



## *The Boundless Artistry of Steve McQueen*

By Wyatt Mason (October 12, 2015)



Juergen Teller

*Over lunch in a sunny Manhattan restaurant, the British artist explains to Wyatt Mason how he finds the perfect medium for his every idea, transforming the ubiquity of violence into the viewer's personal, revelatory shock.*

BY THE TIME I met him for lunch this past August, the last thing I wanted to do was talk to Steve McQueen. I had spent the morning alone with a laptop in a pleasant, private library at his New York gallery, Marian Goodman, on West 57th Street, watching a dozen pieces that the 46-year-old British artist had selected and sequenced from his body of work. This experience came with a disclaimer from McQueen: As I would not be watching the works in the original installations designed especially for them (on double-sided, floating screens with separate visual sequences unfolding on each side, for instance), I was to understand that I wasn't actually seeing these artworks. Rather, I was seeing reproductions, like pictures of paintings in a book, that shouldn't be mistaken for the originals. The concern struck me as characteristic of McQueen, a contemporary artist intent upon making even video feel rare and new. Practically speaking, though, the caveat ended up feeling beside the point: The experience of watching McQueen's pieces on a laptop was hugely powerful. So much so that if I'd had to see them on my phone I think I still would have felt overwhelmed.

Though most widely known as the director of the 2014 Academy Award-winning best picture, "Twelve Years a Slave" — his third feature after "Hunger" (2008) and "Shame" (2011) — McQueen has made some 20 short art films since the early 1990s, when he was a student at Chelsea College of Art and Design and then Goldsmiths College, London, where his career began

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while he was still completing his coursework. Perhaps the most perfect of them is “Charlotte” (2004), which serves as a kind of skeleton key to all the work McQueen has done since, whether in galleries or in movie theaters. In a nearly six-minute silent film shot through a red filter, framed macro-close on Charlotte Rampling’s gorgeous right eye, McQueen’s finger probes the frame. He touches her brow, pinches her lid and pokes — shockingly — the very surface of the eye itself. Such a moment — violent but tender, vulnerable and, unexpectedly, safe — occurs repeatedly in McQueen’s work: He jams his films with these crudely literal human touches, and we can’t help but feel the tenderness of those gropings, even as they implicate the viewer in the bodily experience of threat, of violence.

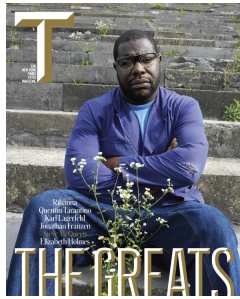
Consider the opening of McQueen’s “Hunger,” in which we see a man’s hands as he removes his wedding ring and then soaks his bruised, scraped knuckles in an ice-cold sink of water. We watch the man have breakfast, those same hands tidily brushing crumbs from his cloth-napkin lap, and later see him standing outside, in winter, in a prison guard’s uniform, smoking, his gaze empty, snowflakes falling, the shirt of his uniform sweated through, and his hands now bruised and bloodied further, flakes of snow falling onto and dissolving into them. He looks utterly destroyed. Only later in the film will we see him doing the work that has wounded those hands: Repeatedly, we watch him savagely beat I.R.A. prisoners nearly to death. By then, it’s not so much that the viewer sympathizes with the villain as that we are made to feel how the guard, no less than the prisoner, is being destroyed by the violence he is made to be a part of.

All of McQueen’s feature films document brutality with unflinching power, whether in a prison in Northern Ireland, the figurative jail of sexual addiction or the serial tortures of slavery. In an entertainment culture that has only grown increasingly hospitable to violent diversions, McQueen’s preoccupation with the reality of violence in our lives would be meaningless had he not found forms of depicting it that were meaningfully new. As his short films, though shorn of narrative, made clear to me, McQueen has a cunning range of means to make us feel what we have been habituated to barely notice.

“I’m so sorry to put all that stuff on you at one time,” McQueen, a physically imposing presence, told me as I arrived at the SoHo restaurant where we were having lunch. Broad and bearishly built, wearing black work boots, baggy black shorts and an exquisitely blue T-shirt, McQueen spoke in jagged bursts of baritone. “A bit much, isn’t it?”

McQueen’s particular muchness, his commitment to documenting the human struggle, seems less a choice than a temperament. “He’s so aware of everything,” Thomas Dane, McQueen’s London gallerist of the past 15 years told me. “All his antennae are up. Very few people are as perceptive as he is. He’s so fully aware.” The dyslexic child of working-class West Indian parents, a boy who wore an eye patch at school and was thought to be unintelligent by his teachers, a man who won Britain’s Turner Prize before he turned 30, McQueen has long been committed to doing as much work as he can, regardless of reception or perception, exploring the ideas most urgent to him.

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One of the six covers of T's Oct. 25 Greats issue. See all the covers here.  
Credit: Juergen Teller

“We’re all going to die anyway,” McQueen told me, as we settled into the lively, luminous cheer of the restaurant, its fresh flowers and lemony light. “I mean it: Might as well just go for it. I don’t have too much fear for that. It’s there to be dealt with.”

One of the ways in which McQueen has dealt with it is by making an audience feel strangely compelled to stare. His second art film, the 10-minute, silent “Bear,” completed while he was still at Goldsmiths, is shown on a continuous loop. Shot in high-contrast black and white, two naked black men, one of them the artist, round on each other, ogling here and wrestling there, the camera in motion, coming close to the cheek of one, so close you can feel its roughness, then diving low as the men silently collide, their genitals wiggling at the top of the frame. There’s threat, obviously, in their tussle and their taunts, but there’s also something tender and silly in this dance to unheard music.

