Tanja Nusser

“They starve to death, but who dares ask why?”

Steve McQueen’s Film *Hunger*

“There’s no such thing as political murder, political bombing or political violence. There is only criminal murder, criminal bombing, criminal violence. We will not compromise on this. There will be no political status.” (Margaret Thatcher, 5 March 1981)

Disruptions dis- or interrupt and question an order or system – this seems to be a given. Even if this tautological formulation is not presenting fundamental new insights, it still highlights an important fact: a disruption needs an object for its activity, and this object is defined as a structure, system, or order that we perceive as normal exactly because of the rupture (Fleischhack and Rottmann 2011: 9). To formulate it differently: ruptures mark the order as such, in that it can be argued that disruptions are ambivalent. While they “disturb” existing orders or structures, and might inaugurate a shift in these structures, they also make it possible to get an understanding of the definitional categories, the ex- and inclusions, on which the order is based. Following the destabilization of a social order, system, or structure, the process of re-stabilization offers a chance to define and adapt to a new “normality” (Horn 2011: 11; Gansel and Ächtler 2013: 9).

Within an anthropocentric frame, these disruptions are often defined as natural catastrophes, wars, revolutions, humanitarian and medical disasters, and so on. Even if these disruptions target human societies in their structures, it is often the singular human body as exemplary object of the violence that is depicted in the different medias and genres. In literary texts, films, photography, documentaries, or even in news often one body, one person is singled out, standing in for the disaster we cannot portray in its totality. In identifying with this one person, one face, one story or fate we try to understand and make sense of the violent interruptions of our lives. On this structural level it makes no difference if we follow the story of a victim or hero; the important fact is that the person paves a new way (metaphorically speaking) for the viewers or readers to deal with the rupture. While this identification allows us to produce sense, the position of identification is a totally different one, depending on whether we follow the story of a victim or hero. Following a victim narrative, readers or viewers identify with an object position as victims of the disruption, whereas in the hero narrative they identify with a subject position that is established in reaction to the disruption.

tion; here the viewer or reader identifies with a person who has or gains agency in dealing with the aftermath of the catastrophic situation.

Yet to make matters even more complicated, there is also the possibility that the object and subject of a disruption are actually the same. In this case, while the person reacts to violent situations, transforming him- or herself from object to subject, he or she at the same time causes other ruptures, which violently change societies, making his or her body a disruptive subjectivity. This means that I am not interested here in a psychosocial constellation, in which the victim of a disastrous situation becomes the hero and masters his or her life – the typical Hollywood or tabloid narration about a catastrophe happening, the nuclear family or lonely hero fighting against disastrous events and surviving them, comes to mind. I am interested in another configuration, in which the singular body can be described as the object and subject of the violence, as the victim and hero, but also perpetrator of the disruption. In occupying the different positions of a disruptive situation, this body can actually collapse the process of sense and meaning-making, and becomes in itself the sign of a fundamental rupture. Signifying an impossible situation, this body can be read as inaugurating a new order that it destroys in the moment it creates it.

I am particularly interested in the figure of the hunger striker or the death faster, who uses his or her body as a sign to articulate and manifest a protest and rupture of an existing political order.¹ While the body is transformed into a disruptive sign, it annihilates itself – or to be more precise: is annihilated – as exactly the (political) sign that inaugurates a new order. In transforming the body into, or performing the body as, a vanishing sign,² whose potential death opens the body to a multitude of narrations and interpretations, the death faster or hunger striker might, at the beginning, intentionally author and distribute meaning. However, the proliferation and dissemination of meaning detach the authorship from the fasting body and surround it with ever more meaning, the more the body vanishes³: the fasting body in itself is a rupture that needs interpretation, to make sense out of it. Embedding the fasting body in con-

1 The title of this article – “They starve to death, but who dares ask why?” (Sands 1981) – raises the issue of hunger strike as a political signal.

2 As Lauren B. Wilcox formulates it, the body in pain can be understood “as performative act of interpolating a community or audience” (2015: 66; 68–69).

