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Long Kesh: Site - Sign - Body

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Abstract: This paper engages with the former prison at Long Kesh in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and, in particular, with the republican inmates' protests in the 1970s and early 80s. Addressing the penal institution itself, its architecture, interior designs and the rituals implemented there, the paper argues these were not only designed but involved on-going design processes to which inmates responded by the developing a complex design practice involving the site itself as well as their bodies and the way these are made to signify within the semiotic regime of the penal institution.

Keywords: design, politics, bodies, semiotics

The Camp

Dealing with the events at Long Kesh prison in Belfast leading up to the 1981 death of hunger striking Provisional IRA prisoner (henceforth, PIRA) Bobby Sands, Steve McQueen's film *Hunger* (2008) engages a set of concepts and practices that pertain to today's thematic: violence, the body, semiology and design. Broadly speaking, these can be divided into two categories: those that involve topography and spatiality (architectural- and interior design) and those that involve the body (what I will refer to as sema-somatic design processes). It should be added, however, that these categories do not constitute closed entities but intersect at various points as bodies are situated in spatial topographies and spaces are inhabited and used as stages for acts and rituals of psychological and corporeal violence. This paper will trace this interstitial space between body, site, semiology and design through the events at Long Kesh depicted in Steve McQueen's film.

The infamous prison at Long Kesh, also known as The Maze, was a British penal institution in Belfast, Northern Ireland, housing a large, paramilitary population, both Loyalist and Republican. I should add that I use the word penal institution, or prison, with some caution in this paper. Certainly, Long Kesh was considered a penal institution by the British



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government but given the state of exception that defined the situation in Northern Ireland at the time, Long Kesh, alongside other penal institutions in Northern Ireland, would perhaps be better described, following Giorgio Agamben, as operating according to the logic of the camp. In the *State of Exception* (2005), although his main concern is admittedly a more contemporary political situation, Agamben describes a situation not unlike the one in Northern Ireland during what has been euphemistically termed “The Troubles.” Writes Agamben:

“Faced with the unstoppable progression of what has been called a “global civil war” the state of exception tends increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics. The transformation of a provisional and exceptional measure into a technique of government threatens to alter – in fact, has already palpably altered – the structure and meaning of the traditional distinction between constitutional forms. Indeed, from this perspective, the state of exception appears as a threshold of indeterminacy between democracy and absolutism.”
(Agamben, 2005, pp. 2-3)

In other words, sovereignty, as Judith Butler eloquently puts it in *Precarious Life* (2004), can “under emergency conditions in which the rule of law is suspended [...] reemerge in the context of governmentality with the vengeance of an anachronism that refuses to die” (Butler, 2004, p. 54).

Now, the state of exception was, indeed, a defining feature of British rule in Northern Ireland during this period, and much in the same way as the current so-called “global war on terror” has rendered the state of exception permanent opening up to the establishment of detention centres – yet another euphemism – such as Guantanamo Bay, The Troubles, considered a state of exception, made possible the construction of penal institutions across Northern Ireland. In such situation, prisons become “camps,” following Agamben's definition of the camp as a direct reflection of the state of exception:

“*The camp is the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule.* In the camp, the state of exception, which was essentially a temporary suspension of the rule of law on the basis of a factual state of danger, is now given a permanent spatial arrangement, which as such nevertheless remains outside the normal order.” (Agamben, 1998, pp. 168-169)

Interestingly, in a situation such as that in Northern Ireland during The Troubles, resistance tends to take forms that Howard Caygill in his reading of Carl von Clausewitz refers to as “vaporous” (Caygill, 2013, p. 61). As opposed to conventional military forces, which seek to form a solid body and eliminate chance and irregularity, the paramilitary avoids, by all means, forming such a solid body as it can easily be recognised and struck down. Instead, the paramilitary should be as vaporous as possible and, furthermore, use chance and irregularity to its advantage (Caygill, 2013, pp. 61-62).

In many ways this holds true of paramilitary activity in civilian Northern Ireland, but within the topography of the penal institution – what Agamben refers to as “the camp” – resistance takes a different form. The collective body of militant inmates is far from vaporous. It already constitutes a solid measurable body. It is recognised and marked as such within the

regime of the penal institution that divides it into the regular, disciplined and individualised units so aptly described by Michel Foucault as the result of a practice of “partitioning”:

“Each individual has his own place; and each place its individual. Avoid distributions in groups; break up collective dispositions; analyse confused, massive or transient pluralities. Disciplinary space tends to be divided into as many sections as there are bodies or elements to be distributed. One must eliminate the effects of imprecise distributions, the uncontrolled disappearance of individuals, their diffuse circulation, their unusable and dangerous coagulation.” (Foucault, 1991, p. 143)

Certainly, Long Kesh is a prime example of such partitioned space that somewhat paradoxically renders the bodies of inmates a collective mass in uniform clothing and with shared patterns of behaviour and simultaneously breaks the collective body of militants into distributed individual units prevented, at all times, from “dangerous coagulation,” that is, from forming a collective. The political collectivity of militant inmates, in other words, is broken down by individualising each prisoner, whereas another collectivity is being constructed – one consistent of identical units in a uniform mass.

In *Formations of Violence*, Allen Feldman explores this in detail in his analysis of the cells and interrogation rooms at Long Kesh and Castelreagh, referring to these spaces as a “sensorium of death” (Feldman, 1991, p. 128). In these spaces, all heterogeneity is eliminated. There are no differences. Blank white walls. Anonymous chairs and tables. Fluorescent lights turned on permanently. Even time is suspended – clocks stopped, slowed down or manipulated in other ways. The only interruption is interrogations and beatings at irregular intervals. In one of the interviews Feldman conducted with PIRA militants, this is described as follows:

The ceiling itself is pure white. The paneling around the door is light gray and the door is white. High in the top corner of the wall there’s a circular light. It sits out there about three inches from the wall. The light has a circular red plastic rim around it. It is controlled from outside the cell. It can be dimmed or brightened at their will; invariably when you are showing signs of activity they’ll dim it. When you’re beginning to relax or to sleep the light is brightened. (Feldman, 1991, p. 125)

Another PIRA inmate paints a similar picture of the cells:

You’re in a cell with the light on all the time, painted white ceiling to floor. You’re naked, and you think hours have passed and it’s only an hour. They strip you of everything. (Feldman, 1991, p. 133)

These are very deliberate forms of interior design meant to simulate death by removing prisoners from any sense of time and space. The interrogation rooms are specifically designed to resemble the cells. In the words of a former PIRA militant:

The interrogation rooms are roughly the same dimensions as your cell. There’s no protuberances or breaks in the interrogation rooms, except there is a desk. Like your cell, everything is painted white. (Feldman, 1991, p. 125)

This is not, of course, unique to Northern Ireland and Long Kesh. We find similar strategies implemented and refined in prison structures ranging from Stuttgart-Stammheim to Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. What is interesting about Long Kesh, however, is that here

resistance is re-articulated as a struggle to recreate the collective political body inside the regime of the penal institution by whatever means seem viable. In this paper, I will put forth the argument that the form this struggle takes involves the manipulation of sites, signs and bodies in a set of sophisticated sema-somatic (*sema*, as in sign, *soma*, as in body) and topographic design processes.

Blankets, Naked Bodies

Using Long Kesh as a setting, Steve McQueen's film explores precisely this: the different means of struggle and resistance involved in the escalating conflict between paramilitary inmates and the authorities inside the prison structure itself considered a reflection of the wider conflict between Republicans, Loyalists and the British armed forces in Northern Ireland. It takes as its starting point, the British government's decisions to revoke what was known as the paramilitary prisoners' "Special Category Status," a judicial term which meant the inmates at Long Kesh were considered political, not criminal, prisoners, thus protected by the Geneva convention.

The reason the British government revoked Special Category Status in Northern Ireland was, of course, in large part to criminalise and de-politicise the inmates and thereby also the conflict itself, and one of the most important consequences of the annulment was that prisoners would now be forced to wear prison uniforms – a marker, in many ways, of the subjugation of the criminalised body and the criminalised subject. The republican prisoners resolutely refused to oblige, and in protest against the shift in status, they opted instead to remain naked or to wrap themselves in blankets. An act, thenceforth known as "going on the Blanket," which also gave rise to the concept and the image of the Blanketman frequently seen on political posters and flyers at the time.

