

Hunger

Study Notes



Directed by: Steve McQueen

Certificate: 15

Running time: 96 mins

Synopsis

Hunger, led by Bobby Sands follows life in the Maze Prison, Northern Ireland with an interpretation of the highly emotive events surrounding the 1981 IRA Hunger Strike. With an epic eye for detail the film provides a timely exploration of what happens when body and mind are pushed to the uttermost limit.

Factual information in a fictional form

Any film that is telling a true story can only ever give us a flavour of the real-life events on which it is based. Details such as what individuals actually said to one another during conversation, or exactly what people thought, are impossible to recreate.

In the case of *Hunger*, compressing a six-week period in the life of Bobby Sands into a 96-minute feature inevitably means information will be omitted. The film's focus moves into the Maze prison, concerning itself primarily with the story of Bobby Sands, but there are other important moments and characters that function to flesh out the picture of life in the Maze.

1. At both the beginning and the end of the film, additional information about the actual events appears onscreen. What does this add to the narrative?

News recordings from the period also feature in the film. Whilst the Prime Minister at the time, Margaret Thatcher, doesn't actually appear on screen, we often hear the radio quoting her or reporting the responses of her government to the situation in Northern Ireland. In this way, policymaking and the broader political landscape are distanced from the picture as it focuses the day-to-day existence of the prisoners and guards.

2. How does the news inform the narrative? What kinds of reactions do the different characters have to these bulletins?

3. With any film, choosing what is finally seen on screen is a long and collaborative process. What questions are raised for you during viewing the film? For example, before you watched *Hunger*, what did you know about this period in history? Are there aspects that you now want to find out more about?

Looking at life in the Maze

Director Steve McQueen says of *Hunger* that he wanted to make a film that would '*...bring everything back.*' His attention to detail and research have been translated into what we see on screen. His focus on the people living and working in the prison offers a specific approach to the recent history of Northern Ireland.

McQueen talks about his research with former inmates and prison officers, asking them about the conditions in the Maze. He says, '*Usually people ask them the big questions. But I was more interested in the details you couldn't find in the books. Like what's it like waking up with maggots all over your body? What's it like with all these bluebottles dancing around your cell? At what point do you get used to faeces on the wall?*' (New York Times, 6/3/09)

Characters

In the film, there are some characters who occupy significant amounts of screen time but who have hardly any dialogue.

4. Which of these stand out to you? When these characters appear on screen, what do you find moving, shocking or interesting about these representations?

For example, from the beginning we observe both the working and home life of one of the prison guards. We see his chilling daily routine, how he matter-of-factly checks under his car for bombs, and the struggle he has with everyday life. We never hear what this character thinks, we hardly hear him speak, and instead we see him at work and at home struggling on screen in both environments.

5. Why do you think this character's often-bleeding hands are repeatedly seen immersed in water?
6. Think about other characters that had an impact on you. How was this achieved by the director and the actors?

Directing Confinement

The film has very distinct sections, making it almost like a play with a three-act structure.

7. The central scene, the conversation between Father Moran and Bobby Sands, is filmed as a single take. Were you aware of this technique at the time? What impact did this scene have on you as a spectator?
8. Can you think of other moments in the film where this technique is employed? What impact does it have this time, how does it make you feel as a spectator?

Director Steve McQueen talks about the atmosphere that he wanted to create in the film, saying, *'If you see a drop of rain on someone's knuckle, you feel it because you know that physical sensation, that sensory experience brings you closer to an emotional one.'* (New York Times 6/3/09)

Inside the prison we see the horrendous conditions that have become everyday life. The final resource left to these prisoners are their bodies, something they can control and through which they can generate some of their protest. McQueen talks about *'...the whole idea of the body as a weapon. If that's all you have, how do you use it?'* (New York Times 6/3/09)

9. The film has been described as 'visceral'. Checking your understanding of this word, would you agree with this description? Think of key scenes to support your answer.

Interests of a Director

Steve McQueen is an artist and a director. *Hunger* is his first feature film, but he has worked in video for some time. In 2003, he started work on a project called *Queen and Country* developing a range of stamps featuring those that have died in Iraq.

Use the following links to find out more about the themes his work addresses:

www.guardian.co.uk/film/2008/oct/12/2

www.artfund.org/queenandcountry

www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCNRqnxYCn8