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# Eye witness – memorialising humanity in Steve McQueen’s *Hunger*

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## Abstract

*This paper builds on a developing field of enquiry regarding the potency of film as an intervention into normative patterns in popular culture which are recognisable in a legal pluralist sense, and that relate to more standard legal analyses of constitutional development. The argument is developed that Steve McQueen in Hunger has made a film which marries a particular filmic formal device of lingering on highly aestheticised details of human behaviour with an overall filmic sensibility of refusing ‘politics’ in favour of ‘humanity’. The film demonstrates a resounding success, both in critical terms and in having the film accepted on its own terms of ‘humanity’. The suggestion in this paper is that the ongoing processes of ‘dealing with the past’ in Northern Ireland and other post-conflict societies may have something to learn from the marriage of idea and aesthetic form in Hunger.*

‘People say, “Oh, it’s a political film” but for me it’s essentially about what we, as humans, are capable of, morally, physically, psychologically. What we will inflict and what we will endure.’  
 (McQueen, quoted in O’Hagan, 2008)

## 1 Introduction

The 2008 film *Hunger*, directed by Steve McQueen, and co-written by McQueen and Enda Walsh, deals with the 1981 hunger strike and death in the Maze Prison/Long Kesh of IRA prisoner Bobby Sands.<sup>1</sup> McQueen’s first feature film, it achieved enormous critical success, winning the *Camera d’Or*

\* Thanks are due to various people for conversations regarding this essay, in particular Stephen Douds, Gráinne McKeever and Catherine O’Rourke. The contribution of the students in my ‘Law and Film’ class, in particular Roisin Devlin, has been central to the completion of this piece in its current form. Thanks also to the editors of this special issue for their suggestions. And special thanks to Sara Ramshaw for invaluable help and forbearance.

1 Sands, within the command structure of the Irish Republican Army, was the prison ‘Officer Commanding’ or ‘OC’. The IRA (and its political component Sinn Féin) was dedicated (politically) to the establishment of a socialist republic throughout the whole island of Ireland, and militarily to the overthrow through ‘armed struggle’ of the British presence in Ireland. The IRA, formed early in the twentieth century to expel the British from Ireland as a whole, had waned in significance following the 1922 partition of the island, after which the newly constituted entity of ‘Northern Ireland’ remained a part of the United Kingdom. The organisation was rejuvenated by the outbreak of the modern Northern Ireland ‘Troubles’ period of political violence in 1969. In 1972, coincident with the introduction of a policy of internment without trial of those suspected of involvement in political violence, the internees and prisoners were awarded ‘special category’ status, modelled on the status of prisoners of war under the Geneva Conventions. The policy of ‘criminalisation’ of political violence in Northern Ireland – initiated under Home Secretary Merlyn Rees in 1975 – was marked by the cessation of the award of ‘special category’ status (in 1976) and the replacement of Nissen hut ‘cages’ at Long Kesh with newly constructed H-Block structures, renamed as the ‘Maze Prison’. Those prisoners (and their supporters) who wished to maintain the claim to political status generally refused to adopt the new name and continued (and continue) to refer to ‘Long Kesh’. In search of the restoration of ‘political status’ some prisoners instituted a ‘blanket’ (refusal to wear prison uniform) and eventually ‘no-wash’ or ‘dirty’

award at Cannes and numerous other international prizes.<sup>2</sup> Given the subject matter, it is of no surprise that it also generated a certain amount of controversy, some critics regarding it as a blatant 'hagiography' of a terrorist, and the dominant positive critical reception as a symptom of the unreflective romantic attachment to the underdog of naive liberal commentators.<sup>3</sup> This majority critical reception, however, seemed less characterised by support for the political position identified with Sands, but rather support for the artistic achievement of McQueen, tied to his own frequently stated position that he was neutral on the Northern Irish political issues and, as reflected in the quotation given above, interested in the idea of 'humanity' defined as the limits of what humans 'will inflict and . . . will endure'.<sup>4</sup> McQueen himself on at least one occasion made the point that such issues were particularly relevant given the ongoing debates on issues such as the use of torture on terrorist suspects, the abuses at Abu Ghraib, the detentions at Guantánamo Bay, and that the film was more than just an artistic intervention into the historical record, but spoke very clearly to 'now'.<sup>5</sup>

Accepting this version of the relevance of the film, on the abstract level as a filmic argument on the nature of humanity related to the more practical level of how certain issues of justice should be approached with an attention to the nature of humanity, gives rise to very obvious opportunities to consider the film as a text which raises specific legal issues and themes relevant to socio-legal studies. The field of 'law and film' as an area of socio-legal scholarship, however, has developed to the point where it is recognised that film as a 'multimodal' text is particularly rich in terms of what messages it communicates to an audience.<sup>6</sup> The analysis of films has moved beyond simply looking for legal themes or social themes with legal relevance, to looking for the (usually) hidden coherences in filmic texts which amount to imagined normative worlds with attendant 'alternative jurisprudences'.<sup>7</sup> This is a form of critical attention which comes closer to respecting the internal coherences of filmic creation and the way in which meaning is expressed through specifically filmic technique, and in short is a development which allows for a more transdisciplinary approach which moves beyond viewing films as a passive object for legal analysis and attempts to see the law of filmic language as much as the law in film, and therefore the ways in which film subtly encourages particular normative views of the world.<sup>8</sup>

The pathway of influence of film has also been theorised, rather than simply assumed, in terms of the mass exposure which film has, its persuasive and seductive qualities, and the likely or plausible effects of film read as argument, whether hegemonic or opening up alternative views and positions.<sup>9</sup> The particular quality of this mass-market appeal and seductive quality as an influence on the specific nexus between law and politics has also been examined, both in terms of influence on

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protest (the refusal to remove body and food waste from cells). When this was unsuccessful, the decision was taken to go on hunger strike in pursuit of 'political status' and Sands was the first of ten men to die before the tactic was abandoned.

