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'Steve McQueen on the Oscars whitewash: 'I'm hoping we can look back and say this was a watershed moment'



📷 Steve McQueen: 'Decisions being made by heads of studios, TV companies and cable companies about what is and is not being made. That is the root of the problem'
Photograph: Armando Gallo/Corbis

The only black director to win best picture says change has to happen now. He talks about Hollywood apartheid, being written off as a young black teenager, and his friendship with Kanye West

"This is exactly like MTV was in the 1980s," says Steve McQueen. "Could you imagine now if MTV only showed music videos by a majority of white people, then after 11 o'clock it showed a majority of black people? Could you imagine that's happening now? It's the same situation happening in the movies."

McQueen doesn't have a film to promote, he can't yet talk about his forthcoming projects for HBO or the BBC. He just wants to talk about the Oscar Problem: the fact that not a single non-white actor has been nominated at this year's Academy Awards, for the second year running. Spike Lee has declined to attend this year's ceremony, and since then the retributions, condemnations and the #OscarsSoWhite hashtag have turned into an unprecedented crisis for cinema's most prestigious awards. Civil rights activist Al Sharpton put it concisely: "Hollywood is like the Rocky

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Mountains: the higher up you get, the whiter it gets.” Snoop Dogg was more blunt: “Fuck that old slavery bullshit-ass award show.” At the time of writing, a backlash to the backlash is also underway: best actress nominee Charlotte Rampling feels the call for proper representation from the Academy is “racist to whites”. As the only black director to have ever won a best picture Oscar, McQueen feels a responsibility to speak up.

“Hopefully, when people look back at this in 20 years, it’ll be like seeing that David Bowie clip in 1983.” He is referring to a clip that has been widely circulated online since Bowie’s death, in which the singer politely assails his interviewer about MTV’s under- representation of black artists. “I don’t even want to wait 20 years,” McQueen continues. “Forgive me; I’m hoping in 12 months or so we can look back and say this was a watershed moment, and thank God we put that right.”

It’s familiar territory for the artist and filmmaker. In 2013, when *12 Years a Slave* was in its awards-season limelight, *The Hollywood Reporter* put together a roundtable discussion featuring McQueen and six other (white, male) directors in the Oscar running that year, including Alexander Payne, Jason Reitman and Bennett “Moneyball” Miller. It is pretty excruciating. Particularly when the host asks, Alan Partridge- style: “You’re all men. Only one of you, Steve, is a minority. Why is that?” McQueen replies with an impassioned attack on Hollywood’s lack of diversity. “It’s shameful, it’s unbelievable. It’s bizarre!” When he has finished, the interviewer asks: “Anybody want to explain, take that on?” There’s an awkward pause. Then Reitman says: “I’m not stepping into that.” As if McQueen has just shat on the carpet – which, metaphorically speaking, you could say he has.

“You are in it!” he exclaims, recalling Reitman’s comment. “You are in it! Are you living in a different world from everyone else? I don’t think this is a “black” issue. I think this is our issue. If people want to categorise it as a black issue, that’s weird. Just like if I was talking about women in film. It’s my issue, too. It’s our issue. It’s about ‘we’.” He spells it out: “W.E; not M.E.”



📷 McQueen with Chiwetel Ejiofor during the filming of *12 Years a Slave*. Photograph: Jaap Buitendijk/AP



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Since the furore arose two weeks ago, the Academy has issued a series of apologies and pledges of reform, but McQueen essentially agrees with Lee's comments that the Academy Awards is "not where the 'real' battle is". He says: "One could talk about percentages of certain people who are Academy members and the demographics and so forth, but the real issue is movies being made. Decisions being made by heads of studios, TV companies and cable companies about what is and is not being made. That is the start. That is the root of the problem."

It is not just actors and directors either; it is also "below the line" industry personnel. "It's like Johannesburg in 1976, if you go behind the scenes," he says. "I made two British movies [Hunger and Shame] and I never met one person of colour in any below-the-line situations. Not one. No black, no Asian, no one. Like, hello? What's going on here? Very odd."

When it came to working in the US, making *12 Years a Slave*, McQueen was adamant that he wouldn't let the same thing happen again, particularly not on a film about slavery, of all things. "I expressly said in a meeting, 'Look, I can't make this movie in a situation where I don't see any black faces other than my own behind the camera. We need to employ certain people.' I made that very clear and it was attended to." Two African American assistant directors were duly hired.

