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Anger as new film of IRA hero Bobby Sands screens at Cannes

Turner Prize-winning artist focuses on the hunger striker's last six weeks

Vanessa Thorpe and Henry McDonald
Sunday May 11, 2008

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An uncompromising new film that examines the last six weeks in the life of Maze prison hunger striker Bobby Sands has drawn criticism from those who see it as an untimely celebration of the martyrdom of a terrorist.

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The 96-minute film, *Hunger*, which has been part-funded by Channel 4, will have its world premiere at the Cannes film festival, which opens on Wednesday.

Sands, a member of the IRA jailed for possessing a gun, achieved iconic status for the Irish Republican movement when he died 27 years ago this month in the infamous H-Blocks at Long Kesh after 66 days of hunger strike in protest at prisoners losing their political status.

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The film is the directorial debut of the Turner Prize-winning British artist Steve McQueen, best known for his recent work for the Imperial War Museum. An official war artist, he produced a provocative series of postage stamps bearing the faces of dead soldiers who had served in Iraq.

The artist's first feature film has now placed him in controversial territory once more. 'In Hunger there is no simplistic notion of "hero", or "martyr" or "victim". My intention is to provoke debate in the audience, to challenge our own morality through film,' McQueen said.

'If this film disarms the viewer, removes their barrier for a moment in time, then we've got them and through that experience the film can have some power, some meaning and hopefully make a difference. If, through entertainment, one can grab people's attention, then it is great.'

But Richard O'Rawe, who was the IRA prisoner's press officer at the time when Sands was dying, is not happy about a film that makes the hunger strike an artistic emblem. A former IRA prisoner himself, O'Rawe expressed concern that any life story about his comrade 'did not reflect the narrative of the later peace process'.

O'Rawe, whose controversial book on the death fast, Blanketman, claimed that six of Sands' fellow prisoners could have been saved if the republican leadership had accepted a compromise deal from Margaret Thatcher, said: 'Bobby was a left-winger. He did not think a united Ireland was worth it unless it was a socialist Ireland. I know that because he told me inside the H-blocks.

'Bobby did not die so we could be where we are now - with Sinn Fein working inside a British-controlled parliament. I have heard the film is more a psychological story about one man facing death. If that is all it is, then I have no problem with that. My main concern is if the narrative tries to take us from Bobby's struggle to the political situation we are in today. He would not have wanted that.'

Jeffrey Donaldson, the Democratic Unionist MP who had relatives killed by the IRA during the Troubles, was also critical of the subject matter of the film. He said he wished film-makers and writers would take time to 'give a more balanced portrayal of what went on in Northern Ireland'.

'Hopefully one day film-makers will look at the innocent victims, the ones who didn't choose to die and tell their stories instead of focusing all the time on those who had a choice to live or die. I fear this film won't do that, but instead portray what groups like the IRA did in a heroic light,' he said.

The part of Sands is played by Michael Fassbender, who appeared as Stelios in the recent Hollywood Spartan epic, 300. The artist co-wrote the screenplay with the acclaimed Irish playwright Enda Walsh, author of Disco Pigs and Bedbound. '

'When Jan Youngusband at Channel 4 approached me at the beginning of 2003 there was no Iraq War, no Guantanamo Bay, no Abu Ghraib prison, but as time's gone by the parallels have become apparent. History repeats itself, lots of people have short memories and we need to remember that these kinds of things have happened in Britain,' said McQueen.

Films covering the Troubles have attracted controversy at the film festival before. Terry George's *Some Mother's Son*, in which John Lynch played Bobby Sands, caused anger, while Ken Loach's *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 2006.

This year's festival, the 61st, runs until 25 May.

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