- 2 Aside from Cannes, the film also won prizes at the Sydney, Venice, Toronto and Chicago film festivals.
- 3 An extreme example of a frequent criticism that the film constituted a 'hagiography' of Sands appears as a feature comment by David Cox on *The Guardian* filmblog website (Cox, 2008). See also comments on 'worshipping at the shrine of terrorism' (Tookey, 2008).
- 4 The film, for example, was awarded the inaugural Sydney Film Festival Prize, for 'its controlled clarity of vision, its extraordinary detail and bravery, the dedication of its cast and the power and resonance of its humanity'.
- 5 See McDonald (2008).
- 6 Multimodal texts are those that combine different expressive modes, typically sound, image and discourse; see Schulenberg (2003).
- 7 See, in particular, on alternative jurisprudence, MacNeil (2003; 2005).
- 8 For specific discussion of 'transdisciplinarity' in this context, see Manderson and Mohr (2002). For examples of such transdisciplinarity in action, see Moran *et al.* (2004) and Manderson (2004).
- 9 For relevant discussions of legal pluralism in this context, see Kleinhans and Macdonald (1997).

particular issues but also more broadly on the promotion of various subject positions which accord with visions of constitutional propriety.<sup>10</sup> The development of this point is that within various particular flexible constitutional systems the influence of film can be theorised as quite immediate in the constitutional legal realm, as is the case in moments of great constitutional flux where the line between law and politics becomes blurred.<sup>11</sup>

It is in this area of study that this essay seeks to examine more fully Steve McQueen's *Hunger*, as a particularly timely intervention into a legal constitutional field that is concerned with 'dealing with the past', and in particular with the idea of 'memorialisation', that is with achieving some kind of public marking of past events or the past generally.<sup>12</sup> This has a particularly local relevance to Northern Ireland, as it goes through various processes that span this divide of law and politics to try to achieve a sense of new beginning, but is also of relevance much more broadly to post-conflict societies as they attempt to grapple with issues of personal and social memory and the often fraught relationship of a past that must be dealt with to a future that is yet to be achieved.<sup>13</sup>

The film constitutes an intervention that is not only measurable, or even primarily so, in terms of a discursively coherent set of ideas. Rather, as befits the form, the filmic intervention is multimodal and by its nature invites a high degree of audience 'reading' which will differ from person to person, a form of engagement that is certainly reflected in the balance of this essay which, in 'transdisciplinary' fashion, is mixed film review and academic comment. The film is not an explanation, and the influence can never be expected to equate to producing a complete rational understanding, if such a thing were possible. The influence is based not only around grasping an idea or narrative, but also around sensory experience, in particular vision, and the production of emotional response, or affect.<sup>14</sup> Insofar as the human faculty of memory is concerned with affect and the recollection of images in 'the mind's eye', the suggestion here is that film, as it were, encounters memory where it lives. As a process, literally, of imagination (the creation of images) the film is able to span the territory between the recollection of images as memory and the creation of images of 'imagined worlds'. It allows for witnessing past events of which there were no witnesses. To develop this suggestion into an argument which partly grounds this essay, it is that the nature of film provides a formal quality which relates closely to memory and imagination. In films which aim at dealing with past subjects in a deliberately aesthetic way, in a way which pays close attention to form as resonant with subject matter, then the territory is close to that of public memorialisation.

In the particular scheme of ideas (as opposed to the form) that McQueen tries to convey through his particular approach in this film, the idea of humanity as nobility and resilience in the face of extreme physical situations to the point of death is offered to the public as a form of memorialisation that, I will argue, even if it cannot avoid political interpretation, manages to avoid political partisanship and cliché. In this it may have something to offer the wider social consideration on how to memorialise past conflicts, but importantly it must also be seen as a work of memorialisation in its own right.

10 See Chen and Churchill (2007). While not specifically a legal text, this book deals with the idea of 'citizenship' and thus precisely with the nexus of constitutional law and politics.

11 See, in particular, Duncanson (2008) and the provocative reading through each other of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and the BBC coverage of Princess Diana's funeral; see also McNamee (2004); see more generally on this point, Kahn (1999).

12 Two other films, *H3* and *Some Mother's Son*, which deal directly with the hunger strikes of that period have been made but, unlike *Hunger*, in those films the director and author had personal connection to the hunger strikes and/or the Republican movement.

13 For an introduction to this area of study generally, see Campbell and Ní Aoláin (2003), and particularly Bell (2003).

14 For the sketching of the beginnings of exploration in this area see Buchanan and Johnson (2009).

The reception of the work, of course, is not something which McQueen or any other artist can control, and the reception is the element which most closely regards any idea of 'social effect' of the film. This essay will suggest that the reception of the film thus far gives hope that McQueen has managed to create a work of great beauty and power which has chimed with social consciousness in such a way that it may also have contributed to the developing social, political and constitutional landscape as regards 'the past' in Northern Ireland, and beyond.

