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Small Monuments

Recording and Forgetting in the Work of Steve McQueen

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Queen and Country (2007 – ongoing) is one of the most contended works by artist and film-maker Steve McQueen. It is also a memorial to the British servicemen and women who perished in the 2003 Iraq War. Following a visit to Iraq as an appointed war artist, McQueen decided to ask next-of-kin for photographs of the deceased. He then incorporated the portraits as multiple stamps on facsimile sheets, kept in the vertical glass drawers of a long, minimally designed, oak cabinet, conceived for an audience to handle. In spite of original institutional resistance to the project, the object toured the UK, stopping in sites as diverse as the National Portrait Gallery and the garrison town of Colchester, where it stood on display during the Remembrance period. Philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman has argued that this work aroused a dispute because it implied a commemoration deprived of both ‘settled past and established consensus’,¹ as the military engagement in Iraq had at the time neither been resolved nor collectively lauded.

While *Queen and Country*’s challenging relation to memory and memorialisation may be particularly conspicuous, the work is not, as it has been treated so far, an exception within the artist’s oeuvre, nor is it perhaps even his most radical memorial work. McQueen’s work, especially his video installations and early feature films, form a challenging corpus, in which experimental fiction and documentary paradigms are carried together in equilibrium. The non-discursive way in which they address historical episodes that have barely surfaced in popular Western narratives relates to memory and is even comparable to the construction of monuments, as I suggest in this article. While the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines monuments, in a modern framework, as either structures built with the intention to commemorate or historical structures that have endured through time,² here I understand monuments in a more contemporary, perhaps postmodern sense: as phenomena

1 Georges Didi-Huberman, ‘Commemoration on the High Wire’, in *Steve McQueen: Works*, Isabel Friedli, ed, Schaulager, Basel, 2012, pp 40–42

2 ‘Monument’, *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2015, <http://www.oed.com/>

susceptible to eliciting memory and as material but mutable manifestations of past events. In this light, several works by McQueen can come to be seen as memorials. This outlook poses questions both about his film- and video-based practice and about the rationale of contemporary sites of memory at large.

The aim of *Queen and Country* was to become not only a transportable, manipulable mausoleum, but also a more diffuse monument through the transformation of the portraits into real stamps, which Royal Mail has thus far refused to produce. This very refusal, and the campaign to protest against it,³ have become as much the substance of the work as was its physical component, arguably shifting the focus of this memorial towards memory's pendant: forgetting. The works by McQueen which I will discuss here address the politics of forgetting slightly differently, by tackling the absence of certain memory narratives, historically treated as marginal. Regarding the totality of these works, a debate is taking place as to whether McQueen is pursuing historico-political perspectives⁴ or, on the contrary, systematically drawing attention away from pure content, in favour of structure and recording devices.⁵ The literature that delves into political and racial concerns is at variance with the artist's reluctance to recognise such content,⁶ despite it being patent at times. Another approach, which is ubiquitous in interviews with McQueen, emphasises the importance of the body in his art.⁷ In seeking to exceed these binary constructs and attempting to understand McQueen's singular relation to the time and recounting of events, I compare his work to a new manufacturing of monuments, wherein body and politics become inalienable from each other.

Memory illuminates the central paradox in McQueen's work, namely, as with *Queen and Country*, the constant tension between subject matter and the means of conveying it. Similarly, numerous writings on memory consistently evoke and name its content (memories) and its process (memory) together, as though they were essentially indivisible. In the Western origins of what is now called memory studies, memory was assimilated with mental images: for Plato, these images were misleading copies of worldly objects, unless the competence of remembering was mastered through philosophical dialogue, while Aristotle saw memories as affective marks on the mind, which he influentially compared to a wax tablet, imprintable by perception. The strands that have formed contemporary memory theories, generally approached today as a global concern, were marked in the 1980s by historian Pierre Nora's seven-part, monumental book *Les lieux de mémoire*. Leaning on a telling pun, Nora stated that memory is a paradigm of our day: 'there are sites (*lieux*) of memory, because there no longer are environments (*milieux*) of memory'.⁸ It is because many communities no longer gather spontaneously to remember together that memory has, it can be argued, been recently institutionalised so systematically in compensation. Contrary to 'history', Nora explains that 'memory' belongs to the 'affective and magical' and can only accommodate itself to 'the details that comfort it'; thus it feeds on variables such as 'transfers, screens, censorship, and projections'.⁹ Sites of memory are split between the realms of history and memory, between immediate perceptions and abstract elaborations, as interplays between two distinct approaches to the past. If this condition is fulfilled, many spaces and objects can qualify as sites of memory, from archives

3 See 'Queen and Country', *ArtFund*, <http://www.artfund.org/queenandcountry/index.php>

4 For example, Sarah Whitfield, 'Douglas Gordon/ Steve McQueen', *Burlington Magazine* 145, 2003, pp 46–47.

5 For example, Joanna Lowry, 'Slowing Down: Stillness, Time, and the Digital Image', *Portfolio* 37, 2003, pp 51–53.

6 Steve McQueen, 'Let's Get Physical', interview by Patricia Bickers, *Art Monthly* 202, 1996, pp 1–5. In this interview, McQueen insists that his work does not particularly deal with taboos and does not relate to (his) blackness.

7 For example, Bickers, 'Let's Get Physical', op cit, pp 1–5.

8 Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire, tome I: La République*, Gallimard, Paris, 1984, p xvii. Quotes from documents consulted in their original version were translated by the author of this article.

9 Nora, *Les lieux I*, p xix

and intentional monuments to ceremonies and works of art. These monuments in the broad sense become the crystallising points of intersection between history, memory, and visual culture – and, because of that, the light in which I look at McQueen’s work. Another aspect revealed by historian Krzysztof Pomian accounts for Nora’s comprehensive enterprise and functions as an underlying concern in this study. Pomian explained that others in Nora’s generation had studied history ‘as it were behind the backs of the people who took part in it... He wanted to bring history back... into the memories of ordinary people’.¹⁰

