



MIKE LEIGH

Mr. Turner

Like Keats, that other impermeably popular British Romantic, J.M.W. Turner has been a man for all artistic seasons. Championed by Ruskin as a supplier of the Sublime, he was later seized on as a proto-impressionist and even as the founding father of abstract impressionism (those vortices of grey paint in *Snow Storm*, the cloudy, briny swirls of his late work). In this rich, ruminative and wonderfully executed character study of Turner in his later years, Mike Leigh, himself a doggedly original creator, depicts his subject (Timothy Spall) as an artist *sui generis* rather than a relentless modernist, but one who also embodies the early Victorian tug of war between tradition and the steam speed rush of modernity. Sucking up old and new eagerly, he is as struck by a rushing locomotive or a daguerreotype as he is by regular visits to Dutch old masters. Leigh's taciturn Turner is omnivorous in finding fuel for his art.

The film is unusual among painter biopics in asking the audience to understand Turner chiefly through sharp-eyed episodes from his daily round, trotting from ducal dinners to rivalrous Royal Academy varnishings. Rather than unpacking his interior self via tumultuous relationships like Robert Altman's *Vincent & Theo* (1990) or Julie Taymor's *Frida* (2002), *Mr. Turner* shows the artist being doted on first by his aged father (a sly, tender Paul Jesson) and then by guileless Margate widow Mrs Booth. Odd man-and-myth moments occur – a fellow painter noting that the passing Temeraire 'would make a good subject', Turner lashed to a ship's mast in a snowstorm like a North Sea Odysseus – but they're served up with wit and brio.

By Leigh's standards, it's a remarkably warm film, and not just in the absence of *Another Year*'s well-honed glumness. Suffused with yellow light, Dick Pope's cinematography is cleverly Turner-tinged rather than Turneresque, opening on a glorious Dutch landscape, and teasingly recreating a Petworth watercolour of 'The Artist and his Admirers' to show Turner's creation-as-cabaret painting style. In the manner of Leigh's *Topsy-Turvy* (1999), the film is fascinated by the life of Victorian artists, truffling around after Turner from his spit- and-egg-laden canvases to his magnetic solar experiments with scientist Mary Somerville (a fluttery Lesley Manville). This is painting as performance art, lapping up Turner's unnerving creative throes. Art is a compulsion here, a force that finds Turner sketching in a brothel, sobbing with misery after his father's death. One that sends him staggering from his deathbed to draw the corpse of a drowned woman found outside his Chelsea house. There's something very English, too, about the film's eye for the artist's class hopping, as Turner takes in high-class recitals and Academicians' brawls with equal amounts of gusto.

Spall is simply magnificent, giving a fully realised performance that never sinks into caricature, and that is often extremely moving. Full of grace notes – such as the way his hidden hands clench to express a honour that his voice cannot on hearing of his grown daughter's death – it's a tremendously eloquent portrayal, mostly utilising a huge repertoire of grunts, which run the gamut from bulldog growls during courting to snorts of sardonic amusement at the young Ruskin's gaucheries. Like Seurat in Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park with George*, Turner channels his expressiveness through the extraordinary colour and light of his images. He is lavish with art and economical with words, though Dickensian dialogue runs around him playfully.

Turner, dogged observer and inveterate scribbler of storms and sunsets, proves a beautiful fit for Leigh's own watchful style, replete with long takes and unhurried exchanges. Leigh was once rebuked by David Thomson as 'a rapt observer of the process of acting', but *Mr. Turner* shows him achieving a thrilling integration of theme, visual style and bravura performance.

One gets the feeling that Leigh is deeply invested in this thoughtful meditation on the tenacity of the ageing artist, whose fierce will to make art has him pushing through his collapsing health to go beyond conventional tastes. Unbowed, Turner produced pictures like the exhilarating *Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway*, of which biographer Anthony Bailey observed: 'It was a masterpiece. Nobody bought it.' Tracing the arc of Turner's popularity from society's darling to the butt of music-hall jokes and Queen Victoria's opprobrium ('a dirty, yellow mess'), the film is both a paean to stubbornly personal late works and a glorious example of one. Humane, deeply felt and gorgeously executed, this portrait of the artist as an old man is a masterwork.