## 2 McQueen's art and the politics of memorialisation

Steve McQueen first came to public prominence in 1999 when he won the Turner prize for contemporary art.<sup>15</sup> At the centre of his exhibited work on that occasion was *Deadpan*, a four-and-a-half-minute 16 mm black and white silent, recreating a famous Buster Keaton stunt. In *Deadpan* McQueen takes the part of Keaton and stares straight out into the camera while the tall façade of a building collapses around him in a shower of dust and debris, leaving him completely untouched as he stands precisely where an empty window frame falls to surround him. In its brevity and black-and-white starkness it has the quality of a pure image of courage in the face of eventual and inevitable collapse, a courage that is all the more striking in that it is played out as a comedy moment. Another early McQueen silent film, *Bear*, has the artist wrestling with another large man, both men naked. *Drumroll* has the artist rolling a large tin drum through the streets of Manhattan, filming the reactions of passers-by. McQueen, in short, is primarily known as an experimental filmmaker who relies particularly on focusing the attention of the viewer on out-of-the-ordinary situations in which he himself is involved as a participant or actor and which are worked to a kind of super-normal aesthetic pitch through attention to the detail of the scenes, through encouraging an intense almost meditative attention in the viewer by the slow pacing of the changing image, and through the use of silence to sharpen the visual intensity of the sequences. His own presence in the scene serves to localise the action and to implicate the knowing viewer, yet the seeming unnaturalness of each occasion serves to create a kind of critical distance, thereby setting up a dissonance for the viewer between being in on the action and being radically outside it. The effect seems designed to unsettle and intrigue the viewer, but not to alarm or frighten, and there is in each case the sense that what is being explored is the strangeness of human behaviour and the variety of the range of human response.

In 2003, McQueen was approached by Channel 4 with the suggestion that he might make a feature film. For McQueen, perhaps bizarrely given his lack of obvious connection to Northern Ireland, the suggestion somehow recalled his childhood fascination with a TV image of Bobby Sands: 'it was to do with 1981, and Tottenham winning the FA Cup, the Brixton Riots and Bobby Sands popping up on my TV screen with a number beneath his image. It stayed with me. The seed was planted' (quoted in Mottram, 2008).<sup>16</sup> The quote is typical McQueen; an invocation of the importance of memory that is at once personal and social, connected to a very defined image or very limited sequence of images, and married to a confidence that a form can be found to express this in a way that is both personally true and artistically engaging, in this case eventually leading to the film *Hunger*. Bobby Sands and his death forms part of a wider social tableau for a young Black boy in Brixton that has little to do with defined political positions, but has something to do perhaps with the idea of the underdog confronting authority (rioting against the police, the hunger-strikers versus the government, and Tottenham weren't the kind of team who were supposed to win the FA cup).

15 The Turner prize is awarded annually by a committee of jurors organised by the Tate Gallery London, in memory of radical landscape painter J. M. W. Turner. Instituted in 1984, it is the mostly highly publicised of UK art awards and has become associated with conceptual art which 'provokes comment on art'.

16 The number beneath the image referred to the number of days Sands had been on hunger strike.

As if in ironic counterpoint to his decision to make a feature film on Sands's death, in 2003 McQueen also accepted an appointment as 'Official War Artist to Iraq', where he (briefly) accompanied British troops on a tour of duty.<sup>17</sup> His eventual artistic project issuing from this experience was the exhibition 'Queen and Country', comprising of a set of commemorative stamp sheets bearing the portraits of British service personnel killed in Iraq.<sup>18</sup> Discussing this work, McQueen commented that:

'Strangely, it seems that for those who are against the war, my project is regarded as a good thing. For people who support the war, it is regarded as a good thing too. It is not pro or anti-war. This work is like a sphere – roll it this way, roll it that way. In the end, it is an art work. When we hear about all the men, women and children killed in Iraq, we are numbed to it. I'm pointing out that these people are all victims, too. What happened to them all was a consequence of their participation. The MoD try to say that such and such many soldiers died in action – they don't include or count all the people who died in friendly fire, in traffic accidents and so on. Some were suicides. They chopped them all out. They deleted them. They're all part of this war. Nor do I think that soldiers have to have been manning a gun emplacement with one arm tied behind their back and doing a double somersault in order to be remembered or to get a medal. An 18-year-old kid gets killed by a landmine or catches a bullet. He has contributed his life.'

(quoted in Searle, 2007)

In this quote McQueen gives an indication of the artistic sensibility which he brought to what might seem politically incommensurable projects; the commemoration of the British soldiers killed in Iraq and the commemoration through film of the life of someone dedicated to the military overthrow of the British presence in Ireland. McQueen's declared concern is not with the politics in either case, but with memory and memorialisation of the dead, whatever his or her status, and the importance of the individual life lived as opposed to the political calculation of the value of a life in pursuit of an end. Frequently in interview he has stressed his concern with the 'humanity' in the story of Bobby Sands, rather than the politics, and on one occasion elaborated on this idea as follows:

'I am Davey and Gerry [prisoners in the film] and I am Raymond, the prison officer. It's not about right or wrong, good or bad, or the devil and Heaven. If you can answer it then you must be God – I'm not.'

