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Body of Evidence: Performing *Hunger*

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Post-conflict films of the Northern Irish Troubles are, overwhelmingly, male-dominated narratives. These screen stories are marked not by representations of militarized masculinities, but by victimized masculinity and the struggle for masculine definition. This has less to do with the wider-scale perceived 'crisis in masculinity' which inflects British films such as *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997) and Irish films such as *I Went Down* (Paddy Breathnach, 1997), and more to do with creating a post-conflict masculinity that audiences can identify with in the context of the peace process and, in this context, that audiences can extend understanding and forgiveness to. This trend is particularly noticeable in films about the 1981 Hunger Strike.

There have been three major films of the Maze prison hunger strike in 1981, led by Bobby Sands: *Some Mother's Son* (Terry George, 1996); *H3* (Les Blair, 2001); and *Hunger* (Steve McQueen, 2008). This essay will focus on *Hunger*, but it's important to note that this most recent film is exemplary of what has become an identifiable representational strategy: an overwhelming emphasis on the prisoners' points of view, and the exclusion of all other stories, in particular the exclusion of female prisoners as protestors (though their prison protests are the subject of *Silent Grace*, directed by Maeve Murphy (2001)).

Most importantly, *Hunger* is typical in representing the strikers as sacrificial victims. In this stress on victimhood and, as will be argued, on a victimised masculinity, *Hunger* is not only typical of prison protest films, but of films of the Northern Irish Troubles generally. Films such as *Bloody Sunday* (Paul Greengrass, 2002) and *Five Minutes of Heaven* (Oliver Hirschbiegel, 2009), both internationally prize-winning, represent the Troubles as a male-

dominated narrative framed not by paramilitary, colonial or community politics, but by a struggle over the subject's masculine definition.

The Hunger Strike

In the spring of 1981, the second hunger strike in the Maze prison in six months was led by Bobby Sands, the republican commanding officer of the H-Blocks. Sands was determined that the second hunger strike would maximise public exposure, making the invisible bodies of the strikers visible, and thus heightening the pressure on the British government. Sands went on hunger strike on March 1st by himself, followed after two weeks by Francis Hughes and, a week after that, by Raymond McCreesh and Patsy O'Hara, with each striker replaced as he died. By the time the strike was ended on October 3rd 1981, ten men had died of starvation. The tactic of successive strikers was designed to exploit the publicity surrounding the strike and to raise their profile as much as possible. In this it was certainly successful, though it also had the effect that Sands became the undisputed icon of the whole strike.

The prisoners in the 1980s were drawing on a long tradition of republican hunger striking, most famously the 1920 martyr Terence MacSwiney. MacSwiney was Mayor of Cork when he was arrested and his strike attracted huge media attention internationally. The coverage of MacSwiney's strike, and his survival for an amazing seventy-three days, generated widespread sympathy for and awareness of the republican cause and this was one of the reasons that Bobby Sands deliberately modelled the 1981 hunger strike on MacSwiney's. MacSwiney's strike also moulded modes of visualising the striker; in 1920 images of MacSwiney, prone in bed, captured the imagination and sympathies of the newspaper-reading public and this tradition of imaging the striker has continued, focussing on the body of the striker in bed, passive and vulnerable.

Hunger

Hunger, directed by Steve McQueen, is constructed in three parts. The first section stresses the horror of the Dirty Protest and the violence of the prison regime. The middle section of the film is a twenty-minute scene between Bobby Sands and the community priest, Father Moran. The film's third section focuses exclusively on Sands, as he undertakes his hunger strike. It is only in parts two and three that Sands emerges as the central character, the first part of the film attempts to convey the group situation in the Maze H-Blocks.

In the first part, the blanket and dirty protests are introduced to the audience through the figure of a new prisoner (Brian Milligan) who arrives and asserts his identity as a political prisoner by refusing to wear the prison uniform. The audience then watches, along with the prison officers, as he slowly and fearfully removes his clothes. The next shot shows him walking down the prison corridor, his head bleeding from an unseen beating, and entering a prison cell that is already dirty. His slow and horrified gaze around the darkness and filth of the prison cell is an onscreen correlative to the audience's horror at such dehumanised conditions. These scenes play out in almost total silence, adding to the strangeness of the experience, and implying that it is beyond language.

