

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Rajesh Punj, 'Steve McQueen', *African AH*, June 6, 2014



McQueen's greatest strengths lie in his sequential short-films that have his audience shifting the visual pieces left and right, in order the film begins to make sense; and in those precious moments when his playful props run their course, his spectators are lost in this magical stretch of limbo, where ideas and animation supersede logic and order; which is where McQueen holds his own.

Rajesh Punj analyses the work of Steve McQueen.



Deadpan, 16mm black and white film, transferred to video, no sound. 4:35 mins, 1997. Image courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery.

The work of Steve McQueen

Return to the Real

Steve McQueen is regarded as a leading light among his contemporaries; a film-maker of much repute. Yet his original interests were more art related; employing simple aesthetics, with a preoccupation for elemental movement and motion, McQueen disseminated his ideas through art and film-making. Principally focusing on subtle actions, bodies in light and figures rooted in darkness; he would eventually declare *greater possibilities* in film. The storm of interest surrounding his landmark films *Hunger* 2008, and more recently *Shame* 2011, is far removed from McQueen's original appetite for visual intimacy and his intellectual prowess with the camera in the early days. It could well be argued that his unflinching interest in art and aesthetics had a very distinct and profound influence upon his major works, and it requires of his new audiences a willingness to return to the beginning of his career to understand that for McQueen it was always about *less being profoundly more*.

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‘The best dialogue is very, very thin dialogue; when you let people improvise and then basically you record what they’ve improvised and then write it down.’ (Let’s Get Physical, Steve McQueen interviewed by Patricia Bickers, Art Monthly, December 1996)

Taking Aim

‘People in this city, often have to shoot, in self-defence, with a real gun. I shot my films diaries also out of self-defence. Out of self-defence, to protect myself from being crushed by the bleakness of the reality around me, defending myself against the attacks on all my senses, on my whole being, Yes, I film in self-defence. And you can look at my personal journals too in order to try and correct the city, the land, by emphasising certain aspects and getting rid of others.’ (Jonas Mekas, Films immobiles, une celebration, ex, cat., Galerie du Jour-Agnès B, Paris, February – March 1996) Mekas describes a city under seize, and he is a man *taking aim* inspite of his beleaguered circumstances; making for a body of work that is truly animated for his heightened sensitivity. Given to considering British film-maker Steve McQueen, the Lithuanian film-maker Jonas Mekas appears like a father-figure for the younger protégé, for their collected ambition *to deliver the spoils of life* on screen.

It is impossible not to digress when given to discussing the British film-maker Steve McQueen, besides the American film icon Steve McQueen, of ‘Bullitt’ fame, one is also inclined to think of the late British fashion designer Alexander McQueen; and such idol parenthesis leaves McQueen in good company when deliberating over his visual contribution, everything points to his own vanguard position among his contemporaries.

Principally an artist spellbound by film, McQueen had from the beginning a steely determination to define his own destiny. Studying art at Goldsmiths College, East London before going onto film-school in the US, McQueen substituted painting for filmmaking, and immediately employed a visual maturity for his first film-shorts. Given film had quite a substantial history, when not applying himself to making films, McQueen indulged in watching international pictures that purposely redefined genres, movements, and their lead actors, as the substance for his forward film aesthetic. For McQueen, during his time at Goldsmiths, it was clear there were far greater possibilities with film that just weren’t easily apparent in painting. ‘I already knew that I wanted to be involved in film-making. It was the whole idea of working with people that was interesting; also the fact that film moves – physically as well as emotionally. It was much more dynamic than other art forms. (Let’s Get Physical, Steve McQueen interviewed by Patricia Bickers, Art Monthly, December 96 – January 97)

Film was McQueen’s blueprint for *setting things in motion*, and when given to exploring some of those initial college films, that appear grounded in quite simple relationships between improvised movement and little dialogue. In which he either filmed himself up-close or he invited a cast of two or three others who were given licence to react. McQueen intentionally saw in those early films an opportunity for visual altercations to manifest themselves, as a set of actions that should be allowed to happen rather than organised by design. That art historically go back to the 1950’s and 60’s and the era of the performance, employed by the likes of Joseph Beuys, Allan Kaprow and Andy Warhol Specifically it was Warhol who

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surreptitiously filmed a man sleeping at his studio in 1963; and it is this kind of idol animation that McQueen cavorts with in his contemporary films, *Hunger* 2008 and *Shame* 2011.

