The Funambulist Pamphlets 11: Cinema
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HUNGER: THE BODY AT WAR

In 1976, the British government withdrew the status of political prisoner to every detainee who had been imprisoned for having taken part in the Northern Irish conflict. On March 5, 1981, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher delivered a speech in Belfast stating the following:

There is no such thing as political murder, political bombing or political violence. There is only criminal murder, criminal bombing and criminal violence. We will not compromise on this. There will be no political status.

The refusal to attribute this status to prisoners forces them to wear a uniform, and to do prison work, and also prevents them from association with other prisoners. More importantly, it denies the very essence of each convict’s action that was accomplished within the frame of an ethical collective narrative, and not for some individual opportunist purpose. The point of the following essay is to show how the Republican prisoners’ bodies constituted the unique site of both resistance and torture in the actions that were undertake following this governmental decision. In order to do so, I will use screenshots that I made from Steve McQueen’s film, Hunger (2008), about which film it is not my purpose to launch a critique but rather to use its still-images to illustrate some important political points.
The first form of resistance against the withdrawal of the status of political prisoner consisted for the Republicans in refusing to wear the carceral uniform, and thus remain naked with only a blanket as cloth. Through several articles on The Funambulist, we have seen how wearing a certain cloth could constitute a form of resistance against normative or authoritarian processes (see articles in the “Dressed Bodies” categories on thefunambulist.net). In the case of the Irish Republicans however, the “blanket strike” consisted in the refusal of any clothing that might be provided by the prison administrators, expressed also the high discomfort (cold, dirt, lack of intimacy, etc.) that such a choice involved in the determination to also refuse the new status. There is a high symbolism in the refusal to wear the clothes that are imposed by the carceral authorities: the violence of the prison walls’ inescapability is already highly present; the clothing would also carry a violence, even closer to the body itself, and refusing to wear it constitutes an attempt to avoid, and thereby also void the new designation as ‘criminal.’

In 1978, another strike was enacted: the “no-wash protest,” or “dirty protest,” which consisted in the refusal of the Republican prisoners to wash and to use the toilets, access to the bathrooms being granted by the wardens. Both in the Long Kesh men’s prison and in the Armagh women’s prison, prisoners spread their excrement on their walls — as well as their menstrual blood for women — and urinated under the doors of their cells. The notion of the abject is particularly striking here, whether by the fecal and menstrual matter that constitutes part of the direct environment of the prisoners’ bodies, or by these bodies themselves, dirty and smelly as they were. The ability for bodies and matter to reach abjection has consequential political effects: abjection reveals the repugnance we have for other bodies and their material effects, and as “matter out of place” (Mary Douglas, 1966), they disrupt the
order of the system in which they are embedded. One could think that there is a paradox in seeing prison wardens forcefully washing the prisoners’ bodies (cutting their hair, plunging them into a bath, etc.), as well as regularly cleaning the cells’ walls. There is none however, for the reasons given above. It constitutes an attempt to annihilate abjection, its distressing imaginary, and the disruption it enacts.

Bodies as sites of resistance are total. Even the transmission of messages and other miniaturized objects is made through them. The orifices of the mouth, the anus, and the vagina were used as dissimulated transportation vessels whether to get documents out of the prison — like Bobby Sands’s poems for example — or to get them in. Miniaturization as a form of dissimulation operates here at its climax: messages are written as small as possible — in another geographical and historical context, one can think of Sade’s 120 Days of Sodom written on a single roll of paper in prison — and objects need to be reduced to the minimum size to fit the size of their transporting vessel, etc. Since these methods are well-known to and anticipated by the prison wardens, violent bodily searches of orifices are regularly conducted.

The third strike that was enacted by the Republican prisoners was a deadly one: a hunger strike. The first one, accomplished by Bobby Sands — represented by McQueen in Hunger — started on March 1, 1981. Margaret Thatcher and the British government systematically refused to grant the political prisoner status to the Republicans, and as a consequence ten men died from this refusal as a result of their determination to pursue their strike until the end. We often associate the difficulty of a hunger strike to hunger itself as the materialization of an intuitive need. However, what McQueen’s film shows well is the consequences that the absence of nutrition triggers in the body. After three weeks without eating or drinking,
the muscles and the bones of a body begin to substantially deteriorate. After 66 days of his hunger strike, Bobby Sands’s body ceased to perform vital functions.

The few years that followed the 1976 negation of political prisoner status in Northern Ireland was thus exemplary in demonstrating how the carceral violence puts bodies at war and makes them become sites of resistance and of torture. Many Republicans prisoners did not present any defense when being tried and convicted, refusing by doing so to recognize the legitimacy of the British court. Their bodies were forcefully placed into a carceral architecture from which no escape seemed conceivable. However, by using their bodies in their abject nudity, in the matter they secrete, in their ability to transport objects, and in the possibility of becoming the expression of their voluntary and slow deterioration, Republican prisoners used the available means — what is more available than our bodies? — to pulverize the role that was designated for their instrumentalization. By doing so, they also accepted that the violence developed to break their efforts would be directed at the very weapon that they were using — that is, their bodies.

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