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Steve McQueen. How Does One Believe in the Future?

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☐ English abstract ☐

There is a cultural tipping point at which belonging to a condition of oppression becomes a key to addressing many issues. Above all, as a way to move out of an arena that can be politically acceptable, but is inclined to stay confined. On the other hand, focusing on human nature in the global sense may prove particularly problematic, especially if it ends up suggesting the inevitability or even incurability of aspects such as cruelty, aggression, and the systematic identification and exploitation of other people's vulnerabilities. The violence inflicted on minorities, be they of skin colour, ethnicity, gender, or psychological weaknesses, are coming from historical and social issues, but they draw on a violence within us, an unspeakable but irrepressible tendency to taunt, to hurt, to cross boundaries, and to follow urges like the impulse to control and possess: inclinations we can normally stifle, but which in the right conditions well up like blood from a wound, releasing the banal evil – to use the Hannah Arendt's expression and concept (Arendt 2006) – lodged in us. Sir Steve McQueen (London, 1969) seems to deal with a double issue.

I will not describe his technique, albeit its importance, which goes from using 36mm or 16mm films to super8 cameras, always keeping in mind "the beauty of recording" (Steve McQueen, quoted in Nelson 2022, 57), a strong relation between the screen and the space and a formal approach that comes from Bruce Nauman and other video-experimentations within the visual arts, the French new wave, a certain cinema from the sixties and seventies and, above all, the New Queer Cinema from

the eighties and nineties, with its "emphasis upon the role of the camera as a formal and political instrument" (Steve McQueen, quoted in Nelson 2022, 60). Given the importance of a technical analysis, nevertheless I will focus on the artist's view on humankind.

In his work, the way Black – or simply oppressed – people have been treated, which is unforgivable and requires a social engagement on the side of the artist, goes hand in hand with the need to show "who we actually are, not the way we think we are" [1]. The problem of building our own identity has been recognised as a crucial point in McQueen's work from a very early stage (Enwezor 1999). Yet, a general view on his oeuvre brings me to a realisation: we should acknowledge that we are all pervaded by a violent undercurrent of competition and territoriality. This is especially hard due to one dilemma: what is the purpose of struggling to stigmatise and isolate such behaviour, if we imagine it to be an intrinsic part of being human? Every condemnation of it is justified, but if the problem lies in nature and therefore in history, then the protest is as necessary as hobbled [2]. It strikes me that Steve McQueen's work has many different facets – racial, social, and psychological – but that deep down, it all seems to share the same disillusioned view of what it means to be human that links Hobbes, to Voltaire, to Arendt, where the roots of totalitarianism seem irredeemably entangled with our worst impulses. Under certain circumstances, "life is perverse" says the artist [3], and every human being can become a slave or a violent oppressor [4]. One could find a confirm of this view in some of the critiques McQueen has received. According to Philip Kaisary, his film *12 Years a Slave* (2013) does not focus enough on the role of slavery as a way the Western culture has constructed the idea of the self (Kaisary 2017, 94). Nevertheless, this kind of negative remark can be turned into a hint for a wider way to look at his entire oeuvre. If such a vision is justified, then it becomes a question of in what conditions and contexts we allow this extreme side to come out into the open.

To see if this interpretation makes sense, it may help to examine certain works by McQueen, especially his short films, yet keeping in mind that his whole production is built around two languages that converge yet do not coincide: one conceived for the entertainment industry [5] and the other for the world of visual art. The two languages are in a relation which is comparable to the one between literature and poetry [6].

