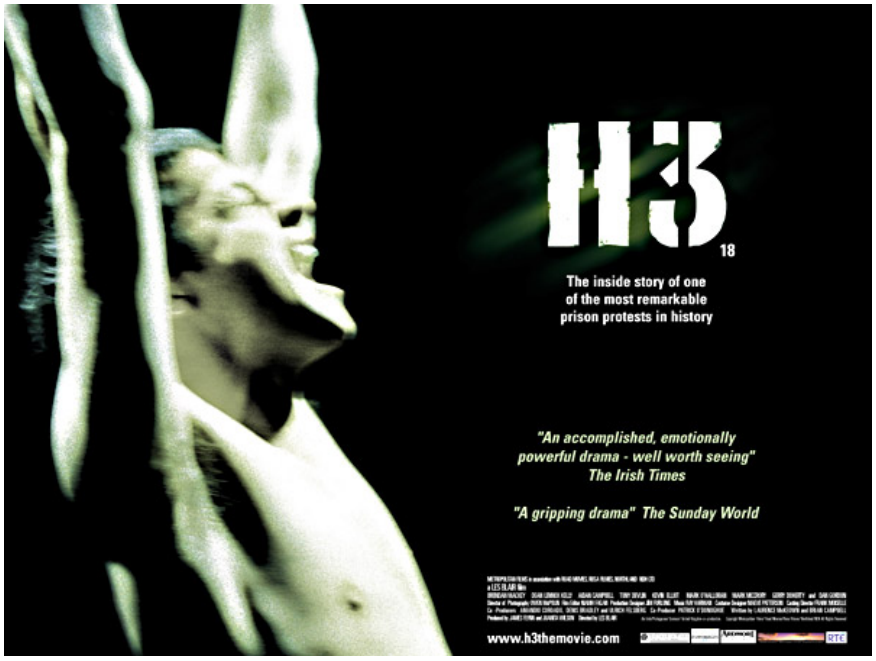

H3 screening at Writing on the Wall festival

Reviewed by Denis Joe May 2011

The 30th anniversary of the Irish Hunger Strike was excuse, if excuse were needed, for a showing of the excellent Les Blair film **H3**, written by former Hunger Striker Laurence McKeown and ex-prisoner Brian Campbell, and filmed in the H Blocks of the Maze prison in the North of Ireland, screened at the Writing on the Wall festival with Séanna Walsh.

H3 was made nearly a decade before Steve McQueen's Hunger (though McQueen was ignorant of the existence of **H3** - at the premier of Hunger it was believed that Hunger was the first time that the Hunger Strikes were the subject of a film, as Seanna Walsh pointed out after the screening). Whilst McQueen's film is the more celebrated of the films, **H3** is in many ways the superior - there were also two other films made about the Hunger Strikes before Hunger: Some Mother's Son directed by Terry George in 1996 and Il silenzio

dell'allodola, by Italian film director and scriptwriter David Ballerini in 2005.

The reason for this is that there is a greater understanding of the circumstances and the issues that led to the Hunger Strikes. There are no scenes of polemical discussions that feature in many of Ken Loaches' films for example and the use of cinematic devices, such as flashbacks, are kept to a minimum. Blair had enough confidence to let the story tell itself, though that is not to say that the film is a balanced view of events. As Blair said at the time of **H3**'s premiere: "The problem was about giving a more balanced view. Balance kills drama. The film is written by ex-prisoners and was going to be from a prisoners' perspective." (The Guardian, 14 July 2001).

The film begins with the arrival of a new prisoner, 19-year-old Declan (Aidan Campbell) at the Maze, where the inmates have already been on the "blanket" and "dirty" protest for more than three years. He is 'padded' up with Seamus Scullion (Brendan Mackey), the man chosen to select the names of his fellow prisoners in the **H3** prison block to replace those hunger strikers whose strike came to an end. As it would be expected, the narrative of H3 is grim, but not without its moments of sheer humanity. In an early scene Declan is being introduced to the other inmates after they have been banged-up for the night. He is asked to sing a song, and much to the bafflement of the fellow prisoners, he gives a rendition of the Undertones' song 'My Perfect Cousin'. Later in the film, after the inmates had been set upon by the riot squad, Scullion, sitting in his cell, battered, starts singing 'A Nation Once Again', which is then taken up by the rest of the prisoners. In other hands this sort of thing would come across as corny.