As a film-marker, McQueen has been described as a master formalist, 'As demonstrated in his Turner Prize-winning days, he is a master formalist, (Deadpan, the 1999 Turner winning short, is a black and white Buster Keaton homage constructed from stately locked on camera shots). And *Hunger* was littered with stylish visual coups, including one strangely beguiling shot of a prison corridor slowly filling with urine. *Shame* too had many of startling moments, none more so than an epic tracking shot through the streets of New York that follows Brandon on a late-night jog.' (Kevin Maher, 'An Actor should give everything to a role. Otherwise, I say, get out!', *The Times*, Saturday December 24, 2011)

These stretches of inconsequential time sit on celluloid like colossal weights that grind the film to a halt, and it is where McQueen concentrates heavily on minimal exchanges and actions that turn each of his films from sequential plot and story into something more akin to art. For McQueen the adversity of life and death become the intrinsic substance that envelopes everything else present. Like sound tearing into silence, those intrinsic moments of idol nothingness are themselves the make-up for what has already occurred or is very eminent. Just as German photograph Thomas Demand does with his cardboard model scenes of the forensic after effect of a specific location irreconcilably affected by a *happening*, McQueen concentrates on the simple details of a tragedy, in order to find moments of beauty in despair.



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Top: *Five Easy Pieces*, 16mm black and white and colour film, transferred to video, no sound. 7:34 mins, 1995.

Bottom: *Carib's Leap*, super 8mm colour film, transferred to video, sound, 28:53 mins, 2002. Images courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery

In the beginning McQueen considered his short-films as installations and not projected as straight film. Given their changeable scale and motion, he saw his silent sketches deserving of as much concentration as any art object. 'Projecting the film onto the back wall of the gallery space so that it completely fills it from wall ceiling to floor, and from side to side, gives it this kind of blanket effect. (Let's Get Physical, Steve McQueen interviewed by Patricia Bickers, Art Monthly, December 1996 – January 1997) Those early shorts began without sound as McQueen concentrated on the elemental actions. 'The whole idea of making it a silent experience is so that when people walk into the space they become very much aware of themselves, of their own breathing.' (Let's Get Physical, Steve McQueen interviewed by Patricia Bickers, Art Monthly, December 1996 – January 1997) *Bear* (1993) black-and-white short shows two naked black men contoured and entangled in an on-going physical encounter.

That for its simplicity moves between stereotypes of physical aggression and more abstracted tender sensations of brutal eroticism. *Five Easy Pieces* (1995), has McQueen urinating onto the camera, which falls onto the screen and into the audience's viewing lens. *Five Easy Pieces* includes sequences of a tight-rope walker and a concrete landscape of five hula hooping boys gyrating on the spot that make for an absorbing tension between what is above and what is cast below. *Stage* (1996), a two minute film loop, of a white woman and black man, each appearing to desire the other, yet physically divided by McQueen's split screens. In those early films McQueen's artistic strength lies in the thin dialogue and in the opportunity for his protagonists to improvise, and for those acts on invention to be recorded as legitimate sequences. *Just Above my Head* (1996), a nine-and-a-half minute thread of the artists walking under an overcast sky is characteristic of much of McQueen's early work. Here the simplicity is quite startling as the filmmaker's head comes in and out of shot and the sequence culminates in his head being framed by an overhanging tree. *Catch* (1997), *Deadpan* (1997), for which McQueen was championed as a Turner Prize winner, and *Drumroll* (1998) were another series of McQueen short-films that are black-and-white films transferred to video and projected onto the back wall of a specially constructed room within the gallery space.

'It is for this reason that 'McQueen' shuns anything that smacks of the grand narrative, preferring instead, to search out the tiny nuances and glosses, the visual bits and pieces which taken together constitute the micro-narrative: the collective visual minutia which makes for what Paul Virilio has christened the 'Cinema of Fragments'. (Steve McQueen, Portikus Frankfurt am-Main, Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 1997, Jon Thompson) McQueen's visual deliberations amount to a film-maker choosing microscopic grit over grandiose scale and being deliberately preoccupied with the elemental energies that draw all reality together. Beginning as he does in his early films with his sensitivity for unchoreographed actions and altered perspectives.