In an attempt to balance the horror of the prison conditions, *Hunger* also represents the bleak life of one prison officer, Ray Lohan (Stuart Graham). Lohan's character is given some depth, so that he is not simply a cipher, but a real counterpart to the IRA prisoners, and this balance is achieved primarily by depicting the stress and trauma of working in the H-Blocks. Even though McQueen shows Lohan's home life as peaceful, the emphasis on the exactitude and order of his morning rituals, smoothly orchestrated by his silent wife, and his donning of a prison-guard uniform, suggests that his home life is also dominated by his work. As Lohan leaves for work, he checks under his car for bombs, watched nervously by his wife. Again, these scenes play out in almost total silence, leaving the audience to make their own

judgements of Lohan's character, and establishing a link between the silence of endurance within the prison cells, and within Lohan's home. At the prison, Lohan is broodily withdrawn, clearly oppressed by the situation. Later in the film we get another glimpse into Lohan's life when he visits his senile mother in a care home. This visit is cut short when an IRA assassin enters and shoots him dead. Yet the tragedy of Lohan's oppressive life and brutal death is itself ameliorated by the other side of his character – when McQueen shows him as a leading member of a team of guards who viciously beat the prisoners. Lohan's main duty in this scene is to shear off the prisoners' hair, which he sets about with a sadistic energy. This violent scene dramatically alters the otherwise sympathetic portrait of Lohan, and breaks the link between him and the prisoners, who are never shown as aggressors. Though McQueen paints Lohan as a man trapped within a system, the real victims, indeed martyrs, of the system are the prisoners. The film thus consistently privileges their perspective and this prevents real balance.

In the middle section of the film Bobby Sands (Michael Fassbender) emerges as an important character, having been seen previously beaten by the guards, but not identified as the prisoners' commanding officer. In the film's central scene, Sands' conversation with Father Moran (Liam Cunningham), Sands puts forward his case for why a hunger strike is necessary, and why it must be undertaken by him. In response, the priest puts forward the counter argument that community activism is more effective, and that Sands is embracing death instead of compromise. The priest clearly recognises, what the film goes on to endorse, that Sands is making a martyr out of himself, choosing the path of the grand gesture of self-sacrifice rather than the smaller sacrifices of compromise and community politics. In response to this accusation, Sands recounts a story from his boyhood when he and some other Belfast boys, on a cross-border trip to Donegal, encountered a wounded foal lying in a stream. Sands took decisive action, drowning the foal to end its suffering and accepting the

punishment for this killing (though, again, we are not shown Sands committing any violence). Instead of denying Moran's accusation, Sands's boyhood story suggests that the strike is a similar quest, a narrative of ruthless leadership and, crucially, a coming of age as a man of action and principle.

Apart from revealing the intractable positions of the two men, the central section also betrays the mode in which the strike will be imagined. The strike is here constructed as an individual quest. The scene is set in a deserted visiting room, and Sands has thus moved out of the communal context of the H-Blocks and into his own, solitary zone. This is confirmed in the following scenes of his wasting away and death, where silence and solitude are the two strongest elements of his environment. McQueen thus imagines the hunger strike along the lines of MacSwiney's in Brixton in 1920 – as a solo endeavour. Yet this depiction is historically inaccurate, indeed the entire point of the 1981 strike was that it was a mass strike, led by Sands but not by any means constituted solely by him. This approach thus tells an emotional truth – the loneliness of the striker – but by doing so, McQueen chooses not to show how it really was. The rationale for doing this will become clear below, but it begins I think from a desire to imagine the striker on a heroic quest, and indeed is linked to the concepts of masculinity informing the idea of the hero – he rides alone.