(quoted in Mottram, 2008)

In this attitude McQueen is expressing a familiar non-judgmental 'artistic' idea of humanity that 'nothing which is human is alien to me'.<sup>19</sup> However, whatever McQueen's intention, the idea that a film could be made that would somehow avoid being regarded as political and embroiling McQueen in political controversy whether he wished it or not, is, on the face of it, extremely implausible. It is an accepted fact of political history in Northern Ireland that the hunger strikes represented a turning point in the conflict and one to which a direct line of heritage may be traced from the current political arrangements, the functioning Executive Government of Northern Ireland.<sup>20</sup> The hunger

17 The appointment is made by invitation of the Imperial War Museum. An account of the limited access afforded to McQueen in this process of 'embeddedness' (which he described as almost literally being forced by the army to remain in bed for his own safety in Iraq) is given in an interview with Searle (2007).

18 McQueen also promoted the idea that such a special edition of UK stamps should be issued into general circulation 'all first class'.

19 The quote is originally from one of Terence's comedies, but has been reproduced almost to the point of cliché.

20 There are by now many histories of this period which look behind the scenes at the multiple interactions in play. For the most readable journalistic accounts see McKittrick (1994) and Mallie and McKittrick (1996). For academic history see Bew and Gillespie (1999) and Bew (2007). For a privileged internal account, see the book by the American 'Special Envoy to Northern Ireland' who was heavily instrumental in the talks process; Mitchell (1999).

strikes, in other words, are grandly over-determined as not only political events, but events of such massive political significance that they may be fairly regarded as events of constitutional foundation, in both the general and the legal sense.<sup>21</sup> Not only this, but on the level of local experience the hunger strike period may be taken as a kind of distilled version of the entire 'Troubles'; the violence, the grand issues of constitutional politics mixed in arguable degree with issues of human rights, the local effects in terms of the polarisation of communities and political opinion, the public displays of certain political positions revealed by later events and histories as postures hiding very different strategies and calculations, a seemingly irresolvable argument between implacable foes.<sup>22</sup> It was, in short, a time of political ferment which inflamed and polarised Northern Ireland. It was one of those periods of the extended 'Troubles' where it was impossible to maintain the everyday fiction of a generally normal society with some trouble around the edges.<sup>23</sup> The hunger strike period is not only a site of the genesis of institutional and constitutional reformation, but is also a site of vivid and raw personal memory for the general population who lived through it.<sup>24</sup>

Not only this, but the film was released in 2008 at a time when the issue of remembrance of the past was a hot political topic in Northern Ireland. The 'Consultative Group on the Past'<sup>25</sup> (also known as the 'Eames-Bradley Commission' after the two co-chairs) had begun sitting in 2007 to review and suggest proposals to overhaul the hitherto piecemeal approach to 'dealing with the past' in Northern Ireland, and already certain leaks as to their proceedings had created political furore.<sup>26</sup> This is an indication of the extent to which Northern Ireland is still dealing with the past as an active element of the continuing present. Sectarian attacks are still fairly frequent, and are the tip of an iceberg of continuing sectarian segregation and tensions.<sup>27</sup> 'Dissident' Republican groups still oppose the constitutional settlement through 'armed struggle'.<sup>28</sup> Education is still, in the main, conducted in schools segregated along sectarian lines, and people, in the main, still live in segregated areas.

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- 21 The question of origin is a persistent one in constitutional terms, in particular within the Constitution of the UK. Aside from an elaborated argument on this point, I confine myself to noting that the political arrangements under the Belfast Agreement (and which were a precondition for its acceptance), under which 'terrorist' prisoners were released under licence after having served as little as two years of life sentences for murder, represent such a definitive victory for politics over the rule of law that the idea of revolution is not entirely misplaced.
- 22 For a highly controversial recent account from an ex-prisoner close to the hunger-strikers, see O'Rawe (2005).
- 23 In the midst of his hunger strike Sands stood for election as Member of Parliament for the constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and was elected with over 30,000 votes. When he died the crowd at his funeral in Belfast was estimated at 100,000 (the overall population of Northern Ireland being approximately 1,500,000).
- 24 It is also an extremely 'commemorated' event in that there are multiple murals throughout Northern Ireland which picture the ten men who died, as well as an annual commemorative parade. As one example among many of international reaction to the hunger strike and the perceived injustice of the British position, 'Winston Churchill Avenue' in Teheran, the street on which stood the British Embassy, was renamed 'Bobby Sands Avenue'. This is not to suggest that international opinion was uniformly anti-British on the issues, rather to point to the raising of the international profile of the Republican cause.
- 25 The Consultative Group on the Past was an independent body set up under recommendation of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to report jointly to the British Government and the Northern Irish Assembly on dealing with the legacy of the past. It held public meetings, private meetings with individuals and received written submissions for a period of about eighteenth months up until January 2009 when the report was submitted (Consultative Group on the Past, 2009).
- 26 Press leaks, for example, that the Group were considering using the term 'war' to refer to the conflict, and that 'compensation' payments were being considered for the relatives of those killed.
- 27 On 24 May 2009, Kevin McDaid, a community worker, was murdered by a sectarian mob in Coleraine when he intervened to try to calm a violent altercation after a Rangers-Celtic football match.
- 28 On 7 March 2009, Sapper Mark Quinsey and Sapper Patrick Azimka were killed outside Massereene Barracks, Antrim, in an attack by the 'Real IRA'. Two days later Constable Stephen Carroll was murdered in an attack in Craigavon by members of the 'Continuity IRA'.



