

Critical Analysis of *Hunger* (2008)

Steve McQueen's *Hunger* extensively depicts the "blanket" and "dirty protests" followed by hunger strikes in Northern Ireland during the 80's. The driving force of this distemper was the paramilitary IRA members who bitterly demanded the renewal of their political status, while the opposing British Government ignored them.

The protagonist of the movie mockingly defines this complicated situation as "differences of opinion". The ultimate purpose of Bobby Sands' hunger strike is to gain public support in the IRA's political struggle, to draw the world's attention to the circumstances in the Great Britain.

Sands perfectly understands that the "blanket" and "dirty strikes" will not help to achieve their goal: "Some women bringing up three children in West Belfast, shouldn't care about civilian type clothes or whatever they're calling these clown outfits. It's childish sculduggery". Thus, more radical actions are indispensable.

As a matter of fact, the movie can obviously be divided into three logical parts, and each fragment has its own pace, atmosphere, and mood. The first one is the sickening depiction of the blanket and dirty protests, where the director spares no detail.

It is essential to take a closer look, how the narrative elements of the movie are represented. Stuart Hall describes representation as "the production of meaning through language ... called up in the mind by description or portrayal" (Hall 16-17). One should take into account that in the cinematography the visual devices are important the same as the linguistic means.

Besides, the functionalism of art implies the interconnections between the immediate social situations of the recipient, that is, the narrative contains the social challenge (Naremore, Brantlinger 104-106).

The form of *Hunger* is a brilliant and unprecedented one. According to Bordwell and Thompson, the form must not be underestimated and opposed to the content: “We do not accept this assumption. If form is the total system which the viewer attributes to the film, there is no inside or outside. Every component functions as part of the overall pattern that is perceived” (Bordwell, Thompson 42).

An artwork’s form creates a special kind of inclusion and involvement on the part of the recipient. The spectator’s emotional response and evaluation depend on it. Moreover, the artwork “cues us to perform a specific activity” (Bordwell, Thompson 39).

The scholars claim that formal expectation “pervades our experience of art” (Bordwell, Thompson 45). For instance, we expect the repetition of a melody or a motif, and if the action is abruptly switched off, the only thing we feel is frustration. However, the satisfaction of recipient’s expectation may be suspended or delayed.

In this context *Hunger* is absolutely misleading. One will never find the conventionality of plot-lines in McQueen’s masterpiece. In the opening scene, there is a very neat and pedantic prison officer who is obviously suppressed with all cruelties, which his job involves. The whole scene of Lohan’s breakfast is just a pretending of a normal ordinary life. There is no conversation during the breakfast: the husband and the wife are silent and very strained. It is all depicted in a painstakingly unhasting manner.

There is a significant, yet very fugitive detail, as some crumbs silently fall on his lap. It gives a hint that this idyl is just a fake that something is wrong. The close up of this moment

emphasizes its meaning. After the breakfast, Lohan attentively checks his car for explosives and carefully observes the surrounding street, while his wife watches him anxiously. Thus, one can easily perceive the tragic and dangerous situation in the disintegrated society of that time.

Thus, the Troubles affect both sides of the fence, making the IRA's opponents extremely unhappy as well. Another ambiguous personage in the movie is a young soldier from the riot police who seems deeply shocked with the abhorrent events in the Maze Prison. He cannot stand this violence, and he is simply sobbing aside.

Thus, the director poses a question in front of the spectators, whether Lohan – this man who injures knuckles beating prisoners during his working day – is really evil? Or perhaps such accusations should be referred to the government?

McQueen relevantly uses the fragments of Margaret Thatcher's public speeches concerning the Northern Ireland nonconformists, asserting that "there is no political crime, only a criminal one".

In fact, her words sound rather arrogant and iron-hearted: "Faced now with the failure of their discredited cause, the men of violence have chosen in recent months to play what may well be their last card. They have turned their violence against themselves through the prison hunger strike to death. They seek to work on the most basic of human emotions, pity... as a means of creating tension and stoking the fires of bitterness and hatred" (Beresford 179s).

However, the film suddenly addresses a new prisoner. Davey Gillen shares the cell with another rioter, they smuggle messages and participate in the protests. In fact, this personage is only an introduction to the protests background and the prison lifestyle.

When it comes to Bobby Sands, he appears much later and when it happens, Davey and Lohan are just cast away from the cinematic narrative. Thus, the director applies the non-linear development of events, introducing the characters quite unexpectedly.