CARIB’S LEAP

In the 1990s, McQueen was one of only three black artists in Great Britain to be represented by a gallery (at the time, Anthony Reynolds Gallery in London). One of McQueen’s most renowned works, the dual-screened video installation *Carib’s Leap* (2002), returns to the island where his parents were born, in Grenada. For McQueen’s first comprehensive retrospective exhibition, at the Basel Schaulager in 2013, *Carib’s Leap* was presented on two colossal LED screens splayed across the institution’s outdoor façade, giving it the status of both a preamble and an epilogue to the exhibition, as well as a monumental projection to glance at in the seemingly incongruous setting of Neumünchenstein, the museum’s industrial district. The left screen features quotidian tropical beach scenes, dominated by fusions of background noises, solid blues and greens and powdery beige: wind in the palm trees, children playing, men fishing, chunks of tin burning on the sand, and no white tourists on the horizon. Towards the end, the film leads to a morgue, where the camera slowly travels above occupied coffins. The video’s discrete editing yields a distinct sense of slow time and open space, with medium-shots that read like tableaux. While it runs in a less-than-thirty-minute loop, its twin video, to the right, has a shorter, twelve-minute cycle. It is a silent and almost monochrome milky grey integral shot, with a cloudy sky like an empty field of vision and, every now and then, the silhouette of a body falling nimbly in slight slow-motion. The work depicts an event that took place in 1651, when Carib rebels were pushed to the northernmost point of the island by the French colonial forces after a series of killings on both sides. When the rebels realised they were defeated, they chose not to surrender but to jump off a rock promontory that now bears the name Morne Sau-teurs, or, in English, Leapers’ Hill or Carib’s Leap.

McQueen considers this episode of history to have been wrongly remembered as an act of desperation rather than hope.¹¹ Considered as a form of resistance, the Caribs’ suicide could have been correlated in popular discourse to similar historical events, such as the mass suicide of Sicarii Jewish rebels around 73 CE, when a Roman legion’s siege proved ineluctable in Masada, a rock plateau in the Judean desert. The Masada ruins have been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site, considered as a symbol of patriotic ‘last stand’ during violent destruction and ‘continuing human struggle between oppression and liberty’.¹² Retrospectively, however, the installation *Carib’s Leap* succeeds in linking up formally with another historical counterpart. The motif of bodies

10 Krzysztof Pomian, quoted in *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*, Aleida Assmann, ed, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, p 134

11 See Jean Fisher, *Steve McQueen, Carib’s Leap/Western Deep*, Documenta, Kassel, 2002, pp 117–125.

12 ‘Masada’, *Unesco World Heritage List*, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1040>

falling from a great height, especially conceived in 2002, inescapably elicits 9/11 imagery. Before the collapse of the Twin Towers, an estimated 200 men and women leaped from windows – an act that led to the widespread use of the term ‘9/11 jumpers’, to debates on their status within patriotic discourse,¹³ and to a snapshot that has become a historical icon, the ‘decisive moment’ photograph *Falling Man* taken by press photographer Richard Drew.

13 See for example Tom Leonard, ‘The 9/11 Victims America Wants to Forget’, *Mail Online*, 2011 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2035720/9-11-jumpers-America-wants-forget-victims-fell-Twin-Towers.html>.

Ambivalently, while McQueen’s installation creates striking, potentially iconic visuals, it simultaneously reflects on historical oblivion. The artist willingly mingles the *Carib’s Leap* narrative with that of a memorial ceremony which he experienced personally, as he heard the Caribs’ story for the first time in 1999 from his mother, standing on the site of Morne Sauteurs on the occasion of his grandmother’s cremation. During his stay in Grenada, McQueen saw no signs commemorating



Steve McQueen, *Carib’s Leap*, 2002, Super 8 mm colour film, transferred to video, sound, 28 minutes 53 seconds, continuous play, Monitor presentation and 35 mm colour film, transferred to video, no sound, 12 minutes 6 seconds, continuous projection, Emanuel Hoffmann-Stiftung, gift of the president, 2012, on permanent loan to the Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Installation view, Steve McQueen, Schaulager, Basel, 16 March to 1 September 2013, photo: Tom Bisig, Basel

the event and no resonance of it within the community,¹⁴ leading to the conclusion that ‘time had done its work’.¹⁵ His double-video installation largely instantiates this statement. One film offers sound, bright colours and assorted actions; it is where the viewer’s attention is directed, while the other, noiseless, white screen translates, almost literally, a faded state of memory. The coffins briefly recorded and left unexplained in the first film constitute the only bridge towards the suicide scene, which itself is left ambiguous. Furthermore, the double screen device evokes a palimpsest, as if archaeologists had dug out a time layer and arranged it horizontally next to the present day. The ideology implied by such a visual apparatus would be that places on Earth have a memory of their own, no matter how unacknowledged by humans. Egyptologist and cultural theorist Aleida Assmann specifically says that what binds past and present geographically is a ‘reconstructed narrative passed on to new generations’,¹⁶ although, as the title of her book indicates, the institutionalisation of this transmission essentially concerns Western sites.

In keeping with the weak transmission of the story of Morne Sauteurs, McQueen does not reconstruct a narrative, nor does he show any intention of passing it on to new generations as described by Assmann. Rather, *Carib’s Leap* conjures phantom presences by remembering an episode that was not bequeathed through official narratives and one that is located on a beach rather than a conventionally propitious memorial site. The events of 1651 are undoubtedly complex in themselves, tangled in a series of massacres and territorial occupations,¹⁷ and inscribed in the wider issue of indigenous cultures dissolving under colonial pressure. Yet, in the end, historiography has conferred on the Caribs’ mass suicide neither an established status of ‘history’ nor one of a resonant ‘story’. Consequently, McQueen’s work does not seek to correct this situation by filling in narrative gaps. The filmic structure of *Carib’s Leap* echoes not only certain facts, but also their state of potential oblivion. As for the nature of the display, the work is always installed for a limited period of time, its dimensions shifting according to location. It bespeaks alternative ways of subsisting in the present: not with words carved in stone, but fleetingly, serendipitously and non-verbally.

CRAFTING NARRATIVES

In an essay about the metaphorical figure of Venus within archives of Atlantic slavery, cultural historian Saidiya Hartman asks how dreaming up narratives can embody life, while still respecting that which we cannot know.¹⁸ Representing the lives of the forgotten is by definition a consoling endeavour, the benefit of which is to provide closure in a place where narratives, especially those stemming from the victims of history, are painfully deficient. However, Hartman warns against the risks of ethical drifts within this practice, notably by asking rhetorically: if narration can afford a home in the world for those who have been violated, for whom is this a refuge, ‘for us or for them’?¹⁹ Therefore, she advocates a form of ‘narrative restraint’, the aim of which, rather than give a voice to those who have not been able to speak, is to imagine what cannot be verified by creating an experiential space, in which those who have disappeared are made visible but only during the

14 Arguably, McQueen’s impressions of the event’s general impact prevail here over individual memorial or historiographical efforts; for instance, a modest monument with a carved Christian cross was indeed erected on the site of Morne Sauteurs.