3 See also Patrick Anderson who formulates a similar idea: “The surface of the self-starving body fully takes on the paradoxical significance suggested in the pairing loss / resistance, for as it literally shrinks into oblivion it becomes larger and larger in the vernacular of its political effects.” (2010: 10).

texts (how diverse and many they might be) questions the possibility of establishing a new order.

The following chapter will specifically focus on the depiction of the 1981 hunger strike in Northern Ireland, as depicted in Steve McQueen’s 2008 film *Hunger*, viewing it as a disruptive bodily practice that strives for political and societal change through self-violent agency. The 1981 hunger strike of PIRA (Provisional Irish Republican Army) and INLA (Irish National Liberation Army) members resulted in ten deaths before it was called off on 3 October 1981. It was the second hunger strike within a year, through which PIRA prisoners attempted to regain their status as political prisoners. While the fasting men in 1980 and 1981 called the refusal of food intake a hunger strike, the more correct formulation is death fasting. I highlight the difference between these two forms of the refusal of food intake because they differ in their structure. A hunger strike is not necessarily based on the willingness to commit an “altruistic suicide”⁴ (Emile Durkheim) or “politically motivated suicide” (Graitl 2012: 111), whereas death fasting, to quote Lorenz Graitl: “implies the refusal of food – in rare cases also of fluids – to enforce/assert political claims in the name of a collective interest. This abstinence is to be maintained until all demands are met. If this does not happen, the faster is willing to accept death.”⁵ While I am referring here to death fasting as an

4 I am referring here to Emile Durkheim’s concept of the altruistic suicide in his 1897 study on *Suicide*: “For society to be able thus to compel some of its members to kill themselves, the individual personality can have little value. [...] For the individual to occupy so little place in a collective life he must be almost completely absorbed in the group and the latter, accordingly, very highly integrated. [...] The individual thus has no way to set up an environment of his own in the shelter of which he might develop his own nature and form a physiognomy that is his exclusively. [...] It is thus natural for him to be yet less protected against collective necessities and that society should not hesitate, for the very slightest reason, to bid him end a life it values so little. [...] Having given the name of *egoism* to the state of the ego living its own life and obeying itself alone, that of *altruism* adequately expresses the opposite state, where the ego is not its own property, where it is blended with something not itself, where the goal of conduct is exterior to itself, that is, in one of the groups in which it participates.” (1979: 220–221) While his assumption that “lower societies are the theatre par excellence of altruistic suicide” (227) has to be critiqued, his argumentation also shows the possibility for altruistic suicide in different social groups, such as Christians (“Christin Martyrs,” 227) and Soldiers. This is interesting in the context of the 1981 hunger strike because the hunger strikers, especially Bobby Sands, were elevated to the status of martyrs of the cause. At the same time, the members of the PIRA and INLA perceived themselves as soldiers.

5 “bedeutet die Verweigerung von Nahrung – in seltenen Fällen auch von Flüssigkeit – zur Durchsetzung politischer Forderungen im Namen eines kollektiven Interesses. Dieser Verzicht wird so lange aufrecht erhalten, bis die gestellten Forderungen erfüllt werden. Geschieht das

altruistic or politically motivated suicide, I do not want to suggest that hunger strikes or death fasts are private or personally motivated acts. Banu Bargu rightfully highlights, in her discussion of the Guantánamo Bay prison, “that these acts tend to be conflated, at times purposefully, with suicides in order to conceal the occurrences of resistance or to neutralize their reverberations [...]. [...] these acts do not often arise from personal despair or psychological pathologies but are conscious, voluntary, politically motivated, and orchestrated, thereby directly contributing to their political and subversive qualities as acts of protest” (2014: 13, 18). I still use the concept of a politically motivated suicide to underscore the fact that the individual, who is willing to transform his or her body into a sign of protest, is prepared to die for this cause by his or her own hands or actions. To perceive only personal despair or psychological pathologies as “legitimate reasons” to name a self-killing a suicide reduces and excludes the possibility of negotiating the different levels connected to politically motivated suicides. It also posits despair and psychological pathologies as personal / private reasons for committing suicide, whereas I would argue that both also have to be understood within their cultural, social embeddedness. In this sense, Emile Durkheim’s differentiation between the altruistic and egoistic suicide reflects exactly the definitional difficulties to differentiate between distinct types of self-killing.