Kate Stables, *Sight & Sound*, November 2014

'Turner is a very uninteresting man to write about,' complained A.J. Finberg when working on his biography of the British Romantic painter in the 1930s. 'His virtues and defects are all on the drab side. Everything interesting about him appeared only in his work.' Not according to Mike Leigh. For 15 years the British director dreamt of making a film about J.M.W. Turner. His tragicomedy, drawn from biography but related with a healthy dose of creative licence, reveals a fascinating, larger-than-life and very contradictory character. 'A man on a mission' is how Leigh describes his and Timothy Spall's portrayal of Turner in his mid to late years – an artist consumed by wanderlust, furiously interpreting the world with paint and ink, 'a passionate, poetic clairvoyant' according to Leigh, but also 'a very mortal, eccentric curmudgeon', generous and tender to some of his acquaintances and family, heartless to others. Spall's nuanced performance is alive to both the jovial and surly sides of the artist, a figure whose behaviour, appearance and mannerisms rarely embody the gentle, picturesque qualities of his painting of moonlit ruins, seascapes or sunsets.

As with all of Leigh's films, the characters in *Mr. Turner* arose out of an intensive period of research and then improvisation 'to define who they are, how they move, walk, talk, where they come from, their lives, their parents' education, their tastes, their religion, politics, gastronomic proclivities, you name it.' This involved Marion Bailey (who plays Turner's mistress Mrs Booth) studying early sound recordings of Margate residents at the British Library, and Spall spending two years learning how to paint ('We weren't going to cut to somebody else's hand in close-up') and evolving Turner's guttural repertoire out of a page-long account of how the artist spoke. Meanwhile, Leigh's exhaustive attention to detail meant only selecting actors who could actually paint to play Turner's fellow Royal Academicians, and spending a lot of time recreating Turner's world – building his studio on to a Victorian house in Woolwich, recreating the Royal Academy at a disused Sheffield stately home, and even moving a steam train from Manchester's Museum of Science and Industry to Wales to reconstruct the artist's famous invocation of modernity hurtling out of the natural world, *Rain, Steam and Speed*.

Isabel Stevens, *Sight & Sound*, November 2014

MR. TURNER

Directed by: Mike Leigh
©: Channel Four Television Corporation, British Film Institute, Diaphana, France 3 Cinéma, Untitled 13 Commissioning Ltd
In co-production with: Diaphana Films, France 3 Cinéma, Amusement Park Films
With the participation of: Canal+, Ciné+, France Télévisions
Produced by: Xofa Productions
In association with: LipSync Productions
A Thin Man film
Developed with the support of:
MEDIA Programme of the European Union
Developed and made with the support of: BFI's Film Fund
Developed with the support of: Film4
Co-produced by: Untitled 13 Limited, Untitled 13 Turner Produktion, Diaphana
Presented by: Film4, Focus Features International, BFI
Executive Producers: Tessa Ross, Norman Merry, Gail Egan
Produced by: Georgina Lowe
Co-producers: Michel Saint-Jean, Malte Grunert
Line Producer: Danielle Brandon
For BFI: Director of Lottery Film Fund for BFI: Ben Roberts;
Senior Production and Development Executive: Lizzie Francke;
Head of Production: Fiona Morham; *Head of Production Finance:* Ian Kirk
For Film4: Head of Commercial Development and Brand Strategy: Sue Bruce-Smith; *Head of Film Finance:* Harry Dixon
Head of Production: Tracey Josephs
Production Manager: Sarah McBryde
Production Accountant: Linda Gregory
Unit Manager: Nathan Flaher
Location Manager: Henry Woolley
Post-production Supervisor: Polly Duval
Research: Jacqueline Riding
1st Assistant Director: Josh Robertson
2nd Assistant Directors: Ben Howard, Caroline Meer
Script Supervisor: Heather Storr
Casting: Nina Gold
Casting Associate: Robert Sterne
Written by: Mike Leigh
Cinematography/Camera Operator: Dick Pope
2nd Camera Operator: Lucy Bristow
Steadicam Operator: Pete Robertson
1st Assistant Camera: Gordon Segrove
Additional 1st Assistant Camera: Iain Struthers
Gaffer: Andy Long, Liam McGill
Grip: Colin Strachan
Stills Photographer: Simon Mein
Visual Effects Supervisor: George Zwier
Visual Effects Producer: Paul Driver
Visual Effects: LipSync Post
Special Effects: Ignition Arts
CG Supervisor: Ian Ward
Film Editor: Jon Gregory
1st Assistant Editor: Billy Campbell
Digital Grading: LipSync Post, Lisa Jordan
Post Producer: Lee Hodgkinson
Production Designer: Suzie Davies
Art Director: Dan Taylor
Standby Art Director: Caroline Harper
Set Decorator: Charlotte Watts
Painting Advisor: Tim Wright, Charlie Cobb
Production Buyer: Mick Pirie
Property Master: Paul Carter
Costume Designer: Jacqueline Durran
Assistant Costume Designer: Andrea Cripps
Costume Supervisor: David Crossman
Make-up and Hair Designer: Christine Blundell
Senior Make-up and Hairstylist: Lesa Warrener
Title Design: Chris Allies
Digital Colourist: Adam Inglis