15 Charles-Arthur Boyer, ‘Steve McQueen: rêver dans le bruit du monde’, *Artpress* 287, 2003, p 33

16 Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*, op cit, p 322

17 The island of Grenada was originally inhabited by the Arawaks (mainly by Taino People), before the Caribs violently displaced them around 1000 CE. Half a millennium later, the Caribs were themselves conquered by the French, after which the land was passed from hand to hand between France and Britain before being briefly invaded by US forces in 1983.

18 Saidiya Hartman, ‘Venus in Two Acts’, *Small Axe* 26, 2008, pp 1–14

19 *Ibid*, p 3

moment of their vanishing – that is, precisely the moment usually recorded in archives and remembered by history.²⁰ By providing, in terms of narrative, only a vision of bodies falling, *Carib's Leap* might not prove comforting in the way the genres of the traditional historical novel or film can be, by granting an interior life to characters having left no obvious traces (for instance through a memoir). Yet in limiting itself to an 'exterior' vision of the Caribs leaping, McQueen's work proves conscious of a crucial fact: that the capacity to remember does not equal the power to recover forgotten pieces of the past.

The links that bind memory, archives and historical fiction thus appear particularly labyrinthine. Touching on this matter in an essay entitled 'The Site of Memory', novelist Toni Morrison affirms that the essential distinction to observe is not one between fact and fiction, but rather that between fact and truth, 'because facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot'.²¹ At times, certain historical truths leave no palpable traces. Like Hartman's, Morrison's prime examples are the 'inner lives' of slaves who, when they wrote, rarely delved into their emotions. In such cases, where direct testimonies are lacking, Morrison recommends, by way of fiction, a movement that begins with an image or a sensory impression and leads towards the final object of composition (in her case, a written story based on history). In order to achieve this, one must turn to elements that have little to do in appearance with the examined historical moment. Thus, instead of a traditional archive, it will be a 'dimly recalled figure', a voice, or 'the corner of a room' that would conduct Morrison to reconstruct what she calls the truth.²² This approach serves a comparison not so much with McQueen's research and creative process, but rather with the process of memory itself as it is triggered by McQueen's work. While the ghostly vision of bodies falling in silence and the textured scenes of seaside humdrum in *Carib's Leap* do not reconstruct the Caribs' mass suicide, they establish salient imagery capable of eliciting a historical event, almost by association of ideas. In this sense, both Morrison's and McQueen's approaches are akin to the Proustian, unexpected but powerful tea-soaked madeleine, which sufficed to faithfully conjure an entire era, as the narrator's childhood in Combray emerged through sensory associations after each bite.²³

WESTERN DEEP

Carib's Leap was conceived to form a conceptual diptych with *Western Deep* (2002), a twenty-four minute Super 8 colour film transferred to video, wherein the viewer is taken down, as literally as is possible in film, into TauTona Mine or Western Deep N°3 Shaft as it was known under Apartheid: a gold mine west of Johannesburg, home to the planet's deepest mining operations. The film begins with the edited recording of the descent into the mine, in a scene lasting over six minutes – a long duration in cinematographic time. The video installation's screening room, which can only be entered at the beginning of the film, is bathed in darkness and often filled with large steps on which to stand or sit. After the initial filmed descent, the rest of the claustrophobic journey inside TauTona is made up of static-shot points of view which, antithetically, never cease to tremble, as though to remind us that

20 Ibid, p 12

21 Toni Morrison, 'The Site of Memory', in Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T Minh-ha and Cornel West, eds, *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1990, p 303

22 Ibid, pp 299–305

23 Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu, tome I: Du côté de chez Swann*, NRF, Paris, 1919, pp 65–68

the camera's eye can only be objective in theory, or as if to suggest that mobile surveillance cameras had decided to become witnesses of the mine's activities. Total silence and startling, loud uproars alternate, along with close-up views of manual labour, the shaking of blinding head-lights, long corridors of pipes, faces drenched with sweat, thermometers stuck in mouths, and a mysterious penultimate scene in which lines of bare-chested, predominantly black workers exhaustedly step on and off a bench in synchrony,²⁴ hammered by a flashing red light and a honk-like signal.

What comes to the fore is a strong sense of being trapped, which could seem surprising given that *Western Deep*, meant to function as a metonymy for a miner's entire day, is an experience that lasts less than half an hour for the viewer. This physical impact, however, can be explained by considering that transcribed phenomena are sometimes perceived as strongly as first-hand witnessing. Susan Sontag once explained that watching real-life surgical operations was far less shocking to her than seeing one in Michelangelo Antonioni's 1972 documentary *Chung Kuo-Cina*. Sontag justifies this postulation by qualifying the particular vulnerability of the viewer, a 'spectator twice over, spectator of events already shaped, first by the participants and second by the image maker'.²⁵ This particular prisoner-like condition of the spectator is accentuated, in *Western Deep*, by the loud, enveloping sound. Here, the 'image makers', McQueen and cinematographer Sean Bobbitt, play further with spectatorial expectations. They shirk the conventions of the point-of-view shot (the widespread editing technique that shows, after the protagonist, the object of their gaze) by not showing what should physically be situated in the counter-shot, thus disorienting viewers accustomed to classical Western tropes of editing and accentuating the sense of panic inside the mine. As TJ Demos demonstrated in an article about filmic intervals and McQueen's discerning use of darkness, *Western Deep* stands out precisely 'for what it does *not* show'.²⁶ And as McQueen has suggested, darkness, like a veil over someone's eyes, 'says more about the image than if it were visible',²⁷ as it induces an effort in seeing and discerning. Thus, although *Western Deep* presents novel imagery, it does not aspire to become an authoritative document of labour in TauTona Mine, or a temporally situated record. Like *Carib's Leap*, it does not quite belong to the category of fiction either. Rather, McQueen's works here are non-verbal, at times dark and uncomfortable films that do not dream up interior lives for their protagonists.

