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Remembering otherwise: media memory, gender and Margaret Thatcher in Irish hunger strike films

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses two films about the Irish republican prison protests and the hunger strikes of 1981 – Terry George's *Some Mother's Son* (1996) and Steve McQueen's *Hunger* (2008) – as countermemories of the dominant British media coverage of the protests and the hunger strikes. Focusing on the use of the voice/image of British prime minister Margaret Thatcher in these films, the article asks for what purpose and to what effect these clips and recordings are employed and suggests that Thatcher's gender does matter in these films. In contrast to the worried mothers of the incarcerated republican sons, prime minister Thatcher appears as the unbending Iron Lady of the British government in *Some Mother's Son*, representing the gendered chief villain of the film. In *Hunger*, Thatcher's cold, disembodied female voice – Thatcher as *acousmêtre* – is set against the resisting and suffering male body of Bobby Sands. This article addresses these gendered depictions and their construction through the use of voice and silence. In both films, the female presence of Thatcher is used to invoke the old and create new media memories of the hunger strike.

KEYWORDS

Margaret Thatcher; voice; hunger strike; film; Northern Ireland

Many Northern Ireland Troubles films include documentary images, sound recordings and clips from speeches by Margaret Thatcher that are juxtaposed with (mostly) fictional images of the IRA men and their activities. The Troubles (1968–1998) remained an unresolved question in British domestic policy throughout Thatcher's years as prime minister. The IRA prisoners' hunger strikes in 1980 and 1981 constituted some of the darkest episodes of the Troubles to take place during the Thatcher years. To regain the status of political prisoners, which the inmates associated with paramilitary groups had had between 1972–6, the republican prisoners in Northern Ireland's Maze prison carried out hunger strikes in 1980 and 1981. Prime minister Thatcher adopted a hard line, making it clear that she would not concede political status to the prisoners. Altogether ten men died in 1981 before the protest was called off in October. The hunger strikes and the preceding "blanket" and "no wash" protests have been depicted in a small body of four films, two of which, Terry George's *Some Mother's Son* (1996) and Steve McQueen's *Hunger* (2008), are studied in this article.[1] The two films are examined for their use of

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documentary images of and radio speeches by Margaret Thatcher in constructing countermemories of the dominant British media coverage of the protests and the hunger strikes.

The article asks for what purpose and to what effect these clips and recordings are employed and suggests that Thatcher's gender, as well as gender in general, does matter in these films. In contrast to the worried mothers of the incarcerated republican sons, prime minister Thatcher appears as the unbending Iron Lady of the British government in *Some Mother's Son*, representing the gendered chief villain of the film. In *Hunger*, Thatcher's cold, disembodied female voice – Thatcher as *acousmêtre*[2] – is set against the resisting and suffering male body of Bobby Sands. This article addresses these gendered depictions and their construction through the use of voice and silence. John Lynch has also used the concept of *acousmêtre* when discussing the use of Thatcher's radio voice in *Hunger*.[3] Using the same concept and acknowledging Lynch's significant prior work on this topic,[4] this article moves in another direction and focuses on the significance of gender in its examination of how *Some Mother's Son* and *Hunger* challenged and augmented the dominant media memories of the hunger strikes.

Lynch argues that McQueen, by using radio, avoids the media machine – television news – "that endlessly reproduce[d] the habitual recognition without reflection" and that *Hunger* constructs a "possibility of reflecting more effectively on the *process* of representing these events" and thus evades the limits of the "political and discursive framing" of media news coverage.[5] This article, on the other hand, puts more emphasis on the role of gender and on how and why Thatcher's voice and/or image is used in the films, using also Kaja Silverman's (1988) work on female voice in cinema. Doing that, the article builds on and moves forward from a previous article by the author,[6] answering questions that came up during the writing of that previous work.

Constructing British media memories of the hunger strike

The Northern Ireland conflict was shown and interpreted for a British audience through British news media and most memorably through television news coverage. This coverage constructed and perpetuated a mediatised memory of the Troubles, including the hunger strike, for that audience.[7] British television news of Northern Ireland focused mostly on reporting violence during the Troubles, rather than explaining the conflict or giving background information or context.[8] As British people with no direct experience of or contacts in Northern Ireland formed their key memories of the region mainly through media, those memories were mostly of violence, ranging from particular atrocities to killings and funerals.[9] That memory was formed by a largely one-sided and, to a certain extent, simplified explanation: terrorism. The British media offered its audience an abundance of "facts" but not much in the way of explanation or background and therefore "the Irish conflict appeared as a series of decontextualized atrocities."[10] Rather than explaining the conflict or encouraging dialogue, the British media had a key role in creating a consensus around the conflict in Northern Ireland, whereby the Northern Ireland problem was seen to be about terrorism and the role of the army as one of peacekeeping. Significantly, the "consensus was closely aligned to the state's explanation of the conflict."[11] Censorship heavily affected the coverage of the Troubles and the presentation of opinions contrary to the official line were managed by the state.[12] The overwhelming

media memory of British viewers (96.9% of the participants) in David Miller's study was that television showed Northern Ireland as mostly violent.[13] While many British viewers rejected the factuality of this reportage and did not believe that life in Northern Ireland was mostly violent, those British people who accepted the view did so apparently precisely because of the media coverage, proving its influence. Actual experience of going to Northern Ireland was the clearest reason for rejecting the view of Northern Ireland as mostly violent.[14]