McQueen's 2002 diptych *Carib's Leap/Western Deep* is an installation of two impressively poignant films that run in sequence. These dark animated fables attempt to address something of the history and circumstance of the island of Grenada, where McQueen's parents are from,

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and South Africa. Of the two screenings, *Carib's Leap* has a greater visceral aura about it, as it opens to a shot of dogs and goats roaming the beach front. In it human activity punctuates threads of silence, as the idle energy of man and beast are played out on film. For McQueen such inconsequence is overshadowed by the historical circumstance of this particular location. From the most northern point of the island of Grenada, at the fishing town of *Sauteurs*, overlooking the bay of *Sauteurs*, from a 40 foot tall cliff edge, mass numbers of native Carib's committed suicide as a protect against the French occupation of the island in 1651. For McQueen such political dynamite is referenced in the incongruous faint detail of a man falling through the sky. As time and tide appears to have ravished this island of all of its free will. The squalor, mixed with scenes of serene beauty, make *Carib's Leap* a haunting testament to the era of slavery and the colonial ills sweeping across the world, and it is testament to McQueen maturing ability that this film appears to draw on his early principles for simple emotive actions that demonstrate much more than they suggest.

In this washed out film, McQueen falling figure speaks volumes for the historical catastrophe that took place at the edge of this fishing town, centuries previously. Upon completion, the auditorium becomes utterly black, an impossible place to breathe, and McQueen's second film, *Western Leap* 2002, shatters the ubiquitous silence. *Western Leap* throws its audience down a lift-shaft, (where previously McQueen allows his audience to watch a symbolic act of suicide, here they are forced to experience the sensation of free-falling by following the camera drop into the depths of a South African goldmine. As the intensity of the noise increases, so the audience follow the miners to the depths of the earth, and the deepest point of the mine.

'Western Deep, like so many of McQueen's previous works, is concerned with the surfaces and textures and weight of things, not just what light and shadow reveal, but what light and shadow are in film, and what mysterious things happen when that light fails, or what happens when film, in this case hand-held super 8 – tries to record what is at the limit of its physical, photochemical capacity to record.' (Adrian Searle, Into the Unknown, The Guardian, Tuesday, October 8, 2002) As a beguiling endeavour on the part of the film-maker, to take his audience to ground zero, McQueen's film becomes utterly absorbing for the sheer impossibility of our being access to the underbelly of earth; witnessing a cohort of black miners collectively tearing into the rock for a glimpse of gold. *Western Deep* proves to be an extraordinary film, in which McQueen concentrates on the unforgiving circumstances of a South African gold-mining company that runs in much the same manner under apartheid as it does now. Its miners appear depleted in numbers and deprived of the basic elemental requirements of any human being. Where political injustice eliminates the idyllic innocence of *Carib's Leap*, *Western Deep* is framed by the depravity of mining companies exploiting young men in South Africa. A world away from the lives of ordinary people on the surface, McQueen's men enter this bird's cage daily for long stretches of time, in order to scavenge for small pieces of gold mineral for an even smaller salary. 'This is extraordinary, almost inexplicable footage' referring to *Western Deep*, 'Some of the workers flail about, barely able to stand, let alone step up and step down, one foot after the other, on the rows of low metal benches.' (Adrian Seale, Into the Unknown, The Guardian, Tuesday 8 October, 2002)

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As such McQueen's pivotal sequences become the central building blocks that lead one from his 1997 film *Deadpan* to his cinematic masterpiece, *Hunger* (2008). Entrenched within the material of the film, McQueen invited the lead protagonists Bobby Sands, (Michael Fassbender), and Father Moran, (Liam Cunningham), to shoot a seventeen and a half minute scene of both men sitting either side of a prison table engaging in a long and deliberate conversation. It would prove to be Sands last civilised act before his sixty-six hour fast that would ultimately lead to his death and that of some of his fledging contemporaries. That specific sequence in a boarder sense, recalls the work of American Andy Warhol and his real-time 1963 film *Sleep* for the manner in which McQueen managed to encapsulate something of the heavy burden of something simple under extenuating circumstances. The heavy breathing of a man stretched out on an unmade bed beneath the Empire State building is laboured over in black and white for five hours and twenty minutes by Warhol as McQueen does like with this conversation between these very different men. Unlike Warhol's playful artistry, McQueen uses the weight and steeliness of real time to explore a pivotal the relationship of the two men that shapes the rest of the film.