Precisely, one of the most destructive aspects in both the actuality and the aftermath of systemic exploitation (as with Transatlantic slavery) and exploitative labour conditions (for instance mining in TauTona, where several deaths due to poor safety measures occur yearly) is the absence of a voice given to victims of these situations.²⁸ Yet this silence resulting from a structural censorship, perhaps because it is equated with a 'nothingness' that is hard to tackle formally, is rarely reflected in historical period films. When this silence is indeed tackled, the outcome can be disturbing, almost physically, for the audience. Abdellatif Kechiche's film *Vénus Noire* (2010) constitutes a turning point for this phenomenon. The film retraces the adult life of Saartjie Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman who was exhibited in freak shows in Europe during the early nineteenth century under the name Hottentot Venus, and whose body

24 This exercise is carried out once a year to test the miners' physical capacities. McQueen compared its brutality to the imagery of slave ships. McQueen, 'Dialogue with Stuart Comer', Minneapolis, Walker Art Center, 9 November 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KM_5z9WvUc.

25 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* [1977], Penguin, London, 2008, pp 68–69

26 TJ Demos, 'The Art of Darkness: On Steve McQueen', *October* 114, 2005, p 61 (emphasis in the original)

27 McQueen, 'Dialogue with Stuart Comer', op cit

28 See 'AngloGold Ashanti Annual Reports', 2000–2014, <http://www.anglogoldashanti.com/en/Media/> and 'South Africa: Sacrificing Life and Safety for a Profit', SAM Project (Queen's University), http://www.queensu.ca/samp/migrationnews/article.php?Mig_News_ID=4128&Mig_News_Issue=23&Mig_News_Cat=8.

after death was dissected and displayed as an example of ‘abnormality’ by naturalist Georges Cuvier. Like the miners in *Western Deep*, Baartman in *Vénus Noire* is depicted almost exclusively as a body performing what it was requested to perform. Moreover, the two films are comparable in the unusual psychological distance they establish with their protagonists. Given that narrative constructions are often more conventionalised in feature films than in video art, *Vénus Noire* sheds light on *Western Deep*’s singularities. Certain critics condemned Kechiche’s approach and accused him of confining the character in a ‘spectacular spiral’, hence turning her into ‘pure exteriority’.²⁹ The fact that the film does not model an ‘interiority’ and does not imagine complex dialogues for Baartman duplicates her condition as a person who was objectified. Viewers might indeed perceive Baartman’s demeaning freak show performances as being inflicted on them and thus find them physically unbearable to watch, just like the dark, loud shots that remain in TauTona Mine and never resurface to ground-level can convey a sense of suffocation and entrapment. But the main reason why these scenes become unbearable is because they are never followed by a relieving moment of ‘requital’, be it in the form of an acquaintance with the ‘true’ personality of Baartman, perhaps through her anger, her hopes, or simply her perspective on her life, which could make up for (or comfort us from) the agency she was largely denied.

Bringing up Baartman, however, art historian Ian McLean criticised ‘victim narratives’ that deny agency to people who performed a role – often as ‘savage’ – and thus somewhat co-created their image within Western imagination.³⁰ And indeed both *Vénus Noire* and *Western Deep* maintain this ambivalence: although under coercion, the characters of Baartman and the miners are shown as having the agency at least to ‘choreograph’ certain labour gestures which they perform. Moreover, these films can be established as historical witnesses (including of recent history, such as labour in a South African mine) not because of a process of personification that allows viewers to identify or empathise with protagonists, but thanks to an essentially non-verbal performance carried primarily by the bodies of the protagonists, by a startling treatment of sound and by the irregular rhythm of editing. Exemplifying McQueen’s claim that ‘cruelty is formal’,³¹ this approach makes memorable specific events and situations while maintaining a narrative restraint that prevents the distortion of the protagonists’ conditions of existence.

SMALL MEMORIES

Certainly, the creation of pictures and especially moving pictures devoted to a historical moment devoid of such imagery is a powerful act. Whether it is highly fictionalised or an attempt at faithful reconstruction, a film can potentially compensate for missing documentary traces, especially if it is relatively contemporary to the time-period being depicted. As the historian Marc Ferro has noted in his seminal essays on the interlaced influences between film and history, popular visions held as historical epitomes often stem from the imagination of film-makers.³² Witness Sergei Eisenstein’s sequence of the 1917 storming of the Winter Palace in his film *October* (1928), stills of which even surfaced to illustrate history school-

29 Mathieu Macheret, ‘Vénus noire’, *Critikat*, <http://www.critikat.com/actualite-cine/critique/venus-noire.html>

30 Ian McLean, ‘Reinventing the Savage’, *Third Text* 118, vol 26, no 5, September 2012, pp 607–610

31 McQueen, ‘Dialogue with Stuart Comer’, *op cit*

32 Marc Ferro, *Cinéma et histoire*, Gallimard, Paris, 1993, p 218

books without mention of the source, as ‘genuine’ records of the event were wanting.³³ This conflation between source and reconstruction can lead us to question the absence, in English, of a verbal distinction to qualify history as a past experience and history as a discipline or intellectual operation – especially since the latter is meant to make the former intelligible. Other languages and cultures emphasise the fundamental difference between the two concepts more, such as German, which mainly uses the term *Geschichte* for past events and *Historie* for history as intellectual operation. Yet the argumentation and rhetoric of certain memory studies, such as Nora’s *Les lieux de mémoire*, are influenced by the opposite phenomenon: the fact that further coalescing takes place in French and other Latin languages wherein vocabulary does not even differentiate between the notions of story and history (*histoire/histoire*). Thus, everyday Western vocabulary tends to blend the events, the processes that turn the events into discourse, and the discourses themselves, leaving very little linguistic transparency to the operations that shape what we ultimately remember as a society.

This entanglement is closely related to the question of history as written by its victors and to the tension between grand metanarratives and small or local narratives, as they were diagnosed by philosopher and sociologist Jean-François Lyotard. One of Lyotard’s core contentions in *La condition postmoderne* is the characteristic end of grand narratives through a generalised incredulity regarding metanarratives.³⁴ Legitimising and often institutional, metanarratives provide a totalising account to disperse events and notions, thus aiming to legitimise an aspiring canon or one already established by governing forces. As the anthropologist and memory scholar Paul Connerton interprets them, metanarratives also ingeniously pretend not to be narratives,³⁵ employing factual communication registers to establish their authority more imperceptibly. In that sense, their purpose resembles that of Michel Foucault’s ‘total history’: to seek the reconstitution of an ‘overall form of a civilisation’ and a significance common to all the phenomena of an epoch.³⁶ The distracted beach-goers and anonymous falling bodies in *Carib’s Leap* or the miners in *Western Deep* would typically be excluded – especially as protagonists – from total history or grand narratives and the compliant memory which they yield. The postmodern theory of small narratives suggests that, by contrast, small, localised and fragmented narratives are being born, stories stemming from ‘smaller’ subjects whose aim is not to produce a majority discourse or promote heroes designed to legitimise social institutions. Instead of consensus, they yield dissension, and may even produce profitable ‘blind spots’.³⁷