In terms of a temporal structure, the hunger strikers / death fasters react to a political situation, against which they protest. In the case of the North Ireland hunger strike in 1981, they specifically protested against the criminalization of PIRA and INLA prisoners. In a linear logic the PIRA and INLA prisoners in the Maze Prison perceived this form of protest as a reaction to a political structure (for example, the refusal to grant them political status as prisoners as well as, on the broader political level, the situation of the republican fight for identity, independence, and equality). They aspired to achieve, through death fasting, the re-negotiations and changes to the hereto existing political structures, as well as the acknowledgement of the political status of PIRA and INLA members as prisoners of war (a status that the British Government had withdrawn in 1976). Learning from the hunger strike, which took place a year before, the hunger strike / death fasting in 1981 was organized as a chain of fasters, in order to prolong the situation and to put more pressure on the British Government to fulfill the demands of the INLA and PIRA prisoners. They instrumentalized the body violently as a sign of the ongoing violence through the political system.

nicht, ist der Fastende bereit, dafür den Tod in Kauf zu nehmen” (Graitl 2012: 63, translation by the author, T.N).

But the fasting body as an intentional sign (as victim, perpetrator, hero, subject, and object of the violent act of self starvation [Anderson 2010: 3]) is polyvalent and opens the space for a proliferation of meanings that do not any longer originate in the fasting body. The fasting body as a disruptive message becomes independent of the intentions of his author. This has been shown by Allen Feldman in his groundbreaking study on *Formations of Violence. The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (1991). Highlighting the bodily practices and oral histories in Northern Ireland as ruptures of “the appearance of lawful continuity between centers of legitimation and local acts of domination,” (1991: 2) Feldman seeks to “excavate the different and discontinuous strata of historical time that structure political antagonism in Northern Ireland” (1991: 2). In the chapter on the 1981 hunger strike in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh, Northern Ireland, he examines the different interpretations of this political act of self-annihilation: as a protest form that had a long-standing tradition in Ireland dating back to the “ancient Brehon legal codes (*Senchus Mor*)” (1991: 219), as religious narrative or as military campaign, as “journey to the inner truth of the British State” (1991: 227), as a “reenactment of the relation of domination that characterized Britain’s historical relation to Ireland” (1991: 227), as “initiation rite,” or “a final resolution of juridical-political-biological liminality, or as an eschatological rite of collective conversion” (1991: 227).

1 “He has chosen death”⁶

Refusing to eat or drink, that he may bring
 Disgrace upon me; for there is a custom,
 An old and foolish custom, that if a man
 Be wronged, or think that he is wronged, and starve
 Upon another’s threshold till he die,
 The Common People, for all time to come,
 Will raise a heavy cry against that threshold,
 Even though it be the King’s. (Yeats 2011: 122)

The quote from William Butler Yeats’s “The King’s Threshold” shows that hunger striking in Ireland has multiple meanings and connotations, not least of which is a traditional sign of wrongdoing. Embedded in diverse traditions, it is at the same time signifying a just cause, blaming a wrongdoing, establishing martyrdom in the Christian tradition, and acting as a political message. This overlap

6 William Butler Yeats, “The King’s Threshold” (2011: 122).

of meanings evokes different categories, in which the 1981 hunger strike / death fast has to be read: historical, social, political, juridical, traditional, mythological, and so on. It narrativizes the body and makes it into a polyvalent text whose multitude of meanings work against a singular interpretation of *The Troubles* (the Northern Ireland “Conflict”). But at the same time, as the body is narrativized, it is also – this is important to not forget – commodified and instrumentalized by violent forces and a politics that uses the body as the ultimate (vanishing) bearer of a message (Feldman 1991: 8). “The eloquence of hunger striking lies,” as Patrick Anderson argues:

in its potential to throw into crisis the binary passive / active in terms of violence performed and to undermine the conception [...] of individual and state as absolute discrete entities at odds with one another, a conception that facilitates the dumbing-down of questions about political terror into the language of cause and effect. In other words, hunger striking rebuffs a particular notion of domination and simultaneously stages the seizure, resymbolization, and enactment – one might say the *ingestion* – of modes of violence typically performed by the state. (Anderson 2010: 122)