The same pithy, non-judgmental black-and-white – all analysis and investigation – that one finds in Andy Warhol's screen tests, also turns up in some of the short films by Steve McQueen. Here, however, images depict a relationship; the act of filming becomes a severe intimation to look at the facts, since rather than showing a face gazing blankly into the camera, it depicts unusual moments and emotionally heated situations. There is no embellishment in these scenes, except for intentional photographic "errors" that fit into a tradition imbuing them with meaning (Chéroux 2003): for instance, the excessive closeness to the subject, which helps capture our

attention and keep us engaged to the point of feeling queasy. Nothing must distract us from our response. In his films for a wider audience this rule is often broken by the narrative, even if some of the empathic effects remain: for example, a certain nausea may arise while watching some of the obsessive smoking/flirting/dancing scenes in *Lovers Rock* (2020) from the *Small Axe* TV series. But I think it is precisely to retain the possibility of creating an even more radical immersive atmosphere that McQueen has never abandoned experimental languages. They allow him to employ an overstretched kind of cinematography that was pioneered above all by the Surrealist cinema in order to achieve, paradoxically, the epitome of realism. This full grasp of reality is the key point of his most relevant short films: despite his penchant for storytelling in longer films, he is definitely never suggesting or allowing any sort of escapism.

1 | Steve McQueen, *Charlotte*, 2004, film still.

In *Charlotte* (2004), someone's hand touches the lid – now drooping – of what was one of the most beautiful eyes ever filmed, the troubled eyes that first defied and then submitted to the violence of a Nazi officer in Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter* (1974). I think it is not irrelevant to cite that film, even if McQueen never did. In it, a girl in a concentration camp reluctantly accepts humiliation in her youth, then definitively gives in to it when older. Lucia, the lovely and disquieting protagonist, has been imprisoned because her father is a socialist. Cavani has explained in various contexts [7] that she did not want to make a film about the Shoah, directly connected to racist violence, but rather about a more general theme: the self-destruction of Europe and of Western civilisation as a whole. The trauma of this character, who in the meantime has apparently found fulfilment in her marriage to a successful man – flipping the power dynamic with her torturer, who is now a humble clerk – proves unresolved and unresolvable. The only way out is the suicide of both victim and tormentor. And the trauma was not only having been forced to behave seductively, but having derived a narcissistic pleasure from it. Over the years, Charlotte's lovely eyes have changed. The actor has done nothing to hide the passage of time. The young barriers that shielded two blue irises

> from a harsh world have aged, sagged, and lost their elasticity. A sense of decorum calls for their dignity to be respected, for them to be left in peace. But no: in Steve McQueen's short film, where we only see one eye, a finger grasps, tugs, raises that eye as if to touch the cornea, filmed in black and white bathed in a crimson filter verging on blood. The scene is magnified, as if we were voyeurs peering through a keyhole into a darkroom lit only by this alarming glow. Discomfort, compulsion, failure to keep the proper distance between bodies: this fully meets the description of an offensive interaction between human beings, and Charlotte is complicit in the offence as if in a co-dependent relationship, just like her character in the film that made her famous.

The image also wavers in and out of focus, as if we were inside those eyes and had to strain to see the finger tormenting it. In McQueen's film, she is once again the victim. Yet she also proves to be the tormentor of the person committing the offence, because she does not resist, does not pull back, does not rebel, and thus even aids and abets the harm to her bodily integrity. Her immobility encourages the micro-assault to continue. It is a violation that touches her face and thus a symbolically grievous one, since, in the words of Emmanuel Lévinas, "The skin of the face is that which stays most naked, most destitute [...] the face is exposed, menaced" (Lévinas 1985, 86). The other party is unscrupulously taking advantage of this defencelessness, but her failure to defend herself is not just forbearance: it becomes almost an incitement to crime. Claustrophobic and vulnerable feelings are at stage [8]. This ambiguous psychological mechanism is intensified by the extreme closeup that turns a detail into the main focus, in a projection that makes the anatomical feature appear enormous.