Also when reporting the hunger strikes, the British media mostly toed the government's line.[15] Aogán Mulcahy points out that the hunger strike was "a direct threat to Britain's policies in Northern Ireland," and this was reflected in the coverage of the conflict in the *London Times*. Mulcahy notes that the correspondence between the British government's position and that of the *London Times* are such that it seems that the *London Times* was "serving as an instrument of 'official discourse'."[16] Newspapers "questioned the rationale behind the hunger strikers' actions and the validity of the protest."[17] Mulcahy has found that the *London Times* coverage of the hunger strike constantly emphasised the "violent" pasts of the hunger strikers.[18] Doughty notes that the hunger strikes were presented as a publicity stunt with the view of attracting support for the movement both domestically and internationally rather than a protest for the right to a political status. The purpose of this media portrayal was to decrease the political significance of the protests.[19] Following the same line as British newspapers, British television coverage of the hunger strike was unsympathetic towards the prison protesters. The British media did not discuss the possibility that the government might have some responsibility for the crisis. Instead, the media supported the government's stance.[20]

The cinematic representation of the Northern Ireland conflict, beginning with Carol Reed's *Odd Man Out* (1947) as John Hill has pointed out, focused also on depictions of violence rather than on explanation or facilitating dialogue between the conflicting parties. In twentieth-century outsider (especially British but also American) film representation of Ireland and the Irish, there was an influential tradition that portrayed Ireland as a strife-torn place and the Irish as prone to irrational violence.[21] Martin McLoone has noted that

> In the films that have dealt specifically with political violence in Ireland, the tendency has been to use dominant negative stereotypes to deny the politics of the situation and to blame the Irish themselves for their own proclivity to violence.[22]

As Irish republican and loyalist combatants were portrayed "as atavistic, deranged and irrationally violent," the possibility of dialogue with them was effectively denied in/by these films.[23] Although, as Crosson suggests, "*Some Mother's Son* is also suspicious of the potential for real dialogue in its depiction of both British and republican representatives,"[24] it widens its representation of the Troubles by focusing on women. This was still a rarity at the time, for Troubles films had depicted mainly male characters and perspectives. As Fidelma Farley argued at the turn of the century, "the majority of films about the Troubles in Northern Ireland are concerned with male identity, particularly the relation between masculinity and violence."[25] *Hunger*, on the other hand, though focusing on male characters again, broke new ground in Troubles films with its striking "cinematic aesthetic and its foregrounding of dialogue."[26] Furthermore, I argue, gendered bodies and voices play significant roles also in McQueen's film.

For both Terry George and Steve McQueen, their hunger strike films were the first feature film they directed. Their hunger strike films, which they had also co-written, challenge earlier media memories in their own ways. Both screenwriter-directors have explained in interviews that the British news media coverage of the conflict was a key influencing factor for them. George notes that he made a film based on an image or images on television news that had stuck with him:

> Between March 1 and October 2, 1981, more than twenty young men, mostly IRA prisoners in a local jail, yet no different from me and my mates, decided to starve themselves to death rather than concede to *Margaret Thatcher's* British government that they were criminals. Eventually ten of them, led by Bobby Sands, died on hunger strike. The battle of wills was played out before the TV cameras of the world. And as I watched I became transfixed by an image that was repeated over and over as each man died. In the harsh glare of the TV lights the families of dead hunger strikers would emerge from the wire cages to the Maze Prison, and a mother would step up to the microphones and announce that her son had died [. . .] The image of them emerging from the concrete and razor-wire tomb called the H-Blocks haunted me for several years. I wanted to say something about the burden those mothers carried, and about the dignity and courage they displayed.[27]

George had help from two documentary filmmakers, Ed Burke and Pam Yates, for his first version of the script written at the beginning of the 1990s. The re-writing of the script was a collaborative effort: after working with Irish filmmaker Jim Sheridan on his *In the Name of the Father* (1993) as a co-screenwriter and second unit director, George re-wrote the script with Sheridan. The two of them agreed that George had "the passion and the obsessive drive" to direct this film and Sheridan agreed to produce it.[28] George had been a politicised young Catholic who had lived in a predominantly Protestant neighbourhood in Belfast. He was interned for several weeks in the early 1970s at the age of nineteen because he had been named by people he had been hanging around with, who "were peripherally involved with Fianna Eireann, the junior IRA" and were "badly brutalized" during interrogation.[29] George was arrested again in 1975, when he was driving an armed passenger across Belfast when they got stopped at a roadblock. George served three years of a six-year sentence in the political status section of the Maze and was released in 1978 for good behaviour. He got to know "many prisoners' mothers, as well as some hunger strikers who were in there at the time."[30] *Some Mother's Son* reflects some of his experiences, focusing on the ordeals of the prisoners' mothers.

The media memory of the hunger strikes was the impetus for George to make the film. He also utilised the media coverage of the strikes when preparing to make his own film in the mid-1990s. George and his team had "access to a lot of archival footage" as George's friend had kept all the daily television news reports since the hunger strikes on videotape, and the filmmakers studied "a lot of that" for the film.[31] The media representation of the conflict has centrally influenced the writing, shooting and editing of *Some Mother's Son* and challenging and broadening the "official" representation of the hunger strikes informs the whole film. Arthur Lappin, one of the producers of the film, has explained that *Some Mother's Son* is "certainly not proselytising for the IRA but the film does try to redress a media imbalance regarding the hunger strikes."[32] I argue that the use of news clips of Margaret Thatcher plays a central role in this.