The body of the hunger striker / death faster is the ultimate sign and weapon in a fight over power, freedom, and the recognition of political rights.⁷ Moreover, while the Northern Irish hunger strike / death fasting transports different meanings because of its polysemy, it also operates within a regime, whose bio-power targets what Giorgio Agamben defines as bare life. It uses the logic of the regime to turn it around in re-forming the hunger striker into a sovereign over his own body. However, even if death fasting reinstates, on one level, the agency of the death faster (his control over his body, his life and death), it operates on another level within a logic of subjectivation, as Patrick Anderson, referring to Foucault, argues. Subjectivation is a concept:

that folds subordination and agential subjectivity into the very same function. The word subjectivation is intended to preserve both aspects of that function, suggesting that subjectivity, classically conceived as a somewhat pure form of human agency, is underpinned by subjugation to more dire forms of institutional and ideological power. (Anderson 2010: 3–4)

⁷ Banu Bargu calls it a “weaponization of life.” She refers with the term weaponization of life “to the tactic of resorting to corporeal and existential practices of struggle, based on the technique of self-destruction, in order to make a political statement or advance political goals.” She also introduces the term human weapons “to designate the actors who forge their lives into weapons of political struggle by a resort to self-destructive techniques” (2014: 14–15).

So far, I have been discussing the disruptive potential of the hunger strike and the hunger striker within a discursive frame, highlighting the polysemy of the body as vanishing sign and the different levels of meanings it produces. Nevertheless, from today’s perspective a hunger strike is also disruptive because it shows the limits of the legal system, as debates about force-feeding of hunger strikers in Guantánamo Bay have shown. Bringing up Guantánamo and force-feeding in this context might be surprising,⁸ but Steve McQueen makes this connection in an interview talking about his film *Hunger*: “What’s interesting for me about this film is not just what happened twenty-seven years ago, it’s also about what’s happening now, to a certain extent, with Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. For me that’s the main accomplishment” (quoted in Crowds 2009: 25). Although it remains to be seen if *Hunger* allows for a reading that makes a connection to the “political situation” of Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, Steve McQueen’s quote shows that he locates his film, or the message of the film, in a broader context that focuses, through the prison and hunger striking / death fasting, on fundamental questions of (the disavowal of) human rights and legal definitions of human rights. The politically motivated hunger striker / death faster in a prison asserts his / her agency through the possibility of his / her own death, and in such fundamentally re-installs his / her sovereign power, as he/she also questions the state and legal system.

The legal and ethical debate surrounding death fasting and hunger striking marks the body of this “violent self-annihilation” as a territory that is defined through concepts that either acknowledge the fully legal status of the hunger striker / death faster as rational subject or not. If hunger striking / death fasting is perceived as suicide and the person is declared mentally unstable, the state can intervene and try to prevent the person from committing suicide; if it is perceived as a political self-expression, the state cannot act because it would violate the freedom of speech (Tag and Groß 2012; Wilcox 2015: 69–79). While hunger striking / death fasting can be interpreted as a performative act that “fights,” as this chapter argues, for agency, sovereignty, and recognition of the fasting person through an audience, it also violently disrupts – in the case of the 1981 hunger strike / death fasting, the (violent) prison regime and colonial power of the British Government—in making the body into a subject and object, as well as a vanishing sign that produces narratives that are originating in the fasting body but are independent from it. The body also marks the inconsistencies of a legal system that decides the legal status of the hunger striker / death faster as a suicidal

8 Bargu also makes the association between the 1981 hunger strike and Guantánamo (2014:11).

and mentally instable or rational person, who instrumentalizes the body as a political message.