An extended treatment of the Eames–Bradley detailed report is beyond this essay, but I would like to pick up on a core point of fundamental approach that grounds many (arguably all) of the detailed recommendations within it. The point relates to the following statement, contained in the section on 'Developing a road map for the future':

'Buried memories fester in the unconscious minds of communities in conflict, only to emerge later in even more distorted and virulent forms to poison minds and relationships ... Most importantly for present purposes, one should emphasise that, although the past is past, it continues to exist in people's minds. That past affects how people live their lives and how they experience the world. Divided communities carry different experiences and understandings of the past in their minds, and indeed it is this that divides them ... If these conflicting moral assessments of the past are to change, then all sides need to be encouraged and facilitated to listen and hear each other's stories. This listening must then lead to honest assessment of what the other is saying and to recognition of truth within their story. In such a process it might be possible to construct a remembrance of our past which is more humane, comprehensive and rounded.'

(Consultative Group on the Past, 2009, p. 52)

Unpicking the thematic threads of this statement, there are several issues to note. The first is the striking philosophically nominalist view of the past as relative and conditional on the 'stories' of those who refer to it. The second is the focus on what might be unkindly termed a 'pop psychological' version of the relationship between past trauma and present life, in the reference to memories 'fester[ing] in the unconscious minds of communities in conflict'. This is connected to the theme of the relativity of truth positions and to the consequent need for story-telling from all sides and for each side to recognise the truth within each other's stories. In other words, there is a presumption of 'sides' to truth, and of truth within all stories. The technique for managing the past is that this truth, or these truths, should be let out into the open air, not for judgement as to its (their) value as truth, but for recognition of the value of the very exercise of 'truth' telling. Truth gives way to a process of truth-telling, a kind of psychosomatic tool, a species of 'talking cure'.

Whatever the merits of this position (and in particular the extension of a recognisably therapeutic individualistic idea to the level of community conflict resolution), there is an implicit core presumption behind even these presumptions as to the relativity of truth, and it deserves serious attention. It is that the past should be bent to the service of the social health of the present, and in particular the future, or, as the 'key principle' laid out in the document states:

'The past should be dealt with in a manner which enables society to become more defined by its desire for true and lasting reconciliation, rather than by division and mistrust, seeking to promote a shared and reconciled future for all.'

(Consultative Group on the Past, 2009, p. 23)

While on the face of things it would seem churlish to argue with the sentiment behind such a position, there is perhaps too much of an easy move from sentiment to an idea that 'telling stories' is the way forward without any working through of a coherent moral framework within which such stories might stand or fall in relation to each other. To translate this moral idea to a formal equivalent in the artistic realm, there is a kind of blind faith in the democratic nature and value of story-telling, without consideration of the idea that some people, for whatever reason, are better story-tellers than others, not to mention that some will certainly reject the idea of experience as 'story'.

Furthermore, the understanding of memory implicit in such an Eames–Bradley approach has certain ineluctable features. Implicit is that the past somehow owes a debt to the present, the debt of offering up some route to reconciliation.<sup>29</sup> The past, in other words, is not so much about what

29 The idea of 'reconciliation' is not one that should escape critical interrogation. For an introduction, see Bell (2003; 2008).

happened, but about what we presently need to have happened in order to construct our future. The past becomes an area to be mined to produce some good quality hardcore on which to build. Memory as truth is malleable in the service of a good story of reconciliation. To put it another way, it seems that everyone is being given the responsibility to tell their own story, but a prior condition to do so must be the acceptance of a responsibility that their story and their telling is something that works for the common good. This seems not only philosophically incoherent, but also something likely to be practically unachievable, and therefore opens up as many questions as it resolves. It tries to marry the ethical (ought) questions of responsibility to the ontological (is) questions of people's memory of their lived experience.

The intention here is not to embark on an extended critique of the Eames–Bradley document, but to highlight the continued significance of 'dealing with the past', and to further highlight the complexity and difficulty of finding a form through which this might be achieved, and the likely controversies which will dog any attempt. McQueen's approach, as already foreshadowed earlier in the discussion of his work in relation to the British war dead in Iraq, is very different from that of Eames–Bradley.

### 3 *Hunger* and lingering with the image of humanity

The film is split into three distinct sections. In the first and final sections there is practically no dialogue, while the second section consists entirely of an extended duologue which is almost all shot in a single 18-minute long 'two-shot' take, the actors facing each other while the camera remains static. This scene was scripted by Enda Walsh,<sup>30</sup> and consists of an extended theologico-political debate between Sands and a priest. This scene, as a 'landmark' in cinema form (the extended single take), gathered a huge amount of critical attention, but the fact that it was scripted by Walsh while McQueen as director seems to have decided to almost withdraw from the scene, makes it less interesting for this analysis, and so I don't propose to dwell on it further.<sup>31</sup> The third section catalogues Sands's progression towards eventual death, principally through a series of slow-paced scenes and images that recall the discussion of McQueen's art above, yet draw heavily on Christian and in particular Catholic iconography of the Passion of Jesus Christ. Likewise, this section is less interesting for this analysis. Insofar as it relates to the form of image making, this will be discussed in relation to the images in the first section. On the level of ideas the story is simple; Sands completes his hunger strike to the death. The idea of the impact of how this story was told on the reception of the film will be discussed in the conclusion.

