can be seen to invade the space of the other: guards/prisoners; insurgents/state; the militant/church. In its own way, the film articulates quite effectively the oscillation between escape and capture that defines the Irish Republican struggle itself. The resistance of the prisoners is driven by a nomadic desire to escape the limits of the State and its segregative social structuration, yet, because they are defined by Republican politics they become invested once more in a transcendental unity that leads back into molar identity.

McQueen has repeatedly argued that the film does not deal with a political subject in any ordinary sense: "People say, 'Oh, it's a political film,' but for me, it's essentially about what we will inflict and what we can endure" (O'Hagan 2008). He offers that one might draw wider lessons on treatment of prisoners of contemporary conflicts, but not really on the specifics of Northern Ireland, for as Maria Fusco sharply writes: "there is one thing missing: politics with a capital 'P'" (Fusco 2008: 37). His motivation, it seems, is singularly a creative one: an aesthetic fascination with exploring the pressures on those corporeal bodies that have chosen to engage in this war for control, as seen through his humanising lens. This leads to limitations on the subject (the broader terrain of the political/military conflict) yet does, it is argued, simultaneously lead to useful insights into another kind of subject (a type of militant subjectivity). If there is a politics here it is less in any explication or context and more in a way described by William Connolly as a "neuro-politics," where the focus is on those potential circuits that exist between perceptual experience, habits of thinking, ethical disposition and filmic technique, that spur "new thoughts into being"

(Connolly 2000: xiii). *Hunger*, I would argue, creates a kind of cinematic body that allows us to critically reflect on the terms of the emergence of a militant becoming, the awkward reality of its emergence, and yet, finally, capture by its own historical temporalities, even if it hints at connecting with a wider militant collective.

“Words are shit”

In an interview from 2002, McQueen states that: “Words are shit, because they put you somewhere else. I’m trying to catch the things that are in-between” (Brooks 2002). As a filmmaker who derives from a fine art background rather than one shaped by the commercial imperatives of film school, McQueen brings an approach to the subject of the hunger strikes that is more formally experimental. Approached by Channel 4 to direct a film, he is one of a number of contemporary artists who have crossed over into the mainstream film circuit in recent years. In the year after the release of *Hunger* he represented Britain at the 2009 Venice Biennale, where he projected across two screens a 40-minute film titled *Giardini* (Demos 2009). Certainly, he is driven by the creative imperative of “show, don’t tell” and there is no doubt that as a film experience in sound and vision *Hunger* profoundly impresses the senses. Other critics have taken issue with the problem of what is left out in this narrative of resistance and oppression as well as what is included (Helliwell 2009, Mac Giolla Léith 2008, McKenzie 2008, McNamee, 2009).

For British filmmakers there is always a question of where to start and finish narratives concerned with any of the painful episodes of the conflict in Northern Ireland (Herron and Lynch 2007: 65-78). It is a pertinent question to ask whether *Hunger* inevitably endorses the format of the media reporting of the conflict over many years with its abstractions and barren repetition of empty moralities. Such was the charge levelled at Alan Clarke’s *Elephant*, a film with which *Hunger* shares certain formal affinities, and indeed both directors are reported to have described the intentions in making their films as creating a “diagram of killing” (Kelly 1998: 199). However, McQueen brings an aesthetic of art installation and gallery projection to the subject that is initiated by the question of how to reduce elements of signification in the work so that what is left resonates or vibrates with an affective quality.

Previous films on the blanket protest and hunger strikes, such as *Some Mother's Son* and *H3* have adopted a more conventional form that is, arguably, more easily accommodated within existing narratives on the conflict. A key problem, here, is always of how to speak about colonial experience when the very terms themselves are already embedded in a structure of meaning established by the dominant regime. McQueen employs more challenging strategies of creative filmmaking that seek to evade this problem that is not one of simply presenting a different narrative which leaves the terms of the language itself intact. This strategy relates well to an observation from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari on the struggle for a challenging artistic and philosophic practice: "We do not lack communication. On the contrary, we have too much of it. We lack creation" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 108). McQueen certainly tends towards creation rather than communication more convincingly than many other filmmakers. In this way he produces what T. J. Demos refers to as: "[. . .] an experience of perceptual creativity that denies the certainty of identity and the clarity of signs on which hegemonic order rests" (Demos 2009). By avoiding many of the televisual clichés of films on the Irish conflict he is able to shift the perception away from the "presentifying function" of television and towards a film that has the potential to generate new emotions that move beyond the prefabricated emotive models of the dominant media (Deleuze 2006: 291). In this formulation it is not a matter of merely telling a different story but of generating a new syntax to "[. . .] carve out a kind of foreign language within language [. . .]" (Deleuze 1997: 72). This is not to overstate the extent to which McQueen produces something radically different, which I think he does in many ways, but, rather, evidence of a genuine will to innovate on this subject within the cinematic form.