It seems like a further variation, stripped of eroticism, on the theme of *Cold Breath* (1999), where the snippet of body in the frame is one of the artist's nipples. Although it follows a different psychological impulse, this long sequence also inspires discomfort: for ten minutes we watch a self-stimulation of this nipple between his index finger and thumb, as it is prodded, tweaked, and rapidly rubbed. There is the rhythm of desire and a sense of masturbation, but also a perverse compulsion to push the limits of pleasure. There is self-torment. There is obsession and an inability to stop, much like the addiction to pleasure that becomes an affliction in McQueen's feature film *Shame* (2011). It veers into self-harm. In this case the black-and-white is statue-like, reminiscent of ancient marble sculptures and their play of shadows, but also of many photos that combine a fixation on some

fragment of the body – often sexualised – with a classical aesthetic that attempts to dampen sensuality through the quest for beauty. The potential beauty seems tormented, though. It lies in the folds of skin, in the sharp rise of the nipple, in the supple movement of tissue, in the ebony that evokes the cultural stereotype of the Black body as a locus of hyper-masculine fantasies A sexual superiority which is a poisoned gift often offered to those who are socially denigrated, from ancient barbarians to Native Americans to people with dwarfism [9].

In both shorts, we see a relationship established between an I and a you: in the first, it does not matter whether the Other really exists, whereas, in the second, the Other is created by a different part of the same body: as Maurice Merleau-Ponty would say, both cases involve a relationship between the body as object and the body as subject, as it sees and is seen in the meantime (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 159-190). The relationship portrayed in *Cold Breath*, which indeed predates *Charlotte*, is also imbued with violence and with an overstepping of bounds. It is a fact, however, that these two actions and the flogging scene in the theatrical feature *12 Years a Slave* (2013) feel similarly unbearable to watch: they prompt the same desire, in the viewer, for the action to cease. This is what Steve McQueen means when he says, as I already mentioned, that his experimental shorts employ a language that is more lyrical than the narrative language of his films for the big screen, which unfold more like novels [10]; yet while the form varies, the substance remains the same.

The visual concision becomes less radical in other films created for a museum setting, though they do not adopt the fluid storytelling approach of his films for theatrical release. By paratactically grouping together many of these works in one exhibition space, as he often does, McQueen at least partially embraces the editing dynamic implicit in "expanded cinema" [11], which presents fragments of a narrative in different places, giving viewers the freedom and task of creating their own version of the film going through the space and choosing their own timing and montage.

Of course, compared to the small monitors used by some pioneers of this practice who were active in the 1960s and 1970s also in England (Partridge 2011), the choice of large-scale projections, or even little but meant to have a relation with the viewer's body, creates a much greater absorption in the image: viewers literally plunge into it. There is no revelling in the medium, as in the juxtaposed, hysterical videos of Nam June Paik; there is no reflection on television, or inversion of its entry into homes. Instead, there is a kind of cinema that retains its ability to take us out of ourselves, to mesmerise and transport us into an imaginary different from our own, while keeping us locked in a state of "intimacy" with the images [12]. This is true to the point that caressing and any other kind of tactility are key points in what McQueen's film suggest (Donna De Salvo's words in the same interview).

The possibility to watch the projection from both sides of the screens, often offered by the artist by displaying the screens in the middle of the space and not on the wall, also adds the idea of a possible double point of view; this technique arrives at

its peak with *Sunshine State* (2022), the double film projected on two screens that plays with the "blackface" practice [13]. Here effects such as inversion, mirroring, and symmetry come to the forefront. All this charges the films with ambiguity, and compels us to let our gazes, our minds, our bodies to be trapped by the moving images. It hurts on purpose: by being engaged and fascinated, we become prisoners of a dangerous game. One of the aims of the director is that we feel slaves, too, by inverting the sentiment about ourselves as free selves.

2 | Steve McQueen, *Western Deep*, 2002, film still.

It comes as no surprise that in *Western Deep* (2002) we live a descent into hell at the world's deepest gold mine, in South Africa, together with the miners: both they and we are modern-day slaves. Indeed, they are almost all Black – working conditions have not changed since the days of apartheid – and they are forced by their dangerous job to behave in mechanical, repetitive ways. These men become mere bodies used for labour, reified and stripped of all individual frills by their identical uniforms, and must start their shift by travelling three and a half kilometres straight down. The way that the projection unfolds means that we experience a day in the bowels of the Earth from their own perspective, in a process of painful identification, but also from the perspective of someone observing them with a curious eye. Both points of view, as a worker and as a controller, create a state of anxiety.