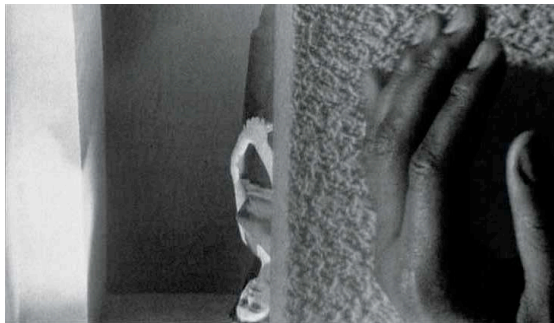
Significantly for McQueen it isn't the anger or the political fight that leads this film, *Hunger* is propelled as a masterpiece by such simply sequences that appear to stretch his films into forensic anti-matter.

It is the central axis of McQueen's work then that he appears to approach everything as an artist, images for McQueen are less incident and action, as his figures are defined one by another within choreographed boundaries of space and recorded for film; and time as it stands is reflected in the routine of violence and love, as they punctuate his later films. Whether it is a scene of two men procrastinating over political affiliations in *Hunger* 2008, or the repetitive energies of a scene from Buster Keaton's silent 1928 film, *Steamboat Bill*, in McQueen's short black and white *Deadpan*, 1997, there is a sense that McQueen is exploring something for himself; from the relationships we have with one another within the spaces we are given to the time we occupy those spaces. Everything else, McQueen might declare is the dressing on the doll, as principally McQueen describes himself as a facilitator much less a director. 'McQueen flinches at the mere mention of visual style, and insists, 'I never put my stencil on a subject. The subject has to tell me what it needs, and I do my best to translate (facilitate), that. It's all about story, story, story.' 'As an actor you should give everything to the role, really, you could be knocked down by a busy tomorrow, and the only thing we'll be left with is this performance ; so let's do it right now. Otherwise, get out!' (Kevin Maher, An Actor should give everything to a role. Otherwise, I say, get out!' The Conversation, The Times, Saturday Review, December 24, 2001)

Go back to McQueen and those tentative associations to his name sakes', and as if by chance one of his more poignant early film works is entitled, *7th November*, which is a short film dedicated to a heinous act that his cousin Marcus had been responsible for many years earlier. *7th November* is a twenty-four minute slide projection that rhythmically cracks to the sound of each slide popping in and out of the caracal. Each image appears as the same, a young man, shaved, scarred and nervously energized by a steady thread of adrenalin that propels his story, of heart-break and irreprehensible damage, into our individual psyche. It can almost be seen as an edited confessional, in which he divulges to the unintentional shooting of his younger

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brother, and the act and their consequences, are the blueprint for this monologue that runs the length of the action, the minute by minute account of what happens all those years ago, between Marcus and his innocent brother. ‘Vivid in the telling, his heartbreaking tale bears the hallmark of a born storyteller. This work pairs virtuoso verbal skills with images of imposing physicality.’ (Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, *Flesh Becomes Words*, Frieze, September 2008) The date of McQueen’s monologue is also significant to the life of American actor Steve McQueen, who died on the 7th November in 1980. McQueen’s twenty-four minute film was, as he describes, a cathartic act for which is allowed his cousin the license to speak independently in front of the camera, without prompting or policing of any kind, and it is a tribute to the ‘accidental’ act of violence that defines this man for the rest of his life. When asked about the planning of the piece, McQueen explained something of the liberty at play when recording it, ‘I just let it happen, it was a situation where all he (Marcus), needed was the frame. I just had to put him in a situation where I could record the story. I didn’t know how long it would last – it lasted as long as it needed to last, which was about twenty four minutes I think. He (Marcus), has a way of speaking whereby he can go on and on with descriptions.’ (Steve McQueen, Marian Goodman Gallery)



Top: *Stage*, 35mm black and white film, transferred to video, no sound, 6 mins, 1996.

Bottom: *Carib’s Leap*, super 8mm colour film, transferred to video, sound, 28:53 mins, 2002.

