

## Blu-Ray Review: Galvanizing 'Hunger' Paints Unforgettable Portrait of Revolt

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on February 12, 2010 - 12:24pm

- [Blu-ray Review](#) [2]
- [Bobby Sands](#) [3]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [4]
- [Hunger](#) [5]
- [IRA Hunger Strike](#) [6]
- [Liam Cunningham](#) [7]
- [Matt Fagerholm](#) [8]
- [Michael Fassbender](#) [9]
- [Passion of the Christ](#) [10]
- [Steve McQueen](#) [11]
- [Theater, TV, DVD & Blu-Ray](#) [12]

CHICAGO – Here's an art house film more visceral and unsettling than any run-of-the-mill mainstream bloodbath. It's the feature debut of visual artist Steve McQueen, an unfortunate name for anyone who doesn't happen to be the star of "Bullitt." His previous work has been confined to art galleries, and there are countless shots in "Hunger" that could function as standalone artworks.

Though his film may seem fragmented at first, it holds together triumphantly, and packs an overwhelming punch. It immediately solidifies McQueen's status as one of the most promising filmmakers of our time, proving that he will surely overcome his name. With a hypnotic attention to detail, "Hunger" depicts the events surrounding the 1981 IRA (Irish Republican Army) Hunger Strike that took place in Northern Ireland's notorious Maze prison. IRA inmates, led by Bobby Sands, went on the strike to protest the British government's refusal to grant them political status.



Blu-Ray Rating: **5.0/5.0**

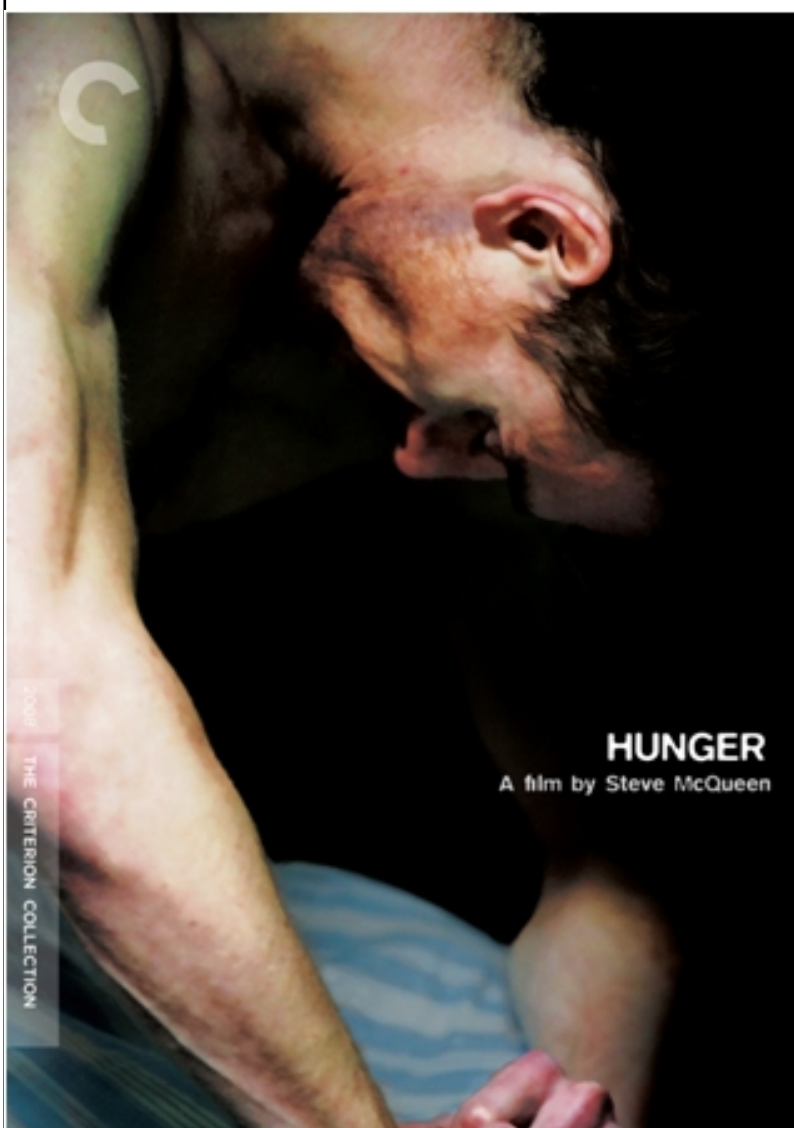
Viewers unfamiliar with this vital chapter in recent history will have no trouble getting swept up in McQueen's assured and uncompromising vision. The filmmaker's abstract approach to the subject matter allows the onscreen events to resonate on a universal level. For its first half, the film is nearly excruciating, as it depicts the horrifically brutal treatment of political prisoners in scenes so unflinching that they evoke the naked inhumanity on display in Frederick Wiseman's "Titticut Follies." They also call to mind images from Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, though McQueen makes a valiant effort to humanize the prison guards as well, delving into their own fear and incarceration. Sands is kept offscreen for the opening 25 minutes, which follow the protests of two prisoners (Brian Mulligan and Liam McMahon), as well as the daily trials of a guard (Stuart Graham).



