



Interview: Steve McQueen on telling the truth in Hollywood

By Peter Aspden (October 3, 2014)

The Oscar-winning director of '12 Years a Slave' is champion of the huge – and dark – subjects that others avoid



©Stefan Ruiz. Oscar-winning director Steve McQueen

My rendezvous with Steve McQueen is in Amsterdam's Vondelpark, a handsome oasis of greenery which has attracted no little publicity in the past for its fruitier nocturnal activities but which today is the picture of wholesome living. It is hard to find someone to tell me the way to the Blauwe Theehuis, an elegant teahouse near the park's eastern gates, as everyone is either cycling or jogging, taking advantage of an idyllic late-summer morning.

Finally I find it and settle down with a coffee to wait for McQueen to show up. He is half an hour, then an hour, then an hour and a half late. I am mildly concerned. He can't be lost because this is the city he calls home. A few frantic phone calls to his gallery result in a changed plan: I will meet him instead at the Stedelijk Museum's café in a couple of hours. He can be a little chaotic, says our fixer.

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He apologises profusely and explains all when he pitches up at our new meeting place, a little out of breath as he parks his bicycle. His excuse is disappointingly uncomplicated. "I'm really sorry," he says. "I was trimming my hedge. And I forgot all about you."

It has been a busy summer for McQueen; no wonder the garden needed some concentrated maintenance. The explosion of publicity that surrounded the release of his Oscar-winning masterpiece *12 Years a Slave* last year, and the trail of critical plaudits that has followed it, have been life-changing experiences.

Except that McQueen's life barely seems to have altered. If he has become a cultural superstar, you wouldn't know it. There is a notable lack of interest in his presence here. He once told me that he chose to live in Amsterdam for its "human scale", and the city's residents are doing their bit to offer a corrective coolness to the geysers of acclaim which have come his way over the past year.

As if to prove the point, McQueen puts his hand up to try and order some drinks. He fails to catch the eyes of the waiting staff. I decide to help him, and the two of us wave away, drowning in anonymity, hoping that someone will notice. A good 60 seconds later, we finally succeed. I wonder to myself if that has ever happened to a current holder of the Academy Award for Best Picture before. The maître d's of Los Angeles would rather be skewered for sushi than allow such a thing to occur in any of their establishments. "I thought my arm was going to break!" says McQueen cheerfully.

McQueen's latest project, his first since *12 Years*, is an entirely predictable change of register. It is a short film shot on Super 8mm, *Ashes*, which is on show at London's Thomas Dane Gallery from October 14. While *12 Years* played to a captivated global audience in its millions, *Ashes* belongs to the more rarefied province of the contemporary art gallery, in which McQueen made his name.



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A still from McQueen's new work, 'Ashes', about a young fisherman who was killed by drug dealers. The film uses footage shot in Grenada 12 years ago

The film shows a handsome young black man sitting, standing, preening on the bow of a boat. He shows off to the camera, laughing and striking poses. In front of him is the sea and the bluest of skies. The camera seems to love him, and he loves playing to it, and he finally pratfalls off the boat.

The film is a joyful paean to youth and innocence – until you listen carefully to the soundtrack, in which two men recount, in thick Caribbean patois, the plight of one of their friends, a fisherman named Ashes. He found a stash of drugs on a beach, they say, took it away, and was then hunted by a gang of men who wanted it back. The posse caught up with him and shot him dead as he tried to escape. The narrators' voices are full of sadness. We know, no explanation required, that the carefree young man in the film is Ashes.

The juxtaposition of spoken word and image, pulling and pushing at different emotions in the spectator, is typical McQueen, complicating and subverting a seemingly straightforward narrative. The film, he explains, has something of the quality of a found object for him: the footage of Ashes was shot 12 years ago in Grenada, his father's birthplace, while he was shooting for another film entirely, the installation diptych, *Caribs' Leap* and *Western Deep*.

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"Ashes was a fisherman, this extremely striking, beautiful young man, with blond dreadlocks, very charismatic," says McQueen. "And I just thought, 'Let's shoot him.' He didn't say very much, but he just had this aura about him. In other circumstances he would have been a rock star or a movie star. He had that quality about him. I just wanted to shoot him. I didn't know why. The footage wasn't necessary for the piece, so when we got back I just put it away."

McQueen returned to Grenada eight years later and made inquiries about the young fisherman. Friends recounted the circumstances of his demise. "I was so shocked. I found out what happened and it was in some ways a completely classical story – the young man who finds the stash of drugs, the 21st-century equivalent of treasure, and then the pirates go after him and kill him. Now that doesn't happen in Grenada, it's very rare. I was struck by this deep sorrow [of the islanders] about his death."