Images courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery

For McQueen, documentary filmmaker Jean Rouch is influential; principally the notion of our attention being drawn to the incidental, and Rouch developed a free-flowing relationship among the participants of a film, those in front and those behind the camera. For Rouch the

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reciprocal action manifest itself in *feedback* and *collaboration*. As if those invited to stand in front of the camera had as much authority as those seated behind the camera. The relationship was defined as a 'cooperative act', saying that 'one of the things he (Rouch) developed, injected into the economy of the people he worked with, was the sense of them being co-authors. (Steve McQueen, Marian Goodman Gallery)

Equipped with Rouch's stylistic licence and punctuated by a series of remarkable images, McQueen's *Hunger* 2008 resonates like a cartridge of magnum photographs distilling the troubles in Ireland in the 70's and early 1980's as they are experienced from within the Maze prisons. As background, convicted paramilitary prisoners were treated as ordinary criminals until 1972. Significantly as part of a policy of 'criminalisation, the British Government brought an end to 'Special Category Status' for paramilitary prisoners in Northern Ireland. The end of special category status was regarded as turning point in the relationship between prisoners and prison- officers and as relations deteriorated beyond reproach, in 1976 the IRA began a series of assassinations on a number of prison officers in an act of political defiance and in September of that year newly convicted prisoner Kieran Nugent began the 'blanket protest; during which time IRA and INLA prisoners refused to wear prison uniform and either went naked or crudely cut garments from prison blankets. As a consequence prisoners were beaten indiscriminately, and in March 1978, the 'dirty protest' marked the beginning of a new phase in the stand-off between prisoners and prison-officers. The claustrophobia experienced by the audience of the shit-smear cells in *Hunger*, recalls something of McQueen's 2004 work *Western Deep* in which he employed a series of remarkable techniques to challenge the audience to feel something of the circumstance of men driven to the underbelly of the earth in search of gold. The free-fall of the camera through shades of light and dark, lead McQueen's audience to the base of the world, where men rip at the earth until there is nothing left.

The prisoners refused to leave their cells to wash or use the lavatory because of escalation of violence. The 'blanket protest' escalated into the 'dirty protest', as prisoners resorted to smearing excrement on the walls of their cells. When the European Commission of Human Rights rejected a case of four of those prisoners that the cells had become inhuman, the prisoners turned to hunger strikes and marked a turning point in these morose protests. In late 1980 IRA and INLA prisoners began a hunger strike in order to secure their 'five demands', and this is where McQueen's film becomes embroiled in the conflicting drama that has politics interpreted in macabre acts of depravity. The 1981 hunger strike was lead by Bobby Sands, who refused food for sixty-six days, which lead to the deaths of ten men, including Sands, from starvation. 'McQueen, who brings to the project an artist's unhurried eye and an exacting technique, constructs a movie that is almost entirely image-driven.' (Terrible Beauty, Artforum, January 2009, Brain O'Doherty)

A lot of McQueen's early techniques are employed in his longer feature films; his unyielding eye and the aesthetic that shapes each scene, is employed here and is evident in his early films, as they demonstrates the filmmaker's ambition to liberate the camera of its prescribed locations in order to act more impulsively. French philosopher Gilles Deleuze described it as 'a camera-conscious' approach, that as is seen in McQueen's work, is no longer defined by the movements it is able to follow or make, but by the mental connections it is able to enter into.