What appears increasingly evident, is that design here is explicitly linked to politics. Not only is the prison itself as an architectural structure a design that functions explicitly to partition, prevent collectivity, and control and discipline the body of the prisoner, the prison uniform is furthermore a garment designed to signify the subservience of a uniform, criminalised mass of bodies rendered docile. This certainly links design to authoritarian politics, but it does not exhaust the link between the events depicted and design. More profoundly, the use of the blanket as an item of clothing becomes a design practice by which to *counter* the power invested in the prison uniform. In much the same way, the very *nakedness* of the nude body of the prisoner, stripped from his clothing, becomes a design choice – a counter-design – by which to subvert the power the prison authorities, considered an extension of the colonial authority (i.e. the British government) in Northern Ireland, exerted over the body of the individual prisoner as well as the collective body of the prisoner community as a whole. 'We had the blanket and we were naked,' a PIRA prisoner reports in an interview, "[t]hat became our badge" (Feldman, 1991, p. 160). Another PIRA inmate uses similar terminology:

"Right away we knew that we as political prisoners were not going to wear prison uniforms which were symbolic of a criminal. The suit itself didn't mean an awful lot. It

was just material. The suit of clothes doesn't make the prisoner, but it was symbolic."
(Feldman, 1991, p. 153)

As the tension between the authorities and the prisoners escalate, these complex links between power, politics and design not only become clearer, they also become more explicitly linked to the semiological practice of the encoding of the body.

Confronting the prisoners' protest, a system was implemented by the authorities designed specifically to regain control over the prisoners' bodies. The prison uniform is not simply a garment that carries certain significations in itself. It is in effect a way to sema-somatically encode the body of the prisoner, and to control its meaning within the penal system. Refusing to wear the uniform is a counter-measure intended to take back the control of the body and its encoding. Considered a design choice, using the naked body or the body wrapped in a blanket, deprived the authorities of that level of control, transferring it instead to the prisoners themselves as a political collective.

The system implemented by the authorities in response sought to regain control over the prisoners' bodies by employing a tactics of violence that would not only injure the body of the prisoner, marking it with cuts and bruises, but furthermore render it entirely visible. Prisoners were taken to the showers or to an open space at the intersection of the prison wings, spaces that topographically came to function as stages, where inmates were restrained and subjected to ritualistically performed beatings and, significantly, repeated cavity searches using medical equipment and mirrors.

A former PIRA prisoner describes this ritualistic re-coding of the body as follows:

"That morning at seven o'clock you could hear all the screws of the block filing into the yards and from there into the circle. You could hear the gates being locked. They all gathered in the circle and they began beating the batons against the bars [...]. They started beating the batons slowly against the bars in a steady rhythm, then it gets louder and louder and faster and faster until it builds up to a crescendo. (...) You hear the sound of bolt locks shooting, opening the cell door, getting nearer. (...) On this day they set the examination table at the top of the wing in the middle of the landing. You were grabbed by the arms, and the two screws would run you toward it. Your towel is ripped off so you're naked. You're runned until you're slammed by the waist into this rectangular table, which forces you to bend over. There's the table and the sponge with the mirror for the anal search. You're ordered to spread-eagle over the mirror. You refuse to comply so they kick you down over it. Your anus is searched. A torch shined up your anus, your mouth, your nose and in your ears." (Feldman, 1991, pp. 186-187)

Allen Feldman argues that this, "colonization of the prisoner's body was intended [...] to divorce the prisoner from what little sense of somatic mastery he had managed to retain in prison" (Feldman, 1991, p. 174).

A colonization of the body, indeed, rendering its most intimate interiors visible. Feldman speaks of this in terms of a ritual that uses the technical paraphernalia of the medical exam but that actually constitutes a reversal of the meaning of the nakedness of the prisoners' bodies. "The prisoners' refusal to wear the uniform," Feldman continues, was the "first

interruption of optical circuits. The guards responded by transforming nakedness into an obvious surrogate tool of visual degradation in place of institutional clothing” (Feldman, 1991, p. 175).