The first section of the film deals in parallel with the contrasting experience of two characters. One is a new prisoner arriving in the prison, and the other is a prison officer going about his daily routine of travelling to the prison and starting his work shift. The prisoner adopts the 'dirty protest' techniques in refusal of the status of a normal prisoner.<sup>32</sup> He strips naked before prison guards, is led to his cell, meets his cellmate and is gradually over time introduced to the routine realities of prison

30 Enda Walsh is an award-winning Irish playwright known for the complexity and vivacity of his writing in plays such as *Disco Pigs*, *Bedbound*, *The Walworth Farce* and latterly *The New Electric Ballroom* (all published by Nick Hern Books, London). He is only secondarily known as a screenwriter – *Hunger* his second credit in this role.

31 In relation to this scene, McQueen's concern seems to have been far from the contest of political ideas expressed: 'I was interested in the whole notion of intimacy, the intimacy of the conversation . . . so it's just a two-shot of those two having a conversation . . . you have a situation where the audience thinks it shouldn't be involved, so your attention is heightened, your focus is sharpened . . . you become the camera' (McQueen, quoted in Mottram, 2008).

32 For an explanation of 'dirty protest' see fn 1.

claustrophobia and brutality. In parallel to the viewer's introduction to the realities of the prison through the experience of this character, we are also introduced to the realities of prison life from the 'other side of the fence', as we see the daily routine of a prison officer, having breakfast, checking under his car for bombs, driving to work in civilian clothes, changing into uniform, entering into the gang of warders having tea and sharing jokes before they clock on for their shift.

While this opening portion of the film develops a context for what follows, the idea of context here is only obliquely a notion of political context, as this relates to the political situation outside the prison. At one point, for example, one prisoner manages to use a tiny smuggled radio to gain access to news from the outside world about how the political and military struggle is progressing. But the real force of the scenes regarding the radio within the film is that we are shown it being smuggled into the prison by a female visitor who, at visiting time, takes a cellophane wrapped sausage-shaped package out from beneath her skirt and passes it to a prisoner who puts it down his trousers before smuggling it back to his cell where he is shown retrieving it from his anus. The radio is one of many items which are used to illustrate the theme of the rebellious bodies of the prisoners, and their ability to find ways to subvert the rules of the prison.<sup>33</sup>

The viewer is introduced to these scenes with the new inmate, and the depiction of the physicality is accentuated by the camera periodically adopting the prisoner's perspective. The viewer is made to recoil with him as he is pushed into a cell and takes in his new surroundings, the shit smeared on the walls in patterns to create a kind of cave art, and out of the darkness looming his cellmate resembling a caveman, naked, filthy, long hair and beard matted and unkempt.<sup>34</sup> There are horrific scenes of the naked men being beaten by a riot squad of prison officers that recalls scenes of cattle being beaten and prodded towards their death in an abattoir. The zenith of this thematic illustration of the conditions in which these men find themselves (or have created for themselves as a refusal of the condition of normalised humanity as it exists for the prison regime) is a scene in which this prisoner stands at the metal grille which covers the broken window from his cell to the outside and toys with a fly that has come through the window and into the cell (or perhaps hatched as a bluebottle from the maggots infesting the rotting food and shit on the floor). The scene seems to suggest that the prisoner is so abject that even a fly is good company, and the prisoner seems to play with it not in cruelty but in empathy. In a trademark gesture of McQueen's art, the camera lingers in silence for a long time on this odd and moving interaction.

In a parallel scene the prison officer through whose eyes the film was introduced is shown standing alone in the prison exercise yard, smoking a cigarette as snow gently falls. The camera lingers as the flakes settle down on his grazed knuckles, knuckles that have been picked out previously in several scenes of the film. They were grazed in a horrific scene where he beat the prisoners as he tried to force them to wash, and the impression is given that this is a frequent practice and that the wounds on his hands are practically permanent. The snowflakes settle like a balm on the open wounds of his hands as he stands starkly alone and seemingly alienated even from himself.

33 One visiting room scene is almost comic in the mass and variety of material that is removed from enclosed body parts, mouths, ears, noses, anuses and passed across to be transported out of the prison, with a similar volume of material moving in the other direction. There is an extensive anthropological literature on the 'body as a site of resistance' developed through studies in Northern Ireland, in particular in the prison system, and more particularly in relation to the blanket protest, dirty protest and hunger strikes. For an explanatory introduction to this literature, as well as an extensive bibliography of material, see Wilson and Donnan (2006).

34 The adoption of the perspective of any individual character, with the attendant promotion of identification with the literal 'point of view' of this character, is done rarely throughout the film, which in general maintains an 'objective' viewpoint. An interesting exception which relates to this scene mentioned above is a scene in which a (sympathetically portrayed) prison orderly enters (clad head to foot in protective clothing) and pauses to remove his helmet and stare at the 'art' on the walls; the viewer being offered this point of view.

Only nature comforts him. In the film's opening scene of his home life his wife is so anonymised that her face is never shown, the crumbs that fall from the table are paid more attention. In scenes with his fellow officers he is raucous and sociable, but to the point where it seems like an act that he is putting on, a mask that he wears. In his final scene in the film he is visiting his mother in a rest home. As he sits trying to communicate with her it becomes obvious that she is in the late stages of dementia, and does not recognise him. A killer walks in and shoots him from behind, his blood splattering the unreacting face of his mother. The overall characterisation (in keeping with McQueen's declaration, cited above, that 'I am Raymond ...') seems one of immense sympathy for the plight of this officer who is so dehumanised in his loss of capacity for authentic human interaction, and where this loss of capacity seems brought on by the abnormal and inhumane conditions of prison life.

