

Bath Film Festival 2008 Thursday 30 October

HUNGER

UK | 2008 | 96m | 15

Director/Writer: Steve McQueen

Writer: Enda Walsh

Cinematography: Sean Bobbitt

Editing: Joe Walker

Composers: Tom McCullagh, David Holmes

Leading Players: Michael Fassbender, Stuart Graham, Helena Bereen, Larry Cowan, Liam Cunningham, Liam McMahan

Directed by Turner Prize-winning (1999) artist Steve McQueen, *Hunger* depicts the struggle of republican prisoners in the infamous Maze Prison in Northern Ireland in the 1980s.

The film tells the story of Bobby Sands, one man who makes the ultimate sacrifice for his beliefs. Protesting the end of their right to special category political status, the prisoners demand the right to not wear a prison uniform; the right not to do prison work; the right to free association with other prisoners; and the right to one visit, one letter, and one parcel per week. When the 'blanket' and 'no-wash' protests fail, Sands escalates actions to a hunger strike. Again, parallels with today's political strategies cannot be ignored: the use of the body as a site of protest demonstrates the strength, the depth of feeling that generations of oppression can create and raises questions about the relationship between heroism, martyrdom and futile acts of frustration.

Director Steve McQueen is associated with the Young British Artists movement, which also includes Tracy Emin and Damien Hurst. In 1999 McQueen won the Turner Prize for *Deadpan*, an homage to silent-film star Buster Keaton; for *Hunger* he had considered having no dialogue at all as he wanted to 'focus on the texture of what it was like being there at that time – the atmosphere' (McQueen 1998).

Some viewers will find *Hunger* a challenging viewing experience, for various reasons: the long takes, the silence, the disturbing imagery, the political questions raised, and the emotional investment required. However, the investment should also bring rewards. Writing for the *Guardian* earlier this month, former prisoner Ronan Bennett describes the impact of the film:

I do not know that I have ever seen a film as powerful, beautiful, haunting and individual as Hunger, Steve McQueen's movie about the dirty protest and the hunger strike. Obviously, having been in Long Kesh, some of the movie's impact on me is particular, though I was never in the H-blocks (I was released, suddenly, before the blanket protest began). But as a writer I was, frankly, awed by McQueen's art and vision, by writer Enda Walsh's superb and unusual framing of the story, by Tom McCullagh's stunning production design, and by the authenticity and breathtaking dedication that actor Michael Fassbender brought to the role of

Bobby Sands, the leader of the hunger strike and the first to die, on May 5 1981...

The global political situation has changed dramatically since McQueen was originally approached about the project by Channel 4 in early 2003: the escalation of the war in Iraq, continuing struggles against the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the spotlight on Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba are only some of the parallels that have become apparent over the past five years. *Hunger* reminds audiences that 'history repeats itself, lots of people have short memories, and we need to remember that these kinds of things have happened in Britain' (McQueen, 2008). The film's attention to detail and superb performances bring to life the deep sense of injustice that political prisoners must feel and asks audiences to consider how complicit we are in the continuing persecution of those willing to fight for a cause.

BFF Film note by Joelle Adams