2 “And all of a sudden there’s a rapid, your reality is being disturbed, disrupted”⁹

“[...] we were trying to find the drama in what we were denying the viewer and then asking, when will they need this information. So the structure of the piece began to define itself by what we were denying the audience.” (Corless 2008: 27) (Edna Walsh)

The film *Hunger* only gives minimal information about the historical situation of the 1981 hunger strike in the Maze Prison; it excludes broader knowledge about the North Irish *Troubles* and focuses instead – only marginally contextualizing the situation – on the body, its materiality in the prison.¹⁰ This de-historicization is already apparent in the title. The hunger strike is reduced to, and at the same time expanded into, an undifferentiated *Hunger*. On the one hand, it is deprived of its political implication: hunger as a form of strike, as a politically motivated suicide. On the other hand, the implicit question asked is: hunger for what? The title *Hunger* shifts the hunger strike to the level of a fundamental lack (in the sense of hunger for something): of freedom, of agency, of knowledge, of human rights and so on. In addition, it puts the viewer right at the beginning of the film already in a position where he/she experiences this lack, this hunger, in depriving him / her of a clear meaning and message. This becomes even more obvious if we analyze the first forty-five seconds of the film. The film separates the different levels of narration and thus indicates right from the beginning a fundamental lack of understanding, a disorientation because information and narration are minimized and the viewer is put in a position where sense-making cannot rely any longer on hearing or seeing, since both are separated and transport different messages.

While the viewer hears a sound that reminds him / her of a metallic banging, the following white text is visible for two seconds on a black screen: “Northern Ireland, 1981 2,187 people have been killed in ‘the troubles’ since 1969.” After being followed by a black screen while the sound continues, the next white text appears on the screen for seven seconds: “The British Government has with-

⁹ Corless 2008: 26.

¹⁰ Most literature about the film highlights the absence of the historical embeddedness of the plot. See for example Toni Ross (2012: 169).

drawn the political status of all paramilitary prisoners." This is followed again by a black screen, the same ongoing sound, and the next white text (for again seven seconds): "Irish Republicans in the Maze Prison are on a 'blanket' and 'no wash' protest." In the nineteenth second of the film the camera shows in a close up a movement that the viewer cannot identify. In a gold, brown, black coloring, something moves so fast that the impression is more of reflections of light on a moving surface than actually seeing and identifying a clearly defined object on screen. However, in this instance the sound (the metallic banging) becomes associated with the indistinguishable movement on screen, though the viewer still does not really understand what he/she is observing on screen. In the twenty-third second the film cuts for five seconds to a close up of a women's face in profile in the right half of the screen, looking to the left side of the frame. The face moves up and down to the sound of the banging while in the background something (or someone) is moving in front of the source of the backlight that illuminates the screen in the golden-brown hues. In the twenty-ninth second, the camera focusses again on the former fast-moving, blurry object to then finally show, in the thirty-ninth second, on the black screen in small lettering, the title of the film in the lower left half of the screen: *Hunger*. For six seconds – as long as the title remains on the screen – the film is completely silent, only to cut then to a close up of a washing basin, with hands reaching into the basin and the sound of flowing water.

I am describing the title sequence of the film in such detail because it establishes already, in less than a minute, the complicated relationship between seeing, hearing, knowledge production, and orientation that characterizes the whole film. While the viewer receives only minimal textual information about the situation, the three sentences nevertheless prelude the title and in such establish an interpretive horizon for the title *Hunger*. On the visual level the film intersperses, between the three sentences and the title, blurry moving images that at best give ominous clues, because they are filmed in (extreme) close up. This excludes the possibility of a location or framing of the non-recognizable detail on screen. The interpretation the viewer might have so far is based on associations. The sound is connected to the white text on the black screen and the close up of movements and a face in profile, but the viewer is still deprived of a narration that makes sense. What the viewer so far sees and experiences is a kind of violence: the three sentences locate the following story in the year 1981, in the murderous history of the North Ireland conflict, as the sounds seem to beat this information acoustically into the viewer's perception. While the viewer still struggles to make sense of the first thirty-nine seconds, he/she is then confronted with an abrupt and profound silence and blackness; everything stops, comes to a standstill, and out of this moment the title emerges as

a sign: *Hunger* takes its space on the screen. It is a sign against the noise of the first thirty-nine seconds that cannot be located, against a minimal narration, against a claim to make sense of the situation in North Ireland or what we have seen so far on the screen. It leaves the images on screen undefined and already produces a multitude of meanings¹¹ that are not solely connected to the hunger strike / death fast in North Ireland in 1981.