Although he follows a different argumentation, Nora situates the atomisation of memory in the same postmodern era of nascent small narratives, marking the end of a joint national memory roughly after World War II.³⁸ While this shift means welcoming new potential storytellers from the former margins of society, the fragmentation of memory additionally implies an unsteady of collective memory. The philosophical and sociological concept of collective memory, postulated by Maurice Halbwachs, suggests that individual understandings of the past are forged by group consciousness, each sum of individual memories constituting a ‘point of view on collective memory’.³⁹ Not coincidentally, the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, during which European and

- 33 The filmed images of the storming of the Winter Palace were in fact recorded in 1920 during a mass spectacle restaging events that had taken place in 1917. These images became famous through Eisenstein’s film and have since been popularly identified as visual documents and icons of 1917 Soviet Russia.
- 34 Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne*, Minuit, Paris, 1979, pp 7–9
- 35 Paul Connerton, *The Spirit of Mourning: History, Memory, and the Body*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp 2–5
- 36 Michel Foucault, *L’archéologie du savoir*, Gallimard, Paris, 1969, pp 15–20
- 37 Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne*, op cit, pp 98–100
- 38 Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire*, III *Les France*, 3 *De l’Archive à l’Emblème*, Gallimard, Paris, 1992, pp 985–998
- 39 Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective* [1950], Albin Michel, Paris, 1997, p 94



Steve McQueen, *Western Deep*, 2002, Super 8 mm colour film, transferred to video, sound, 24 minutes 12 seconds, screened in a cinema-like space, Emanuel Hoffmann-Stiftung, Gift of the president, 2012, on permanent loan to the Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Installation view, Steve McQueen, Schaulager, Basel, 16 March to 1 September 2013, photo: Tom Bisig, Basel

American nationalism flourished, was also the moment when, as historian Partha Mitter put it, ‘societies became acutely aware of the discontinuities between past and present’.⁴⁰ Thus, the sense of unity inherent to modern nationhood was sustained by the simultaneous birth of a historically minded collective memory. In return, to suggest the breaking down of a unified national narrative due to the rise, amongst other things, of post-modern small narratives, implies that collective memory would be similarly affected. But the partial dismantling of the latter is more difficult to study than that of grand narratives, as investigating fragmented collective memories would likely require long-term and thorough collaborations between sociologists, neurologists, psychologists, and art and cultural historians. Nonetheless, one can start finding clues regarding these emerging ‘small memories’ by examining the interfaces between humans and collective memory, namely public monuments. McQueen’s

40 Partha Mitter, ‘Monuments and Memory for Our Times’, *South Asian Studies* 29, 2013, p 163

works, which elicit memory and are material but mutable manifestations of past events, approximate postmodern monuments. In a work like *Western Deep*, McQueen plays havoc with the tropes that are traditionally used to immortalise events, first by choosing a subject usually treated as marginal by grand narratives and second, methodologically, by synthesising conventional documentary tropes with his own alternative narrative inventions. For instance, *Western Deep* acquaints the viewer with a recurring figure, a man with short dreadlocks and a thermometer in his mouth, who often performs looks-to-camera – a conventional documentary sign of genuineness.⁴¹ Despite this familiar process, the overall structure of the film is that of an unusual and thought-provoking vertical time and vertical unfolding, as opposed to classical horizontal development. That is, the film visibly follows a geographically vertical path by taking its viewer down into the earth, but it also follows a temporally vertical course by developing, in lieu of a chronological sequence, a piling-up of strenuous and disturbing gestures related to mine labour.

STEVE MCQUEEN'S MONUMENTS

McQueen's films are thus neither condensed, comprehensive dramas, nor objective, corroborating records, but rather sweeping devices in which the viewer takes part, slowly 'experiencing' a historical event. The lack of guiding voice-over commentaries is a defining feature of this status. Film-maker and theorist Jean-Louis Comolli compellingly suggested that 'ours is not an age of images, as the *doxa* keeps repeating', but rather a time marked by the conflicting yet symbiotic relationship between words and images.⁴² Whether in journals and billboards or on the internet and television, captions are continually present to chaperone our reading of pictures. McQueen's works defy this tendency. In 2007, he produced a short, fifty-four-second-long video called *Unexploded*, which, uncharacteristically, is presented on a television monitor. Given that the imagery of *Unexploded* is also televisual-like – made up of short shots with a dusty quality typical of international reporting and the immediate aftermath of a catastrophe – its ambiguous title and absence of sound appear almost uncanny. The film was shot in 2003, before the creation of *Queen and Country*, when McQueen was commissioned by the Imperial War Museum to create a piece in response to the war in Iraq. Despite a visual appearance similar to televised news, the content of the film involves events that would typically be omitted by that genre: a bomb landed on a building in Basra and partly demolished it but failed to burst; its 'unexploded' status is what remained officially acknowledged. A hand-held camera presents the viewer with eight immobile takes from various angles, including only one general view to provide context, and seven textured close-ups of damaged architecture. The considerable crater left by the unexploded weapon can only suggest how massive the damage would have been had the bomb indeed exploded. While these short straightforward shots approximate the 'no comment' recordings frequently broadcast by channels like Euronews, the absolutely mute, almost solemn, and puzzle-like quality of *Unexploded* relates more to a series of tableaux. The work feigns duplication of common imagery of the war in Iraq, yet it uses editing and close-ups –

41 This standard, seen as testifying to spontaneous filming conditions, contrasts with the fiction film convention that actors should not look straight to the camera.

42 Jean-Louis Comolli, *Corps et cadre: Cinéma, éthique, politique, 2004–2010*, Verdier, Lagrasse, 2012, p 29

in the sense of actually entering the building, far beyond the remit of a news reporter – to interrogate this very imagery and its impact on the rapidity with which events are catalogued and stored. The foremost achievement of these images is to slow down the habitual pace of watching news-reporting imagery, such that, in its entirety, the work suggests that merely knowing these facts does not equate to understanding them, but that the viewer (and indeed the maker) of the images needs to appropriate the facts in order to *remember* them. That is, the work's temporality and the minimal information it provides fulfil a function more similar to that of a monument than a continuous content feed.