The formal elements and stylistic peculiarities of the movie are of extreme importance. The director uses multiple visual devices, such as emphasizing symbolical details, which convey some abstract meanings (Bordwell 39-50). For example, Davey touches the insect through the grating, a bit later he tries to catch snow through it – all these moments express the man's aspiration and yearning for freedom. Davey's undressing process is deliberately very slow and painful. Everything in Maze prison is in bleak colours. The stench of excrement is quite tangible to the spectators. The long corridor with wet floor, the unbelievably long process of cleaning are the highlights of the movie's style.

Indeed, the movie is an outstanding example of visual narrative, primarily due to its seemingly insignificant details. The use of music and sound is unusual: the thunderous bumping of pan lids is the initial frame of the movie – it is the public support of the IRA strikers. Apart from this accompaniment, some ethnic music sounds when Bobby is beaten and during the scene of his death. After Gillen's refusal to wear the uniform of the convicts, he goes along the corridor with a bad wound in his head, though there was no beating shown in the frame. The lighting is also unique, switching from the morbid greenish prison corridor to the deep blue night sky.

One can also observe some significant repetitions (flashbacks and retrospections), as the warden's injured knuckles and the wall behind the snowy curtain reappear. Bordwell and Thompson remark that such spacial and temporal recurrences contribute to the coherent form of the narrative (Bordwell, Thompson 339-341).

The intensity contrasts, such as scenes of violence replaced with peaceful scenery of falling snow are of great importance as well. After a little while Lohan is assassinated by the IRA member. This event is also extremely opposite to the catatonic atmosphere of the institution for elderly care, where it takes place.

It is necessary to conclude that the prison officers demonstrate the incredible amount of abuse and violence, however, the prisoners are politically motivated, and, hence, they resist. They stoically endure the inhuman conditions and embark on disgusting and horrible strikes. At great risk to themselves, they somehow or other manage to smuggle information in and out of jail and speak the Irish language. Thus, physical pain cannot break their moral courage and strength of mind.

The spiral image drawn with dejecture on the cell's wall may symbolize the labyrinth (of the *Maze Prison*), thus, there is no way out of this complicated situation. At the same time, it may perhaps be regarded as a target, for the IRA are gradually avenging themselves.

The next fragment is the incisive and intense dialogue between Bobby Sands and the priest. As a matter of fact, it is the only real dialogue in the whole movie. It must be also mentioned that *Hunger* is notable for this 17-minute unbroken shot, in which Sands and Moran are discussing "the business of the soul". It is interesting because the camera remains in the same position during the whole dialogue, there are no cuts. Thus, it is claimed to be the longest shot in a mainstream film (*Hunger breaks record for longest single shot*).

When Sands informs Moran of his intention to go on hunger strike, the priest does not support this idea at all: "You're going head to head with the British Government who declaredly despise republicanism, who are unshakeable. They can easily live with the deaths of what they call terrorists". He reckons the hunger strike is a hopeless and fruitless affair: "Just highlighting British intransigence ... The whole world knows what the Brits are like". Moran

actually accuses Sands of vanity: “you’re writing your name in laurels for all them history books”.

However, a very symbolical story from Sands’ childhood provides a solid background for his present actions; it explains his motivation and zeal. Bobby depicts his childish experience of a school trip to Gaoth Dobhair, Co. Donegal extremely affectionately: “Donegal is the most beautiful place in Ireland, I reckon”. Thus, his patriotic beliefs are only natural: “I believe that a united Ireland is right and just”.

In this context the clash of different cultures is represented in a very interesting way. For example, when Davey’s cellmate speaks Irish Gaelic, Gillen is somewhat confused.

One must also bear in mind that “culture” is a rather complicated notion mainly because of its “intricate historical development in several European languages” (Williams 76). It is derived from the Latin word “colere”, which had several different meanings: inhabit, cultivate, protect, honor with worship. In the long run, some of them segregated with accidental overlapping (Williams 76-82).

Thus, the notion of culture as opposed to that of civilization is clearly perceptible in Sands’ worldview: “The next time round I’m gonna be born in the countryside, guaranteed”.

Moreover, the religious misunderstandings are obvious along with the ethnical ones: “...these young fellows from Cork ... there’s some banter about our accents ... They could barely talk, we couldn’t understand what they were saying. A few boys were Protestants and the rest of us were Catholics ... You get the idea that they are lording it over us ... Looking down on us, I’m sensing it anyway”.

When the boys found a fawn at the point of death, Bobby was the only one courageous enough to strangle the fawn to death, in order to save it from suffering. Thus, he took the whole

responsibility and was punished, but still Bobby was strongly convinced that he had done the right thing.