Music Composed by: Gary Yershon
Violin Leader: Sonia Slany
Music Conducted by: Terry Davies
Music Editor: Andrew Glen
Sound Designer: Robert Ireland
Sound Recordist: Tim Fraser
Boom Operator: Ben Collinson
Re-recording Mixer: Robert Farr
Supervising Sound Editor: Lee Herrick

Cast

Timothy Spall (*J.M.W. Turner*)
Dorothy Atkinson (*Hannah Danby*)
Marion Bailey (*Sophia Booth*)
Paul Jesson (*William Turner Sr*)
Lesley Manville (*Mary Sommerville*)
Martin Savage (*Benjamin Robert Haydon*)
Ruth Sheen (*Sarah Danby*)
David Horovitch (*Dr Price*)
Karl Johnson (*Mr Booth*)
Peter Wight (*Joseph Gillott*)
Joshua McGuire (*John Ruskin*)
Stuart McQuarrie (*Ruskin's father*)
Sylvestra Le Touzel (*Ruskin's mother*)
Leo Bill (*JE Mayall*)
Kate O'Flynn (*prostitute*)
Sinéad Matthews (*Queen Victoria*)
Karina Fernandez (*Miss Coggins*)
Richard Bremmer (*George Jones*)
Mark Stanley (*Clarkson Stanfield*)
Jamie Thomas King (*David Roberts*)
Tom Wlaschiha (*Prince Albert*)
Patrick Godfrey (*Lord Egremont*)
Niall Buggy (*John Carew*)
Fred Pearson (*Sir William Beechey*)
Tom Edden (*CR Leslie*)
Clive Francis (*Sir Martin Archer Shee*)
Robert Portal (*Sir Charles Eastlake*)
James Fleet (*John Constable*)
Nicholas Jones (*Sir John Soane*)
Roger Ashton-Griffiths (*Henry William Pickersgill*)
Simon Chandler (*Sir Augustus Wall Callcott*)
Edward de Souza (*Thomas Stothard*)
Oliver Maltman, Sam Kelly (*theatre actors*)
Sandy Foster (*Evelina*)
Amy Dawson (*Georgiana*)
Alice Bailey Johnson (*young lady singer*)
Alice Orr-Ewing (*2nd young lady*)
Veronica Roberts (*Lady Stuckley*)
Richard Dixon (*Mr Manners*)
Michael Keane (*clergyman*)
James Norton (*clarinettist*)
David Ryall (*footman*)
Nicola Sloane (*brothel keeper*)
Eleanor Yates (*Ruskin's wife*)
Fenella Woolgar (*Lady Eastlake*)
Richard Cordery (*dinner guest*)
James Dryden (*Cornelius*)
Marcello Magni (*colourman*)
Mark Wingett (*mariner*)
Ruby Bentall, Lee Ingleby (*unhappy couple*)
Pearl Chanda, Ned Derrington, Phil Elstob, Peter Hannah, Francesca Zoutewelle (*theatre actors*)
Billy Holland (*boy actor*)
Michael Culkin, Vincent Franklin, Nicholas Woodeson (*gentleman critics*)
Elizabeth Berrington, Eileen Davies (*lady critics*)

UK 2014
150 mins

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