

Mr Turner

Presentation by Peter Anderson (from Wikipedia)

Mr. Turner is a 2014 British, French and German biographical drama film, written and directed by Mike Leigh */liː/*, and starring Timothy Spall */spɑːl/*, Dorothy Atkinson, Paul Jesson, Marion Bailey, Lesley Manville and Martin Savage. The film concerns the life and career of British artist J. M. W. (Joseph Mallord William) Turner (1775–1851), who is played by Spall. It premiered in competition for the Palme d'Or at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival, where Spall won the award for Best Actor and cinematographer Dick Pope received a special jury prize for the film's cinematography. The film was critically acclaimed, and received four nominations each at the 87th Academy Awards and 68th British Academy Film Awards.

Describing Turner as "a great artist: a radical, revolutionary painter", writer/director Leigh explained, "I felt there was scope for a film examining the tension between this very mortal, flawed individual, and the epic work, the spiritual way he had of distilling the world".

Reception

Mr. Turner has received universal praise from critics. The performance of Timothy Spall was lauded, along with Gary Yershon's film score and Dick Pope's cinematography. It has a "certified fresh" score of 98% on Rotten Tomatoes based on critic reviews, but a score of only 60% based on audience reviews. The "Critics' Consensus" states, "Led by a masterful performance from Timothy Spall and brilliantly directed by Mike Leigh, *Mr. Turner* is a superior Hollywood biopic." On Metacritic, the film has a score of 94 out of 100 based on 41 critics, indicating "universal acclaim".

Critic Katie Kilkeny in *The Atlantic* called it "a gorgeous, important film". *Observer* critic Mark Kermode described the film as a "portrait of a man wrestling light with his hands as if it were a physical element: tangible, malleable, corporeal". *Slate* reviewer Dana Stevens wrote, "Writing about *Mr. Turner* a few weeks after seeing it, I feel a craving to be again immersed in its world, which is rich with colours, textures, and, it sometimes almost seems, smells..."

The consonance between the film and its subject was addressed by Sir Nicholas Serota, director of the Tate Galleries in England: "Mike Leigh and Timothy Spall's great achievement is showing us how the artist approached the physical business of painting. But they also convey the spirit of a man whose reputation as a curmudgeon */kɜːmˈdʒʌn/* is unwarranted, given his passionate interest in people and the world around him. There is a great humanitarian streak in Turner and Mike Leigh has found a way of capturing this on film, as he has done so often before."

Plot

A look at the last quarter century of the great British painter William Turner. Profoundly affected by the death of his esteemed father, loved by his housekeeper, Hannah Danby, whom he takes for granted and occasionally exploits sexually, he forms a close and loving relationship with a seaside landlady with whom he eventually lives incognito */ɪnˈkɒɡnɪtə/* in Chelsea, where he dies.

Throughout all this, Turner travels, paints, stays with the country aristocracy, visits a brothel, is a popular if anarchic member of the Royal Academy of Arts, has himself strapped to the mast of a ship so that he can paint a snowstorm, and is both celebrated and reviled by the public and by royalty.

Release

Mr. Turner had its premiere at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival, where it competed for the Palme d'Or, with Timothy Spall winning the Best Actor award and cinematographer Dick Pope winning the Vulcan Award. Entertainment One released the film in the United Kingdom on 31 October 2014. Sony Pictures Classics handled the United States distribution, with a release date of 19 December 2014. It was screened in the Special Presentations section of the 2014 Toronto International Film Festival.

Piracy

The film was leaked by the hacker group "Guardians of Peace" onto peer-to-peer file sharing websites on November 27, more than three weeks ahead of its intended theatrical release, as part of the Sony Pictures Entertainment hack. Along with it came *Fury* and three other at-the-time unreleased Sony Pictures films (*Annie*, *Still Alice* and *To Write Love on Her Arms*). Within three days of the initial leak, *Mr. Turner* had been downloaded by an estimated 63,379 unique IPs.

Turner's Style

Turner's talent was recognised early in his life. Financial independence allowed Turner to innovate freely; his mature work is characterised by a chromatic palette and broadly applied atmospheric washes of paint. According to David Piper's *The Illustrated History of Art*, his later pictures were called "fantastic puzzles." However, Turner was recognised as an artistic genius: the influential English art critic John Ruskin described him as the artist who could most "stirringly and truthfully measure the moods of Nature."

Suitable vehicles for Turner's imagination were found in shipwrecks, fires (such as the burning of Parliament in 1834, an event which Turner rushed to witness first-hand, and which he transcribed in a series of watercolour sketches), natural catastrophes, and natural phenomena such as sunlight, storm, rain, and fog. He was fascinated by the violent power of the sea, as seen in *Dawn after the Wreck* (1840) and "The Slave Ship" (1840).



Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth, 1842

Turner's major venture into printmaking was the *Liber Studiorum* (Book of Studies), seventy prints that he worked on from 1806 to 1819. The *Liber Studiorum* was an expression of his intentions for landscape art. Loosely based on Claude Lorrain's *Liber Veritatis* (Book of Truth), the plates were meant to be widely disseminated, and categorised the genre into six types: Marine, Mountainous, Pastoral, Historical, Architectural, and Elevated or Epic Pastoral. His printmaking was a major part of his output, and a museum is devoted to it, the Turner Museum in Sarasota, Florida, founded in 1974 by Douglass Montrose-Graem to house his collection of Turner prints.

Turner placed human beings in many of his paintings to indicate his affection for humanity on the one hand (note the frequent scenes of people drinking and merry-making or working in the foreground), but its vulnerability and vulgarity amid the 'sublime' nature of the world on the other. 'Sublime' here means awe-inspiring, savage grandeur /grændɔə/, a natural world unmastered by man, evidence of the power of God – a theme that romanticist artists and poets were exploring in this period. To Turner, light was the emanation of God's spirit and this was why he focused the subject matter of his later paintings by leaving out distractions such as solid objects and detail, concentrating on the play of light on water, the radiance of skies and fires. Although these late paintings appear to be 'impressionistic' and therefore a forerunner of the French school, Turner was striving for expression of spirituality in the world, rather than responding primarily to optical phenomena.



Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway painted (1844).

His early works, such as *Tintern Abbey* (1795), stayed true to the traditions of English landscape. However, in *Hannibal Crossing the Alps* (1812), an emphasis on the destructive power of nature had already come into play. His distinctive style of painting, in which he used watercolour technique with oil paints, created lightness, fluency, and ephemeral atmospheric effects.

In his later years he used oils ever more transparently, and turned to an evocation of almost pure light by use of shimmering colour. A prime example of his mature style can be seen in *Rain, Steam and Speed - The Great Western Railway*, where the objects are barely recognisable. The intensity of hue and interest in evanescent light not only placed Turner's work in the vanguard of English painting, but exerted an influence on art in France; the Impressionists, particularly Claude Monet, carefully studied his techniques.

Turner used pigments like carmine in his paintings, knowing that they were not long-lasting, despite the advice of contemporary experts to use more durable pigments. As a result, many of his colours have now faded greatly. John Ruskin complained at how quickly Turner's work decayed; Turner was indifferent to posterity and chose materials that looked good when freshly applied. By 1930 there was concern that both his oils and his watercolours were fading.



Chichester Canal's vivid colours may have been influenced by the eruption of Mount Tambora in 1815.

High levels of ash in the atmosphere during 1816, the "Year Without a Summer", led to unusually spectacular sunsets during this period, and were an inspiration for some of Turner's work.

John Ruskin says in his "Notes" on Turner in March 1878, that an early patron, Dr Thomas Monro, the Principal Physician of Bedlam, was a significant influence on Turner's style:

His true master was Dr Monro; to the practical teaching of that first patron and the wise simplicity of method of watercolour study, in which he was disciplined by him and companioned by Giston, the healthy and constant development of the greater power is primarily to be attributed; the greatness of the power itself, it is impossible to over-estimate.

On a trip to Europe, circa 1820, he met the Irish physician Robert James Graves. Graves was travelling in a diligence in the Alps when a man who looked like the mate of a ship got in, sat beside him, and soon took from his pocket a note-book across which his hand from time to time passed with the rapidity of lightning. Graves wondered if the man was insane, he looked, saw that the stranger had been noting the forms of clouds as they passed and that he was no common artist. The two travelled and sketched together for months. Graves tells that Turner would outline a scene, sit doing nothing for two or three days, then suddenly, "perhaps on the third day, he would exclaim 'there it is', and seizing his colours work rapidly till he had noted down the peculiar effect he wished to fix in his memory."



Wreckers Coast of Northumberland, painted ca. 1836. Yale Center for British Art



An engraving of a sketch by Turner depicting Brougham Castle. The sketch, made during a visit to the castle in 1809, provided the starting point for a later watercolour.



Turner's 1813 watercolour *Ivy Bridge*



The Fighting Temeraire tugged to her last berth to be broken up, 1839



The shipwreck of the Minotaur, oil on canvas



J.M.W. Turner, *Calais Pier*

The first American to buy a Turner painting was James Lenox of New York City, a private collector. Lenox wished to own a Turner and in 1845 bought one unseen through an intermediary, his friend C. R. Leslie. From among the paintings Turner had on hand and was willing to sell for £500, Leslie selected and shipped the 1832 atmospheric seascape *Staffa, Fingal's Cave*. Worried about the painting's reception by Lenox, who knew Turner's work only through etchings, Leslie wrote to Lenox that the quality of *Staffa*, "a most poetic picture of a steam boat" would become apparent in time. On receiving the painting Lenox was baffled, and "greatly disappointed" by what he called the painting's "indistinctness". When Leslie was forced to relay this opinion to Turner, Turner said "You should tell Mr Lenox that indistinctness is my forte." *Staffa, Fingal's Cave* is now owned by the Yale Center for British Art.