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The Great Hunger: (Re)Visions of Aesthetics and Politics in Irish Republicanism.

My paper focuses on artistic strategies in visual art of Irish Republicanism and in particular two recent treatments. These are Steve McQueen's film, *Hunger* and David Farrell's photographic work, *Innocent Landscapes* and they are two distinct landscapes that bookend this paper. Each employ and trade on a certain mythical register, summoning up rich iconic relationships to these different sites. I will begin with an examination of the 2008 film *Hunger* to expand on these themes.

A Film in 3 Acts

Hunger is a cinematic re-enactment of the 1981 Hunger Strikes and is principally a portrait of the icon of this protest, Bobby Sands. The film is structured rigidly in three separate acts, of shifting tempos and approaches. The first act of the film follows a new Republican inmate's journey into this harsh prison system. It shifts between still observation and graphic violent attacks by the prison regime on young naked prisoners, set alongside the sheer visceral intensity of the prison cells and living conditions. However, this cycle of violence reveals the underlying sympathies of the film's narrative by proposing to distinguish between the institutional and redemptive forms of brutality. In a key scene, a close up of a prison officer washes his bloodied hands twice. This follows on the second occasion, a severe beating of the Bobby Sands character and this viewing a shift occurs as the sympathy, like the blood, begins to dissolve away.

The violent attacks on the Republican prisoners is followed directly by another critical scene, outside of the prison, where a lone Republican gunman kills the same prison officer seen earlier while he visits his mother in a nursing home. The callousness of this assassination is tempered by the volume of violence dished out by the riot prison officers against the prisoners in the preceding scenes. This editing sequence clearly establishes a legitimatisation of revolutionary violence in response to the state's force.

Although *Hunger's* murder scene is clearly reminiscent clearly of Alan Clarke's TV film *Elephant*, this echo functions very differently as it shares only a formal relationship.

The second act of the film consists of a radical shift in rhythm and visual approach, as the camera remains static for an uninterrupted 18-minute take; this has rightly placed *Hunger* in film history for this virtuoso scene. This act unfolds a robust and combative conversation from either side of the ideological fissure, that is between the physical force tradition of Irish Republicanism and constitutional Nationalism, as represented by the only two developed 'real' characters in the film: Bobby Sands and Father Denis McFaul, aka Denis the Menace.

The stillness of this central act is followed by the third act where we encounter Sands in a silent, emaciated state, dressed in striped pyjamas. His frail frame, zombie-like gaunt expression has an immediate, striking presence and is reminiscent of much iconic imagery. Bobby Sands has now been transformed into an existential prisoner and through the decline of his own body he gradually loses the umbilical life connection to the physical world, encased and trapped in a muted, exhausting nightmare. The emphasis on the body's mutation into corpse is intensified in this final phase, as his physical body becomes the total locus of the resistance. The realism of the scene was compounded by the actor Michael Fassbender's method approach who lost body weight to foster realism.

Much of *Hunger's* impact is created through the film's meditating and contemplating of the subterranean prison space. This selection of forensic detail is nightmarish and utterly immersive. There is a fixation with point of view throughout the film, as the gaze is passed like a baton from anonymous prisoners to the protagonist Bobby Sands, as we follow his descent from violence towards an altered state and eventual transcendent death. This nightmarish ghost train journey is deeply emotive as we face our own screen mortality through Sands's mutation and agonising death.

McQueen has described his intention for *Hunger* as:

I want to show what it was like to see, hear, smell and touch in the H-Block in 1981. What I want to convey is something you cannot find in books and archives: the ordinary and extraordinary, of life in this prison.

McQueen, S. Quoted in Fusco, M., *Steve McQueen Hunger*, Art Monthly, London, Oct 2008, p37.

This aesthetic assault and effect is the film's most remarkable feature, however, McQueen's remark on archival resources suggests a certain shortcoming with the film's historical interpretation. This overt aesthetic art strategy in *Hunger* tends to serve the myth of Bobby Sands and the 1981 Hunger Strikers rather than penetrate this miasma. The only available visual representation of the protesting prisoners exists in the World in Action TV program entitled *The H-Block Fuse*, transmitted on the 24th November 1980. This blindspot of archival material is intriguing as it gives permission for artistic intervention and interpretation in the absence of documents; no real evidential basis here hints at *Hunger's* unstable foundation. Therefore, the film is not an accurate re-enactment but an approximation, fictionalising and heavily dependant on living eye-witnesses for a stamp of authenticity. Moreover, traumatic memory and testimony have been proven untrustworthy chroniclers of the past as memory is an unreliable narrator. Art critic, Goldsmiths academic and native of Belfast, Maria Fusco, reviewed *Hunger* in *Art Monthly* in October 2008 as:

The weakness of *Hunger*, in my view, is that within the temporal space of the film, we are introduced to Sands's (and by implication other hunger strikers') motivation as personal rather than political.