In *Hunger* the focus on Sands' death is overwhelming, as his strike constitutes the whole third movement of the film. This is the only hunger-strike film in which the actor chose to lose a significant amount of weight, in order to be 'believable', and the camera makes the most of this authenticity, lingering on his starving body in close up, complete with bed sores and wasted muscle. Much of the publicity for the film and interviews with Fassbender (and the DVD extra interviews) focussed on the strict diet and physical regime he underwent in order to achieve his famished physique. And so the media obsession with celebrity weight gain and loss became a lens for reading the film through Fassbender's body

rather than Sands' politics. Yet this surrounding pre- and post-publicity is not a mis-reading of the film, rather it chimes with the film's visual strategy, which focuses on the victimised bodies, rather than the terrorist identities, of the prisoners. For though the political situation is explained in the first section, and debated in the second, by the third section the controversial politics of terrorism are abandoned as Fassbender's abject body is the fetishized object of aesthetic scrutiny, thereby obscuring the historical meaning of Sands' body as a weapon.

This is also, of course, a result of the film's focus on a single striker, rather than a historical representation of the communal strike. In this way, *Hunger's* representation of the prisoner's body shifts from its meaning as a political weapon, to its appearance as an aesthetically (and sympathetically) fascinating object. This shift is underlined by the colour palette of the third section: pristine white, suffused with clear light. This bleached palette contrasts starkly with the darkness of the first prison-cell scenes. Though Sands' body is naked in both parts, the stillness and calm of the final movement of *Hunger*, as he is ministered to by white-uniformed hospital orderlies, obscures the political meaning of his nakedness, and denotes a state of Christ-like transcendence to pure image.

This is a deliberate strategy, which shapes not only the palette of the film, but also the intertextual references that McQueen makes in this final section. Two films in particular provide intertextual links that illuminate McQueen's view of Sands as an innocent victim. In the last minutes of his life, Sands hallucinates that his younger self appears in his hospital room, and the film represents his death with a flashback to Sands' childhood, in a reversal of the coming of age narrative. One of the striking things about this flashback is the way the child turns and gazes off camera to the right. Indeed, this gaze is important to notice because it is not only a challenging look, but also a visual and filmic echo of the final shot of Francois Truffaut's film *The 400 Blows* (1959).

In Truffaut's famous French new-wave film, a young boy – the mischievous and irrepressible Antoine – is repeatedly oppressed by his family, his school and then by the larger society. Though Antoine tries to do his best, he is constantly being punished. In the end, he is sent to a reform school and abandoned by his family. There are clear echoes then between the child Antoine and the character of Bobby Sands as *Hunger* presents him, including the sense that each is oppressed by an unfair system, each is punished by a cold and hard woman – in Antoine's case his mother, in Bobby Sands' case, Margaret Thatcher – and each is institutionalised. However, while we might make a link between Antoine and Sands as a child, both oppressed and trapped within a system that eventually victimises them, it is a far greater stretch from the victimised child to the terrorist adult. By referencing a classic film of the European art-house tradition, McQueen is thus forging a link that distorts the representation of the adult Sands.

Though many who see *Hunger* will not notice this visual reference to Truffaut's film, what they will most certainly notice is the use of a child. In an Irish context, this image recalls the cover of U2's debut album *Boy* (released in 1980). More recently, it brings to mind films such as *The Butcher Boy* (1997) written by Pat McCabe and directed by Neil Jordan, and *Song for a Raggy Boy* (2003) written by Patrick Galvin and directed by Aisling Walsh. These films consistently use the strategy of moving and challenging close-ups of the young boys' faces in order to represent the trauma of institutional abuse, and this strategy is echoed by *Hunger*'s ending, thus further encoding Sands' story into a history of victimisation.

The flashback scenes are important too for another intertextual reference: its soundtrack. The soundtrack at this point, composed by Leo Abrahams and David Holmes, is an aural echo of Vangelis's iconic theme music to *Chariots of Fire*. This classic British film, released in 1981 and directed by Hugh Hudson, follows the journey of five men from different social and religious backgrounds, two of whom used running as a way of

overcoming obstacles in order to achieve their dream. The film is about resistance, endurance and heroism; all key aspects of both nationalism and masculinity. The central characters, Eric Liddell and Harold Abrahams, are in pursuit of the perfect male body, and they explicitly identify running as a way of expressing their religious identity and aspirations. Moreover, like the hunger striker, they imagine their bodies as tools with which to achieve metaphorical power, and social and cultural supremacy. In many ways this parallels the quest of the striker, though it is also antithetical to it. For the striker, physical endurance is designed not to validate, but to undermine British supremacy. Yet both sets of men, in both *Hunger* and *Chariots*, are men of conscience and honour, and this is, as McQueen projects it, an important connection for what it reveals about Bobby Sands and the heroic sacrifice he is making.