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Then in 2011, McQueen reintroduces his intellectual muse, Michael Fassbender as a sex-addict in *Shame*. Dealing in the torture of unlimited sexual fulfilment that is never gratifying enough, the lead character's frustration on screen is exacerbated by the methodical intensity of the film, as though the audience returns to the lift-shaft that takes them back to the place of his 2002 film, *Western Deep*. As heightened anticipation goes, *Shame* reads like Bret Easton Ellis' 2000 book *American Psycho*, but without such violence. Yet McQueen makes little serious attempt to explain his protagonist, as if such details could only dilute and even domesticate the angst ridden experience of Brandon Sullivan, the lead character. For McQueen, without apology, certain details take precedence over others, and the routine camouflage of reality, (Sullivan's job, his obligations), are removed entirely from the film, as though we enter into this world, a spectator, or casual acquaintance of Sullivan, feeling our way through this minefield. McQueen described the film *Shame* 'as a kind of universal acknowledgment of shame or of being good or bad'. For this artist/film-maker his work has always been driven by a need to allow things to occur, to act as facilitator and not director, as he reiterated recently in a press interview. 'I just do stuff; I don't even see myself as a director. I'll be honest, this title or whatever, I don't know what that is – it's too dictatorial. I'm a facilitator.' (Culture, The Sunday Times, Nev Pierce) *Shame* moves McQueen closer to his original ambition for 'People in this city, often have to shoot, in self-defence, with a real gun. I shot my films diaries also out of self-defence. Out of self-defence, to protect myself from being crushed by the bleakness of the reality around me, defending myself against the attacks on all my senses, on my whole being, Yes, I film in self-defence. And you can look at my personal journals too in order to try and correct the city, the land, by emphasising certain aspects and getting rid of others.' (Jonas Mekas, Films immobiles, une celebration, ex, cat., Galerie du Jour-Agnès B, Paris, February – March 1996) Mekas describes a city under seize, and he is a man *taking aim* in spite of his beleaguered circumstances; making for a body of work that is truly animated for his heightened sensitivity. Given to considering British film-maker Steve McQueen, the Lithuanian film-maker Jonas Mekas appears like a father-figure for the younger protégé, for their collected ambition *to deliver the spoils of life* on screen.

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down a lift-shaft, (where previously McQueen allows his audience to watch a symbolic act of suicide, here they are forced to experience the sensation of free-falling by following the camera drop into the depths of a South African goldmine. As the intensity of the noise increases, so the audience follow the miners to the depths of the earth, and the deepest point of the mine.

‘Western Deep, like so many of McQueen’s previous works, is concerned with the surfaces and textures and weight of things, not just what light and shadow reveal, but what light and shadow are in film, and what mysterious things happen when that light fails, or what happens when film, in this case hand-held super 8 – tries to record what is at the limit of its physical, photochemical capacity to record.’ (Adrian Searle, Into the Unknown, The Guardian, Tuesday, October 8, 2002) As a beguiling endeavour on the part of the film-maker, to take his audience to ground zero, McQueen’s film becomes utterly absorbing for the sheer impossibility of our being access to the underbelly of earth; witnessing a cohort of black miners collectively tearing into the rock for a glimpse of gold. *Western Deep* proves to be an extraordinary film, in which McQueen concentrates on the unforgiving circumstances of a South African gold-mining company that runs in much the same manner under apartheid as it does now. Its miners appear depleted in numbers and deprived of the basic elemental requirements of any human being. Where political injustice eliminates the idyllic innocence of *Carib’s Leap*, *Western Deep* is framed by the depravity of mining companies exploiting young men in South Africa. A world away from the lives of ordinary people on the surface, McQueen’s men enter this bird’s cage daily for long stretches of time, in order to scavenge for small pieces of gold mineral for an even smaller salary. ‘This is extraordinary, almost inexplicable footage’ referring to *Western Deep*, ‘Some of the workers flail about, barely able to stand, let alone step up and step down, one foot after the other, on the rows of low metal benches.’ (Adrian Seale, Into the Unknown, The Guardian, Tuesday 8 October, 2002)

As such McQueen’s pivotal sequences become the central building blocks that lead one from his 1997 film *Deadpan* to his cinematic masterpiece, *Hunger* (2008). Entrenched within the material of the film, McQueen invited the lead protagonists Bobby Sands, (Michael Fassbender), and Father Moran, (Liam Cunningham), to shoot a seventeen and a half minute scene of both men sitting either side of a prison table engaging in a long and deliberate conversation. It would prove to be Sands last civilised act before his sixty-six hour fast that would ultimately lead to his death and that of some of his fledging contemporaries. That specific sequence in a boarder sense, recalls the work of American Andy Warhol and his real-time 1963 film *Sleep* for the manner in which McQueen managed to encapsulate something of the heavy burden of something simple under extenuating circumstances. The heavy breathing of a man stretched out on an unmade bed beneath the Empire State building is laboured over in black and white for five hours and twenty minutes by Warhol as McQueen does like with this conversation between these very different men. Unlike Warhol’s playful artistry, McQueen uses the weight and steeliness of real time to explore a pivotal the relationship of the two men that shapes the rest of the film.

Significantly for McQueen it isn’t the anger or the political fight that leads this film, *Hunger* is propelled as a masterpiece by such simply sequences that appear to stretch his films into forensic anti-matter.

