

“One defining feature of Steve McQueen’s art lies in the forbidding difficulty of commenting it. Its formal radicalism and hermetic qualities endow it with the capacity to insist upon being itself.” These words by cultural studies scholar Paul Gilroy resonated with me when I was preparing this laudation. Steve McQueen’s work as a visual artist, screenwriter and filmmaker, which encompasses audiovisual installations as well as feature films and documentaries, has an enormous span width: from the smallest micro-movement of a facial muscle, bodily gesture or trembling voice that hides a wealth of emotions, to the macro-scale of world history and the abstract infinity of galactic travel. Many of his art works and installations have been acquired by leading museums around the world. His films have won many prizes, including three Oscars for *Twelve Years a Slave*. The Faculty of Humanities of the University of Amsterdam is very grateful to add to these artistic recognitions, an honorary doctorate degree that emphasizes also the scholarly and educational qualities of Steve McQueen’s impressive body of work. But where to start to do justice to the vast richness of these extraordinary endeavours?

Thinking about this question, I decided to take another walk in the city of Amsterdam. And not too far from here, at the Zwanenburgwal near the Stopera, I come across the statue of Baruch de Spinoza, the seventeenth century philosopher who was born here in Amsterdam. For Spinoza, body and mind are not in opposition. Rather they offer parallel and intertwined access points to the world. Spinoza placed the body at the centre of his ethics and politics. “But”, the philosopher famously claimed, “we don’t even know what a body can do.” And here I found my first vector into the universe of Steve McQueen, who once in an interview said that “art is the hardest thing because there are no rules, there is only gravity.” That gravity is precisely what is felt so uniquely in the bodies that are the central force in so many of his films and art works. Starting from the artist’s own body in his early installations, we encounter an array of bodily forces throughout the works: wrestling bodies, enduring bodies, dancing bodies, loving bodies, bodies on the run, balancing tight-robe walking bodies, angry bodies, bodies prepared “to fight with every breath they have”, resilient bodies, bodies in sadness, bodies in joy, bodies always both vulnerable and strong at the same time.

Many characters in Steve McQueen’s work explore “what a body can do” quite literally. We see the bodies of the workers in *Western Deep*, exercising in blue towels before descending into the deepest gold mine in South Africa, 3 ½ miles underground, put to extreme physical circumstances and we feel the dust in the lungs of the workers in the grains of the images. We admire the unbelievably supple bodies of the young break dancers in Kanye West’s *All Day* music video that are followed by an almost hallucinating camera lens, stretching the limits of bodily movement and control. We are shocked by the body that refuses to eat in *Hunger*, Steve McQueen’s first feature film about IRA member Bobby Sand’s imprisoned body on hunger strike in the 1980s. There is the kidnapped, enslaved, tortured, surviving and freed body of Solomon Northup in *Twelve Years a Slave*. These are all bodies that discover what they can do, how far they can go, how they are affected and how they affect us in turn.

I return once more to Spinoza to find another resonance, as Spinoza was also a lens grinder. The philosopher was fascinated by microscopes and telescopes and was interested in the most beautiful secrets of optics. Here I find my second vector into Steve McQueen’s artistic universe where every image radiates the joy of looking and filming through a camera lens. Looking and filming in order to see unseen things, in order not to forget, in order to resist, in order to love, in order to explore the possibilities of change. Some images are filmed in close-up: the gigantic mysterious eye in

*Charlotte*, touched by the filmmakers hand, becomes sensual and fragile; the bodies of the dancing couple in *Lover's Rock* become tangible, their intimate closeness makes us feel the music, the rhythm and warmth in our own bodies. But Steve McQueen's camera also zooms out, hovering over the world from above, giving us the perspective of a bomb just dropped from a plane in *Blitz*, or transporting us into the spiral formations of the Andromeda galaxy in the last film of the anthology *Small Axe*. Besides close and far, Steve McQueen's cinematographic language is also characterised by an oscillation between recognizable forms of storytelling and abstract images that are more characteristic of avantgarde cinema where the act of looking is interrogated beyond the human eye. In the opening of *Blitz* an uncontrollable firehose is transformed into a wildly dancing creature-object that seemingly has a life of its own.

There is always an affecting pull in Steve McQueen's work that brings the personal and the collective together. The emotional, embodied attraction of the images is therefore also always political. This means that besides a powerful camera, all works are based on profound investigations. Here is my third (and last) vector into the McQueen universe, the necessity for research at the basis of all artistic work and the political and educational value of his cinematography and storytelling. The enormous amount of work, patience and dedication that one can sense in the direction of the camera work in *Occupied City* is based on Bianca Stigter's historic research. And the narratives of *Hunger*, *Twelve Years a Slave*, *Blitz* and other works, are all informed by real events and circumstances. All this historical background needs to be carefully researched before it can be transformed into aesthetic forms. The five anthology films *Small Axe* are perhaps Steve McQueen's most personal films, since they are set in the 1970s and 1980s and tell different stories about the life of West Indian immigrants in London, the milieu in which he grew up. These personal and historical stories are transfused into a language that many people can understand and relate to, and is of vital educational value. In the last *Small Axe* film, called precisely *Education*, the mother of a young boy who is send to a special educational subnormal school, finds out that IQ tests are biased, and the educational system works against West Indian (and other migrant) children. And she decides to fight this, "with every breath in her body."

With all these Spinozist experiments and investigations of what a body can do, with all the capturing of the beauty and pain of the world through different camera lenses, and with all the research and political and educational value of his work, Steve McQueen has created his own Stoic path of uniquely "being itself" that deeply touches and inspires many.

Therefore I have now the privilege to award him the honorary doctorate **for his outstanding contribution as a filmmaker and artist to portray important historical and social events in a compelling way for a large audience.**

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