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

Fusco, M., *Steve McQueen Hunger*, Art Monthly, London, Oct 2008, p37.

Although *Hunger* graphically renders the prison conflict, it does little to bring about more thought-provoking readings. Rather it consigns the 1981 Hunger Strike to a stirring and at times sentimental, sensory experience, interlaced within a recognisable historical narrative and context. Once the viewer becomes accustomed to the visceral effect of the film, little insight is given into Sands or the underlying structures of this distinctive prison conflict.

The visual methods of *Hunger* indulge in religious connotation and art metaphor. In one extraordinary scene, a bloodied sheet fills the screen, as a compassionate prison orderly cleans it, and this is obviously highly suggestive of the *Turin Shroud* artefact. In another scene, Sands attempts to get out of a bath but stoically falls. On this occasion an unsympathetic prison orderly (we learn from a Loyalist paramilitary background) carries Sands's frail body in his arms along the corridor in an employment of the Pieta motif.

The Abject and the Envy

Such visual gestures call into question McQueen's vision and motivation to tackle this subject area and if it has diminished the political dimension of this prison struggle? Perhaps some answers can be found and examined through the artistic compulsion towards the Abject state. McQueen has described how Sands's image, through the TV portal, interrupted the safety of the familial home:

I remember as an 11 year-old seeing Bobby Sands on BBC news every night. There was a number underneath his image, and I thought that was his age, but I noticed that each night the number increased, and I realised that wasn't his age, it was the number of days he had gone without food. To an 11 year old, the idea of someone who in order to be heard was not eating left an impression on me. I don't know why this image stayed with me, but it is a very strong memory.

McQueen, *Steve McQueen Interview*, Tate Etc, London, Spring 2009, Issue 15,
<http://www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue15/mcqueen.htm>

McQueen's response to this Irish Republican protest is arguably beyond any tacit recognition of political concerns. Rather his artistic practice endeavours through aesthetics to effect, immerse and is drawn towards the spell of the Abject subject or state, that is the troubled or the poisoned. Abjection is the condition where set meanings collapse; hence its attraction for artists whose artistic sublimation is projected, in McQueen's case onto the Irish Republican prisoners.

This allure is evident in *Hunger*, which reveals a fascination, bordering on fetishism, rather than any ambition for provocative political analysis of this troubled history. In interviews McQueen has spoken of Sands's hunger strike protest as a childlike act and the film depicts the Republican prisoners as outsider artists themselves, practically non-verbal, inarticulate but physically expressive and using their own faeces.

British artist Richard Hamilton was similarly drawn to this subject in a painting of the Republican 'No Wash Protests' created in response to the World in Action TV program mentioned earlier. In his catalogue note to accompany the joint exhibition, *A Cellular Maze*, in 1983 with Rita Donagh, Hamilton wrote:

It was a strange image of human dignity in the midst of self-created squalor and it was endowed with a mythic power most often associated with art. I was able to deal with the dirty protest in a very ambivalent way. It was a work of art that they were doing; smearing excrement on the walls is a kind of gestural art of 20th century fine artists. Its like a parable in society however deprived he is the will to [make] art is there.

Each cell is marked with the graphic personality of its inhabitants....

It isn't difficult to discern the megalithic spirals of Newgrange inscribed there, nor the Gaelic convolutions of the book of Kells remote from the wall paintings of Long Kesh.

Hamilton. R., *The Citizen 1981-83*, Tate Collection, London, 2008, Issue 4, <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?cgroupid=1&workid=5832&searchid=false&roomid=false&tabview=text&texttype=8>

Such interpretations locate the Irish Republican prisoners within a mythic framework, even at the core of the Irish cultural renaissance. Arguably they are transformed into performance-painter artists, effecting and shifting public consciousness.

Hamilton's *The Citizen* is a life-sized, double panel, realist painting in a metal frame. In the second panel, a level of expressive abstraction takes hold as the brown spiral pattern populates and extends across from the right panel. A similar reading of the Republican prison protest is evident in McQueen's film, in the scene where a prison officer cleans a cell. He encounters a spiral pattern on the wall and is moved to take off his protective visor, as if to respectfully behold some ancient monument. This scene elevates the status of these scatological doodles and, like Hamilton, acknowledges something beyond straightforward politics.