We see the dark entrance to the cave, smudged with glimmers of red light. We hear the clang of metal, we see iron gratings that seem to imprison rather than protect, we glimpse faces full of tension and feel the prospect of a day without light, without silence, without autonomy. The men's heads are topped by the usual miner's lamp. When we see them together as a group, they are facing each other in orderly ranks of naked torsos over blue shorts; they perform exercises on a long bench, as if to test the efficiency of bodies exhausted by the pressure incredibly higher than that of the earth's surface, by the extremely high

> temperature, by the obligation – due to the dangerous working conditions – to obey and move as one as if they were incarcerated prisoners. The soundtrack is punctuated by red signals that go on and off at the top of the space, a discordant noise that alternates with the silence, and a visual violence that adds to the grimness of the fluorescent lighting. In other parts of the film we see hallucinatory flashes of green or red reflected on the grating. The faces seen in closeup have thermometers in their mouths, or are sweating and wheezing, or staring blankly. The angles shown to us in the exercise scene include a shot through a lopsided window, as if secretly filmed, that seems like a direct allusion to the discipline/punish dynamic that Michel Foucault theorised to be the hallmark of all coercion: punishment has gradually ceased to be a spectacle [14] and McQueens' effort lies in showing it again, not as a caveat nor as a social ritual, but as a glance on a bitter and everlasting truth. Here it has reached its epitome, well beyond the Panopticon: no escape is conceivable without death and, moreover, the act of entering the world's deepest hole has been voluntary.

We also see the phase of rest, with bodies shorn of identity (Demos 2013) that stretch out on green sofas, or in front of a television showing other Black bodies and dance moves: an alienated time-out for individuals who seem to temporarily recover a posture of freedom. It is a fleeting, hypocritical correction of their status as *homo sacer*, as Giorgio Agamben called it [15]: someone whose life is considered disposable, with no rights, and who can be killed without committing any crime.

Steve McQueen experimental films can also show how subtle discomfort can be, arising slowly and softly as in the double screen diptych *Caribs' Leap* (2002). On one side of it, we see bodies plunging into a blue sky and falling through it with utter grace, like a flight of Icarus that is almost a dance, in a shot that never shows the leap or landing, but also offers no hope of survival.This ethereal, suicidal void shows that the only possible reaction to slavery may be death.

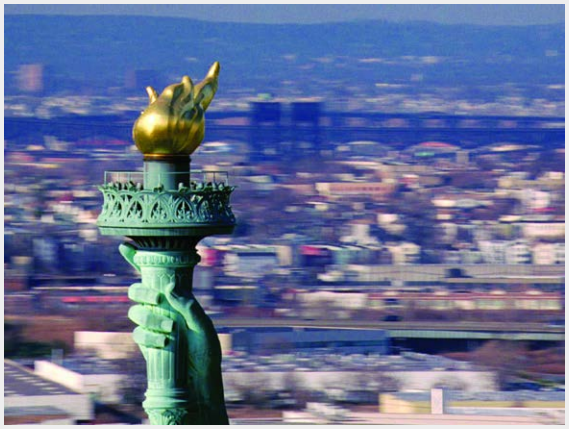
On the other screen, a film tells the story – though always in poetic fragments – of how Grenada's final attempt to preserve its independence came to an end. In a wintry light that is not cold but feels drained of life, tired dogs wait for the arrival of