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It is the central axis of McQueen's work then that he appears to approach everything as an artist, images for McQueen are less incident and action, as his figures are defined one by another within choreographed boundaries of space and recorded for film; and time as it stands is reflected in the routine of violence and love, as they punctuate his later films. Whether it is a scene of two men procrastinating over political affiliations in *Hunger* 2008, or the repetitive energies of a scene from Buster Keaton's silent 1928 film, *Steamboat Bill*, in McQueen's short black and white *Deadpan*, 1997, there is a sense that McQueen is exploring something for himself; from the relationships we have with one another within the spaces we are given to the time we occupy those spaces. Everything else, McQueen might declare is the dressing on the doll, as principally McQueen describes himself as a facilitator much less a director. 'McQueen flinches at the mere mention of visual style, and insists, 'I never put my stencil on a subject. The subject has to tell me what it needs, and I do my best to translate (facilitate), that. It's all about story, story, story.' 'As an actor you should give everything to the role, really, you could be knocked down by a busy tomorrow, and the only thing we'll be left with is this performance ; so let's do it right now. Otherwise, get out!' (Kevin Maher, An Actor should give everything to a role. Otherwise, I say, get out!' The Conversation, The Times, Saturday Review, December 24, 2001)

Go back to McQueen and those tentative associations to his name sakes', and as if by chance one of his more poignant early film works is entitled, *7th November*, which is a short film dedicated to a heinous act that his cousin Marcus had been responsible for many years earlier. *7th November* is a twenty-four minute slide projection that rhythmically cracks to the sound of each slide popping in and out of the caracal. Each image appears as the same, a young man, shaved, scarred and nervously energized by a steady thread of adrenalin that propels his story, of heart-break and irreprehensible damage, into our individual psyche. It can almost be seen as an edited confessional, in which he divulges to the unintentional shooting of his younger brother, and the act and their consequences, are the blueprint for this monologue that runs the length of the action, the minute by minute account of what happens all those years ago, between Marcus and his innocent brother. 'Vivid in the telling, his heartbreaking tale bears the hallmark of a born storyteller. This work pairs virtuoso verbal skills with images of imposing physicality.' (Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, *Flesh Becomes Words*, Frieze, September 2008) The date of McQueen's monologue is also significant to the life of American actor Steve McQueen, who died on the 7th November in 1980. McQueen's twenty-four minute film was, as he describes, a cathartic act for which is allowed his cousin the license to speak independently in front of the camera, without prompting or policing of any kind, and it is a tribute to the 'accidental' act of violence that defines this man for the rest of his life. When asked about the planning of the piece, McQueen explained something of the liberty at play when recording it, 'I just let it happen, it was a situation where all he (Marcus), needed was the frame. I just had to put him in a situation where I could record the story. I didn't know how long it would last – it lasted as long as it needed to last, which was about twenty four minutes I think. He (Marcus), has a way of speaking whereby he can go on and on with descriptions.' (Steve McQueen, Marian Goodman Gallery)

For McQueen, documentary filmmaker Jean Rouch is influential; principally the notion of our attention being drawn to the incidental, and Rouch developed a free-flowing relationship among the participants of a film, those in front and those behind the camera. For Rouch the

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reciprocal action manifest itself in *feedback* and *collaboration*. As if those invited to stand in front of the camera had as much authority as those seated behind the camera. The relationship was defined as a 'cooperative act', saying that 'one of the things he (Rouch) developed, injected into the economy of the people he worked with, was the sense of them being co-authors. (Steve McQueen, Marian Goodman Gallery)