In these terms, it can be said that McQueen operates on the ground between what we can define as meaning and sense, where meaning is what is shared in a communication, but sense has to do with the grounds of intelligibility as such. What can be seen is a struggle, one articulated by Heidegger who called this relation a "self-revealing self-concealment," where it simultaneously becomes possible to speak and impossible to say it all (Bartky 1969). As McQueen himself states:

In art, you are trying to create form. In cinema, form already exists. It's a variation on the form and what you are trying to do is subvert the form. In art, you're trying to make the form and make sense. (McQueen 2008)

In *Hunger*, then, there is a restaging that is resistant to certain conventions, working at times towards their limits but, ultimately, collapsing back into others. What we see is a struggle over the desire to escape cliché, yet the inability, ultimately, of McQueen to sustain this, for as Deleuze says in relation to any artistic practice: “There are psychic clichés, just as there are physical clichés)—ready-made perceptions, memories, phantasms” (Deleuze 2007: 61).

McQueen's effort to shift to a different yet familiar cinematic language can be seen in an early section of the film, as we follow the character Davey Gillen as he enters the prison and is obliged to strip because of his refusal to wear a prison uniform. Standing naked in front of the guards his dissent is logged into the prison ledger in a shot that is reminiscent of one from Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* from 1928 (Dreyer 1928). Gillen's reduction to this bare state is matched by McQueen's film technique that is driven by a strategy of reducing the action, dialogue, and mise-en-scene close to the minimum needed to sustain a narrative. The first nine minutes show glimpses of bloodied hands, prison-guard banter, and auditory inserts of radio broadcasts that provide something of a context. We enter the prison in this way through a climate, both physical and emotional. McQueen describes the initiation of the film project as deriving from a single recollection-image from childhood, of the repetition each night on the evening news of a picture of Sands's face and the number of days on hunger strike below it. Fragments of information are suggestive of childhood memory recall working through the consciousness of an adult. The lack of any substantial historical explication is instead magnified by the duration of many of the camera shots as he sustains long takes from a single viewpoint to maintain a concentration on detail that increases in significance as the seconds pass by, something central to his artistic practice (Demos 2005: 71). This is no mean feat and, as Deleuze argues in relation to the painter Francis Bacon, it is a mistake to think that an artist starts with just a white surface and then reproduces an external object on it. As he says:

The painter has many things in his head, or around him, or in his studio. Now everything he has in his head or around him is already in the canvas, more or less virtually, more or less actually, before he begins his work. They are all present in the canvas as so many images, actual or virtual, so that the painter does not have to cover a blank surface, but rather would have to empty it out, clear it, clean it. (Deleuze 2007: 61)

McQueen seeks to resist language in a way that echoes the refusal of the prisoners themselves, as they demand to be categorised as political actors rather than criminals. This manifests itself in the smearing of excrement on the walls of cells as a form of writing or inscription, something McQueen aestheticises by creating an image of a spiral in one widely reproduced scene.

This echoes an artwork by a previous British artist, Richard Hamilton, from 1983, *The Citizen*, based on footage of the men “on the blanket” snatched from a brief moment of TV coverage. For Hamilton, it was suggestive of the figurative/abstraction mode of artistic expression in the actual image of the men in their cells. Writing of the impressions that inspired him to produce the work, he states he saw it as a form of calligraphy, where this substance is made to: “resonate with echoes of the megalithic spirals of New Grange or the Gaelic convolutions in the book of Kells” (Hamilton 1983: 8). In the film the emphasis moves away from the legibility of the script towards a more expressive mode beyond, as McQueen, once again, voices his frustration with words: “I often think that in movies people talk a lot of shit. They fill the space with words [. . .]. It is all about process and all about ‘doing’ rather than speaking [. . .]” (Caddell 2009). This attitude is made manifest by the on-screen character of Sands who commits to a course of action that seeks to transcend the limitations of words/shit within the prison struggle.