the fishermen, gaze at their nets, watch children run and play. A hand constructs little boats out of coconut shells and plastic, another scene shows the purplish blue of the sea at sunset. There is no epic action, and the memory of 1651, when the island was conquered, is suggested only by the texts (McQueen 2002, McEvilley 2002). The ending, in particular, where we see a row of coffins, speaks of the lost hope for anything beyond the pre-established rhythm of childhood, adulthood, death. It is the life of a remote ex-colony – from which the artist's parents came, and to which McQueen has returned for his grandmother's funeral – where the lack of freedom seems like the opposite of the mine: not control, but neglect. There is no danger and no competition. Those who wish to escape can do so, to a world of continents and cities where they will never find such idyllic conditions, such a place in which to listen to the calm sound of waves or hide behind the palm fronds. But in this paradise, the only possible goal is to be buried in a shiny coffin. Going back to the other screen of the diptych, where the bodies float and fall through the sky, one should note that a cliff on the island is known as "Caribs' Leap" : the title of the work comes from here. On the day the island was conquered by the French, many inhabitants jumped to their deaths rather than accept defeat and humiliation. Indeed, the conquest does not seem to have changed the rhythm of life, but rather to have turned the serene languor of this land into an unhappy lack of self-determination. Missing freedom means missing dignity.

3-4 | Steve McQueen, *Carib's Leap*, 2002, film stills.

The short film that explores the Statue of Liberty from the discontinuous, circling perspective of a camera on a helicopter (*Static*, 2009), with constant changes in altitude, whirring noises, and sudden disorienting cuts, is an unequivocal reflection on this: freedom or rather the Enlightenment ideals of personal liberty as a legitimate aspiration, whose lack creates a creepy state of unbalance. Liberty has been the key concept of the American Declaration of Independence (1776), which was the first political document to found a nation on the rights of human beings and specifically on the right to pursue personal happiness. The film shows us its symbol up close, green from oxidisation, damaged in places, surrounded by a New York that looks purplish from this aerial perspective, and set against a grey sky bristling with skyscrapers. The camera's eye roams in a circle as if seeking a foothold. Still, we find ourselves in a position of instability, with an emphasis on the relative nature of

all observed values, but also – to expand the metaphor – of all the moral values the statue is meant to embody. The theme that emerges is thus the lack of collective liberty, a historical failure and betrayal that is specially embodied by racial inequalities, but far from being limited to that.



5 | Steve McQueen, *Static*, 2009, film still.

This obviously brings up socio-political and historical questions that are too articulated to be explored here. It is nonetheless interesting to note that, around the time these works were made, there was a widespread, much debated tendency among scholars to consider the phase of pure racial antagonism, especially directed at African Americans (Roy Kaplan 2011). The Black Lives Matter movement has brought a restored focus on anti-Black discrimination (regarding the genesis and outlook of the movement, see Taylor 2016; Ming Francis, Wright-Rigueur 2021) although it is difficult to arrive at a clear philosophical framing of the issue (Lebron 2017, xiii). Specifically, there is a heated debate between the idea that "Black Lives Matter" and "All Lives Matter." Studies based on psychological testing, however, demonstrate that racism specifically directed against Black communities cannot really be considered a thing of the past (West, Greenland, van Laar 2021).

McQueen's homage to sexual diversity and to the queer life of Oscar Wilde also moves in this direction. It is the installation *Weight* (2016), which presents the kind of bed once used in places of confinement – prisons and hospitals – covered by a gilded mosquito net that serves both as protection and as a monumental drapery. The work was conceived after visiting the tiny cells of Reading Gaol, where Wilde served his sentence. There is a clear contrast between the bare-bones structure of the bed, which resembles those in Edvard Munch's photos of mental asylums (kept in the Munch Museum in Oslo), and the precious delicacy of the net draped over it, made of 24-carat gold. It thus