During the first forty-five seconds the title sequence of the film already establishes a complex relationship to knowledge production, by variously depriving the viewer of image, language, or sound. It also establishes a *modus operandi* for the whole film: the film is neither about a factual truth nor a retelling of a historical situation. Instead, it is about depriving people of their access to what is perceived as a normality and, at the same time, producing a reality, or perception of reality, that is based on a kind of censorship (what the viewer is permitted to see, hear, and experience; what the viewer is allowed to observe; and who has the power over the knowledge).¹² Positioning the viewer in a situation that is essentially defined by a lack (of language, sound, image, and knowledge) establishes an affective identification through the form of the narration (Brinkema 2014). The affective space the film opens is highly formalized, stylized, and aestheticized, and it does not target some kind of space before signification; it is already embedded in a history of filmic form and narration.

To analyze how Steve McQueen's film produces these affects is not to hint at a reading that perceives affect as something that has power to disrupt, interrupt, or question.¹³ "The thing is," as Eugenie Brinkema rightfully points out in the

11 Zach Horton describes this opening of the film as a "chaos that contains the totality of narrative possibilities" (2012: 117).

12 I am following here Rob White's argument that "perhaps the most powerful device in *Hunger* is much less demonstrative. Reversing the censorious tactic adopted by the British Conservative government during this period – forbidding U.K. broadcasters to transmit the speech of Irish nationalists so that one would see Sinn Féin spokespeople on TV but hear nothing of what they said – McQueen uses fragments of Margaret Thatcher's combative speeches ('they have turned their violence against themselves') over images of darkly silhouetted foliage. In these moments, a narrative film that successfully adopts the defamiliarizing mode of conceptual art becomes politically charged, suggesting the ways in which rumor and folk memory, phantom voices of admonition and exhortation, weave fanatic spells." (White 2008/09).

13 See Brinkema's polemical stance towards concepts of affect that are said to "disrupt, interrupt, reinsert, demand, provoke, insist on, remind or agitate for: the body, sensation, movement, flesh and skin and nerves, the visceral, stressing pains, feral frenzies, always rubbing against: what undoes, what unsettles, that thing I cannot name, what remains resistant, far away (haunting, and ever so beautiful); indefinable, it is said to be what cannot be written, what thaws the critical cold, messing all systems and subjects up. Thus, turning to affect has allowed the humanities to constantly possibly introject any seemingly absent or forgotten dimension of inquiry,

Preface to *The Forms of the Affects*: “Affect is not the place where something immediate and automatic and resistant takes place outside of language. The turning to affect in the humanities does not obliterate the problem of form and representation. Affect is not where reading is no longer needed.” (Brinkema 2014: xiv)

Following this line of thought, I would like to argue that the disruption that hunger strikes / death fasts present is located in the film on a different level. The disruptive quality of the film is not centering on the state or politics (North Ireland, *The Troubles*, the British Government or Terrorism), or on an emotive reaction to the situation of the 1981 hunger strike as a politically motivated suicide in a concrete historical situation, even if the film tangentially references the historical situation. The affective space the film opens is connected to the “visual focus on various breaches of bodily integrity, on festering wounds and open sores, on the exchange of packages between disparate orifices, and on the excretion of urine, faeces, vomit and blood” (Mac Giolla Léith 2008). This visual focus “is complemented by a soundtrack that favors long silences punctuated by sudden, cacophonous irruptions of noise. *Hunger* might be said to mount a sustained assault on the body and on language alike” (Mac Giolla Léith 2008).