The inspiration for McQueen's first feature film is similarly grounded in his media memory of the event. McQueen was younger than George at the time of the hunger strikes, but old enough to have a durable memory of them on television news:

> I remember as an 11-year-old seeing Bobby Sands on BBC news every night. There was a number underneath his image, and I thought that that was his age, but I noticed that each night the number increased, and I realised that wasn't his age, it was the number of days he had gone without food. To an 11-year-old, the idea of someone who in order to be heard was not eating left an impression on me. I don't know why this image stayed with me, but it is a very strong memory.[33]

Elsewhere McQueen has noted that it was this media memory that inspired him to make a film about Bobby Sands: "this memory and this opportunity [to make his first feature film] drew me to find out more about him and I thought it could be a powerful film" (*Hunger* production notes). Authenticity was important for McQueen, who co-wrote *Hunger* with theatre writer Enda Walsh. For their script, McQueen and Walsh interviewed hunger strikers and prison officers in Northern Ireland. The filmmakers wanted to even shoot in the Maze, and when they could not, they attempted to replicate the setting exactly. McQueen produces new images of the conflict, showing what it was like in the Maze. McQueen has stated, "I really wanted the audience to participate in this hunger strike, to drag them willingly or unwillingly through this film."[34]

McQueen has also explained his political motivations to make a film about this event of which he has a powerful media memory: "The British press swept it under the carpet for 27 years. It is one of the, in fact it is the most important event in British history in recent times. My sympathy was for Bobby Sands and the prisoners detained there."[35] Emilie Pine has noted the importance of McQueen's identification of the hunger strike as part of British, and not only Irish, history – a history of which "the British public is largely ignorant of because of lack of press coverage and political amnesia."[36] As she puts it, *Hunger* "is thus an important political intervention in British history." *Hunger* can be read as a countermemory to the British state-approved media presentation of the event as the film portrays the prison protests and hunger strikes that, McQueen notes, were never "seen by an audience in clear detail" because "there's only 90 seconds of footage shot of that period within the prison."[37] As Jennie Carlsten has written, films "can replace the ideas of an accepted history with a range of competing images, symbols, and discourses" and thus "create, transmit, and maintain countermemory, a set of narratives that challenge the transmission of exclusionary or oppressive history." As Carlsten suggests, "*Some Mother's Son* is positioned explicitly as a work of Nationalist countermemory."[38] Similarly, John Lynch argues that the lack of dialogue in *Hunger* allows the viewer to have space to reflect on the representation of the event and consequently the film does not simply offer an alternative point of view "but a critical reflection on how we come to think about what is shown to us."[39] In both films, I argue, the role of Thatcher – of her image and/or voice – is significant in the construction of an alternative view, a countermemory of the hunger strikes.

Both George and McQueen emphasise in interviews Margaret Thatcher's role in the antagonistic situation; she personifies the British government's side of the conflict. In the

citation above, George writes not merely of the British government but *Margaret Thatcher's* British government and about the "battle of the wills" between Thatcher and the hunger strikers. In the same vein, McQueen has explained his focus on the interior of the prison and the events taking place there:

> The truth is this was the front line. The struggle in the Maze and in the cellblock, that is where the war was taking place, that is where Margaret Thatcher met the Irish army. I didn't have to go outside for that. This was the essence of the situation - two extremes meeting right there.[40]

McQueen does not mention the British government at all, only Margaret Thatcher as its embodiment. For him, and in his film, the conflict is played out between the person of Margaret Thatcher and the hunger strikers, between two opposing views taken to the extreme. Yet the film is not about the politics of the particular situation, but about the politics of the British government, at the time personified by Thatcher, of handling what are classified as terrorist threats. As the film depicts a particular conflict in meticulous detail inside the prison, McQueen's choice to use the voice of Thatcher – but no image of her – is thoroughly meaningful. Thatcher's mere voice invokes memories and meanings attached to it.

As Max Atkinson has noted, oratory and debating skills had been monopolised by men for a long time and when Margaret Thatcher became prime minister in the late 1970s, women in politics faced certain disadvantages. The natural pitch of women has "a higher starting-point than is the case for men, and therefore cannot rise as far before reaching a level at which it sounds excessively 'shrill'," something which may turn out to be problematic as high-pitched vocalisations are often associated with emotional or irrational outbursts.[41] Thatcher herself has written that her voice was "naturally high-pitched, which can easily become grating" especially when trying to get a hearing over the din in the House of Commons. Thatcher had felt the situation difficult because when increasing the volume of a high-pitched voice "one automatically goes up the register." She had deliberately tried to lower the tone of her voice with the help of an expert in the mid-1970s.[42] As a consequence of lowering her pitch level, she also spoke less rapidly than before.[43] In addition to monitoring the pitch of her voice, she worked hard to control her public delivery of speeches in other ways, too: "I always insisted that from any public platform I *must* be able to see as well as hear how my words were being received." She could then speed up or slow down her speech as need be.[44] This coached and controlled, *female* voice was so easily recognisable even long after Thatcher's premiership that it can effectively be used without her image. Doing so, it can be argued, even heightens the effect of her voice. Thatcher's public image, audible as well as visible, was characterised by two qualities, toughness and femininity, which the nickname "Iron Lady" so well captured,[45] or even ruthlessness and femininity, as Anneke Ribberink describes her self-cultivated and controlled image.[46] Both of these characteristics are significant when one examines the use of Thatcher's image and/or voice in *Some Mother's Son* and *Hunger.*