> evokes both the public censure of those seen as different yet talented, and the bubble of isolation that in some way shelters them, waiting for their revolutionary cultural value to be discovered and acknowledged. This suffering and delay is the price of their superiority and of their distance from ordinary behaviour and ethics. In any case, the bed as an element is always linked to the material nature of a body, and to the cruelty inflicted first and foremost on bodies: this kind of moral trial quite often passes through the flesh, leading to deaths one could easily consider collective murders. In McQueen's films, the starting place for pain, privation, and humiliation always seems to be the body. There is a historical substrate that turns this planet into a place of oppression and expulsion, in a process that unfolds, to quote Saskia Sassen, through the constant construction of "predatory formations" and the "warehousing of people" (Sassen 2014, 14, 16) – above all, of thin, famished, exploited or mutilated bodies. Alongside these objective factors, I must repeat myself: McQueen seems to offer an explanation that is not really social, let alone racial [16], but rather existential [17].

It is easy "losing oneself" (Steve McQueen, *Dialogue with Stuart Comer*, Jan 31, 2014) through an external aggression or an internal one, such as addiction: freedom is a social, but also an inner conquer against the evil we might be clinging to. McQueen seems to be saying that we are unable to break free of our weaknesses and addictions. Sexual desire, which ought to be a source of pleasure, can easily become a relationship with our own body and others that imposes obsessions, strictures, and acts of self-harm, a libido plugged into the Freudian death drive [18]. We think our freedom is something we can govern, but we have internalised a system that has taught us the ethics of exploitation and that ultimately, tends to make us exploit ourselves, even in our experience of pleasure (see Han 2015).

We are probably victims and tormentors by vocation, a condition that is therefore almost unchangeable, because it is not tied to any specific race except the human race, as a whole. And we tend to make our rage pathological, turn it into a social disease, into the addict's game of creating conflicts, needs, hierarchies and other holes to fill. We have so much trouble finding the proper distance, building

connections, and creating conditions that imply neither exploitation nor submission. Although there are personal responsibilities and individual actions that must be identified and punished, we seem impelled – like the protagonist of the film *Hunger* (2008), who starves himself to death in the name of Irish freedom – by a general existential condition, the one described by Emmanuel Lévinas when he theorises that when we look at a face, our first instinct is to desire the other person's death (Lévinas 1961, 85-86).

In arriving at this general vision of life, McQueen seems to be putting his reflection on Blackness into a much vaster context. He does not turn his back on it, but rather does what many Black stars have tried to do once they gain success in a specific sphere, for instance in the field of music. Berry Gordy's choice to found and build a record label solely for Black artists from Detroit was a stroke of genius. He managed to launch incredible careers in entertainment, with side ventures even branching into film and musical theatre. All went well with those who decided to stay Black and stay pop, as Diana Ross did (see George 2007; Flory 2017). But many of his artists found it necessary to enter a broader arena of competition and emerge from that protected, racialised sphere by changing record label. The tragic story of Michael Jackson [19] shows just how costly the road to emancipation can be. A Black artist who continues to talk about slavery and its aftermath, thus, has every reason to do so – although the true challenge is to break out of a sphere that, while segregated and marginalised, can also be a safer space.

Still, one should emphasise that Steve McQueen's vision extends further. Otherwise he would not have chosen the white actor Michael Fassbender to play the lead in his first three theatrical features. Nor would he have chosen Charlotte Rampling for what is perhaps his most jarring experimental film. Nor would he have left the racial identity of the falling bodies unclear. We seem to be on the edge of a shift towards humanity in general, with its tangle of contradictory impulses. For that matter, Toni Morrison's landmark novel *Beloved* (1987) masterfully moved from the dazed mental state of the first freed slaves towards a vaster theme: the search for the truth – if such a thing exists – in lingering, recurring nightmares, and in the aggressive invasion of everyday life by ghosts from the past. Toni Morrison, writing as a Black woman, moves beyond the sphere of race. In a similar way, Black theorist bell hooks insistently emphasised that love, in the sense of the dynamic inherent in any human connection, has an essential, undeniable political component that goes far beyond the issues of race and gender with which her reflection began (see especially bell books, Hooks 2002).