However, how is it done? How does the film produce affects? How is the materiality of the body staged? I would like to argue that the film centers on details, on fragmentation, on isolation as form or stylistic means (Brinkema 2014), to reduce the viewer’s understanding of what is happening to the small space, the particular. This prevents the viewer from having an orientation, spatial as well as contextual (Ross 2012: 171). At the same time, the film favors long shots and minimal camera movement – both techniques establish the single shot as important, or even as more important than the flow of the narration. The single frames develop their own narrative qualities, exhibiting their status as image or tableaux that tell their own story, which disrupts or halts the narration of the film.¹⁴ It can be said that the film, in using all these filmic and narrative techni-

to insist that play, the unexpected, and the unthought can always be brought back into the field.” (2014: xii).

14 See for example Liptay’s interpretation of the wall paintings made with feces in *Hunger*. “Aber es sind gerade die Nahblicke, in denen die Bilder die Schwere physischer Realität zumindest vorübergehend abstreifen, etwa wenn sie die flächig fotografierten Zellmauern und Bettlaken scheinbar in weiße Leinwände verwandeln, auf denen die Flecken wie abstrakte Malerei anmuten. [...] Einmal fokussiert die Kamera sogar ein skatologisches Gemälde, das in säuberlichen Kreisbewegungen gearbeitet ist, so dass die Reinigung der Zelle mit dem Dampfstrahl der Ausradierung eines Kunstwerkes gleichkommt. Eine Weißblende vollendet die Arbeit einer Reinigungskraft, die zuvor noch das Visier des Schutzanzugs hochgeklappt hatte, um das Bild ratlos zu bestaunen. In diesem Moment erfüllt die Figur eine Stellvertreterfunktion für den Betrachter,

ques, is de-historicizing the 1981 hunger strike to make it into a symbol for inhumane prison conditions. Reading the film in such a manner allows one to perceive *Hunger* as a political statement that is not concentrated any longer on one situation (the 1981 hunger strike / death fast in North Ireland), but on the inhumane conditions for prisoners of war. But I would like to argue that this politicization comes at a price: the 1981 situation in Long Kesh, the Maze Prison, is aestheticized. This aestheticization negates the political impact of the Blanket Protest and No Wash / Dirty Protests as “forerunners” of the hunger strike / death fast, as well as the hunger strike / death fast that the PIRA and INLA members had. As David Lloyd points out, the prisoners extended “the limits of their corporal presence” (2011: 147) and formed a “transcorporeal space that exceeded the bounds of the individual body and the separate cells” (2011:147) in smearing the interior walls of their prisons with their feces. These protest forms, as well as the orality of prison communication, established a community that deconstructed the state prison apparatus, which was part of the British colonial system. While the “transindividual soundscape became the foundation of a collective re-composition of Irish as a medium of the community” (2011: 147) it also signified, as Lloyd further argues, something entirely different:

Together with the inhabiting of shit-lined cells and the penetrating diffusion of odor that emanated from them, orality and the breaking-down of the bounding surface of the body into folds and orifices constituted [...] an inversion of what Norbert Elias has designated “the civilizing process,” the development of forms of etiquette and self-control that accompanied the state’s gradual monopoly of violence by disciplining the individual’s impulses and comportment. (2011: 147)

der sich verunsichert fragt, ob er es mit Kot oder mit Kunst zu tun hat. In diesen Bildern interpretiert McQueen die Gefangenen als politisch motivierte <Action Painters>, die Exkremente in ein künstlerisches Ausdrucksmedium zwischen Schrift und Bild verwandelten.” (Liptay 2011: 137). “However, it is precisely the close-ups, in which the images strip off, at least temporarily, the weight of their physical reality, when seemingly transforming for instance the surface-oriented prison walls and sheets into white canvases on which the marks appear as abstract paintings. [...] At one point, the camera even goes so far as to focus on a scatological painting, which has been designed in tidy circular motions, therefore turning the steam-cleaning of the cell into the annihilation of a work of art. A white fade concludes the work of the cleaning person who, just moments ago, had lifted the visor of her protective gear to marvel at the image cluelessly. In this moment, the figure stands in for the viewer of the film who is uncertain whether what s/he is dealing with is feces or art. In these images, McQueen turns the prisoners into politically motivated <Action Painters>, who transformed feces in an artistic medium situated between scripture and image.” (Translation by the author, T.N.).