In addition, the reference to *Chariots of Fire* exemplifies McQueen's belief that a film about the death of Bobby Sands should be as central to British film history, and the genre of British history films, as a triumphalist film about the 1924 Olympics is. Following the general release of *Hunger*, McQueen was interviewed about the reasons he wanted to make the film:

> Bobby Sands was in my psyche … since I was eleven years old. The idea that someone doesn't eat, but gets louder … or who doesn't eat in order to be heard … it just stayed with me. The British press swept it under the carpet for 27 years. It is one of the, in fact it is the, most important event in British history in recent times. My sympathy was for Bobby Sands and the prisoners detained there.[1]

It is important that McQueen identifies the hunger strike as a part of British history. In this identification, McQueen shifts the emphasis away from reading the prison protests as an 'Irish' problem, and integrates it into British history, making it the most important event of recent times, one which the British public is largely ignorant of because of lack of press coverage and political amnesia. The film is thus an important political intervention in British

history. McQueen, however, also states that his sympathy lies with the prisoners, and this is the dominant element of the film.

This emphasis on sympathy and on the prisoners as victims, however, runs counter to the connection with *Chariots*. Though both films represent, in broad terms, the ultimate test of nationalist masculinity, the 1981 Olympic history stresses the heroism of achievement over and above the pain of sacrifice. In contrast, McQueen foregrounds sacrificial heroism, through the means of physical suffering, as the ultimate endgoal. Whereas in *Chariots* the medals and the approbation of the public (and Abraham's love interest) serve as signifiers of success, in *Hunger* the purported signifiers of success – the achievement of the prisoners' five demands – are entirely absent. And so suffering becomes its own signifier – the abjected male body is elevated by virtue of the extent of its victimisation to become symbolic of heroism.

All of these factors contribute to the deliberate representational strategy of the whole of the final section of the film, which moves from the opening story of group politics in the prison dirty protest to a story about a single man. While some critics noted the way the flashback to childhood sentimentalises the end of the film, I would go further and say that it not only sentimentalises, but denudes the film of its specifically terrorist politics. In using an image of childhood innocence at the end, and in focussing on the victimisation of Sands' body throughout the film, McQueen displaces the politics of terrorism and replaces it with the politics of identity. The graphic visual emphasis on the violated and beaten male body in the first section, and in particular, the final section's obsessive gaze at the starved and wasted male body, transform a history of violent struggle between two forces, into the victimisation of one group, and the sacrifice of an individual.

Crucially, this victimisation is portrayed through the decimation of the traditionally masculine body. This decimation is brought into relief by the contrast between the bodies of

the male prisoners and those of the prison guards. The guards are violent and physically powerful, while the prisoners are – as shown in the mirror-search scene in particular – subject to this power. In this, the guards seemingly represent an active masculinity, while the prisoners, though they resist, are far more physically passive. In the final section, this opposition is underlined by the stark contrast between Sands' weak body and the burly figure of the UDA-identified prison guard, who watches impassively as Sands collapses while attempting to get out of his bath without assistance. Indeed, the reference to UDA, tattooed across the guards fist, highlights that the differentiation between these two performances of masculinity is not only between guard and prisoner, but between hyper-masculine Loyalism, and the sacrificial martyrdom which runs through republican culture (and which is not present to the same extent within loyalist culture). Yet in order to be imprisoned in the first place, Sands himself must have been involved in violence. However, since Sands is never shown as a terrorist, because of the film's concentration on the process of institutionalisation rendering the prisoners passive, his violent and hyper-masculine identity is evaded; this is typical of the eschewing of militarized masculinity in post-conflict representations of republican males.

The de-contextualisation of Sands' story is inevitably politically biased because it generates sympathy for the republican hunger striker and confirms his transformation into a martyr by strongly suggesting that he is at heart still childlike, and thus an innocent victim of an oppressive system. This is a narrative that audiences are familiar with from films such as *In the Name of the Father* (Jim Sheridan, 1993) which depicts the Guildford Four, who were innocent victims of a morally corrupt British penal system. As a result, audiences used to narratives of trauma and injustice are able to sympathise with Sands in a relatively unproblematic and straightforward way.