Foregrounding mothers in *Some Mother's Son*

As quoted above, George decided to make *Some Mother's Son* because the media images of the mothers of the dead hunger strikes announcing the passing away of their sons

haunted him and he wanted to depict the heavy burden those mothers carried. Unlike the British television news and press of the time, George's film focuses not on violence, but on the toll the conflict took on families. While the British media coverage and most Troubles films focused on male violence in Northern Ireland when reporting the conflict, George's film shifts the perspective and creates a new media memory and a powerful representation of the conflict by focusing on the struggles and sacrifices of two Northern Irish mothers. The largely apolitical middle-class single mother and schoolteacher Kathleen Quigley (Helen Mirren) and the working-class mother Annie Higgins (Fionnula Flanagan) become, despite their many differences, united by their situation as mothers of imprisoned and, later, hunger-striking sons. Kathleen, who herself still refuses to be politicised, becomes involved in her son Gerard's political struggle. As a more political figure, Annie is involved in the events from the beginning, possibly because British troops have killed her young son. Ultimately, the women have to decide the fate of their hunger-striking sons. The two families' stories are intertwined with scenes depicting politicians explaining and implementing the policies of the new prime minister Margaret Thatcher in Northern Ireland.

Thatcher became prime minister on 4 May 1979, when the blanket protest had been going on in the Maze for two years and eight months. *Some Mother's Son* begins with documentary footage of the newly elected Margaret Thatcher arriving at 10 Downing Street, which immediately sets the tone of the film and activates viewers' media memories of the time Thatcher began her premiership and laid out the rules of her Northern Ireland policy. Thatcher is introduced as one of the central characters of the film, but the role is played by herself through the use of television interviews and radio broadcasts, rather than an actor playing her. Her real and historical presence is important for the activation and complementation of media memories of the time. Thatcher quotes Saint Francis of Assisi and presents herself as a harmonising figure:

> I know full well the responsibilities that await me as I enter the door of Number Ten and I'll strive unceasingly to try to fulfil the trust and confidence the British people have placed in me and the things in which I believe. And I would just like to remember some words of Saint Francis of Assisi which I think are really just particularly apt at the moment. Where there is discord, may we bring harmony.

At this point the image cuts to a fishing boat at sea somewhere in Northern Ireland, indicating that as a place "where there is discord." This is also a point when Irish music by the Riverdance composer Bill Whelan begins to play, marking the film's story as a recognisably Irish one, told from an Irish point of view. For the rest of the quotation Thatcher is off screen and the image is of the boat coming to harbour: "Where there is error, may we bring truth. Where there is doubt, may be bring faith. And where there is despair, may we bring hope." This is followed by a title telling us that this is Northern Ireland 1979.

Thatcher's words frame the whole narrative of the film, while the irony of the words of bringing harmony to troubled areas is emphasised when in the next scene British troops blow up a bridge to isolate Republican communities. This calls into question Thatcher's whole Northern Ireland policy, which is subsequently explained by a Thatcherite official, Farnsworth, in Stormont. Farnsworth informs the civil servants and the military present in the room – as well as the audience – that "the Prime Minister wants an entirely new

approach to the Northern Ireland problem." The new hardline strategy against the IRA consists of three elements: isolation, criminalisation and demoralisation. Echoing Thatcher's well-known speech, Farnsworth also states that "these people are criminals. They are not soldiers. They are not guerrillas. There is no war. There is only crime." He goes on to add that demoralisation happens through putting "these people in jail," for "it is in the prisons that we will break the back of the IRA."

Farnsworth acts as an interpreter and explainer of the prime minister's stance and its practical policies throughout the film, making direct references to the prime minister, but Thatcher herself is also seen twice and heard once on radio as well as mentioned several times by the media, including newspapers, in the course of the film. Using documentary images or texts or old newsreels "to create an impression of authenticity" is common in historical films.[47] The use of archival footage of Thatcher in *Some Mother's Son* serves also other purposes than merely authenticating the narrative. It draws attention to the past mediation of the blanket protest and the hunger strikes. *Some Mother's Son* draws on the news coverage, reminding viewers of how the protest and the strike were shown and spoken about in British media, especially by the prime minister. By including the uncompromising and cold statements by Thatcher and contrasting them with Kathleen's initial apolitical stance and humane approach, the film portrays the conflict from a point of view seldom seen on British television or other media news during the Troubles. The film shows those sides of the conflict that went unseen in British media, and emphasises the cost the conflict and the intransigence of both the IRA and the British prime minister had on ordinary people and civilians living in Northern Ireland. The film is focalised through Kathleen, who acts mainly from humanitarian reasons throughout the film, and is shaken by the various stages of the conflict in prison. As someone who says her life would not change even if the British left, she is shocked by the tragedy and loss of life on both sides. When a soldier is killed during the fight to catch the sons of Kathleen and Annie, who have fired a rocket launcher at British troops as retaliation for blowing up the bridge, Kathleen's son Gerard shrugs it off by saying that the dead man was a soldier. Kathleen, however, views the matter not from a political but a humanitarian point of view: "he was somebody's son like you're mine!" The film is sympathetic first and foremost to the suffering mothers, especially those who want nothing to do with the conflict.