A dominant code of documentary is to create a visual language which intimates that the filmed events would have unfolded similarly had



Steve McQueen, *Unexploded*, 2007, Super 8 mm colour film, transferred to video, no sound, 54 seconds, courtesy of the artist, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris and Thomas Dane Gallery, London

cameras and cameramen not been present to record them. In McQueen's works, faithfulness to natural filming conditions, signalled by darkness, unpolished noises and a hand-held camera, all translate as supposed guarantors of a truthful testimony. Structurally, however, McQueen never hides the fact that the *mise-en-scène* resulting from editing and installation in fact generates the most impact, for example the diptych juxtaposition in *Carib's Leap*, the heavy use of sound and simulation of underground entrapment in *Western Deep*, or the muting of *Unexploded*. Thus, these works do not try to replicate for the viewers the sensation of 'having been there', but instead engage their bodies in other, less illusionistic ways. McQueen's instructions regarding his projections are generally highly specific, although they can acclimate to individual sites. Most of his video rooms measure six by four by three metres, with the screen creating an immersive effect by occupying an entire wall. Such monumentality, as curator and critic Okwui Enwezor has remarked, is paradoxically quite unspectacular.⁴³ It is instead almost meditative, in part because, rather than astonishing the senses, McQueen's use of space and sound endeavours to spark his viewers' awareness of themselves,⁴⁴ of their own breathing.⁴⁵ Made to navigate between televisual-like yet utterly silent videos and monumental projections whose bass notes are so deep they shake the floor, the viewers can acknowledge ways in which they have interiorised certain stimuli. Instead of creating the illusion of transporting the audience to a distant location or time, these works constantly remind the viewers of where they stand in the present moment. The particularly embodied perception generated by McQueen's production strategies contrasts with Nora's description of a memory always-already 'seized by history', a memory 'which we no longer inhabit' and whose end is not a visceral but a historical understanding of the past.⁴⁶ Rather, McQueen's focus on physical sensations and gestures evokes what Nora calls 'real memory': the most spontaneous and elusive strain of memories, which resides in gestures, in imparted *savoir-faire*, and in all that which 'the body knows'.⁴⁷ Although Nora does not dwell on 'real memory' and uses it as a foil for institutional 'sites of memory', he favours it almost nostalgically as it represents a less self-conscious bodily understanding opposed to the epochal, highly institutionalised obligation of remembrance. In that case, one may wonder: how can monuments to historical events be predicated on the seemingly antithetical category of a bodily, spontaneous memory?

Hunger, McQueen's 2008 debut feature film, is a decisive step towards answering this question. Co-written with Irish playwright Enda Walsh, it relates the story of the 1981 hunger strike in Maze Prison, County Down, which was led by Provisional IRA member Bobby Sands to demand a return of political status for prisoners. The strike ended with the death by self-starvation of ten protesters, including Sands. Comparably to *Carib's Leap*, the movie tackles the question of suicide as a form of resistance, whereby bodies are taken to a place in which they are no longer restrained. As with McQueen's previously discussed works, *Hunger* is a film dedicated to a historical event bound to be forgotten, at least within popular narratives. McQueen said about *Hunger* that it tells a story which 'had been swept underneath the carpet for twenty-seven years'.⁴⁸ Although the events ultimately proved

43 Okwui Enwezor, 'Haptic Visions: The Films of Steve McQueen' in *Steve McQueen*, ICA, London, 1999, p 40

44 McQueen, 'The Human Body as Political Weapon' interview by Gary Crowds, *Cineaste* 34, 2009, p 25

45 McQueen, 'Let's Get Physical', op cit, p 25

46 Nora, *Les lieux I*, pp xxiv-xxvi

47 Ibid, p xxv

48 Steve McQueen, 'Venice Biennale' interview by Alastair Sooke, *Daily Telegraph*, 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/venice-biennale/5394613/Venice-Biennale-Steve-McQueen-interview.html>

material to advancing Anglo-Irish dialogue, governmental inflexibility regarding prison regime despite a deathly hunger strike was not a gladly broadcast narrative. Set in this context, *Hunger* belongs with McQueen's predominantly non-verbal works that endeavour to reconstitute not only a series of historical events, but also the sensory phenomena involved. While very few dialogues appear in the film, McQueen instructed his sound recordist to 'capture everything' on set, not with a mind to realism or faithfulness but to enhancing the audience's experience – an experience which would then be informed by other factors than the usually emphasised plot and cinematography.⁴⁹ Often replacing verbal narration, sounds that are rarely heard with such precision in cinema participate in telling the story of the strike: exhausted or courage-seeking sighs, the muffled bashing of riot officers' batons and shields, the sound of hair tearing out, of a needle entering a vein. Moreover, the Maze 'blanket protest', which involved smearing excrement on cell walls or the prisoners' resistance to being showered, is filmed recurrently and in detail, creating a pervading visual leitmotiv. The vanishing body of Sands, incarnated by actor Michael Fassbender, who underwent ten weeks of supervised fasting, is filmed closely yet unspectacularly, providing the equivalent of a non-documentary record for the bodily reality of hunger striking.

Similarly, McQueen's third and most recent feature film, *12 Years a Slave* (2013), addresses a proportionately neglected moment in history: slavery in the United States, more precisely the experiences of African-Americans forcibly transported South during the nineteenth century in the context of plantation economy reorganisation. The text at the origin of this work belongs to the category mentioned by Hartman and Morrison, the too scarce first-person accounts of life under slavery, usually published by abolitionist presses. Here, the scenario follows Solomon Northup's eponymous memoir, which recounts the twelve years he spent from 1841 as a slave in Louisiana, kidnapped from his life as a free man in Saratoga, New York. Like *Hunger*, *12 Years a Slave* creates a platform for an important historical narrative that lacked widespread representation. Moreover, the film focuses on translating experiential features of an individual history. One scene in particular explores embodiment and pain in a manner comparable to their treatment in *Hunger*: punished for having attacked a slave master, Northup (played by Chiwetel Ejiofor) is hung from a tree for an entire day, his toes touching the ground just enough to prevent deathly strangulation. Faint guttural choking sounds make the mostly static scene, which lasts several minutes, seem even longer and more perturbing to watch. Underneath the oak where the scene was shot, bodies of slaves who had been hanged from its branches still lay; and because of the memorial potential of this location, McQueen explained that shooting the scene involved not only acting according to script but also a form of re-enacting.⁵⁰ In parallel to directing the film, McQueen produced the artwork *Lynching Tree* (2013). It is a light-box photograph with colour transparency, which in appearance simply shows a picturesque woodland. But hidden below this tree situated near New Orleans – in the same area where the film was shot – also lie the graves of lynched slaves. The sites' apparent obliviousness to these historical events is confronted by this work and by the 're-

49 McQueen, 'Breathless', interviewed by Jeff Reichert, *Reverse Shot* 24, 2009

50 John Horn, 'Steve McQueen Films 12 Years a Slave on Familiar Territory', *LA Times*, 2013, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/moviesnow/la-et-mn-12-years-a-slave-steve-mcqueen-20131020-story.html#page=1>

enactment' filming of a scene in *12 Years a Slave*, which both point to the trees as monuments.