This approach also resonates with Guy Hibbert and Oliver Hirschbiegel's BBC film *Five Minutes of Heaven*. This film portrays the stories of two men, Alaistair Little (Liam Neeson), a former Loyalist terrorist, and Joe Griffin (James Nesbitt), the brother of Little's first terrorist target. As a seventeen year old, Little shot dead Griffin's brother. This shooting was witnessed by Griffin and this originary trauma was deepened when Griffin's mother blamed the boy for not intervening and saving his older brother. The film is set in both 1975, and in 2008 when the two men are set to meet as part of a truth and reconciliation programme. At this meeting Griffin plans to kill Little but doesn't keep his resolve. Little is repentant and just as desiring of the confrontation as Griffin is, consequently he arranges for them to meet in private, at which point the men engage in a desperate brawl which demonstrates to both the futility of violence and the need for healing and moving on.

Though *Hunger* and *Five Minutes of Heaven* are apparently very different stories, one set entirely in prison, the other predominantly set in a post-Agreement north, they bear very strong similarities and these echoes suggest the way in which Northern Irish films of the Troubles are overwhelmingly marked by concerns over masculinity and victimhood.

When Little and Griffin finally confront each other and Little is given the opportunity to confess to Griffin, he constructs the murder of Griffin's brother as a coming of age narrative, declaring that he 'wanted to be someone. I wanted … to walk into the bar a man.' This resonates with Sands' recollection of drowning the foal, as a key coming of age moment when he, alone, took responsibility and leadership. The echo here between the two stories of adolescent violence connoting manliness demonstrates the underlying gender narrative of so many post-conflict films, which not only represent the Troubles as an all-male experience, but as a testing ground for masculinity. In contrast to the dominant framing device of the hard-man act of the adolescent male, the role of women within this narrative is a supporting one – women are restricted to the familial roles of girlfriend, wife and mother. In these roles,

women provide emotional support to the men in their time of masculine hardship – whether that is smuggling in contraband to your blanket-man boyfriend, or cooking breakfast for your husband before he goes to work at the Maze prison in *Hunger*. In *Five Minutes of Heaven* women, as signifiers, also function as a prize. However, though they are sexually attracted to the hard man, as shown by the teenage Little's popularity at 'the hop' following the shooting, as symbols of home and family, more often women represent the compensatory prize for the failed hard-man, the post-conflict victim man. While Griffin is still harbouring dreams of killing Little, he is distanced from his wife and two children. The idea that violence prevents happy integration within a family is confirmed by Little who lives in a 'cold' apartment, and who fetishizes a purloined photograph of Griffin with his family. Griffin only fully achieves this family, however, after he has revoked his dream of violent revenge and, instead, allowed himself to cry publicly over his victim status.

A similar connection is made, indeed, in *Bloody Sunday* which is portrayed as the quest of a single man, Ivan Cooper (James Nesbitt), to organise a successful civil-rights march. The march itself and the military response is, likewise, a male story, with women (even co-organiser Bernadette Devlin) attributed very limited agency and voice. The narrative of the march and the British army's response is set up as a conflict over different performances of masculinity, the hyper-masculinity of the paratroopers and IRA versus the peaceful – and victimised – masculinity of the marchers, in particular the doubly wounded teenage Gerry who is shot and then implicated as an IRA bomber. After the march, Cooper holds a press-conference to inform the media of the thirteen innocent civilian deaths, at the end of which he is brokenly led off by girlfriend Frances. Their relationship, previously shown as conflicted because of Cooper's inability to give time to Frances, is now harmonious as she supports him in his despair, and provides some compensation for the horror of the day. It is only when Cooper has left the room that the two female march organisers are given

space to speak. The consistent focus in films of the Troubles on men as active and vocal leaders not only genders these narratives as male-dominated, though they clearly do that too through the obscuring of women's active roles in the politics of the time, but represents the Troubles as a contest and proving ground for conflicting performances of masculinity. Though the hunger strike film *Some Mother's Son* represents women in more active roles, they are nevertheless defined by their relationship to the male strikers. Kathleen Quigley's (Helen Mirren) most powerful action in the film comes when she refuses Gerry's (Aidan Gillen) identity as a republican martyr and reclaims him instead as her son, over whose life she has moral jurisdiction. However, Quigley's active role can be set against the passive and supportive Rosaleen Sands (Helen Madden) in *Hunger*.

