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Saturday, November 22, 2008

'Hunger' fails to wrest the narrative from the hunger strikers

CULTURE SHOCK: ONE OF the strangest experiences I've had as a journalist was accompanying the former IRA hunger striker Pat McGeown on his rounds as a local councillor in Ballymurphy. The experience was strange because it was banal, writes **FINTAN O'TOOLE**

McGeown was talking to people about cracks in the pavement and malfunctioning streetlights - the mundane stuff of local politics. But he had also spent 41 days on hunger strike in the H-blocks. He thus existed simultaneously at two very different levels. He was a nice, quiet man helping people with their everyday problems. And he was a myth.

There is an obvious reason why artists return again and again to the 1981 hunger strikes, and it is not primarily political. It has to do with the sense in which the hunger strikes were themselves a kind of art. They functioned, as art does, on the plane of metaphorical transformation. They were all about definition and language. They began with the prisoners' determination to define themselves as political actors rather than as criminals. And as they developed, they acquired the potential to transform the prisoners from victimisers to victims, from those who had inflicted suffering to those who suffered. With that transformation, they achieved what most artists dream of: a reordering of perceptions. If the hunger strikes were thus an aestheticisation of politics, the dirty protests that preceded them were even more directly appealing to visual artists. They couldn't help seeing the smearing of excrement on the walls of cells as a kind of primitive painting that, again, had a power denied to their own tamer efforts. Thus the first big artistic response: Richard Hamilton's 1981 diptych *The Citizen*. One half shows an idealised prisoner in his blanket. The other hones in on the detailed pattern of his excrement on the wall. As Hamilton wrote: "Each cell is marked with the graphic personality of its inhabitants; the walls look different because the pigment, of their own creation, is deployed in varying ways. It isn't difficult to discern the megalithic spirals of Newgrange inscribed there . . . "

As well as the obvious romanticisation of the protest and the IRA, there is a kind of wish-fulfilment at work here. The blanket man becomes the kind of artist that avant-garde artists would like to be - primitive, urgent, transformative, able somehow to fuse his own body with the

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body politic.

If you look at Steve McQueen's much-praised film, *Hunger*, you can see a further, more elaborate working-out of this process in which a visual artist essentially projects himself into the persona of a hunger striker. The great sequences in the film are the ones in which the violence is aestheticised into a series of marks on a surface: the cuts on a prison officer's knuckles from the blows he has delivered, the excrement on the walls, the red stripes left on a naked body by blows from a truncheon, the pattern of urine flowing on the prison corridor, the sores on Bobby Sands's emaciated body. McQueen is really drawn to the H-blocks as an especially charged kind of gallery space in which the canvasses are walls, floors and, above all, naked bodies.

This is not in itself an objection to *Hunger* - artists are inevitably drawn to the aesthetic aspect of things and McQueen does what he does brilliantly. The problem I have with the film is that McQueen seems to feel ashamed of this impulse and to believe that he must also acknowledge that the events were deeply political. This is a mistake on two levels.

On the level of form, it means using dialogue, which works against McQueen's basic nature as a maker of silent films. A long dialogue between Michael Fassbender's Sands and Liam Cunningham's priest is awkward, not because the actors are less than stellar or even because the script is bad, but simply because it is in the wrong kind of film. And on the level of politics, it is utterly naive to think that you can both plug into the hunger strikes as an aesthetic event and give them a neutral political treatment.

The whole point of the hunger strikes, after all, was that aesthetics trumps politics. The fusion of a visual imagery that deliberately tapped into images of Christ and the potent drama of slow death worked to simplify and transform a complex political reality. It obliterated the reality that the prisoners were killers. It even obscured the stark fact that far fewer prisoners than prison officers died in the H-blocks conflict - 10 dead hunger strikers against 29 prisoner officers murdered by the IRA. Whatever its intentions, any film that plugs into that aesthetic power will always repeat that act of obliteration. McQueen's efforts at balance - an ambivalent portrait of a prison officer who is murdered and a silly scene of a young riot policeman weeping as his colleagues beat the prisoners - merely highlight the extent to which the narrative has already been written by the hunger strikers.

In a way, the real task with the representation of the hunger strikes is not so much to demythologise them (which will never be possible) but to do something like Pat McGeown did in his own life. He stepped out of the posters and the imagery and the sacred drama and into the banal everyday world. Can artists manage that kind of complexity? One hint of the way they might go about it is the recent *Deconstructing the Maze* project by Dara McGrath and Conor McFeely for this year's Belfast Festival. McGrath photographed the Maze in the course of its demolition, and his images hang perfectly between myth and reality. The prison corridor so faithfully reproduced in *Hunger* has rubble falling in at one end and bits falling from the ceiling. Huge coils of barbed wire lie on a rubbish heap, forming a weird sculpture of spirals and knots. Rows of prison keys (H1, H2, Admin, Hospital) hang in mute abandonment. The children's play area stands silent, with its primary coloured plastic furniture all askew. You think of the ordinary life that went on here amid the high drama and feel glad that this story is over.



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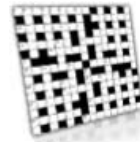
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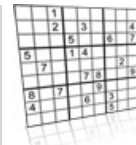
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