In the film the narrative is driven by the lead up to the escalation in strategy from that of disruption to one of assassination and suicide. In a previous work, in the film *Caribs’ Leap*, McQueen had already addressed the theme of suicide in a colonial situation. Here, McQueen interweaves scenes of everyday, primarily beaches from the island of Grenada, with scenes of figures falling through the sky in an allusion to the suicide of seventeenth-century Caribs fighting a losing battle against French colonial forces. As T.J. Demos writes, this story: “provides yet another allegory of the resistance to capture, of the sacrifice of the body in the escape from the forces of colonization” (Demos 2005: 81).

The Hunger Artist

Apart from the changing groups of spectators there were also constant observers chosen by the public—strangely enough they were usually butchers—who, always three at a time, were given the task of observing the hunger artist day and night, so that he didn't get something to eat in some secret manner. It was, however, merely a formality, introduced to reassure the masses, for those who understood knew well enough that during the period of fasting the hunger artist would never, under any circumstances, have eaten the slightest thing, not even if compelled by force. The honour of his art forbade it. (Franz Kafka, "A Hunger Artist")

Kafka, in his story of the hunger artist, draws attention to the fact that a fundamental aspect of the hunger strike is aesthetic and a primary motivation. McQueen indicates that early on in pre-production he had considered making the film without any dialogue at all and that his ideal choice for screenwriter would have been Samuel Beckett. Clearly, by the time he has got to the shoot this has been left behind, but there is something to the idea of McQueen working through the creative image of such an artist. In their book on Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari write of the style of Beckett as operating, like him, with a "willed poverty" that pushes deterritorialisation "to such an extreme that nothing remains but intensities" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 19). Further on, they speak of the disjunction in Kafka between eating and speaking, and indeed, eating and writing with the potential of the latter to compete with food. This power of transformation is what seems to underpin the appeal for the artist of the hunger striker: as they say "To speak, and above all to write, is to fast" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 20).

Again, what is useful from this is how this emphasises the struggle between that which has been deterritorialised against the drive for meaning and the relative fixing through a reterritorialisation of this language, in an extensive or representative function. In *Hunger*, there is a line of flight represented here, but one that leads to the sadness of suicide as trapped in the spectacle of starving flesh. As Kafka's story describes, self-starvation is a performance and as such an audience is essential, necessary, and at the same time the essence of what is at work. For Maud Ellman, the hunger strike is actually comparable to an act of terrorism because the force of both relies upon words as much as the display of violence itself. To stop it being an act without sense the hunger striker must "append a text of words to the mystery of their disintegrating flesh"

(Ellman 1993: 19). Similarly, the journalist David Beresford in his account of the prison campaign writes:

Hunger-striking, when taken to the death, has a sublime quality about it; in conjunction with terrorism it offers a consummation of murder and self-sacrifice which in a sense can legitimize the violence which precedes and follows it. (Beresford 1987: 38-39)

Both sides of the prison conflict are very aware of the nature of this struggle—this is not a disagreement over empty words or the particulars of styles of clothing but a struggle for power to *define* the framework in which power itself is to be exercised. Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish* that all prison revolt is at the level of the body (Foucault 1977). Resistance, in this context, is a contest over the power to determine symbolisation, evident in the ritual of prisoner arrival and the imposition of a prison number. McQueen effectively focuses on the Goffmanesque struggle for this power (Goffman 1961: 18-30). An increasing level of violence and brutality on the screen sees the structure of domination attempt to impress its force upon soft-flesh which, of course, works to harden minds.

The Maze we see on screen is not visualised as a particularly panoptic space, more of a dungeon-like series of spaces-within-spaces. Indeed, Allen Feldman argues that the refusal to wear the prison uniform was itself a refusal to enter into what Foucault calls the “compulsory visibility” of the penal regime and an interruption to the “optical circuit of domination” (Feldman 1991: 156). Although, as we see in the film, the rectal mirror examination is a violent extension of the powers of observation, a “colon-ization” according to Feldman (Feldman 1991: 174). In terms of the production process, McQueen is adamant that the architecture and light source for the cell act to determine, to a large extent, the nature of the film image itself.