The visual of the newly-elected Thatcher in her feminine attire, hair and makeup at the beginning of the film further points to the gendered aspect of the conflict and its mediation. The Troubles have largely been sustained by male violence and violent masculinity, even if, as John Hill points out, "the role of (predominantly republican) women as perpetrators of paramilitary violence" should not be ignored either.[48] Since the media coverage of Northern Ireland during the Troubles was dominated by violence, it was also dominated by men. In George's film, the focus is on women, not as perpetrators of violence but as residents of Northern Ireland and mothers of young, imprisoned IRA men. These young men have significant roles in the film but the stories told are those of their mothers. These stories are complemented with images and audio of Thatcher, who was not "afraid to be seen in the traditional female roles of wife and mother, even to the extent of being photographed at the kitchen sink." Thatcher also repeatedly emphasised the virtues of family life.[49] She trumpeted the ideal of traditional full-time motherhood, even when it was at odds with her own career and projected an image of herself as a good mother with a balanced and happy family life.[50] Added to this is the fact that

Thatcher maintained her feminine appearance when in power. Atkinson notes that all this left no "possible grounds for doubt that she is anything less than a 100% female of the species."[51] Thatcher's very feminine appearance in the clip also activates memories of her as the first woman prime minister – a term she herself did not like to use.[52] Furthermore, gendered terms were frequently used by the media as well as by Thatcher's supporters and opponents to express their opinions of her.[53] However, the media depicted her as tirelessly energetic, needing only four hours of sleep, hard-working and dedicated, mastering any political brief, she was marked different from "ordinary" women. She was portrayed as exceptional, "even inhuman in her capacity and ambition."[54] The inhuman qualities and unflinchingness of Thatcher are in stark contrast to Kathleen's humanity and compassion for the dead soldier and his mother.

In addition to showing an untelevised, civilian side of the conflict, the film also makes a point about the deceiving nature of the British media control and coverage of the conflict. One of the characters tells the two mothers that it was announced on the radio that the prisoners will get civilian clothes and both the families of the prisoners and the prisoners themselves are shown celebrating the news. It soon turns out, however, that what the prisoners are offered, is civilian-style clothes, not civilian, that is, their own clothes. The camera shows Sands' face when he is told he is to wear these civilian clothes offered by the guards. Disembodied Thatcher's voice is then heard speaking over these images:

> As to the question whether all prisoners in Northern Ireland should be allowed to wear civilian clothes, issued by the prison officials rather than prison uniform. We decided on that, that it should apply to all prisoners, and therefore we gave that concession to all prisoners.

Both the earlier radio announcement about civilian clothes and this explanation by Thatcher herself point to the deviousness of the British government and the prime minister in the film, especially as Thatcher herself, whose "love of clothes was legendary" and who "paid close attention to her wardrobe,"[55] would have been very aware of the symbolic importance of clothing, as well as to the role of the media in disseminating misleading information. This approach is further explained by Farnsworth: "We didn't say their own clothes, we said civilian-style clothes." When another character, Harrington, who has been trying to negotiate with the IRA, says that he is a diplomat and does not break agreements, Farnsworth replies: "Well, this is war, not diplomacy." Harrington replies acidly: "Really. I distinctly remember you saying to me that it wasn't war." This exchange underlines the battle for the discursive control of the conflict, reflected also in the media, and makes the point that even the British officials may have regarded the conflict as war rather than "ordinary" criminal activity or even terrorism. The speech by Thatcher and its interpretation by Farnsworth mark the British policy and their media coverage as duplicitous, whereas the prisoners seem to operate in a very straightforward manner.

The exchange between Farnsworth and Harrington is followed by Bobby Sands telling his fellow prisoners, all agitated by the disappointment of not being allowed to wear their own clothes after all, that they will start a hunger strike. As the British government controls the media and the discursive battle over the conflict in public and is unwilling to make concessions over clothing and other matters, the republican prisoners are shown to take control of the things they still

can, that is, their food intake and their life/death. Their extreme decision comes as a direct consequence of the British government's uncompromisingness. Subsequently, the newspapers, in another mediation of the event, announce the beginning of a Republican hunger strike, mentioning Thatcher who is "standing firm" and making "no concessions" to prisoners, leading to a battle of the wills between two extremes. The firmness of Thatcher is emphasised again by a radio broadcast heard on Kathleen's car radio soon after an expert has explained the British officials how a hunger strike affects the body. The radio presenter notes that "once again the prime minister stayed unflinchingly firm." This is then followed by Thatcher's voice:

> There is no such thing as political murder, political bombing or political violence. We will not compromise on this. There will be no political status. All attempts to intimidate us will fail.

This is a familiar presentation of Thatcher, her Iron Lady role, her unflinchingness, her intransigence. The film evokes this media memory and asks viewers to think of the side of the conflict this media representation hid from view.

The film also highlights how the British government controlled the electoral politics option of the republican movement through media as the results of the by-election, in which the hunger-striking Sands was a candidate, are announced via radio:

> in an unprecedented move the prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, called for the electorate to reject the IRA prisoner, Bobby Sands now in his fiftieth day on hunger strike. Mrs. Thatcher threw her support behind Harry West, the leader of the Unionist Party as polls showed the gap closing between him and the hunger striker.

After Sands' election win, Kathleen explains to Farnsworth that her community has been rendered voiceless in the arena of parliamentary politics: "Look, they won't even let Bobby Sands talk to the press. He's our MP. We have no voice. You know 30,000 people voted for Bobby Sands. That's more than voted for Thatcher." *Some Mother's Son* addresses the bias of the media and the government's censorship. As these sentiments are voiced by the reasonable, moderate and politically rather disinterested Kathleen, the audience is likely to agree with her and share the ethos of condemnation apparent in the end titles: The hunger strike "ended when several mothers intervened to save their sons. The British government granted all the demands fourteen days after the hunger strike ended."