Yet, beyond the scene of the tree as a gallows, *12 Years a Slave* contrasts in many ways with the other works discussed in this article. While the tone of the film is influenced by memory – a memoir being the genre to which it adheres – its structure and plot are much more determined by the mind frame of a fairly classical history film. The comparatively conventional scenario, editing and quick rhythm can be understood by noting the particular stakes, for this work, of historical accuracy. Indeed, Northup's is one of the longest and most detailed known slave narratives; unlike many others, it also discloses real names and locations. When McQueen first came across the book, he felt that, as a literary document, it had the potential to be considered analogous to Anne Frank's diary, and deplored that it had never acquired this status.⁵¹ Thus, it was also perhaps a political memorial strategy that led John Ridley's screenplay and McQueen's directing to follow the 1853 text closely, yielding, as a result, a demonstrative and explanatory film, which in this sense is the opposite of *Hunger*.

On the contrary, McQueen's second feature film *Shame* (2011) seems to be readily apprehended, like *Hunger*, as belonging to the ambivalent category of artists' cinema.⁵² More experimental and experiential than *12 Years a Slave*, but less overtly political or related to memory than the two other films, it shows a moment in the life of a male sex addict in his thirties, living in New York and experiencing, beyond a flawless professional and public image, constant fetishised sexual gratification, anguish, ritualised or compulsive behaviour, and frustration when his sister re-enters his life expecting moral support. The three feature films have in common the fact they convey 'small narratives' and communicate the experience of paramount yet neglected historical and societal phenomena, including sexual addiction and the manners in which digital and material cultures feed into it. With *12 Years a Slave*, it is possible to assume that the style – which is openly identifiable with commercial cinema, foreign to the aesthetics of most artists' cinema and video art – was chosen intentionally as a way of circulating through different spaces and markets and thus reaching larger audiences. In this study of film-based monuments, it would be problematic to confuse cinema as a social institution with 'film' as a medium (an expression that additionally amalgamates, almost by convention, monitor and projected images and the material formats of video and film).⁵³ In the case of McQueen, these dimensions all seem to converge. This is made visible even by the famed awards never before combined, from the Turner Prize to an Oscar, which he has received for different film-based works.⁵⁴ Yet very few cases exist of actual co-production between the art world and the film industry, even though the barrier separating these systems seems increasingly blurred. This can partly be explained by the recent practice of to-and-froing between museum and cinema of several artists, mainly European-based practitioners who came to prominence around the 1990s (such as McQueen, Gillian Wearing, Eric Baudelaire, Douglas Gordon, Philippe Parreno, Sam Taylor-Wood, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige), as well as by contemporary art's general expanding popularity and occasional 'blockbuster'

51 McQueen, '12 Years a Slave Was a Film that "No One Was Making"', *NPR Broadcast*, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/2013/10/24/240288057/12-years-a-slave-was-a-film-that-no-one-was-making>

52 This emerging category often refers to filmic works that seem to find a place neither strictly in the art gallery nor within the film industry. Media and film theorist Maeve Connolly's research on the subject has focused on other characteristics: the 'sense of ownership implicit in the notion' of artists' cinema as well as artists' claims upon cinema through their film-based practice. See: Maeve Connolly, *The Place of Artists' Cinema: Space, Site and Screen*, Intellect, Bristol, 2009.

53 In 'The Art of Darkness' (pp 73–79), TJ Demos addresses the material and phenomenological distinctions between film and video in the context of McQueen's work. He explains that the 'projected image' is a particularly relevant art historical framework to understand a practice that 'works across video and film'. McQueen's more recent feature films, conceived and distributed not within the art world but essentially inside the film industry, complicate this matter in terms of both production and medium.

54 Among many other distinctions, McQueen received the Turner Prize in 1999 as well as three accolades which hold contrasting connotations in the film industry: for *Hunger*, the Caméra d'Or at Cannes and a BAFTA Outstanding Debut Award, and a 'Best Picture Oscar' for *12 Years a Slave* at the Academy Awards, where McQueen was the first black director to be granted the prize.



Steve McQueen, *Hunger*, 2008, 35 mm colour film, 96 minutes, screen capture, UK, Ireland: Film4, Northern Ireland Screen, Blast! Films, still reproduced courtesy of Pathé Productions Limited

impact.⁵⁵ In fact, it has been argued that McQueen was able to use his public profile, shaped by his notoriety in the film industry, to promote previous artworks, including the politically charged *Queen and Country*.⁵⁶

Undoubtedly, the production and distribution models respective to the systems of the art world and the film industry influence the works' relation to the politics of memory and determine the type of engagement made possible for the audience. Glancing up-close at *Unexploded's* TV monitor, contemplating a monumental outdoor version of *Carib's Leap* at the Schaulager or sitting for a couple of hours in a dark room with *Hunger* and possibly popcorn imply different conceptions of time, space, seeing, hearing and embodied spectatorship. The loss of control regarding the conditions of film projection inherent to the passage from gallery to cinema is especially striking when installation rigour and site-specificity have been so central to an artist's practice. However, McQueen has begun exploring crossover possibilities between the distribution and projection conventions of art and cinema, in ways that specifically address embodiment and memorialisation. In 2002, London's abandoned, dark, subterranean old Lumiere cinema offered a particularly opportune, materialised and located experience for the open screening of *Western Deep*. As for *Hunger*, its British and Irish premiere site in Belfast was symbolic and resembled both site-specific projection and commemoration, as the city's mayor in 2008 was Tom Hartley of the Sinn Féin party and former friend of Bobby Sands. The screening, hosted by the Belfast Film Festival which grew from another festival founded by ex-Maze prisoners, was attended by two former hunger strikers.⁵⁷

In all, *Hunger* was received favourably in this context and by survivors of the strike, including by the writer and social scientist Laurence

55 For instance, the number of visits to Tate Britain, notably for the Turner Prize, have greatly increased. This was likely prompted by media coverage and by the event's relations with film through its sponsor since 1990, Channel 4, which also broadcast the reality-TV show 'The Turner Prize Challenge'. See Amy Sargeant, 'Crossing Borders: Artist Film-Makers in the New Decade', *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 9, no 3, 2012, pp 503–504.