However Les Blair has succeeded in capturing a realist portrayal of the physical degradation of a group of people and in doing so shows us, without any pretention, that the last thing to go from humanity is the spirit. And it is the spirit, brought about by the treatment of Catholics in the Six Counties as second-class, the brutality of the day-to-day condition of a community under siege by the British state and ultimately the brutality experienced by the prisoners at the hand of a Loyalist prison regime, that the film succeeds in portraying: the belief that these men were

right in making a stand against the British state; it is this that makes **H3** a far greater film than those that followed it and take up the same subject.

However much we would like to ‘feel’ for the men, very few of us have been pushed into such de-humanising circumstances, and we are left horrified by the fact that a so-called civilised country, such as Britain, could allow a situation like this to happen.

But it was the death of the Hunger Strike leader, Bobby Sands that created the greatest world outrage. Whilst still on Hunger Strike Sands stood for the seat of Fermanagh and South Tyrone after Frank Maguire, the Independent Republican MP died suddenly of a heart attack, precipitating the April 1981 by-election. Sands narrowly won the seat, with 30,493 votes to 29,046 for the Ulster Unionist Party candidate Harry West.

Reaction to the death of Bobby Sands was widespread and though there was mixed reaction in the US media, the White House issued a statement of ‘concern and regret’ (diplomacy for: “We do not approve”).

However the film does have two major omissions. Whilst there is some talk of the 'Thatcher government’ there is no mention of the fact that it was a Labour government who, in 1976, withdrew political status for those convicted of ‘terrorist’ offences in Northern Ireland. Political status for Republican (and a handful of Loyalist) prisoners had been a concession won by the Republican movement from the Conservative government in 1972. But the Labour government get no mention in the film at all. For younger people than I, this may prove confusing as we are left with the impression that the war in the Six Counties was conducted by a Tory (Thatcher) government.

Which leads to one of the most surprising omissions from the film: the visit to Bobby Sands by Don Concannon who was a junior Northern Ireland Minister under Merlyn Rees from 1974 until 1976. Concannon met with the dying Bobby Sands in 1980, when Labour were in opposition, to inform him that he and the Labour Party, supported the Conservative government’s refusal to meet the Hunger Strikers’ demands.

These omissions could not have been accidental. The Labour Party’s attitude towards the Republican movement was common knowledge and one can only conclude that Sinn Féin, at the time, the political voice of the IRA, still held to some illusions about ‘socialism’ in the Labour Party (a view not helped by the fact that many of the left-wing organisations in mainland Britain also had the same, long-held belief). That said, **H3** is a powerful film and stands head and shoulders above many ‘political’ films for its portrayal of people in struggle against repression.

The evening was split into two and in the second half former political prisoner, Chair of the Republican ex-prisoners group Tar Anall, Sinn Féin organiser in West Belfast and head of its Irish language department, and current Sinn Féin organiser, Séanna Walsh led a discussion. He opened by saying something in Gaelic which seemed to fall flat as there was no reaction from the audience. He then spoke about how difficult it was for him to watch **H3** and for the next 10 minutes or so he seemed to be viewing the audience as a group of therapists. In the last five minutes of his introduction to a Q&A he spoke of how important the Hunger Strikes were in bringing about the peace process, kick started in 1985 by the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

The Q&A had a very surreal atmosphere to it. The first member of the audience said something in a language I presumed to be Gaelic (Walsh was looking very puzzled whilst the audience member was engaging in what seemed to be an older persons ‘gangsta’ speak). Other people spoke about how moving the film was. It was when another audience member asked how a film about men with strong political convictions could have any relevance to young people today, growing up in a time when narcissism, such as the slogan ‘not in my name’, is taken as the height of political consciousness. At first Walsh seemed hesitant but then spoke about the political struggles that were still happening around the world. What was strange about his response was that he touched on the Palestinian situation but didn’t mention the revolts taking place in Arab and North African countries.

The struggle for democracy in the Middle East and Africa ,
where
Karl Sharro
will introduce this discussion of recent developments and asking whether the Arab movements can survive western intervention? Tuesday 07 June.