Michael Fassbender lost a great deal of weight to portray IRA hunger striker Bobby Sands in Steve McQueen's *Hunger*.

*Photo credit: Courtesy of the Criterion Collection*

The second act puts the first in context, consisting entirely of a pointed conversation between Sands (Michael Fassbender) and a priest (Liam Cunningham). Their discussion unfolds in a single unbroken take that runs for nearly twenty minutes, interrupted by a single close-up of each man. The dialogue, written by Irish playwright Enda Walsh, brilliantly illustrates the ideological conflict between the two men, and the primal motivation of Sands to use his body as a last source for revolt. This is the moment where "Hunger" most directly distinguishes itself from a picture like "Passion of the Christ" (both films were distributed by Mel Gibson's Icon Productions). Though Sands sees himself as a revolutionary, like Christ, whose sacrifice is necessary in order to bring about justice, McQueen refuses to idolize him, allowing multiple viewpoints to be considered.



*Hunger* was released on Blu-Ray and DVD on February 16th, 2010.

*Photo credit: Courtesy of the Criterion Collection*

Fassbender is no stranger to physically demanding roles, having survived "300," "Inglourious Basterds," and the especially grisly "Eden Lake." His performance here is electrifying not merely because of the dramatic weight loss, but because Fassbender captures the impassioned spirit of a man determined to send a message to the world, even if it means fading from it. The final act, devoted to Sands's sixty-six days on the strike, is as wordless and haunting as the first.

"Hunger" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.35:1 aspect ratio), and accompanied by several excellent extras, including interviews with the director and star. McQueen claims that Sands's hunger strike is "the most important event in recent British history," while stressing his desire to have viewers simply observe the onscreen action before judging it. He provides a thorough explanation of his motives behind each section of the film, while discussing his experience working with the people of Belfast, and constructing a set that resembled Maze prison (with no breakaway walls). Fassbender reveals that he lost the weight himself by living on a diet of berries, nuts and sardines, and reminisces about how Cunningham had to move into his flat in order for them to memorize their 28-page scene. A brief featurette provides insights from other cast members, including Cunningham and Graham. Best of all is an enlightening 45-minute episode of the BBC news program, "Panorama," that aired four months after Sands's death, and fills in the historical detail artfully alluded to on McQueen's cinematic canvas.

*'Hunger' is released by the Criterion Collection and stars Michael Fassbender, Liam Cunningham, Stuart Graham, Brian Mulligan and Liam McMahon. It was written by Steve McQueen & Enda Walsh and directed by Steve McQueen. It was released on February 16th, 2010. It is not rated.*



[13]

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- [1] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/users/mattmovieman>
- [2] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/blu-ray-review>
- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/bobby-sands>
- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/hollywoodchicagodotcom-content>
- [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/hunger>
- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/ira-hunger-strike>
- [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/liam-cunningham>
- [8] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/matt-fagerholm>
- [9] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/michael-fassbender>
- [10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/passion-of-the-christ>
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