Hunger is effective in its power to extend the on-screen image to affect the body of the audience member. The phrase most used in relation to the film is visceral, that is, a feeling in the body rather than conscious reasoning. Disgust, revulsion, wincing, these are all bodily reactions more than cerebral processes. Of course, this is not a uniform process, one columnist in the *Guardian* responded that he would have liked to have seen the Republican prisoners actually tortured more on-screen. What McQueen does so effectively is to set up an affective encounter:

this is not a relationship of identification or even pity. Instead, McQueen talks of filming snowflakes landing on an outstretched hand as an entry point for the audience. Violence is the force that drives this film as it did in the H-Blocks themselves. Hands serve to function metonymically as the instrument of violence in this scenario, whether the tattooed fingers of the loyalist nurse, or the bloodied and split knuckles of the guard.

There is something of Robert Bresson's world of circulating objects in an optical space, but not the wallets of *Pickpocket*, rather, the surreptitious pencil from *A Man Escaped*, as we see tightly written "comms" passed back and forth from prisoners to visitors, and even a radio hidden within the cavities of the body.

The Face of the Militant

Within *Hunger*, cinematic signification shifts from the calligraphic of the opening section, to the iconographic of the final third. Here, the face is tied to a struggle over the codifying function of language and the regime of signification. If, to quote Deleuze and Guattari from "Year Zero: Faciality" in *A Thousand Plateaus*, "significance is never without its white wall upon which to inscribe its signs" what happens when that wall is covered in your own shit? What happens when the "black hole of subjectification" leads to suicide through self-starvation? (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 167). Madness is a definite danger here (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 188).

Here, the face, which had been disrupted by the chaos of the no-wash protest leading to a loss of singularity, is brutally shorn of this line of escape away from the penal coding of the prison regime. An echo of an attempt to dismantle the face and stir strange becomings can be detected (this a Bunker-face) even if the effort to elude the organisation of the face is finally abandoned (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 171). Overwhelming and cacophonous violence is used by the repressive regime to try and subdue this disruptive manoeuvre, and out of which emerges a face that will mobilise an absolute semiotic of the body: the face of Christ. There is indeed a Holy Shroud here, As Deleuze and Guattraï say:

The face constructs the wall that the signifier needs in order to bounce off of it; it constitutes the wall of the signifier, the frame or screen. The face digs the hole that subjectification needs in order to break through; it constitutes the black hole of

subjectivity as consciousness or passion, the camera, the third eye. (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 168)

The black and the light are already there and we can ask whether this scene is not one of pitiless darkness: “A horror story, the face is a horror story” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 168). McQueen wants to not explain, but he is relentlessly pulled towards a romanticised landscape. The white walls of the cells are smeared brown, the light is yellow, like piss, and the piss is dark and malevolent. This is a violent interruption to the circulation of meaning within this institution, one of the most important nodal points in the repressive state apparatus of the Northern Irish statelet. By the end of the film, the black hole has become the white hole, but it is still a system orientated towards the degree zero of faciality.

Now, it seems, the mythological is to determine the path of signification. The slowness of this imprisonment will be intensified on the body. It is as if the mouth is sewn shut, the opening closed, the chrysalis nourishing on the internal juices of the body until it runs dry. The correlate landscape is an enclosed one from which it is only possible to escape in recollection, and a repeating of its foundational Republican narrative: sacrifice, martyrdom, redemption.

The face is a landscape now, a sacred land. Deleuze and Guattari write:

The close-up in film treats the face primarily as a landscape: that is the definition of film, black hole and white wall, screen and camera. (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 172)

The maternal face is in this landscape. The recollections are landscapes populated by a dreamed-of face, a child's face. A white wall pushes the subject towards abstraction but is always returned by the ever-present machine that finds a corner from which to extend. The rat is always at the edge of the frame. It travels along the line between the outside and the inside. The maggot, on the other hand, travels between the inside and the outside. Larval blindness versus muroidean gnawing: “Selves are larval subjects” (Deleuze 1994: 100). McQueen begins with yellow and brown form, not as outlines, but as the matrix for the colours yet-to-come (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 173).

The architecture of the prison functions, here, as a face. The corridor is the primary locus of conflict where the impasse is contested and

resisted. It spills out of the cells and invades the space transforming it from sanitised passageway to malevolent a-subjective flow. In a remarkable scene, McQueen shows the prisoners moulding channels and barriers to direct in a coordinated way the buckets of bodily waste that wash underneath the doors, pouring out into the corridor. There is a defiling intensity to this action that sees the urine flow together into pools that sit under the fluorescent strip lighting. The response from the guards to this invasion of the corridor space is vicious and brutal violence that escalates to their invasion into the cavities and anal passages of the prisoners. Later, McQueen maintains a shot of almost unbearable duration as the figure of a rubber-booted guard pushes the liquid down and out of the corridor, only pausing to sweep it under the door of an arbitrary cell.