The context, in other words, is a remarkable context of human ingenuity in the face of extremities of human experience. Men who are imprisoned for terrorist crimes refuse to conform to the definition imposed on them that they are criminals, and in order to assert a different status they embrace a condition of a kind of animality. They refuse to wear prison uniform and so are naked, wrapped only in a single blanket. They refuse to do prison work and so are confined to their cells without rights of exercise or association with other prisoners. They refuse to 'slop out' and so smear their cells with their own excrement to diffuse the accumulated shit. They build channels of rotted and rotting food to direct their urine out underneath the doorways and into the prison corridor. Their only concession to the normality of a prison regime is to don clothes so that they can avail themselves of visiting rights, and therefore to a degree of contact to the outside. Such attitudes necessarily create conflict with the guards inside the prison, who react with physical violence against the kind of systemic violence that the prisoners have, paradoxically, managed to inflict on the guards through wresting control over the physical environment; the guards must also live and work in shit and stench. The first section of the film then opens up a context which is not only a kind of super-humanisation in terms of human ingenuity, but also a context of a kind of cyclical dehumanisation. In each case the concern is with what McQueen expressed as his idea of humanity 'what we, as humans, are capable of ... What we will inflict and what we will endure'.<sup>35</sup>

However, even as this broadly narrative element of the film is gradually unfolded, it is important to bear in mind two things, one itself a condition of the narrative and the second a condition of the film-making process. The first is that practically none of this opening narrative development concerns Bobby Sands. It is the parallel story of two men, one a prisoner and one a warder, and the physical and human context in which they live. The connected film-making point is that of how this story is unfolded, in particular as it focuses in on the two men as, on some occasions and to some degree, divorced from the context. Each of these men is offered several striking scenes where we, as an audience, are made to stay with them as they go through the most mundane of actions that are elevated and heightened into something extraordinary by the attention of the camera, by the details of lighting and sound. The prison officer washing his knuckles beneath running water, slowly smoking a cigarette beneath the falling snow, eating a piece of toast. The prisoner stripping naked before the guards, toying with the fly by the window in his cell, trying to masturbate to a tiny smuggled picture as his cellmate stirs on a filthy mattress a couple of feet away. The lighting and camera effects emphasise the darkness and claustrophobia of the environment. There is no dialogue and a focus on periods of silence punctuated by resonantly loud episodes; a clanging prison door, prisoners' screams, warders' raucous laughter. The effect is, through contrast, to heighten those periods of silence and to draw the attention to the significance of those mundane tasks; the unbuttoning of a shirt, the smoking of a cigarette. The audience is asked to linger in silence with a

<sup>35</sup> McQueen, quoted in O'Hagan (2008).

heightened sense of the significance of the mundane details of the lives of men trapped in extraordinary conditions. This lingering echoes McQueen's earlier silent films, and has the quality of creating a kind of secular, humanistic, devotional imagery. What we will inflict and what we will endure are the poles at either end of a much more normal gamut of sensation and endeavour that joins us all just as the former often divides us; the unbuttoning of a shirt, the smoking of a cigarette. In the midst of conditions of absolute horror, McQueen takes time to linger with such images of the banality of ordinary human experience and to remember that it can be beautiful and moving. The form and the idea are merged in the simple act which is requested of the audience: to watch and to wait, to witness and to feel.

#### 4 Aesthetics and transformation

In his review of the film, that is on one level extremely perceptive, the Irish cultural commentator Fintan O'Toole (2008) regrets what he sees as McQueen's surrender to the 'narrative of the hunger strikers'. He writes:

'There is an obvious reason why artists return again and again to the 1981 hunger strikes, and it is not primarily political. It has to do with the sense in which the hunger strikes themselves were a kind of art. They functioned, as art does, on the plane of metaphorical transformation. They were all about definition and language. They began with the prisoners' determination to define themselves as political actors rather than as criminals. And as they developed they acquired the potential to transform the prisoners from victimisers to victims, from those who had inflicted suffering to those who had suffered. With that transformation they achieved what most artists dream of: a reordering of perceptions.'

Further in the same review he reiterates and elaborates his point, as a pointed critic of what he sees as McQueen's political naivety:

'The whole point of the hunger strikes, after all, was that aesthetics trumps politics. The fusion of a visual imagery that deliberately tapped into images of Christ and the potent drama of slow death worked to simplify and transform a complex political reality. It obliterated the reality that the prisoners were killers. It even obscured the stark fact that far fewer prisoners than prison officers died in the H-Blocks conflict – 10 dead hunger strikers against 29 prison officers murdered by the IRA. Whatever its intentions, any film that plugs into that aesthetic power will always repeat that act of obliteration . . . it is utterly naive to think that you can both plug into the hunger strikes as an aesthetic event and give them a neutral political treatment.'