The abstract brown pattern in *The Citizen* is grounded by the protester's proud authorship of his own representational shit, that is his artwork. This gaze is in fact an envy or kinship between protester and artist, acknowledged in Hamilton's comments. The political referent became supplanted by an aesthetic one and finally immortalised in a pseudo-religious version of political history as these acts fused the body with the body politic. With this scatological transformation the political prisoners achieve what some artists aspire towards, that is the reordering of perception or consciousness. In this sense, McQueen and Hamilton have been drawn to the H-Blocks as an exceptionally charged art space, a potent *mise-en-scène* and colour palette of the surface walls and floors, populated by naked young male bodies as a tragic death drama unfolds.

Hunger is a film fusion of what already existed in both Republican prisoners' memory, TV glimpses inside the H.M. Maze prison and Hamilton's painting. However, *Hunger's* synthesis reduces the potential meaning of the 1981 Hunger Strike to an aesthetic event rather than an antagonistic, violent rupture of history.

A Circuit of Meaning

For the uninitiated or unaware of the 1981 Hunger Strikes, *Hunger* has a shocking and violent impact through its precise aesthetic formula. The acumen of the film's audio-visual tour de force demonstrates McQueen's distinctive artistic ability but also draws attention to the weakness of this approach in relation to such historical subjects. Furthermore this political-light turn dovetails with Republicanism's own simplified wish full-fulfilment and positions the 1980s Republican prison protesters as martyrs, as the complex becomes an abridged assimilation of the past.

Journalist Fintan O'Toole reviewed *Hunger* in the *Irish Times* as:

On the level of politics, 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.

O'Toole, F., *Hunger Film Review*, Irish Times, Dublin, 2008. p.19.

To the conservative public majority, who formerly may not have tolerated such extreme political themes, no longer feel the bigger picture surrounding this event as challenging to contemporary hegemony. Viewed from the shoreline, the anti-colonial Irish Republican 'armed struggle' that occasionally degraded into sectarian violence, has become reduced to a myth-like narrative. The spectacle of *Hunger* becomes part of a historical narrative compendium of Irish Republicanism's martyrdom, that is a romantic self-deception. McQueen's artistic strategy reveals much about the function of aesthetics in politically anchored art. *Hunger's* uncomplicated template to understand the 1981 Hunger Striker's sacrifice, depends on uber-aesthetics to remove any useful political index and facilitates an abstraction of the prisoner's protest.

Not so Innocent

Although David Farrell's well-known 2001 landmark photographic project, *Innocent Landscapes*, appears to trade on Republicanism's infamy, this time in a fusion with symbolic notions of the Irish rural idyll, the artist's hand turns and inverts many of these assumptions.

Indeed, this art strategy is in sharp contrast to McQueen as Farrell resists any easy option. Rather he adopts a choreographic stance with the founding legacy of Republicanism's myths, combining the rural picturesque and a certain Catholic gaze from south of the Irish Border. These connotations and motifs are contained within the photographic images and have been particularly well-formed through the book design that vertically compresses these sedimentary layers as the process of reading re-enacts the act of excavation itself. This descent into Irish Republicanism, in this visual archaeology, isolates past political fossils of Republican violence.

Farrell makes authentic our presence at this evidential search procedure by extending the medium outwards as a visual poetic form of witnessing, in a sinister world of signs.

The absence of the bodies of those murdered clandestinely by the IRA refutes the photographic gaze of Farrell's camera, the probing of the index only suggest clues. Moreover, a sense of confusion prevails as the police search is similarly confounded as few bodies are found, and the documentary photography approach can offer association but little else. *Innocent Landscapes* creates a profoundly moving vision that destabilizes and unearths the myth of Irish Republicanism rather than reaffirming or repeating it. This comes about through Farrell's own visual ability and adeptness, unearthing a deep sensibility towards the terrain and subject, a suspicious investigator of the hidden residue of excessive, secret violence. A dark shadow is cast over the Irish Republican psyche as we witness, on one level the investigation process and contemplate the sheer envelopment of history entombed in this silent landscape.

Farrell's *Innocent Landscapes* can appear to function under a similar romantic spell as McQueen's *Hunger*. However, such comparisons are misleading as the landscape mutates into the uncanny, revealing a hidden residue that is Irish Republican violence. Myth aids the cultural construction of Republicanism's ideology and justification of its use of violence. These artworks plug into real events that carry their own burdens in a circuit of meaning between act and cultural imagination.