Equipped with Rouch's stylistic licence and punctuated by a series of remarkable images, McQueen's *Hunger* 2008 resonates like a cartridge of magnum photographs distilling the troubles in Ireland in the 70's and early 1980's as they are experienced from within the Maze prisons. As background, convicted paramilitary prisoners were treated as ordinary criminals until 1972. Significantly as part of a policy of 'criminalisation, the British Government brought an end to 'Special Category Status' for paramilitary prisoners in Northern Ireland. The end of special category status was regarded as turning point in the relationship between prisoners and prison- officers and as relations deteriorated beyond reproach, in 1976 the IRA began a series of assassinations on a number of prison officers in an act of political defiance and in September of that year newly convicted prisoner Kieran Nugent began the 'blanket protest; during which time IRA and INLA prisoners refused to wear prison uniform and either went naked or crudely cut garments from prison blankets. As a consequence prisoners were beaten indiscriminately, and in March 1978, the 'dirty protest' marked the beginning of a new phase in the stand-off between prisoners and prison-officers. The claustrophobia experienced by the audience of the shit-smear cells in *Hunger*, recalls something of McQueen's 2004 work *Western Deep* in which he employed a series of remarkable techniques to challenge the audience to feel something of the circumstance of men driven to the underbelly of the earth in search of gold. The free-fall of the camera through shades of light and dark, lead McQueen's audience to the base of the world, where men rip at the earth until there is nothing left.

The prisoners refused to leave their cells to wash or use the lavatory because of escalation of violence. The 'blanket protest' escalated into the 'dirty protest', as prisoners resorted to smearing excrement on the walls of their cells. When the European Commission of Human Rights rejected a case of four of those prisoners that the cells had become inhuman, the prisoners turned to hunger strikes and marked a turning point in these morose protests. In late 1980 IRA and INLA prisoners began a hunger strike in order to secure their 'five demands', and this is where McQueen's film becomes embroiled in the conflicting drama that has politics interpreted in macabre acts of depravity. The 1981 hunger strike was lead by Bobby Sands, who refused food for sixty-six days, which lead to the deaths of ten men, including Sands, from starvation. 'McQueen, who brings to the project an artist's unhurried eye and an exacting technique, constructs a movie that is almost entirely image-driven.' (Terrible Beauty, Artforum, January 2009, Brain O'Doherty)

A lot of McQueen's early techniques are employed in his longer feature films; his unyielding eye and the aesthetic that shapes each scene, is employed here and is evident in his early films, as they demonstrates the filmmaker's ambition to liberate the camera of its prescribed locations in order to act more impulsively. French philosopher Gilles Deleuze described it as 'a camera-conscious' approach, that as is seen in McQueen's work, is no longer defined by the movements it is able to follow or make, but by the mental connections it is able to enter into.

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Then in 2011, McQueen reintroduces his intellectual muse, Michael Fassbender as a sex-addict in *Shame*. Dealing in the torture of unlimited sexual fulfilment that is never gratifying enough, the lead character's frustration on screen is exacerbated by the methodical intensity of the film, as though the audience returns to the lift-shaft that takes them back to the place of his 2002 film, *Western Deep*. As heightened anticipation goes, *Shame* reads like Bret Easton Ellis' 2000 book *American Psycho*, but without such violence. Yet McQueen makes little serious attempt to explain his protagonist, as if such details could only dilute and even domesticate the angst ridden experience of Brandon Sullivan, the lead character. For McQueen, without apology, certain details take precedence over others, and the routine camouflage of reality, (Sullivan's job, his obligations), are removed entirely from the film, as though we enter into this world, a spectator, or casual acquaintance of Sullivan, feeling our way through this minefield. McQueen described the film *Shame* 'as a kind of universal acknowledgment of shame or of being good or bad'. For this artist/film-maker his work has always been driven by a need to allow things to occur, to act as facilitator and not director, as he reiterated recently in a press interview. 'I just do stuff; I don't even see myself as a director. I'll be honest, this title or whatever, I don't know what that is – it's too dictatorial. I'm a facilitator.' (Culture, The Sunday Times, Nev Pierce) *Shame* moves McQueen closer to his original ambition for a new visual language that has his camera lens act as a third eye, and imbued within that is a heightened awareness of our more visceral vulnerabilities. Where *Hunger* deals with the depravity of human suffering enmeshed in a blasphemous power struggle that saturates life from limb. *Shame* is about one man's private and more dignified torment for recognition through sexual gratification, and as complex as these profundities are, for McQueen everything returns to his visual manipulation of a story, and the possibility of classifying a situation through a new set of new visual apparatus.

McQueen's greatest strengths lie in his sequential short-films that have his audience shifting the visual pieces left and right, in order the film begins to make sense; and in those precious moments when his playful props run their course, his spectators are lost in this magical stretch of limbo, where ideas and animation supersede logic and order; which is where McQueen holds his own. Begin at the beginning and you eventually arrive at McQueen's major works; like an emotional epiphany.

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