There is a very good point here as to the hunger strikes as aesthetic events, even if in making it O'Toole himself is doing some simplifying and transforming of complex political realities. This is true on a simple factual level (not all the prisoners were killers, for example).<sup>36</sup> On a more complex political level, many Republican 'terrorists' would accept that they were victimisers in the sense of creating victims, but it is striking how many ascribe their political commitment to a response to personal victimisation – Gerry Adams, for example, in his autobiography ascribes his political commitment to his family having been forced out of its home (Adams, 1996). In other words, the boundary between victim and victimiser is not quite as neat as O'Toole suggests.<sup>37</sup>

36 Sands was serving a fourteen-year sentence for 'possession of firearms'.

37 The recent and ongoing response to the Eames-Bradley Commission Report throws up this whole issue once again; who is a victim, is there a parity of victimhood? The likelihood is that the extensive work and multiple recommendations of the group will be lost in the blaze of controversy over their proposal that the 'nearest relative' of those who died (whether civilian, security force personnel or paramilitary) in the

There are other simplifications at play here, which lie on the borders of the political and the aesthetic that are traced out by O'Toole himself. He does not want to concede that the hunger-strikers, in performing a 'work of art', did something that was positive on a political plane. He can accept the status of their gesture as art, but can only see it as transformative through its 'obliterative' power over the political reality of the death of the prison officers. For a cultural commentator and an art critic this seems an odd surrender of the notion of nuance, which is particularly strange in that the move to cast the hunger strikes as performance art is so bold. If the hunger strikes were transformative in an artistic sense, in that they reordered perceptions, were they not also transformative in a political sense that was not merely a negative obliteration, or in a personal sense? The answer to the first of these questions is certainly 'yes', in a way that is both totally banal and yet utterly significant. The promotion of Sands as a candidate in a parliamentary by-election, as a deliberate tactic to draw attention to the support his protest had in the wider community, had the ancillary (and well acknowledged) effect of shifting the balance of power within the Republican movement away from the military and towards the political.<sup>38</sup> In a personal sense there are few who would argue that the movement from murder to self-immolation as a means of protest has at least the virtue of demonstrating the same level of life or death commitment to an ideal without involving unwilling participants in the gesture. O'Toole can't bring himself to concede that the hunger-strikers could have done terrible things and yet that there was something extraordinary in what they were doing through their protest, or the even more simple point that even as victimisers (or victims) they were human beings putting themselves at the limit of human capability. He is performing his own act of obliteration of a complex relation between aesthetics and politics, a relationship which he himself has exploited in his comments.

In effect, what he is doing is trying (ironically for a cultural commentator) to promote politics beyond aesthetics because of his disapproval of the power of the aesthetic gesture of the hunger strikers, and his sense that any approach to this aesthetic power (such as McQueen's) has to take the nature of a surrender. What McQueen has managed, however, together with his co-writer, actors and crew, is to plug into the humanity of the hunger strikes, in his own fascination with human capabilities and limits, and to match this humanity with an aesthetic of his own which performs an alternative work of transformation, the transformation of dehumanised figures hidden behind prison walls – and this is not just Sands but all of the characters, whether prisoner or warder – into figures of humanity who are worth remembering, and worth remembering with a steady and slow eye to the detail of their existence. This is an aesthetic based on captivating images and on dwelling with these images in silence.

Unlike the Eames–Bradley Commission then, which strays towards an idea that the dead somehow owe the living a chance to heal, the idea here seems that the living gain a measure of their own humanity by dwelling with the past for a while, by, in the gracious words of another recent commentator, simply bearing in mind these dead (McKay, 2008). Perhaps film as a form which allowed McQueen, and allows generally for, a structure of imagining a past (or a future) but without the need for text 'shot through with explanation'<sup>39</sup> and which therefore allows for and indeed calls for and relies upon a range of response, is particularly suited to this kind of work of memorialisation,

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Northern Irish conflict should be awarded an *ex gratia* 'recognition payment' of £12,000. The proposal was flatly rejected by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the First Minister of the Northern Ireland Executive.

38 This movement was marked by IRA publicity officer Danny Morrison's 1981 address to the Sinn Féin (the political wing of the IRA) *Ard-fhéis* (Annual Conference) where he stated: 'Who here really believes we can win the war through the ballot box? But will anyone here object if, with a ballot paper in this hand and an Armalite in the other, we take power in Ireland?'

39 For discussion of this idea in relation to cultural forms see Benjamin (1968, p. 84 and Foreward).

of marking the fact of memory yet leaving room for that public act to respect the individual community acts that it should somehow constitute and unify.

While the film garnered, in the main, positive critical comment (and many prizes) this is not something that would necessarily indicate that it would have a positive social effect in Northern Ireland. Of note here are two points. The first is that the film was warmly received by Republicans, even ex-hunger-strikers. While for some (such as O'Toole discussed above) this is simply evidence that the film 'surrendered' to the Republican narrative, a more convincing point is that the Republican movement itself has now moved to a point where the humanist portrayal of Sands, all but shorn of constitutional political elements, is one that they feel comfortable remembering. The second is that the film opened and ran in Belfast without any protests or demonstrations of any kind. An illustration, perhaps, that the form of memory was, if not something that could be shared equally by all, at least one that was tolerable.

Central to the exploration undertaken in this essay is the idea, not only that everyone has their story, which is of course true, but that the right story be told in the right way, notwithstanding that the person telling the story has no particular right (in that they did not live it) to tell it. Sands's story was the right story for McQueen, as discussed above, because of the personal imprint of the TV news image that, coming as an element of a time, place and emotional landscape, over twenty years before, planted the seed. The eventual telling is marked, as so much of McQueen's work, by the dominance of image over narrative, and by a fascination with humanity, with human capacity and human response. The reception of the film would suggest that the film succeeded in striking a positive chord, both in Northern Ireland and beyond, and that the marriage of form and idea somehow managed to express and consolidate an inchoate social idea of just memorialisation.

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