There was a time when true racial struggles could not help but centre on skin colour, whether they took the non-violent approach of Martin Luther King or the combative one of Malcolm X. Perhaps nowadays we should think about the degree to which practices amounting to tacit enslavement have spread through many parts of the globe, even outside the post-colonial world. Today, perhaps no form of enslavement can be analysed without looking at how it overlaps with various forms

of difference, keeping in mind that all categories lie at the intersection of different forms of oppression, and cannot be neatly separated [20]. And so theories related to ethnicity and gender have gradually been linked to theories regarding sexuality, disability, and madness, in both its social construction and inward genesis. One notes that the dogs wandering around free in the film Steve McQueen showed in the British Pavilion of the 2009 Venice Biennale (Steve McQueen, *Giardini*, 2009) also seem to be a metaphor for solitude, for recent migrants, and more generally for human beings left to fend for themselves. But a question still remains unanswered, and I believe this is the question Steve McQueen insistently and forcefully raises: do we enslave others for historical and social reasons, or – without minimising individual and collective responsibilities and the need for action – are we bound to our nature, in which *homo homini lupis*? And to go further, perhaps even bringing psychoanalysis into the debate (Freud [1920] 2011), is man all too often a wolf to himself as well? Yet McQueen seems to be saying that whatever the answers to these tricky questions turn out to be, we cannot help but keep struggling for justice.

With his televised film series *Small Axe* (2021), which reconstructs several key moments in the racial history of the UK, McQueen showed that he wants to believe in the past and in the lessons it holds for the present. Likewise, with the organisation of Year 3 (2019) he showed he wants to believe in the future: this giant exhibition of class photos, systematically collected to involve children from all over London, was one of the most participatory projects ever shown at Tate Britain, and was also presented in outdoor locations around the city. McQueen's position does not boil down to a declaration of surrender to human nature. This can be seen in part from his use of a cinematic language that is always meticulous, harmonious, and astonishing, capable of sparking emotions that can become political.

For many reasons, it would thus make no sense to suggest that McQueen is talking about the end of hope, and it would be equally misleading to associate him only with a cultural investigation of the oppression of minorities. Rather, in his vision, the privilege of hope seems reserved for those who prove open to complex thought, to abandoning the notion that perpetrators and solutions can be easily identified. They must prove willing to gamble on life: a choice that may seem groundless in the light of reason, yet is made inevitable by the emotional needs that come with the desire to stay alive.

Notes

[1] Artist's words in the video interview *Steve McQueen at the Tate Modern*: "I have no choice but to create", BBC Newsnight, Feb 13, 2020.

[2] After a conversation with Steve McQueen on September 28, 2021 in Milan, I must agree with what asserts Paul Gilroy: "McQueen has always insisted that his creative work is not political". ("Time and Terror: Widdershins in the Torrid Zone", in Clara Kim and Fontàn Moran, eds., *Steve McQueen*, London: Tate and Pirelli Hangar Bicocca, 2020, 20-25).

[3] Artist's words in *Newsnight: Steve McQueen full interview*, Jan 7, 2014.

[4] One could find a confirmation of this view in some of the critiques McQueen has received. In Kaisary 2017, his film *12 Years a Slave* (2013) does not focus enough on the role of slavery as a way Western culture has constructed the idea of the self (see p. 94). Nevertheless, this kind of negative remark can be turned into a hint for a wider way to look at his entire oeuvre.

[5] For the wider audience, Steve McQueen has directed the films *Hunger* (2008) on Bobby Sands, the Irish activist who died in 1981 in the Maze prison hospital after 66 days on hunger strike, aged 27, *Shame* (2011) on sexual dependence of a white man, and an adaptation of Solomon Northup's 1853 narrative *Twelve Years a Slave* (2013), *Widow* (2018); five films for the TV series *Small Axe* (2020); the documentaries for BBC *Uprising* (2021), *Black Power: A British Story of Resistance* (2021), and *Subnormal: A British Scandal* (2021). He was awarded a Turner Prize as a sculptor (London 1999) and an Oscar as a director, demonstrating his will to inhabit the visual arts field with attention to different kind of audiences.