However, Farrell's work is distinct due to its ambition to make visible what was unseen, unheard and unspoken, inverting the myth-making process.

The aesthetics of *Innocent Landscapes* are inherently political through the photographing of little or nothing, and downplaying the significance of the camera framing. However, this vision points to an open wound, releasing the bog's meaning. Farrell's identification of the relationship between photography and the bog overlaps with much cultural theory and poetry. Critic Terry Eagleton has written:

The bog reveals the past as still present, with artefacts caught in a kind of living death.

Eagleton, T., *An Ideology*, Verso press, London, 1991, p. 32.

Such a hiatus interweaves the photographic process and memory with the motif of the bog landscape. Furthermore Farrell's understanding of the role of myth, that is vital to maintain such a cultural imagination of an uncomplicated version of past can be also evidenced in Seamus Heaney's poem *Tollund Man*. In *Innocent Landscapes* the pre-modern and the post-modern coexist and as Heaney outlines through the bog motif are deep-rooted in channels:

Out there in Jutland
In the old man-killing parishes
I will feel lost,
Unhappy and at home.

Heaney, S., *Opened Ground, Selected Poems 1966-1996*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, First Edition, New York, Oct 1999, p219.

One of the most pertinent images in *Innocent Landscapes* shows a side view detail of bog soil with traces of cutting tools imprinted on it, sculpting the moist brown earth. The aesthetic beauty of the image is offset by the latent metaphor that suggests an ancient, oral storytelling connection to the land, evident in Gaelic place names, and the scars of colonialism. However, what disrupts this well-worn sense of victimhood, often associated with Irishness, is the realisation that Irishmen committed this horror on other Irishmen, on free sovereign Irish territory, an independent land founded on the mythical sacrifice of earlier Irish Republican heroes and carried out by their contemporary incumbents. This landscape is now tarnished and exists in silent denial of what it has witnessed and the lyrical pastoralism is set against the dark stains of sectarian murder.

David Farrell's sequel work in 2009 *Innocent Landscapes, Revisits, Discovery and a Renewed Search* is hosted on the Source Magazine website in the form of a photo-blog commentary on his regular return visits to the same search locations. Photographs are posted at regular weekly intervals and record a second phase of searches by the Irish authorities in a glacial process of unearthing and untwining memory and topography.

Farrell's long-term commitment to the subject is perhaps clear in his continuation and on-going collaboration with families and search teams. However, a distinct feature this time around are his efforts and strategies to actively involve the audience. In this new photo-blog platform image and text take on an additional role as discursive documents on the website space. Such approaches open up the possibility of art to initiate active thought and positions this work on an axis between speaker and spectator.

In Conclusion

Hunger and *Innocent Landscapes* raise the issue of the commodification of history and questions art's treatment of political subjects. Surely the role of a critically-minded artist is to disrupt rather than perpetuate simplified readings of martyrs and assassins and probe deeper into such violent conflicts. The artistic enterprise should stimulate and resist not serve the pleasure principle of the image. Indeed, formal-led treatments of history thereby can lack content and fail to unhinge precarious myths. Brecht's *Epic Theatre* served the instructive function to shatter the seductive illusion of the stage space that rendered audience passivity. In contrast *Hunger* is positioned to maintain a sense of photographic aura, amplifying effect of the spectacle that disarms a viewer becoming, to employ Brechtian terms a 'Culinary Art'. This sustains what French philosopher Jacques Ranciere has called in his essay, *The Emancipated Spectator* the 'Logic of Stultification'.

Ranciere, R., *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London, 2010, p 19.

Innocent Landscapes through its interplay between form and content, has become a valuable testimony and space to unravel the difficult business of art and politics, thereby establishing a sensible marker in a sea of contested meanings, perhaps even a safe mooring. Farrell's body of photo work develops discourse rather than shutting it down and offers potential insight on the useful role of art to political subjects and audiences.

Indeed Farrell is cogent to these debates and has commented in the Source photo-blog:

My involvement with these sites and the people said to be buried there was not a completely futile artistic gesture of protest in that my photographs would exist as a monument of sorts, an act of remembrance in the face of voracious nature, human forgetfulness and the folly of memory.

Farrell, D., *Revisits, Discovery and a Renewed Search*, Source Magazine, Belfast, 2010, Photo Blog, <http://source.ie/blog/?paged=2>.