Some Mother's Son directs the viewers to sympathise with Kathleen, who represents the civilians caught up in the conflict between two extreme opposites. The viewers share the burden of this mother, who is shocked by the conditions in which her son lives in the prison and frustrated by the British government's as well as the IRA's handling of the protest. Rendered voiceless in parliamentary politics by the censorship that silences their MP Bobby Sands, Kathleen grows tired of the political debates and propaganda of both sides and concentrates on the humanitarian and personal issue of saving her son, which the mother who leads the government, Margaret Thatcher, is unwilling to do. Thatcher's is the loudest voice in the media in *Some Mother's Son*, but the film challenges this voice by depicting the human cost hidden by the censorship and the domination of the government stance in British media.

Hunger: embodiment of silence and disembodiment of voice

As discussed above, the republican hunger strikes and the image of Bobby Sands with an increasing number underneath his face formed a powerful media memory for McQueen in his childhood in London. He has said on the *Hunger* DVD that "the whole idea, as a child, [of] someone who doesn't eat but gets louder or doesn't eat in order to be heard . . . it just stayed with me.' In his first feature film, McQueen went beyond the media image of Bobby Sands and took viewers inside the prison to see the reconstruction of the actual protest. This included showing images and experiences that were largely censored in the British media, that is, what the dirty protest and the hunger strike looked like inside the prison. McQueen has noted that that was "interesting for me to show, visually, because it had never actually been filmed"[56] at the time the protest took place – Les Blair's *H3* (2001) is set inside the prison but is shot in less graphic detail. Unsurprisingly then, the film's emphasis is on the resisting and suffering male bodies as McQueen wanted to show how the protesters used "their body as a weapon."[57] The use of sound in the film accentuates the physical experience of the prisoners, especially as the lack of dialogue in the first and third parts of the film make room for the other sounds in the prison. In contrast, the middle part of the film consists of the famous 22-minute-long dialogue between Bobby Sands (Michael Fassbender) and a priest (Liam Cunningham). Other than this long exchange, the prisoners are for the most part bodies without a voice as they speak very little.

Arguably, the most striking voice in *Hunger* is an acousmatic one, a voice whose source cannot be seen,[58] that is, the voice of Margaret Thatcher. Dialogue and radio broadcasts in *Hunger* are mostly diegetic, the apparent source of the voice being visible on screen. There are two occasions on which the audience hears a male voice on the radio – the first time when a guard listens to a car radio and another time, when the prisoners listen to a contraband transmitter in a cell – but on both occasions the voice is diegetic. This creates a stark contrast to when Thatcher is heard speaking as her instantly recognisable voice is non-diegetic. The use of Thatcher's voice with no image of her brings her inside the prison in a way footage of her speaking publicly would not. In McQueen's own words,

> The voice is so powerful, so you didn't need to show her face. I wanted to remain in the prison and I didn't want the situation where there were punctures in that concentrated situation. To have her voice [. . .] is very strong.[59]

This foregrounds the prison as the site of the battle. McQueen's use of only auditory archival material of Thatcher in *Hunger* renders Thatcher a disembodied voice, an acousmêtre, haunting the film. This in itself is telling, for according to Michel Chion, the powers of the acousmêtre are "usually malevolent,"[60] and that is certainly the impression that the use of Thatcher's voice produces in *Hunger*. Furthermore, Chion suggest, the acousmêtre is all-seeing, which implies "omnipotence, or at least the possession of certain powers whose nature or extent can vary – invulnerability, control of destructive forces, hypnotic power, and so on."[61] The all-seeing, omnipotent, controlling nature of Thatcher and the British government is evident in McQueen's description of the use of Thatcher's voice is the film: it is "powerful [. . .] almost like vapour."[62] The all-seeing-ness of Thatcher in the prison is represented through the (historically accurate) mirror-searches that reveal

what the prisoners are hiding in the body orifices, even if the prisoners still manage to smuggle things in and out.

Hunger emphasises the fact that the portrayal of this specific battle was in the hands of the British government and dominated by Thatcher. Thatcher had enormous discursive power, which is emphasised through her disembodied portrayal, her independent voice-over position as "enunciator." The fact that Thatcher's voice is so recognisable, carrying "extratextual familiarity," augments the impression of her as "the point of discursive origin"[63] in the situation depicted in the film. *Hunger* is less interested in the specifics of the situation: of what the conflict is about and of why the prisoners are in jail, than in the treatment of the prisoners, even if convicted of terrorist action, within the British incarceration system. Thatcher is identified as the point of discursive origin in this battle of the wills inside the prison, whereas the IRA hunger strikers are depicted as vocally silent but using bodily protests to get their message across. In classic film, the voice-over was usually male, whereas the female voice was mostly diegetically bound.[64] In *Hunger*, an experimental film, the usual vocal gender roles are reversed, making the use of Thatcher's disembodied voice in a male-centred film all the more notable and effective. Furthermore, showing the image of the speaking Thatcher, the disembodied voice-over, would have diminished her power and authority. Leaving her unseen both enhances her authoritative role and underlines the male prisoners' emphatically bodily protest as her voice is used to introduce first the "blanket" and "no wash" protest, then again the hunger strike.