The relationship between penal institutions and visibility outlined by Feldman is, of course, something that has been dealt with extensively, notably by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1991), and the violent opening up of the body clearly constituted a way for the authorities at Long Kesh to regain control over the body by the means of visibility and opticality. This doesn't, however, fully engage with the semiotic register of these rituals. It is not simply a question of colonisation and opticalisation but also of colonisation and encoding or, in this case, re-coding. The nakedness of the “open” body is no longer the nudity or part-nudity strategically chosen by the prisoner himself in an act of defiance but a forced nudity, and a more profound one, turning the body inside out, rendering its most private spaces entirely public and visible to the authorities' gaze. This is an act of semasomatic design that at once controls a body, renders it visible *and* renders it the sign of the absolute authority of the prison regime. Power and authority over the collective prisoner body has been restored. Its nakedness no longer signifies defiance but subservience. This is a design process that involves the manipulation of the body and the way it is encoded, the way its materiality is not only made optically exposed but is made to signify – and the way in which its encoding can be subject to translation processes, if we allow ourselves to think the concept “translation” beyond the act of faithful interpretation as a practice of manipulation. It is the translation of the body, *the carrying across*, as it were, carrying the body across or between different signifying sites within the semiotic regime of the penal institution that is at stake here. Nakedness as a sign of defiance is thus translated, by the semiotic re-siting of the body, as a sign of subservience.

There is a strange affinity, worth exploring briefly, between the etymology of the word translation and the events at Long Kesh in that the notion of “translation” is somewhat peculiarly related to the “carrying across” or transportation of the remains of saints. The corporeal remnants are moved from one site to another, they are re-sited, much in the same way as the bodies of paramilitaries at Long Kesh are being re-sited in the signifying regime of the penal institution. In the act of re-siting, however, something else occurs, a differentiation, a splitting or displacement of meaning that could perhaps be referred to as a reciting – not with an “s” but with a “c” – given the etymology of the word “cite,” having to do with a summoning forth. Translation, then, as an act of simultaneous re-siting and reciting. There are no etymological links, I believe, between site with an “s” and cite with a “c” – but if we allow ourselves to think of translation as a “carrying across,” a carrying between sites, that is, a re-siting, does it not also and immediately involve precisely a citation, as the summoning forth of something other?

The paramilitary bodies are then both re-sited, semiologically, and recited in that their positioning within the semiotic regime of the penal institution summons forth a differentiation of the meaning of the collective body of prisoners. This becomes even clearer as the escalation in violence continues at Long Kesh with semasomatic design processes

that involve the function and meaning not just of the body itself, but its waste, odour, its affects, within the topographical structure of the prison complex.

Dirt, Odour, Faeces

Now, these design strategies could be referred to as somatic, or sema-somatic, in the sense that they involve the semiotic en- or re-coding and re-siting of the body for purposes that are political and have to do with relations of power within the penal system and, in a more general sense, in 'postcolonial' Britain. As the conflict grew in intensity, however, these strategies gradually started to involve the topographical, spatial structure of the prison itself. Initially, this took the form of what is known as the "no-wash campaign." In response to the violence, the repeated cavity searches and various other manipulative strategies implemented by the prison authorities, prisoners began to refuse to wash. On one level, this can be seen as another attempt at regaining the control of the body and what it signifies, the washing and the refusal to wash being yet another recoding within the scheme of manipulations at work within the prison complex. As we have seen, these are questions that reside at the very heart of the politics of the prison. On another level, however, it involves the spatiality and the ambiance of the architectural space that is the prison. Although not a physical alteration of the prison design, the sight and stench of the unwashed collective prisoner body becomes part of the designed environment, giving the prisoner a measure of control not only over his body but also over its impact, its effect – and its affect – within the prison as a topographical configuration. In one simple gesture, the prisoners challenged the prison regime's control over their bodies *and* over the prison's interior spaces.

It is clear, then, that both sides of this conflict gradually developed more advanced design strategies, on the one hand, to restrict, restrain, control and encode the collective prisoner body, and, on the other hand, to resist, subvert, and re-code that same body within the physical and semiological structure of the prison.