The debate between Sands and Moran contain several Biblical allusions, as a matter of fact, Sands is equated with Jesus Christ: “and I could take the punishment for all our boys. I had the respect of the other boys now, and I knew that ... Jesus Christ had a backbone, but see them disciples, every disciple since? You need the revolutionaries. You need the cultural political soldier to give life a pulse, – to give life a direction”. Thus, the protagonist is “the man of the guidance”.

At the same time, this dialogue contains rather pungent witticisms referring to religion and the Bible: “Don’t want me rolling up the letter of St. John, do you? – Couldn’t have that in my conscience, no”; “Should God award you in heaven? – Aye, and I’ll be thankful. Once there’s wine involved”.

The embittered smoking priest who comes to Sands to discuss the “business of the soul” is also the part of the sarcastic atmosphere: “How’s your smoke going? – Grand. – Filthy habit. Disgusting. – Oh, yeah, awful. Lovely, though. – Aye. Praise the Lord”.

Moreover, the prisoners constantly use the sheets from the Scripture to have a smoke, although all of them are Catholic: “We only smoke the *Lamentations* here”. This detail indicates at the relation between the Biblical resilience and suffering and the IRA’s troubles.

Thus, Bobby Sands starts a hunger strike to protest for what he believes in: “Come on! Guaranteed, there will be a new generation of men and women, – even more resilient, more determined ... I have my belief and in all its simplicity, that is the most powerful thing”. Sands believes that one simply cannot remain on the fence: “But I will act and I will not stand by and do nothing”.

In this context one may remember Robbie Fowler, a British football player who also tried to express his political and social views during the match: after having scored the second goal against the Norwegian team in March 1997, Fowler “turned to the crowd, pulled up his official jersey, and revealed a red political T-shirt: “500 Liverpool dockers sacked since 1995” the shirt said” (Klein 164-165). Thus, Fowler, “a Liverpool boy himself, decided to publicize the cause when the world was watching” (Klein 164-165).

The third part of the movie is devoted to Sands’ last days of starvation and death. Here the dialogues are almost lacking. This dreadful process is only dryly described by the doctor: “From week one there has been a gradual deterioration of the liver, kidney, and pancreatic function. Also the bone density decreases substantially due to calcium and vitamin deficiencies. The muscles of the heart is also undernourished, causing impaired function and eventually cardiac failure. The left ventricle can shrink to 70% of its normal size. He will have low blood sugar, low energy and muscular wasting ... There will have been degenerative changes to the mucous membranes of the intestines and indeed all the organs in the body.”.

The events are rendered mostly through visual devices rather than through talking. The most powerful moment is the scene when Bobby notices a hospital attendant near his tub. The man deliberately shows Sands his knuckles, with the “UDA” (Ulster Defence Association) tattoo. Sands stares defiantly at the UDA orderly and tries to stand up with all his strength. In the meantime the hospital attendant refuses to help him. All these painful moments are absolutely silent.

Again, the scrupulous depiction of seemingly humble details can be observed: a white feather is floating in the foreground, while Sands is lying in bed. It symbolizes the ultimate weakness and fragility of the protagonist. As Bobby lingeringly stares at the ceiling above him, it expresses his tedious waiting and agonizing suspense.

Finally, Sands is hallucinating, he sees his young counterpart. The protagonist plunges into the memories from his childhood. The spectators obtain the opportunity to witness the above-mentioned cross-country running adventure.

The young boy persistently runs to the point of exhaustion; then he stops to recover breath, turns away, and suddenly, leaves the frame, while the grown-up Sands passes away.

Thus, the conceptual metaphors LIFE IS A JOURNEY; DEATH IS DEPARTURE as suggested by George Lakoff (Lakoff, Johnson 67, 132) are represented in the final scene.

Undoubtedly, one of the most important features of the movie is the fact that it makes no judgements and takes no political side. The director gives the spectators the opportunity to do it by themselves.

The final idea of the movie is also very important. The film ends with onscreen information that the British government eventually granted some rights to the IRA prisoners. However, one should remember that these strikes did not actually contribute to peace and political stability in the Northern Ireland.

Hunger simply cannot leave anyone neutral about it. The film's social relevance is of unbelievable magnitude and influence.

Thus, the movie narrates of disturbing issues and the director managed to represent the historical context by means of different visual devices, applying the minimum of linguistic facilities. The form of the film determines the emotional response of the spectators as well.

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