The film, he says, is about "life's possibilities. There he is on the edge of the boat, looking towards this endless horizon. He doesn't know he will be dead in six years' time. No one knows." Except, that is, for the spectator, watching the film with hindsight. Visitors can also pick up a poster from the film, with a transcript of the difficult-to-understand testimony of Ashes' friends. "I liked the idea of people taking something away with them," says McQueen.

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©Regency Enterprises/The Kobal Collection
McQueen on location filming '12 Years a Slave'

I ask him if it feels good to return to the more intimate milieu of the art gallery after the bombastics of Hollywood film-making. "I never left it," he says immediately. "And last year I did a very big show at the Schaulager [Basel] which actually didn't feel very intimate at all. But the intimacy in one's mind, yes." The best way to describe the relationship between the two means of expression, he says, in a comparison he has made before, is that "the movie is the novel, and art is poetry. Not a lot of people appreciate poetry, and it is the same with art. It is a more specialised form. That's the difference."

But the two impulses are forever "expanding and contracting" in his mind, he says. I ask if it is difficult to shift between genres. It is the rarest of things for a video artist to convert to Hollywood film-making. "Not at all. It is not as if I am jumping into different states of mind. It is all about finding what you want to say, and then how you want to say it." Is that very clear to him straightaway? "Oh yes. But these things are incubating in my mind for a long time. I am in 2007 right now." I look for a hint of a smile as he says this but he appears deadly serious.

McQueen, who turns 45 this week, is routinely described as a prickly man who doesn't suffer fools gladly, but I wonder if that is confusing his seriousness and unrelenting intensity for a kind of social awkwardness. He gives every impression to me of enjoying the interview process, watchful and concentrated while he is listening to the question, like a batsman steadying himself during a bowler's run-up. When Kirsty Young brought up the same subject in a recent edition of the BBC's *Desert Island Discs*, asking why he was so unfairly portrayed, he replied simply: "I am a black man. I'm used to that. If I walk into a room people make a judgment. I don't care."

McQueen was born in west London in 1969, moving from the White City estate to the more comfortable suburban environment of Ealing when he was a small boy. Encouraged by his mother, he turned to art, studying at Chelsea College of Arts and Goldsmiths College, before moving to New York to take a film-making course at Tisch School of the Arts. He was frustrated there by the strictures of the teaching, saying he was unable "to throw the camera up in the air".

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Throughout his career he has shown an innate ability to temper the rhythms of film to startling effect. In 1992's *Exodus*, his camera followed two men walking through Brick Lane market in east London carrying potted coconut palms, imbuing in the innocuous narrative an inexplicable sense of tension and poignancy. In 1997's *Deadpan*, a reproduction of a scene from Buster Keaton's *Steamboat Bill, Jr*, he turned comedic homage into something more sinister and dangerous. The work was one of the pieces that won him the Turner Prize in 1999.



©The Kobal Collection Michael Fassbender and Rory Mullen in *Hunger* (2008)

By the time he came to direct his first feature film, *Hunger*, in 2008 – the same year that he was chosen to represent Britain in the Venice Biennale – he was able to mix stillness and movement to masterly effect, stamping his own style on to a very different form of film-making. The movie, recounting the hunger strike of the IRA prisoner Bobby Sands in 1981, was clustered around a remarkable central scene lasting 22 minutes, shot in two takes and heavy with dialogue, between Sands and a priest. “It was a cascade of language, an avalanche,” recalls McQueen. “Up to that point, violence has been exhausted, so this was language being exhausted. And then the third act is the hunger strike, which is another kind of limit.”

He makes it sound like music, I say. “I like the idea of composing a narrative from A to B, and thinking how you take a person on a particular journey. It’s all about composing. It’s not a waltz, 1-2-3, 1-2-3, it is a more difficult thing for the spectator, but after a while you trust the film-maker’s decision. That is the art.”

Hearing McQueen talk about his film-making like this reminds me that, speaking to him about *Hunger* five years ago, I made a joke that he was about to be swallowed up by Hollywood. McQueen said then that he had taken some meetings which he found to be strange affairs, and that while Hollywood was full of clever people, their only terms of reference seemed to be other movies, and as a result they “killed” original ideas.

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So how did he successfully pitch the idea of *12 Years*, I ask him? How did he conquer Hollywood? “*12 Years* could not have been made anywhere else,” he replies.