[6] Conversation of September 28, 2021, Milan. The same concept is explained by the artist in the video interview for the solo show at Hangar Bicocca "Sunshine State", Milan 2022: https://pirellihangarbicocca.org/en/bubble/interview-steve-mcqueen/ (viewed on July 12, 2022). See also Steve McQueen, *Dialogue with Stuart Comer*, where the artist states this relation again and speaks of "expression compression", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-KM_5z9WvUc&t=4134s (watched on July 14, 2022).

[7] See for example the interview *Spoleto 2012: Liliana Cavani, il significato di* Il portiere di notte, July 3, 2012.

[8] Donna De Salvo's world in the video interview: *Steve McQueen at the Tate Modern: 'I have no choice but to create'* – BBC Newsnight, Feb 13, 2020 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aIgqPAbvf9c (watched on July 12, 2022).

[9] In this regard, see Hill Collins 2004, 149-179. See also Angela Davis *Women, Race and Class*, with the 11th chapter dedicated to "Rape, Racism and the Black Rapist" (Davis 2019).

[10] From the conversation with the Artist on September 28, 2021 in Milan.

[11] The term "expanded cinema" is used here with the definition first provided by Gene Youngblood (Youngblood 1970) and points to McQueen's indebtedness not just to the generation that became active in the 1990s, but above all to pioneers like Nam June Paik, Andy Warhol, Stan Brakhage, Carolee Schneemann, and Les Levine, among others.

[12] Artist's word in the video interview *The Artist's Voice: Steve McQueen,* Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Nov 9, 2017.

[13] See Gilroy-Ware 2022. Up to the 1950s, Hollywood Studios preferred that black characters were impersonated by white actors whose face was made up in dark brown. The film contains footage from *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the first talkie film in which there are synchronised dialogues. Its source of inspiration was the novel *The Day of Atonement* by Samson Raphaelson, telling the story of a young Jewish jazz singer seeking success in Broadway. Jazz has been a way to success for Black too (see Morrison 1993 and Mbembe 2013).

[14] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of Prisons*, London 1995 (Foucault 1995), quoted by the Kindle version 2012, chapter 1: "The Body of the Condemned" (unnunmbered pages in the Kindle version).

[15] See Agamben 1998, especially pp. 136-143 regarding the development of the legal concept of the"life that does not deserve to live".

[16] Of course, this is not meant to downplay the importance of racial themes in the work of the Black British diaspora: in this regard, see Mercer 2016.

[17] Steve McQueen, *Dialogue with Stuart Comer*, Jan 31, 2014, watched on July 12 2022 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-KM_5z9WvUc&list=TLPQMTQwNzIwMjJeMn3kXkWqxQ&index=1.

[18] One should keep in mind that the protagonist of the film *Shame* (2011) is consumed by his sexual addiction.

[19] Among the available studies – many of them not yet particularly scholarly in their assessment of the entertainer's cultural background − see Virgo 2012.

[20] For an examination of intersectional theories of marginality, see Crenshaw 1989, 140.

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English abstract

British artist Steve McQueen (1969) has worked with film in a variety of ways, from the conventional feature film in *12 Years a Slave*, awarded an Oscar, to the television series in *Small Axes*, and the contemporary art film in shorts employing a montage of obsessive repetitions, distortions, and small moves that become the expression of states of mind. What all these approaches describe is the lack of freedom in any kind of oppression, be it racial, interpersonal, or self-damaging. Given this historical critique of dominance and slavery across forms, his view on humankind implies there is no way out from an inclination toward violence that pertains not only to historical narratives but to human nature itself.

keywords | Steve McQueen; Short Films; Contemporary Art; Experimental Films; Black Lives Matter; Slavery; Human Rights; Human Condition.

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