56 Sargeant, 'Crossing Borders', p 514

57 Laurence McKeown, 'Hunger', *History Ireland* 17, 2009

McKeown who deemed the film irreproachable in conveying the experience at the Maze.⁵⁸ The work yielded historical consensus despite the fact that, unlike other recent films on the Irish Troubles such as Oliver Hirschbiegel's *Five Minutes of Heaven* (2009), *Hunger* does not expound on historical context, and, unlike classical monuments to historical figures, it does not generate a canonical narrative of Sands' life. As a nonconforming film, it has been argued that *Hunger* is preferable to a 'series of historical facts to be cognitively assimilated but too quickly forgotten by audiences'.⁵⁹ This remark becomes particularly relevant if the film's purpose is considered that of a versatile site of memory – one that can be transported at the whim of the film's projections. As advocated through Hartman's notion of narrative restraint, *Hunger* and McQueen's video works comply with an ethics of memorialising and historical art making. Instead of filling narrative gaps, they focus on bodily events, such as Sands' vanishing; instead of dreaming up grand psychological, ideological portraits, these filmic works, as effective monuments, reflect on and make memorable series of events and gestures otherwise forgotten by grand narratives. Thus, McQueen's works, which address certain subject matters from oft-ignored perspectives, align themselves with small narratives not only in their content, but more originally in their relation to memory, creating what could be called, by analogy, 'small monuments'.

The etymology of monument comes from the Latin *monere*, which means to warn. Throughout the Roman Empire, erecting monuments was tantamount to writing the story of leaders on stone, reminding and warning the people to be respectful of gods and governors. As envisaged here, the notion of a monument and the forms of memorialising which it accommodates no longer have a necessary interrelation with hierarchy. Nora's multifaceted sites of memory signal a shift away from the 'Latin' definition of monuments. Original, official 'sites of memory' in France emerged during the Third Republic (1870–1940), a time when the structures that fostered collective identity still stood strong. Although Nora inherits Halbwachs's notion of collective memory, the communities to which he refers as he tackles later periods evolve into more abstract groups, defined by diffuse symbols and ideas rather than concrete cohabitation. Accordingly – although perhaps ambiguously – Nora, as we have seen, lets the term 'site' cover material and diffuse cases alike, from sculptural monuments and paintings to minutes of silence. In fact, certain memory scholars have criticised the expression 'sites of memory', insisting that 'process' is preferable.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, a site evokes something that a process does not: a space towards which memory converges and which memory transforms, generally in virtue of more solemn and interiorised behaviours. Monuments can thus be deemed sites of memory to the extent that they have the power to crystallise memory, not in an institutional sense, but according to the experience of the monument's 'audience'. In this way, historian Sylvie Lindeperg has used the adapted expression 'portable sites of memory' to qualify films that have decisively shaped attitudes to and understandings of history.⁶¹ McQueen's works operate similarly: because of their originative perspectives on historical events, *Hunger*, *Unexploded*, *Carib's Leap*, and *Western Deep* may also acquire the status of portable sites of memory, while remaining 'small' in the Lyotardian sense of the term.

58 Ibid

59 Toni Ross, 'Resonances of Nineteenth-Century Realism in Steve McQueen's *Hunger*', in Steven Allen and Laura Hubner, eds, *Framing Film, Cinema and the Visual Arts*, Intellect, Bristol, 2012, p 181

60 Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, eds, *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 2009, pp 1–11

61 Sylvie Lindeperg, '*Nuit et brouillard*', *Un film dans l'histoire*, Odile Jacob, Paris, 2007

Bound to deal with phenomena that are at once commonplace and impenetrable, literature about memory has invariably leaned on metaphors. Indeed, the poetic Proustian madeleine, which crystallises spontaneous, intimate memory, has in recent years been supplanted in popularity by the more alarming allegories of writer Jorge Luis Borges, as in the tale of Ireneo Funes, the man cursed with an absolute memory in the short story *Funes el memorioso* (Funes the Memorious, 1942), or as with the obsessive map at the scale of a mile to a mile in *Del rigor en la ciencia* (On Rigor in Science, 1946). McQueen, who is less nostalgic than Proust and more aware of memory's brittle, non-linear constructs than Funes, creates monuments that are reflexive concerning the disappearance of the memories they contain. The answer to the question previously posed regarding the apparent contradiction between small historical monuments and a spontaneous bodily memory lies in the moderation of McQueen's works, in their approach based on subtraction rather than accumulation. Jean-Louis Comolli remarks that, despite momentous technical progress, films increasingly favour complex scenarios and conventional forms; he thus deplores the filmic compulsion to *show* everything as if to say: 'Why exclude from the field the things that, according to one's beliefs, can only gain value by being seen?'⁶² By contrast, McQueen's works 'exclude from the field' a great deal of elements, creating a privileged space for the unseen and the unexplained, and a space to think about forgetting. Further, Comolli affirms that ours is an epoch of systematic adding, whereas subtraction, perhaps a more complex operation, implies suppressing, distinguishing, taking time, and taking the responsibility for 'making a dent in the world'.⁶³ Similarly, to experience McQueen's films, one needs to endure – but also bask in – multiple absences: be it that of sound, exposition, expected counter-shots or voice-overs, all of which McQueen has subtracted from the conventional formats of film and video, especially as they traditionally address human misery. These gaps mirror the very breaches of memory. Simultaneously, the slight unease they induce tends to reinforce the viewers' memory of the works. The viewers will be marked, as one is physically marked by the presence of a monument in a cityscape, by the absence of familiar elements and by unexplained sounds, body close-ups, and the constant reminders of their own physical presence in front of the works. Small monuments to marginalised historical events can thus be predicated on spontaneous bodily memory when their economy, instead of being demonstrative or spectacular, is that of embodiment, narrative restraint and subtraction.

62 Comolli, *Corps et cadre*, p 12

63 *Ibid*, p 72