“It had to be made in Hollywood. I couldn’t raise the money in Europe. And I was extremely lucky that people trusted me and trusted my vision. Brad [Pitt, whose company Plan B backed the film] was amazing. I was lucky enough to work with people who understood what I was trying to do. They gave me their trust. I had final cut, and that was that.”

Hunger was a film which reopened a historical chapter which many had considered closed. Was that also his aim in *12 Years*? “I don’t think people had looked into the subject matter very much, that relationship between slave and slave-owner,” he says simply. “That is what I wanted to do. It is such a huge part of history, and there was a certain kind of examination or reflection it hadn’t been given. It is very, very important to look back in order to move forward.”

“A lot of people didn’t want the movie made,” he says suddenly. I ask if he was able to understand that. “Yes, because people want to close their eyes on some subjects. They want to keep on going, they don’t want to look behind them.”



© Getty From left: Producers Anthony Katagas, Jeremy Kleiner, Dede Gardner, Brad Pitt and director Steve McQueen, win a Best Picture Academy Award for '12 Years a Slave'

The success of the film – Solomon Northup’s 1853 memoir was proposed to him by his long-time partner, the critic Bianca Stigter – comfortably surpassed his expectations, he says. “I am very happy the film did so well, and that people have been talking about the subject in a real way.” It has had a more visceral effect too. A producer McQueen knows in Toronto told the director of his experience when he saw the film: “There was a black woman sitting next to him, in her thirties or forties, and as the movie’s final part was beginning, she put her hand on his hand. They held hands. And when the titles came up, they fell into each other’s arms, crying. And that is not the first time I have heard a story like that.”

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But in addition to the film's considerable emotional impact on audiences, it is the longer-lasting resonances that give McQueen satisfaction. He has taken part in numerous post-screening debates, which have mostly been "electrifying". One woman stood up to reveal, for the first time in public, that her father had been poisoned for teaching children how to read. "She had never talked about it before like that," he says. "Art can do that. Art can start a conversation."

It is not a conversation that shows any sign of fizzling out: McQueen is now involved in President Obama's charity for young people, *My Brother's Keeper*, and he has also been instrumental in promoting a scheme that will see the film and book of *12 Years* available to every school in America. "I really wanted that to happen," he says, adding that he would also like to see the initiative in the UK.

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He seems to relish plunging into controversial subjects, I say. *Shame*, his second feature film, was an extraordinarily candid view of the unheralded extremes of male sexuality. "That's still not sorted," he says quickly. "That is unfinished business. I really want to come back to that." Why was that? "It is an extremely fascinating subject. But no one talks about it. Let's get real! So many important decisions in the world are connected with the sexual appetites of important men. Whether it is JFK, or Clinton, or Martin Luther King. That is what we are. That is part of us. But sometimes people are embarrassed by their pleasures.

"It is a huge subject. So many people came out after that film and sent me anonymous letters, a lot of thank-yous, and some crazy stuff too." What did women think of it, I ask? "I don't know how much women know, or want to know, about men's sexual appetites. A friend of mine went to see it with his wife, and she asked him, 'Do those things really happen?' And he was, like, 'No, no, it is just a fantasy, it is just the movies.'" McQueen's laugh suggests otherwise.

Politics, priapism and persecution: McQueen's first three films have delved fearlessly into taboo themes. Does he feel he has to screw his courage to the sticking-place when he is looking for a subject? "No, not at all. Sex addiction, hunger strikes, slavery – these are huge subjects. And for some reason people don't want to take them on." What is that reason? "I have no idea. But those are the subjects I want to engage with. I want to narrate them, see them, think about them, grapple with them."

Notwithstanding his ability to focus like a hawk on the most divisive of contemporary themes, McQueen, it strikes me, is the most traditional of artists, balancing the claims of truth and beauty as he picks at the scabs of social injustice and human suffering. More than one critic was struck by the innocent loveliness of many of the images in *12 Years*, some suggesting that it was a distraction from the film's uglier themes. McQueen won't have that. "I wasn't making a horror movie. Have you ever been to New Orleans? It is the most beautiful place. And yes, these things happened there.

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“The world is perverse. And sometimes perversity happens in the most beautiful places. That is what it is all about. You can still go to the American south and visit these whitewashed plantations, and a Scarlett O’Hara figure will give you a guided tour of the place, offer you lemonade or ice cool tea, and show you where the cotton was picked, as if it were Disney World.

“That is where these perverse things happened. And that is what I wanted to show, exactly as it was. Deal with it.”

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