Before we get down to business, McQueen conducts his own interview – Where am I from? How did I get into journalism? – as if he's trying to find out where I'm coming from before he opens up. It's unsurprising; despite being friendly and warm in person, he is often characterised as a somewhat prickly character. When he appeared on *Desert Island Discs*, for example, Kirsty Young expressed surprise that he was so affable and giving, wondering aloud why she might have thought otherwise. "I'm a black man. I'm used to that," McQueen replied.



📷 Carey Mulligan in McQueen's 2012 film *Shame*. Photograph: Momentum Pictures/Sportphoto/Allstar



We meet in a canalside cafe in Amsterdam, close to where he lives, where our allotted 45 minutes stretches to more than two hours. He doesn't talk in concise, clipped soundbites; he often repeats himself, rephrases his answers when he's thought of a better way of saying something, and is quick to apologise if countered, but keen to answer whatever questions I've got, often saying "hit me" when he's ready for the next one.

I wonder if, as he says, this is really "not about the Oscars". Hasn't winning an Oscar made a difference to his career?

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“Oh, yes, absolutely. It’s all about opportunities and possibilities. It’s helped in a way that maybe the door opens, and people look at you differently, but I’ve always been on that same path anyway. Maybe someone else it would have changed more, but not me.”

So, doesn’t having won an Oscar give him access to those back rooms? The ones where “the real battle is”?

“You’ve gotta be Spielberg. You got to be Tarantino to have that muscle. And I’m nowhere near that stratosphere.” He has good relationships with a few production companies and studios now, but that’s not the same. “You can be very cosy with someone but, at the end of the day, it’s about the bottom line. They want hits. It don’t mean nothin’!”

If someone put McQueen in charge of a movie studio tomorrow, what would he do differently? “Give people more opportunities to make interesting movies. Fantastic movies.”



Michael Fassbender in McQueen's 2008 film Hunger. Photograph: Allstar/Film4/Sportsphoto



The word “opportunity” comes up a lot. Yet McQueen is living proof of an artist who became successful despite a conspicuous lack of opportunities. His biography is oft-recounted. He grew up in a working-class family in west London. He showed no academic promise at school (he was dyslexic), and was dismissed as “manual labour” material at 13, as were many of his African-Caribbean classmates. The dice were loaded against him. How does he account for his own success?

“I could draw,” he replies. “Like a footballer can kick a ball, or a boxer, in some ways, it was just raw talent. No one helped me with it really. I just thought: ‘OK, this is what I can do.’ That basic thing I could do educated me. I didn’t get education in school, I got education in art.”

It’s a long journey from childhood talent to winning an Oscar, I suggest. There must have been more to it than that?

He pauses for a while, deep in thought.

“I just wanted it badly. I had to do it. I had to do it. I don’t know. I was very fortunate as well, but I took the opportunities I was given.”

Did he always know what he wanted? “I wanted to be an artist. That was it.” Not a film-maker?

“I don’t want to separate the two. Far from it. It’s like writing poetry and writing a novel.”

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I ask him again. There has to be more to it than just talent? I'm starting to feel like Columbo interrogating a suspect. "Bull-headedness," he replies. "Bull-headedness and drive. It was sink or fucking swim wasn't it? For me, you looked down at where you would go if you didn't keep on climbing, or hold on, or keep on pushing up. There were police to arrest you and there were prisons to keep you. So many people to help you go down. When you want to go up, there's no one to help you."

At a certain point he stops: "Hang on, is this a thing about me or a piece about ...?" Well, it's both. Surely his work reflects his principles?

"Oh, Lord. OK, you're the boss," he says. He orders another mint tea. Then changes his mind and gets a cappuccino. I'm on my third coffee by now.

"Hit me."

We get on to the subject of McQueen's current work. Enticingly, his next movie is an adaptation of Lynda La Plante's hit 1980s crime series *Widows*, in which the widows of armed robbers pick up where their husbands left off. He is still writing it, and itching to shoot, though it hasn't been cast yet. There are also two television series in the works, one in the US, one in the UK, both of which have some bearing on the current conversation.



