



Matthew Norman: When you want your child to share America's moment

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## Tom Sutcliffe: Bobby Sands and 007 united in martyrdom

*Tuesday, 28 October 2008*

If you'd asked me last week I would have thought it vanishingly unlikely that Steve McQueen's film *Hunger* and the latest James Bond film *Quantum of Solace* would turn out to have anything in common at all, apart from the the medium they share. One is a deeply serious account of the damage that humans can do to themselves made by a Turner Prize winning artist; the other is a rather stylish Ford advert with an apparently unlimited budget.

It would have been an even bigger stretch to get me to believe that the link between them would be supplied by Christian iconography. True, *Hunger* includes a startling single-take scene in which a Catholic priest tries to persuade Bobby Sands not to embark on his hunger strike, and true, too, the latest Bond franchise has been directed by Marc Foster, a film-maker with a reputation for art-house entertainments rather than Hollywood slam-bang. But neither film is exactly religious in intent. And yet, having seen them both, it seems undeniable that the venerable artistic theme of the *Ecce Homo*, Pilate's presentation of the scourged and tortured Christ, has played a part in both.

It's less of a surprise that such associations should arise while watching *Hunger*, I guess – even if one raises the matter warily. McQueen has gone to some lengths to ensure that his film – about a ferociously divisive event in recent British history – isn't simplistically partisan. And yet there is no question that it is a kind of martyrology. It deals, rather literally, with the mortification of the flesh in pursuit of a principle – and although any sympathetic viewer of the film will see that its depicted victims lie on both sides of the sectarian divide, there's no denying that Sands's body – emaciated, badged with bedsores, vulnerable – is at its contemplative centre. And in a culture where the contemplation of a suffering has been overwhelmingly a Christian affair, that means that our instinctive personal empathy with another being in pain are likely to be overlaid by some inherited assumptions.

It's far more surprising to find that Bond should be presented as a sacrificial figure. But if you look at the television advert that SonyHD is currently piggybacking on the release of *Quantum of Solace* it's hard to conclude anything else. Bond walks towards us through an imaginary space, buffeted by explosions and flame. It looks as if he is being scourged by invisible assailants and when he finally reaches the foreground of the image, his face still looking directly at us in calm assurance, every drop of blood and oozing cut is visible in crisp definition.

It's a look that's consistent with the film – and that would have been all but unthinkable for Roger Moore, in his creaseless safari suits. The point of Moore's Bond was not to get a mark on him. The point of this one – it seems – is to be wounded and lacerated on our behalf.

That's where the comparison stops though – because while the wounds and welts in *Hunger* are a provocation to serious thought about pain and sorrow, the wounds in *Quantum of Solace* are simply flecks of style. *Quantum of Solace* is an entertainment which exploits the components of great Christian artworks, *Hunger* is an artwork which makes a good claim to stand alongside them.

### **I'm not sure Larry's convinced me about a 'racist democracy'**

I'm guessing that the demographic overlap between Obamamaniacs and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* fans is pretty large anyway – but either group will find something to enjoy in Larry David's recent piece on the Huffington Post about the nervous countdown to 4 November.

Being Larry David, he naturally obsesses about everything that might conceivably go wrong – including the possibility that he might jinx the Democrats chances simply by watching the election coverage.

But he also throws up an intriguing debating point, suggesting that it would be easier to live with a McCain victory if it was due to racism than if it was down to electoral fraud. "If it's racism, I can say, 'OK, we lost, but at least it's a democracy. Sure, it's a democracy inhabited by a majority of disgusting, reprehensible turds, but at least it's a democracy'... Call me crazy but I'd rather live in a democratic racist country than a non-democratic non-racist one."

My first thought about this was that your response to the choice might depend on whether you were on the receiving end of racism or not. Now I'm just not sure – since the democracy would at least offer the possibility of tackling the racism. Is Larry David crazy or not?

### **A big, big toy for boys who won't grow up**

The unveiling last week of Bloodhound SSC – a car designed to travel at more than 1,000 mph – was attended by a lot of pious rhetoric about inspiring the scientists and engineers of tomorrow. "Having the right stuff in the 21st century means being able to understand the world about you", said the Science minister, Lord Drayson, who reportedly came up with the idea.

So, with the entire world about them preoccupied with carbon footprints and sustainable technology, the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council and various universities are applying funding and brainpower to the task of propelling a one-man vehicle dangerously fast in one direction across a desert and then back to where it started, expending ridiculous quantities of energy in the process.

It's fitting really that the Bloodhound should have borrowed its name from a 1960s surface-to-air missile , because the whole enterprise is about 40 years out of date – a hangover from an era of Bluebird and Eagle comic cutaways and compensatory British power projection. Judging from one of Lord Drayson's reported remarks – "I thought, wow! What's it like to drive at 1,000mph? How cool is that" – it has much more to do with small boys in power today than with the scientists of tomorrow.

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