By considering *Bloody Sunday* and *Five Minutes of Heaven* alongside *Hunger* and reading them in terms of narrative strategy, we can perceive not only isolated echoes between the two works, but a wider pattern of imagining the Troubles as a masculine narrative. That narrative is remarkably uniform as all three films prioritise the personal stories of the central male characters within the political narrative, implicating questions of masculine identity as being equally important as political identity. In particular, *Five Minutes* and *Hunger* both ultimately move away from politics towards a personal narrative of redemption. In *Hunger* redemption is granted by the escape into childhood of Sands' last moments, witnessed by the calm and maternal Rosaleen Sands. In *Five Minutes of Heaven,* family again connotes redemption as Joe Griffin is finally fully integrated with his family and gives his daughters a 'Da they can be proud of'.

As Stefanie Lehner argues, 'the post-conflict situation requires a transformation of masculinity: a switch from the formerly hegemonic retributive model of the "hard-man" to a more sensible, restorative male subjectivity' (Lehner, 67).[2] While *Hunger* does not go quite this far, as it is never suggested that Sands's hunger strike is anything other than a

performance of 'hard-man' endurance, at the same time, McQueen's emphasis on Sands' suffering entirely transforms him into a victim who generates sympathy. This transformation is equally to be seen in Alastair Little, whose killing of an innocent Catholic is never in doubt – indeed it is shown in graphic detail – but who is redeemed by his performance of victimisation, albeit as a result of his own violence. Amazingly, Little's suffering is foregrounded as much as Griffin's is, and it is Little who is given the final scene in which he gratefully and tearfully looks up to the sky, almost unable to believe the forgiveness he has been granted.

This stress on victimhood enables both *Hunger* and *Five Minutes of Heaven* to move towards catharsis as Sands dies and is, implicitly, released, while both Little and Griffin are absolved by their expressions of heartfelt emotion at the end of their journeys. This catharsis grants closure, not only to these personal stories but, since they are representative of the larger Troubles narrative, of the Northern Irish story as a whole. That larger story remains a masculine one, despite the focus on women in films such as *Silent Grace*, *Some Mothers Son*, *Bogwoman* (Tom Collins, 1997), Leila Doolan's documentary on Bernadette Devlin, *Bernadette* (2011), or the short film *Unseen Women* (Jolene Mairs and Cahal McLaughlin, 2011). Nevertheless, even as men remain the focus of Troubles stories, due to their more visible role in paramilitary operations, the nature of the masculinity being performed corresponds to the needs of a post-conflict Northern Ireland in which restorative justice and forgiveness, as inscribed in the Belfast Agreement, are cardinal virtues. Male characters in Troubles narratives are thus on show as victims, rather than unreconstructed hard men. In *Hunger* this means that director Steve McQueen, in resituating Sands as a tragic figure, rather than an agent provocateur, has undertaken a filmic version of decommissioning, and in doing so, has, along with so many films of the Troubles, replaced the politics of nationalism with the politics of masculinity.

[1] Steve McQueen, 2009 interview Criterion Collection DVD.

[2] Stefanie Lehner, 'Post-Conflict Masculinities: *Filiative* Reconciliation in *Five Minutes of Heaven* and David Park's *The Truth Commissioner*', in *Irish Masculinities*, ed. by Caroline Magennis and Raymond Mullan (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011), p.67. See also Fidelma Ashe's work on masculinity and the peace process, 'Gendering War and Peace: Militarized masculinities in Northern Ireland', *Men and Masculinities* 15j.3 (2012): 230-248; and 'From Paramilitaries to Peacemakers: The Gender Dynamics of Community-Based Restorative Justice in Northern Ireland', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 11 (2009): 298-314.

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