Another of McQueen’s experiments is “Illuminer,” from 2001. A 15-minute video, it features McQueen alone in France, in bed, watching a documentary we hear but cannot see about the U.S. effort in Afghanistan. The artist’s naked body and the white sheets of the bed are lit only by the glow of the television; the work is one long shot whose single technical alteration is the auto-focus of the camera repeatedly hunting in the dark, to the sound of gunfire and explosions from the documentary. Midway through, you experience a shock of recognition: Here is how we look, in front of our screens, at home, alone, at night. “Illuminer” is thus a portrait of the human condition in the privileged West: the soporific intake of violence. All the stranger, that portrait, given the odd beauty of the sculptural folds and drapery of the bedsheets, as they go in and out of focus to the sounds of war.

“There’s that saying,” McQueen said, when I asked about the role of the long look in his work, “‘Everything’s been done; our job is to try to do it better.’ But at the same time it’s also sometimes a case of just looking again, at the same thing, or how we look at it.”

Much has already been written and said about McQueen’s preference for the long take, understandably so. In “Hunger,” we get a 17-minute fixed shot of an I.R.A. prisoner speaking to his priest about the hunger strike he is about to undertake. “Shame” gives us a five-minute closeup on a woman singing hauntingly as her troubled brother in the audience is forced, at last, to listen. And there is the now-famous sequence in “12 Years a Slave,” where Chiwetel Ejiofor’s Solomon Northup survives a lynching only to have to stand, still attached by his neck to a

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branch, all day, on his tiptoes, awaiting someone who will cut him fully down. It's hugely difficult to watch Ejiófor's dance of survival, for if no one knows what it's like to be hanged, everyone knows what it feels like to try to stand that way, and how quickly one risks falling flat on one's feet. "Some people find it uncomfortable," McQueen explained of the experience of watching his films. "Some people hyperventilate. They can't stay. It's O.K. The screen is like a mirror: You see yourself. It offers a shock. It's difficult to maintain the gaze."

Testing a viewer's limits of endurance has been a common avant-garde mode of engagement for contemporary art for the past quarter-century. And yet McQueen's work makes a viewer primarily aware not of a conversation about technique but about feeling. The conspicuous duration of any shot is less important than what that duration brings to the fore: The rarity of a conversation where two people truly listen to each other; the bareness of a human voice attempting to make itself heard to someone it loves; the tiny, toes'-length margin between life and death. These details, recognizable human features shared by all of us — ears, voices, feet — stand out far more than the length of the shots that contain them, in the way the prison guard's wounded hands do in "Hunger."

"The snow drops on his knuckles. You know it: It's sensation," McQueen said, leaning in. "I'm trying to reach out to the audience: You know what it's like to graze one's knuckles. To have this thing melt, to drop on it and melt, you feel that you're there — you feel it. You can evoke that texture, that sensation. I think that's what that's about. Feel it, as well as see it. And if you can actually allude to that, I think it adds so much more to what you bring to the theater. Because basically what you're bringing to the theater is your self, your own history, your own past — not just your body, not just your eyes, your whole own history — and that's what I want to engage with to help my narrative."

One rare failed attempt of McQueen's to engage on his terms involved the British Royal Mail. "Queen and Country" (2007-09) was an oak cabinet containing a series of 160 facsimile postage sheets that memorialize 168 British servicemen and women who lost their lives during the Iraq war. McQueen, who was appointed the official U.K. war artist in Iraq by the Imperial War Museum in 2003, had hoped the Royal Mail would issue the stamps for public use. "What was important for me was to have stamps on letters that could reach anywhere in the world," he said at the time. "They would be in the bloodstream of the country, and beyond."

The Royal Mail didn't accept the proposal, but the unusual form of the piece was nonetheless a reminder of the importance, for McQueen, of finding the right medium for any idea. Far from being attached to any single form, however, McQueen sees the medium as just the messenger. "With 'Hunger,'" McQueen said, "the idea was telling me it needs to be a feature film. I didn't go out with the idea to make feature films. The idea was telling me the form it wanted to be. I don't decide. The idea decides."

McQueen's latest idea has pushed him into yet another medium, one that has brought him to New York City to shoot a six-part miniseries for HBO, "Codes of Conduct," which he describes as "the tale of two cities. In N.Y.C. Jamaica, Queens, and the Upper East Side." McQueen, who lives

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in Amsterdam, has been coming to New York since 1977; some of his extended family has lived in Queens. Television is the right form for this American series, he says, because, “you’re in someone’s home. As opposed to that person leaving home and going to the cinema where you’ve invited them but it’s your party. It’s the other way around when you’re in their house.” It’s typical of McQueen that he could translate the most obvious idea — television is in one’s home, or in one’s hand — into a radical point of view: What you’re doing, when you watch television, is to invite a stranger into the place where you live. “So how do you use that medium?” he continued. “It’s a great net. To your advantage. To help or benefit the narrative or the story. That’s all. That’s the difference. Inviting someone and being invited.”

That word, “invited,” also seemed to be another key to what I felt that morning and was still feeling — the sense that I had been, as I sat with a laptop in my hands, invited to feel my own vulnerability as I paid close attention to the vulnerability of others. It felt less like a lesson than a gift.