According to Silverman, while the male subject is associated with the gaze, the phallus/anatomical power, and that which exceeds synchronisation/discursive power, the female subject is associated with spectacle, castration/anatomical lack and synchronisation/discursive lack.[65] Significantly, in *Hunger*, it is the male subject that is associated with spectacle, castration (the powerful and able Republican male bodies are manhandled, beaten and humiliated by the heavily armoured male guards commanded in the last instance by Thatcher) and synchronisation. Thatcher, on the other hand, is in control of the gaze (surveillance of the prisoners, the image projected of the prisoners to the outside world) and cinematically, the way she evades the gaze whereas the men are the focus of it. Thatcher is, to use Silverman's words, "inaccessible to the gaze of either the cinematic apparatus or the viewing subject."[66] Thatcher's voice exceeds synchronisation as she remains unembodied. Yet her voice is instantly recognisable as hers and though a female voice, it is that of the Iron Lady and the person in power. McQueen clearly disrupts the norms of classical Hollywood cinema also in his use of gendered voice. His decision to leave Thatcher off-screen, and let her just speak, emphasises her discursive power and power in general as she remains in control from an out-of-sight position. The protesting male prisoners, on the other hand, become displayed as a spectacle, which is partly their own making: they put their bodies on display by refusing to wear (prison) clothes. On the other hand, the spectacle is achieved by the filmmakers, who show the prison protest, which had previously been hidden from view, in all its detail. By putting the male prisoners on full display, the film turns the prison protest into a powerful spectacle – which it would have been in real life as well, if it had been allowed to be shown in the media.

The official media version of the blanket and no wash protests and the hunger strike, audible on the radio but not visible within the diegesis, is undermined by the revelation of the physical reality of the Maze and the prisoners on protest. There is

a juxtaposition of the archival audio and the fictional image, the latter of which is rendered so authentically and realistically as to override the audio memory of Thatcher. The voice of Thatcher is "amplified" by leaving out the image of her body and making her an acousmêtre, reminding audiences of her power at the time, also in the media, which censored the voices of the Republican prisoners. However, this power is then undermined by the power of the images of the protesting inmates. In the British media, the hunger strike was presented from the perspective of the British government, here most recognisably represented by Thatcher, but in *Hunger*, the strike is shown (suggesting it is beyond words) from the perspective of the strikers. The image is there to show what it was like for the prisoners, and to marginalise the voice of Thatcher as the describer of the events. What McQueen points out is that the British have received their version through Thatcher and British media and he shows the British the reality of the strike.

The British government is represented by voices on radio, first a male voice, and then Thatcher's. The male voice is heard from the car radio, when the prison guard, whom the camera follows through his morning routines in the beginning of the film, is driving to work. The voice on the radio introduces the blanket protest to the viewers from the British government's point of view:

> the blanket protest which has been going on for years, all in support of the same demand, political status, that is to say, different treatment for people who commit crimes, hideous crimes, for what they claim to be a political motive and that is what the government will not grant.

The viewers are introduced to the prison and the dirty protest from the guard's – and the British government's – perspective. The end of this part of the film, which evokes familiar media images and memories, is signalled by the voice of Thatcher nine minutes into the film. It functions as an introduction or prelude to the brutal treatment of Sands and other strikers in the hands of the guards. The image is of a bathroom, of a prison wall, of trees and falling snow. We hear Thatcher say, as in *Some Mother's Son*:

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

This speech, originally broadcast by BBC Radio, is a speech Thatcher held in Belfast on 5 March 1981, that is, on the fifth day of the hunger strike. In *Hunger*, it is used to explain the situation before the strike begins and to raise questions about the violent treatment of the inmates in a government prison, since as by the prime minister's statement, "there is only criminal violence." In Chion's words, "[b]eing in the screen and not, wandering the surface of the screen without entering it, the acousmêtre brings disequilibrium and tension."[67] When Thatcher finishes, the image is of a new prisoner being transported to prison. The new prisoner states his intention to join the protest: "I will not wear the uniform of a criminal. I demand to wear my own clothes." Thatcher's voice reminds viewers of the mediation of the strike at the time and the dominance of Thatcher and the British government in British media representations about the strike. *Hunger* then moves on to show the reality of the protest inside the prison, as it changes over from following the guard to the new prisoner's point of view. The new prisoner is followed until

the camera moves on to observe Bobby Sands with whom the camera mostly stays until the end.

The second time Thatcher is heard speaking happens when the film transitions from the depiction of the protest to the hunger strike. Here, Thatcher's voice appears as a prelude to Sands' starving himself:

> Faced now with the failure of their discredited cause, the men of violence have chosen in recent months to play what may well be their last card. They've turned their violence against themselves through the prison hunger strike to death. They seek to work on the most basic of human emotions, pity, as a means of creating tension and stoking the fires of bitterness and hatred.