The individual prison cells are an extension of this process. If tools can become weapons, shackles become winches, pulling the warders into the realm of the prisoners' eco-system and regime of cathected bodies. The cell is only to be entered in prophylactic suits, like the rubber gloved hands that force their way into anuses and then mouths as violent incursion. The prisoners' refusal is a refusal to fold the body to an alien interiority of disciplinary representation. This produces the exteriorisation that is an inversion of the violence of the guards into a counter-defilement, operating on and through the body.

Sands's face is now en-ciphered as part of a regime organising as "political power operating through the face of the leader" (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 175). The face of the militant is here presented as akin to the face of the saviour:

Jesus Christ superstar: he invented the facialization of the entire body and spread it everywhere (the Passion of Joan of Arc, in close-up). (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 176)

The (Anti)Christ-face of the militant is produced in opposition, not just to the guard, but also to the priest. Soon, however, both these oppositions collapse into the Christ-face. McQueen, of course, is not a militant, and cannot keep them apart. Like opposite poles of a magnet they pull with increasing force until they collapse into each other. Speech becomes impossible but the face "is a veritable megaphone" (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 179).

The disciplinary regime seeks to crush any other semiotic and there is outright war on the right to determine the signifier of the almighty. This politics demands a face. The close-up, then, is anticipation, foreshadowing death. This face is not dismantled, the temptation proves too strong and he is caught, pulled back into the face instead of escaping along the “asignifying, asubjective, and faceless” broken line of a love connecting with the other instead of conquering them (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 187).

The Militant and the Priest

I am standing on the threshold of another trembling world.
Bobby Sands (Beresford 1987: 84)

This last section considers the issue of belief—belief in the film (belief *in* film). Halfway through *Hunger*, McQueen changes the dramatic tone seen in the shocking execution of the guard and thus clearing the screen for Sands. This strategy of constantly de-centring the narrative subject is adopted from the beginning of the film. We shift from the gloom of the blanket protest and the relentless violence meted out on the prisoners into, firstly, an intermediate, stabilised realm of the priest versus the militant, secondly, into the light of the passion. Reflecting once more McQueen’s background in gallery installations, the demarcation of this tri-partite structure challenges conventional narrative by opening up this space of inter-mediate dialogue.

In a seventeen-minute fixed-camera shot there is little movement on screen between the two characters. But I think this is less in the direction of a “rediscovery of the fixed shot” (Deleuze 1989: 128), and more towards what Bresson would call “theatricality” (Bresson 1986: 15). What we see in this staged argument is a confrontation between a Republican militant, who has made the choice to commit to death, and a priest in the tradition of a certain kind of liberation theology, who challenges the morality of this act of suicide. McQueen is adamant that he organises the shot like this to make clear that this is not a conversation that we as an audience are positioned as included in; on the contrary—we are made to feel excluded, or at least distanced from it.

This scene is preceded by the execution of the guard in front of his lost-to-dementia mother. Death, therefore, brackets this section and

symbolically clears the screen for the elevation of the Sands character. If Sands ordered the execution then this is part of a very specific line of action: no more “negotiation” but to act. This is to be contrary to negotiation, which itself is a form of recognition, even a legitimacy, certainly an economy of rights (Cheng 2004: 118). This, however, is not simply a demand for recognition but simultaneously a dis-recognition, a refusal of the symbolic order of British rule. This is a move towards the abyssal Real, only to be recaptured by the Republican Imaginary. The scene resonates with a Kierkegaardian sense of character: the Knight of Faith, who does not hesitate, versus the Knight of infinite resignation, whose walk, he says, “Is light and bold.” Kierkegaard concludes *Fear and Trembling* with: “Faith is a marvel, and yet no human being is excluded from it; for that which unites all human life is passion, and faith is a passion” (Hong 2000: 101). However, as Deleuze and Guattari state, the passional regime is a line of flight of potentially dangerous value, where subjectivity is deterritorialised and intensified (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 129).