Now, the spatial and architectural dimension of this escalation in violence reached its peak in the events that followed the "no-wash campaign" and soon came to be known as the "dirty protest."

Throughout the conflict, the violence of the prison authorities continued and, in fact, increased in that more strategic forms of violence were being implemented. Requests to visit the lavatories were being ignored, or, when allowed, followed by beatings. All furniture in the cells, except for mattresses and blankets, were removed. Clearly, these measures were a continuation of the prison authorities' attempts to control the inmates' subversive bodies and the spaces they inhabit. To refuse a prisoner the use of the lavatory is, effectively, to control what enters and exits the body, and to force a prisoner to degrade himself by urinating and defecating on himself or in the space he inhabits. To remove all furniture apart from a rudimentary mattress is to use interior design – the stripped down, bare cell – to deprive prisoners of any sense of personal value. These are essentially two design processes: the sema-somatic control and encoding of the body of the prisoner and

the spatial and architectural establishment of a topography conducive to control and encoding – a stage for ritual proceedings and choreographies involving clothing, cavity searches, urine and excrement, and beatings.

However, when the authorities sought to exert their power over the prisoners by controlling what exits and enters the prisoners' bodies and cells, the inmates responded by taking back control over their bodily functions and what they signify. Inmates started collecting their faeces and urine to mix together into a paste to smear on the walls of the cells. Not only did this act allow for the prisoners themselves to control their bodily functions – not to ask to visit the lavatory, not to risk the beating – it also involved inverting the meaning of the urine and faeces from being a sign of subhuman degradation – the prisoner who had soiled himself in his cell – to being a sign of resistance and struggle.

As prisoners smeared their faeces on the walls of their bare cells, decorative patterns and Gaelic writing were used in what must be considered a political form of interior design altering the meaning of the materials (faeces and urine) and the spatial design of the cell itself. A former Irish National Liberation Army inmate at Long Kesh explicitly refers to this act as design:

“The food was very bad, and some of that was going on the wall to dry with the excrement because it was inedible. Guys would be making designs on the wall with porridge and the excrement.” (Feldman, 1991, p. 170)

Turning to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and in particular to the plateau in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1988), that deals with signifying regimes, might help us understand this process of the encoding – recoding of the body better. The colonial system would then be considered a signifying regime with a despotic centre – the heart of Empire – that renders the colony signifiable as, simultaneously, inferior copy and abject receptacle of all that is excluded and ascribed a negative value, what Deleuze and Guattari refers to alternately as “the excluded,” “the exile,” and the “scapegoat” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, pp. 115-116). However, the exiled or excluded scapegoat is not necessarily an obedient one. Rather, it is one that opens up lines of subjectification, potentially anti-colonial ones, turning the negative sign into one affirmative of militant, political subjectivity. This is the moment of translation, the re-siting and reciting of the body, the turning of the sign that is also the summoning of a new political collectivity. In a very profound way, this is the meaning of “the badges” and “symbols” spoken of by Republican militants: the blanket, the naked body, the dirt, the odour, the urine, the excrement, the porridge. They are all involved in a sophisticated, sema-somatic design process intended to summon forth a new political collective within the prison regime.

Effectively, these design strategies allowed prisoners to regain control of their bodies, their bodily functions, to invert the meaning of excretion, and to subvert the spatial design of the prison. In fact, the design process at stake here effectively rendered diffuse what in prison architecture is perhaps most fundamental: the border between the inside and the outside of

the cell. The counter-design of the collective prisoner body renders this border partially permeable by the means of odour. As a former prison welfare officer reports:

“During the Dirty Protest you never really got accustomed to the stench and the atmosphere of the place. For a prison officer who was in for a twelve-hour shift and who then went home, he would usually have to spend about four hours trying to get the smell off his uniform and his body and then go back into that situation twelve hours later. [...] The prison officers did feel defiled because it extended into their private lives, their bodies their sense of cleanliness, their marital relations, and their relations to their children.” (Feldman, 1991, p. 193)

Corpses

However, it was not only excretion, what *exits* the body, that was used to subvert the power of the authorities at Long Kesh. Significantly, the conflict culminated in a similar approach to what *enters* the body. Providing food, or nutrients and liquids of some kind, is not only a requirement to keep prisoners alive, it is a way for prison authorities to control the prisoner community. Providing spoilt or low-quality food, or no food at all for a period of time, is a mode of control. Providing food in certain temporal patterns – at certain regular or irregular times of the day and night – is another means of control. As the conflict between the PIRA prisoners and the authorities escalated, the decision was eventually taken that prisoners, one at a time, should go on hunger strike.