This is from a speech at Stormont Castle 28 May 1981, made after Sands had passed away, and broadcast on BBC Radio. Thatcher speaks of pity but the images that follow do not invoke pity but perhaps horror and admiration, also sympathy, as Sands appears victimised in his emaciated state and striped pyjamas. Chion has argued that "*[t]he acousmêtre is everywhere*, its voice comes from an immaterial and non-localized body, and it seems that no obstacle can stop it. Media such as telephone and radio [. . .] often serve as vehicles for this ubiquity."[68] Although she only speaks twice in the course of the film, Thatcher is everywhere in the film, as she was everywhere in the early 1980s' British media, her voice and disembodied presence haunt the film. Thatcher's power over the physical bodies of the inmates through the prison is represented through her disembodied voice, for as Silverman argues, "the voice-over is privileged to the degree that it transcends the body,"[69] whereas the inmates are shown to be trapped in their bodies until they begin their bodily protests, the last one of which, the hunger strike, is designed to transcend the body in real life, not merely discursively. In other words, as no material obstacle can stop the immaterial acousmêtre, as the protesting republican prisoners find out, the only option Sands has, the film suggests, to beat the acousmêtre that is Thatcher is to give up his material body by starving to death, that is, by becoming an immaterial legend or martyr. The film's focus on the sensory elements, on the materiality of the body as pitted against the disembodied Thatcher, challenges her point of view, her definition of the conflict and shows viewers the point of view of the prisoners in a memorable, sensory way.

Conclusion

Both *Some Mother's Son* and *Hunger* use Thatcher's voice and/or image in their narration to provide a mediatised countermemory of the 1981 republican hunger strike in Maze prison. Both films show sides of the conflict not portrayed in the British media of the time. The use of Thatcher's voice evokes the media memories that are then countered by the two films. *Some Mother's Son* was released during the Northern Ireland Peace Process in 1996, *Hunger* in 2008 when news and images of Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib were in the public domain. In both films, the effect of Thatcher's speeches and voice is to dehumanise the hunger strikers, whereas both the films focus on humanising the protesting prisoners as some mother's sons and silent (though not powerless or weak) victims of a brutal system. The protesters' have agency but not through speech, which is the domain of the government. Their agency is bodily and often silent, but reinforced in the films by the use

of the recognisable voice of prime minister Thatcher. Both films point out flaws in the (prison) system that inhumanises both prisoners and the guards employed to control the prisoners.

In both *Some Mother's Son* and *Hunger*, gender is relevant. George's film focuses on mothers and women, who were seen on news and media on the Troubles less often than men, and contrasts the love of the prisoners' mothers with the icy statements enunciated by the controlled, female voice of Thatcher. McQueen's film focus on the bodily protests of the male prisoners is contrasted with the disembodied voice of the woman prime minister, who haunts the film as an acousmêtre, creating a malevolent presence in the prison. In both films, the female presence of Thatcher is used to invoke the old and create new media memories of the hunger strike.

Notes

1. The other two hunger strike films are Les Blair's *H3* (2001) and Maeve Murphy's *Silent Grace* (2001).
2. See Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*.
3. Lynch, "Evading the Media."
4. The author of this article had actually begun her work using the same concept of *acousmêtre*, when coming across Lynch's work.
5. Lynch, "Evading the Media," 105, 107–8.
6. Merivirta, "Gendered Conflicts."
7. Lynch, "Evading the Media," 101.
8. Curtis, *Ireland*, 107.
9. Miller, *Northern Ireland, Propaganda*, 243.
10. Rolston, "The Media, the Past," 347.
11. Ibid., 347.
12. See Lynch, "Evading the Media," 101.
13. Miller, *Northern Ireland, Propaganda*, 239.
14. Ibid., 239–45.
15. Curtis, *Ireland*, 203.
16. Mulcahy, "Press Coverage," 463.
17. Doughty, "The Hunger Strike Terrorists."
18. Mulcahy, "Press Coverage," 460.
19. See note 17 above.
20. Curtis, *Ireland*, 203–5.
21. e.g. Hill, "Images of Violence," 147; and McLoone, *Irish Film*, 61.
22. McLoone, *Irish Film*, 62.
23. Crosson, "Dialogue and Troubles Cinema," 82.
24. Ibid., 89.
25. Farley, "Masculinity and Fatherhood," 203.
26. Crosson, "Dialogue and Troubles Cinema," 95.
27. George, "Preface," x. (My emphasis.).
28. Ibid., xi–xii.
29. Crowdus and Leary, "Interview with Terry George," 26.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., 27.
32. Linehan, "Green on the screen."
33. Grant, "Interview."
34. Bowen, "The Taste of Others."
35. McQueen on *Hunger* DVD.

36. Pine, "Performing *Hunger*," 165.
37. Chan, "Exclusive."
38. Carlsten, "Mourning and Solidarity," 237–8.
39. Lynch, "Evading the Media," 107.
40. See note 34 above.
41. Atkinson, *Our Masters' Voices*, 112–4.
42. Thatcher, *The Path to Power*, 295.
43. Atkinson, *Our Masters' Voices*, 113.
44. Thatcher, *The Path to Power*, 296.
45. Atkinson, *Our Masters' Voices*, 117.
46. Ribberink, "Gender, Identity and Image," 169.
47. See e.g. Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film*, 138.
48. Hill, *Cinema and Northern Ireland*, 224.
49. Atkinson, *Our Masters' Voices*, 116.
50. See Ribberink, "Gender, Identity and Image."
51. See note 49 above.
52. Ribberink, "Gender, Identity and Image."
53. Nunn, *Thatcher, Politics and Fantasy*, 35, 40.
54. Ibid., 41.
55. See note 46 above.
56. Wigon, "Interview with Steve McQueen."
57. Ibid.
58. Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 18.
59. See note 33 above.
60. Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 23.
61. Ibid., 27.
62. See note 33 above.
63. Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 51.
64. See Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*.
65. Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 50.
66. Ibid., 49.
67. Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 24.
68. Ibid.
69. See note 66 above.

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