Bobby Sands’s quote from his secret diary, kept for the first seventeen days of the hunger strike, indicates that any politics suggested by such thought will be defined by the tradition of the Christian martyr, as indeed the quote from Kafka at the very beginning alludes to. But the other side of this passion is the inherent violence it contains, for as Levinas argues:

Kierkegaardian violence begins when existence is forced to abandon the ethical stage in order to embark on the religious stage, the domain of belief. But belief no longer sought external justification. Even internally, it combined communication and isolation, and hence violence and passion. (Levinas 1998: 31)

McQueen’s organisation of the film works as a process giving form to a kind of deterritorialisation of the prisoners as they enter the prison system and embark upon the defiance of the blanket protest, and then the reterritorialisation of the prisoners around the figure of Bobby Sands as a militant, but singularised, subject. The question here is whether the shift to the figure of Sands articulates a switch from what might be defined as the combat strategy of the dirty protest and on to a war footing of the hunger strikes. There is something here of the hunger striker as one who pulls the myriad lines of resistance, defiance, and defilement into the realm of the body of the subject, which now becomes the scene of

conflict. Like Dreyer's *Passion*, the judges seek to contain the terms of the dissent to orientate the logic to that of the regime. But, there is a resistance here, even if one prone to capture and codification, and the question remains as to whether it tips over into deification. Deleuze draws a distinction between combat and war that is pertinent, he writes:

Combat is not war. War is only combat-against, a will to destruction, a judgement of God that turns destruction into something "just." The judgement of God is on the side of war, and not combat. (Deleuze 1997: 133)

In one image from the film, redolent for some of a Francis Bacon painting, the bloodied and beaten figure of Sands has an expression of ecstatic bliss. However, this moment signals a shift in the aesthetic of McQueen away from the disintegration of the body and its indiscernibility, to use a term Deleuze applies to Bacon's paintings and his "Anglo-Irish pity" (Deleuze 2003:17). This sense of identification by the artist for the suffering of the body is one of pity for the "meat," the common zone between man and beast. As he states:

This is not an arrangement of man and beast, nor a resemblance; it is a deep identity, a zone of indiscernibility more profound than any sentimental identification: the man who suffers is a beast, the beast that suffers is a man. This is the reality of becoming. What revolutionary person—in art, politics, religion, or elsewhere—has not felt that extreme moment when he or she was nothing but a beast, and became responsible not for the calves that died, but *before* the calves that died? (Deleuze 2003:18)

The presentation of the contrived conversation between the militant and priest can be read as kind of self-argument, less "echolalia" and more like an internal party debate. For one type of militant subjectivity, informed specifically by Maoism, there is an essential need for a "criticism/self-criticism" mode of interrogation, for the breaking and remaking of the self as a militant subject (Thoburn 2008: 103). On screen, Sands is given the opportunity to challenge the charge of narcissism to his action, where violence can always be found as necessary to the destruction of the Other.

The transformation of the hunger striker is the purification of the subject through the movement to an absolute limit. The body of the militant is the medium of the struggle and the film duly focuses on the skeletal frame and suppurating sores, tenderly dressed by the hands of

the gentle nurse. The endurance of the actor in this period of self-enforced starvation is a spectacularised moment for audience consumption, but also arguably shifts the audience investment towards him and away from the historical figure, for as Zach Horton emphasises: “*The figure in the centre of the frame is now Michael Fassbender, the actor*” (Horton 2012: 127).

By the end, the face of Fassbender/Sands on screen has a religious quality suggestive, to a certain extent, of Dreyer’s Joan, a face that out-spiritualizes the Church. But martyrdom will always hold in place a politics defined by the religious transcendental: the militant is too religious and the religious too militant. There is not the joy of being communist here (Hardt and Negri 2000: 411-13). For some, suicide can be an affirmative act, a refusal to accept an impoverished level of intensity, the intolerable (Braidotti 2005: 149). However, the question is: does this operate here? If this were its limit then, as one commentator suggests, it shifts from a biopolitics to its opposite—a thanatopolitics (Gooch 2011: 9). But there is the glimpse of something collective beyond this embodied aesthetic, as the promise made by Sands in the film to radicalise “a new generation” is made manifest as we read in the closing frames that he was elected MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, thus extending to something of the vast crowd of a 100,000 crowd that lined his funeral route. As the skeletal body of Fassbender-Sands is removed from the celluloid space, it connects to a movement outside, a shift from the singular to the promise of a collective.

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