Now, a hunger strike can be seen as an ultimate form of sema-somatic design. In much the same way as the strategies dealt with above – the “no-wash campaign” and the “dirty protest” – it is the control of the body and its meaning – its encoding – that is at stake. The prison authorities’ attempts at controlling and encoding the bodies of the prisoners – from the uniforms, to the cavity searches and beatings, to the restricted lavatory visits – consistently met with resistance from the prisoner community: the naked body, the body wrapped in a blanket, the unwashed body, the cells smeared in excretion – these are all design measures to counter the design of the prison structure itself in all its manifestations. The hunger strike is but the most extreme form of this struggle. Prisoners on hunger strike take control back over their body, what exits it, what enters it, its spatial dimension (the physical disappearance of the body) as well as its temporal dimension (its death). Taking control over the life and death of the body, the hunger striking prisoner renders a prison regime whose authority is based on the totality of its psychological and corporeal control over the community of inmates, entirely powerless. The harder the prison regime tries to exert its authority, the more powerless it finds itself facing the counter-designs of the inmates, the ultimate form of which is the sema-somatic design of the hunger striking prisoner.

The ramifications of this conflict, staged as it were within the confines of the prison structure itself, had a lasting impact across and beyond British society. It is telling, indeed, that at the time of his death, the first PIRA hunger striker, Bobby Sands, had been elected a member of the British parliament. The link between design, the body’s encoding, and politics at Long

Kesh spilled over into the murals, protest marches and funerals of Belfast and Derry, as well as the grand halls of Westminster. Strategies and practices to do with the manipulation of the body and the spatial topography of the prison had become means by which to manipulate the larger territory of Northern Ireland and, indeed, the political system of the United Kingdom.

What I believe the case of Long Kesh illustrates, is the ways in which design practices are involved and instrumentalised in socio-political process of discipline and control. We need to recognise the structures and practices of manipulation we see implemented at Long Kesh as having to do precisely with design. Far from the solution-centred discourse of much design research, we need to develop approaches and perspectives that deal with design as manipulation, repression, subjugation, and exploitation - from an historical as well as a contemporary perspective. Ranging from the various designed environments constructed to make us consume (the very deliberate and sophisticated designs of shops and shopping malls, for instance, or the layout of airports forcing travelers through a physical barrier of shops once they exit security), to so-called "hostile" designs and architectures such as the infamous Camden bench, to practices of "negging," a dating strategy in which a man systematically uses negative judgments in order to undermine the confidence of "target" women (Noys, 2015), what we find are carefully considered and sophisticated designs that effectively function as forms of manipulation of bodies, environments, behaviours, encounters, and so on and so forth. Understanding this is crucial not just because it allows us to explore the links between design and politics but also because it opens up to an engagement with that other register of design practice and thinking we see at Long Kesh; that is, design as resistance, struggle and dissent. In an increasingly unsustainable society, design cannot continue simply to insist on making pretty artefacts or finding practical solutions that fits the economical and sociopolitical system that causes the problems. Design needs to take a different route. This is, of course, complex and it involves several different trajectories of thought and practice. What we see in the case of Long Kesh, however, is that design *can* function as a form of resistance, a form of struggle. It can facilitate and work as a forum for radical dissent. And it can be locally effective. Following the death of Bobby Sands, a further ten PIRA prisoners died in the hunger strike at Long Kesh. Although Thatcher's conservative government never formally reinstated "Special Category Status," it was merely a nominal refusal intended to show that the government did not give in to "terrorists." By 1983, each demand the prisoners made had been met by the British authorities.

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