McQueen poses with his trophy after winning best picture award for *12 Years a Slave* Photograph: Xinhua /Landov/Barcroft Media



The British one is set around Ladbroke Grove in west London, and follows a settled African-Caribbean family from 1968 to 2005 – "From Enoch Powell's "rivers of blood" speech to the 7/7 bombings" – he explains. It sounds like the flipside to Richard Curtis's cheery, moneyed, all-white depiction of the same area in *Notting Hill*. It's to be broadcast on the BBC, which is clearly important to him. "It's a very British story, and I want my mother to be able to put the TV on and see it," he says.

The US project is an HBO series, *Codes of Conduct*, for which he has already shot a pilot. The cast includes Helena Bonham Carter and Rebecca Hall, though the lead character, a young African American from Queens who infiltrates

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the upper echelons of Manhattan society, is played by newcomer Devon Terrell. “He’s had a taste of that world and then he’s thrown back into the old one, and he’s climbing back up.”

A few years ago, Michael Fassbender told me of his experience working with McQueen on *Hunger* and, in particular, that celebrated 17-minute unbroken scene of dialogue at the film’s core. It was just two people sitting at a table talking, but it was electric and riveting. “Steve gives very strange notes,” Fassbender said. “He’d say to Liam [Cunningham] and me: ‘You’re like George Foreman and you’re like Muhammad Ali.’ Then after four takes, he’d say to me: ‘All right, now it’s getting a bit like Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra. I want you to behave a little bit more like God in this scene.’ McQueen denies all memory of this, laughing. But he readily admits that he does love working with actors. “My God. The whole idea of people reflecting humanity. I have huge respect. That’s amazing.”

Some film-makers dread the actual movie shoot, preferring the stages before and after. Others, such as Hitchcock, thought actors should be “treated like cattle”. For McQueen, it’s the complete opposite: “To see something blossom, to see something grow. My first scene with Lupita [Nyong’o, who won best supporting actress for *12 Years a Slave*], to see things come out of her. My heart just rose. It’s like catching butterflies, like trying to conjure up something that is there, but it just needs the confidence to fly, to find something you don’t even know exists in you.”

In his movies, as in his life, McQueen never really sticks to the script. “Are you kidding me? It’s about the material, and the moment. That’s the only way to make film.”

That is why he is envious of musicians, he says. “When you’re at a certain level, you can do what the hell you want; as a film-maker you’re hoping people can give you money to do what you want. It’s about the freedom. That’s what I want to achieve: that freedom, expanding, but also making mistakes.”

I ask about his friendship with Kanye West, who seems to be a kindred spirit – another polymath unafraid to experiment. McQueen shot a short music film for West, has interviewed him in *Interview* magazine, and attended West and Kim Kardashian’s wedding. I’m wondering if there’s a tendency to gravitate towards higher budgets, bigger names and, by extension, celebrity circles, the more successful he gets. I will admit, I am also just curious about West.

“Who’s a friend of mine that’s famous?” he asks aloud. “Kanye, um, Michael [Fassbender], Lupita, I suppose. That’s about it. With Kanye, it’s all about the work. I never talk to Kanye about anything other than work and ideas, mainly ideas. He’s a serious, proper artist. He didn’t know me as a film-maker; he actually went to Basel and saw my show in 2013 and called me. We talked for three hours. That was kind of cool.”

Without realising it, our interview has become like one of his movies. My prepared questions were just a starting point and the conversation has drifted off, looped back on itself and crossed to the same from a different direction. After a while, I turn off the voice recorder, we order some burgers and chat more generally – about music, film, his admiration for John Wayne (“*The Searchers* is like a symphony!”), Britain, budget cuts, education and the sad realisation that his parents would never be able to afford to send him to art school today. Every now and then, when we touch on something he deems relevant, he urges me to turn my voice recorder back on. The official “interview” ends about six times, then starts up again.

Editing it all together into something coherent isn’t his problem this time.

McQueen isn’t doing this because he enjoys the sound of his own voice. Quite the opposite. Instead, it feels as if he wants to say something but isn’t exactly sure what – and we’re both here to work that out. “I’m not interested in just talking. This is an important issue. It’s an us issue. Again, this is not about black, not about white, this is about us how we want to improve our environment and our society, and who we are. So, let’s get on with it. Let’s fix this. It’s ridiculous! There’s no real debate is there ... really?”

<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/jan/24/steve-mcqueen-oscars-whitewash-watershed-moment>