
The Pornography of Pain

Film *Hunger* is all aesthetics and no art

MOUNTAINS OF PRAISE have been heaped on this ambiguous and incoherent movie: 'stunning', 'wonderful', 'powerful', 'icily brilliant', 'unforgettable', 'unbearably poignant', 'a film that goes to the heart of the deep anger that has fuelled Northern Ireland's Troubles'. *Sight and Sound*, the British Film Institute's magazine, has named it 'Film of the Year' in its January 2009 issue, after asking more than 50 writers around the world which five films most impressed them. Upwards of 50 writers can't be wrong, surely? Yes, they can, if the attendance where I viewed it is any guide. There was one person in the cinema in early December – myself alone – and I went out of a sense of duty to review it for this journal.

Hunger is not a conventional narrative but a triptych of loosely related parts, a visually poetic portrayal of life in the Maze in 1981 during the IRA blanket and 'dirty' protests and the hunger strike. But the poetry is more Dante than *Daffodils*, with the prison presented as a modern version of the Seventh Circle of Hell, reserved for the sins of violence against other people, against oneself, or against God.

The first part begins in homage to Bresson, with quiet, austere tableaux in which the violence is implied or feared but not depicted. Bobby Sands is absent from these early scenes, which focus on two fictional IRA men – Davey Gillen, a new arrival who initially seems to be the protagonist, and his cell mate Gerry Campbell, a man of truly excremental artistic vision.

What is not subdued is this self-inflicted squalor, all of which is laid on in gory detail: spirals of faeces daubed on prison walls, hallways flowing with urine (later, we are 'treated' to about 5 minutes of a man sweeping a piss-saturated corridor), snow falling on bloody knuckles, flies attracted by the stench, maggots wriggling over uneaten food, messages and goods smuggled from outside in various orifices. If you find such imagery unpleasant or even simply boring, then this visceral filthfest is definitely not for you.

The director, 1999 Turner Prize winner Steve McQueen, then suddenly switches tack and literally pumps up the volume. The prisoners on the blanket refuse the 'clownish' clothes they are offered and smash up their newly disinfected cells. The riot police are called in and the reprisals are harrowing. The aggressive noise of batons whacking plastic shields is palpable, and one baton hits its target – again and again and again. It is too much for one young policeman who cries behind a wall at the brutality that his colleagues are inflicting on fellow human beings.

Sands, played by Michael Fassbender, then appears for the first time, being forcibly washed and having his hair cut. He spits on a prison officer, who punches him in the head. To stress that he is no passive Christ-figure, we see him fighting and flailing like a wild animal as the warders bundle him into a bath and scrub him down with a yard brush. This part climaxes with a hideous scene of the same prison officer being shot while visiting his senile mother in a care home and the blood spattering all over her face. Sands later informs a priest, who notices the

bruises and asks him how the other fellow is, that he's a lot worse. The implication seems to be that Sands knew about the killing and may even have ordered it. Was this meant to indicate that this is the sort of vindictive behaviour that Sands and his IRA mates were up to on the outside? Or was it that the guard deserved it? It's impossible to tell.

So we enter the second part of the film, a 22-minute moral dialectic in which Sands debates with a priest the rights and wrongs of the hunger strike he is about to start. This turns out to be a tedious string of clichés. Sands argues that the only weapon political prisoners possess is their own bodies, while the priest, a kind of Father Faul figure, maintains that his motive is pride, a desire to have his name in the history books, and that to starve oneself is a form of suicide. It is really all rather pointless, as Sands has already made up his mind.

He recounts an incident from childhood when, on a school cross country run, he drowns a badly injured foal, even though he knew he would be punished, because he believed it was the right thing to do and the other kids would agree, an obvious parallel to his own starvation and leadership of others into the same death. Except that it is a lousy metaphor for collective suicide.

In the final part we watch as Sands's shrinking body, infested with sores, wastes away. The director may protest that he is not making Sands into a martyr, yet he approaches hagiography in depicting a male nurse, with 'UDA' tattooed on his fingers, carrying Sands's emaciated body to his bed in a manner suggestive of Michelangelo's *Pieta*. Like many earlier moments where naked male bodies are depicted in extremes of pain, there is more than a hint of homoeroticism, a sado-masochistic glorification of pain and suffering, which pushes *Hunger* in the direction of a torture porn movie. The inevitable comparison is with Mel Gibson's *The Passion*, especially as we know that in his poetry Sands did compare himself to Jesus, walking 'the lonely road like that of Calvary' and taking the 'cross of Irishmen who've carried liberty'.

What was the director trying to achieve with this film? I find it impossible to answer this question. On the surface, it avoids politics, but it would be futile to deny its underlying sympathy with the republican cause. Both Sands and the priest see the Brits as the problem and quarrel only over the means of removing them. The 'elephant' in the room is actually the non-Catholic population of Northern Ireland, who are represented by nameless and mostly brutal prison officers. They are an integral part of the quarrel, but here they are not granted even the dignity of individuality. The political focus is simply the brutality of the imperial Brits (or Yanks – think Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo).

Contextualising the events in *Hunger*, the IRA inflicted more suffering than they endured and did not achieve political status until they stopped killing people. In his book *Gunsmoke and Mirrors*, Henry McDonald argues that the IRA were defeated both militarily and politically and that their 'war' actually solidified partition. They have settled merely for 'Catholic equality'.

Hunger has aspirations to be an art film in the European tradition. One glowing review suggested that it plays to the strength of cinema, which is the visual image, but aesthetic satisfaction is only the beginning of appreciation. The greatest art, in any form, tries to say something about the human condition, to offer us insights or criticisms, a moral dimension, an engagement with people and their lives, a vision of something better.

The French magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma* recently published a list of 100 best films. Not one British movie featured, and *Hunger* tells us why. Like most British films, it is depressing and gloomy and lacks a coherent narrative and a clear ethical perspective. If it is simply saying that prison is hell, then what's new? Aesthetics divested of engagement with intellect or emotion is empty, exactly like this overwrought and grossly overrated film. **BMcC**