I want to highlight Lloyd's focus on sound- and odor-spaces, which produce the inversion and disruption of the prison system and, by extension, of the colonial power England executed in North Ireland. Both spaces are significantly absent from the film and are replaced by a visual aesthetic that works against an installment of a communal, transindividual movement that disrupts the system. Instead, it establishes a separation, fragmentation, and concentration that finally centers, in the structural middle of the film, on one figure: Bobby Sands emerges as the one person out of the until-then undifferentiated mass (not community) of prisoners, whose body will act as vanishing sign. He is the first hunger striker / death faster who died in the 1981 hunger strike. In narrowing the narration to the one hunger striker / death faster, and making him into and marking him as the quintessential figure, the political impact of the movement is lost to the narration. To circle back to the beginning of the chapter: although the film employs the structures I briefly described earlier – the hero as figure of identification for the viewer to make sense out of the disrupted lives, structures, system – it is no longer able to portray the dynamics involved in the situation of the hunger striker / death faster as object and subject, perpetrator, hero, and victim of a situation, whose body is the quintessential vanishing sign that disrupts the political order in an attempt to establish a new one through the radical act of self-extermination. Instead, the film makes / transforms Bobby Sands into a martyr.¹⁵

In a tripartite structure, the film stylizes Sands as someone who is "reborn" in the middle of the film, as the single person who moves the protest of the PIRA and INLA prisoners to a new stage. In this sense, the tripartite structure of the film can also be read as citing the form of a Christian Triptych, which moves the story from the group to Sands in the middle of the film: a twenty-three-minute talk between Sands and a priest, in which both discuss Sands decision to go on hunger strike (Horton 2012: 126). Seventeen minutes of the talk are filmed in one single shot, and the affective space created through this shot establishes the situation as an intimate theatre. This marks this scene as the pivotal point in the film that transforms Sands, at the same time that he emerges as the singular person, into a symbolic sign (Scarlata 2014: 127) that is not able to question or disturb the existing order in the film, because the political struggle or the North Irish *Troubles* are shut out of the narration. In focusing on him, his weight loss, his handling and mistreatment by the prison wards, and finally, his

15 As Jessica Scarlata formulates it: The "[...] fascination with Sand's body precludes the possibility of understanding the 1981 hunger strike within a wider historical and political framework and turns his death into martyrdom without clear cause." (2014: 128).

death in the prison hospital, the film allows the viewer to get affective impressions of a narrow prison situation.

However, in this depiction the cause for the death fast becomes unclear; the political momentum these death fasts had on the Republican Movement is excluded. In telling the story of the 1981 hunger strike / death fast through the focus on one figure, in using close ups and long shots, in aesthetically highlighting details, in minimizing language as well as separating sound and image, the film stylizes (even if beautifully) the prison situation and politically motivated suicide into a Catholic martyrdom, whose cause is more or less undefined. In interpreting the film as a beautiful aestheticization of the prison situation and the painful death through death fasting, I argue that the film moves the disruptive potential away from the hunger striker / death faster as a vanishing sign to the affective space of the viewer, who is “trapped” in a beautiful depiction of a structural, physical, and mental violence. This violence more or less deprives the viewer of any insights into and understanding of the historical situation. In observing the surface and the details through the camera, the film portrays a Foucauldian micro-physics of power that nevertheless is unable to narrate the story of the hunger strikes / death fast as inhabiting multiple definitional spaces, and as such operating as disruptive signs. In a way, the film removes the disruptive potential from the hunger strike / death fast, and locates it in the state system itself – the brutality of the beatings, the inhumanity of the body searches, the state of the prison cells, and also the conflicts of the single prison wards. Here, and only here, lies the political potential of the film: in the affective perception of the viewer, the system does destroy itself through the filmic depiction of the microphysics of power, from the single cell to the whole corpus of the state.

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