Mr. Turner brings the great painter to life

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Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851), usually known as J.M.W. Turner, was one of the artistic geniuses of the 19th century, and his life and art are powerfully and movingly depicted in *Mr. Turner*, the latest film from veteran British director Mike Leigh.

This is only the second time, in a career spanning more than 40 years, that Leigh has ventured into history and biography, the first being *Topsy-Turvy* (1999), the story of the relationship between Gilbert and Sullivan. In *Mr. Turner*, Timothy Spall gives a marvelous performance as the artist, allowing us to see the complicated man who had such a lasting impact on the history of painting. Turner was a landscape artist without peer, yet an artist whose landscapes included people and were concerned with present-day life and events. His fascination with the effect of natural light led to some of the most memorable and immediately recognizable works of art of his or any other period.

Turner was an unusual figure in the art world, and one assumes that Leigh was attracted to him in part because of this. A man of plebeian background and habits, the painter was the son of a barber in London's Covent Garden district. He never abandoned these "humble" roots, and the mutual devotion of father and son is indeed one of the themes of the film.

Leigh's *Mr. Turner* treats only the last quarter-century of the artist's long life. Taking his epoch into account, the painter is already well past middle age. His father (Paul Jesson) is still alive, however, and functions as his son's loyal and hardworking assistant until he dies, in 1829.

Turner was known as an uncouth character, not very pleasant in appearance at this time of his life, with rough habits and a kind of bluntness and undiplomatic directness of speech. (At times, in fact, Leigh and Spall somewhat overdo this—we get the point early on.) One of the contradictions that Leigh considers is how this rather lowly Londoner became the world-famous artist. This subject, touching on the abilities and the immense potential of "ordinary" people, is one that Leigh has raised in many of his films.

Mr. Turner does not follow a conventional narrative, something that has led impatient viewers to complain that "nothing happens." On the contrary, from the various scenes in the life of the painter, roughly chronological until his death, one slowly but steadily draws a profound understanding of the character of the man and of how he created art. We see him methodically and meticulously purchasing paints and other supplies, traveling to Margate on the coast of Kent in search of the right seascape, even visiting a brothel in order to paint a prostitute.

There is also the effort put into discussions with prospective buyers and patrons, and mixing and sparring intellectually and artistically with rivals and colleagues such as John Constable (1776-1837), usually considered second to Turner in importance among English painters of the first half of the 19th century.

The nature of the period in which Turner lived is not dealt with at any length, and Leigh's semi-improvisational method of constructing a script, although obviously fortified by a great deal of research in this case, is somewhat at odds with the demand for historical context. Nonetheless, the discerning viewer will no doubt think about some of the historical issues that loom in the background.

Turner mixed with various strata of society, as he had to in the course of his work. He could be quite ingratiating when required. Wealthy patrons sought him out, and their support brought him fame and financial reward.

Nevertheless, as the film indicates, these considerations were never primary for Turner. He was a man who was sure of himself, an uncompromising artist who was driven to create, in a manner sometimes recalling the personality of his near-contemporary Beethoven. Turner's earliest attempts dated from the time he was about 10 years old. He entered the Royal Academy in 1789 (a significant year!), was soon exhibiting watercolors and a short time later oil paintings as well.

The period that formed Turner was one of revolutionary upheaval, centered in France but soon extending throughout Europe. It was also a time of tremendous developments in science and industry, concentrated most of all in England. The period covered by the film was one that saw the rapid growth of the railroads (from 1830), of industry, global trade and the working class.

In England these were the years of the Peterloo Massacre in Manchester (1819), the parliamentary election Reform Act of 1832 and the People's Charter, launched in 1838. The career of Charles Dickens was launched in the 1830s. Karl Marx arrived in London on his final exile two years before Turner's death. While none of these events are referenced in *Mr. Turner*, change, crisis and struggle are clearly in the air.

The artist was shaped in part by the legacy of the Enlightenment. Some artists and writers of the Romantic period recoiled at the rapid social and economic changes of the period. It would be fair to say that Turner stood on that wing of the Romantic movement that did not recoil, but rather sensed the importance of and embraced these changes. Turner sought with all the means at his disposal to show the world as it was.

The film also gives a picture of some of the personal difficulties that had produced Turner's rough-hewn personality. His mother had first shown signs of mental illness when the boy was only 10,

at which time he had been sent to live with his maternal uncle. The painter's father, on his deathbed, discusses some of these family trials with his son.

The artist had problematic relationships with women for most of his life. His former mistress Sarah Danby (Ruth Sheen) is a bitter occasional presence in the film. Her niece Hannah (Dorothy Atkinson), Turner's devoted housekeeper—who shares the living quarters with the elder Turner and the painter—is used by Turner for occasional sexual release.

On a return trip to Margate he finds that his former landlady Sophia Booth (Marion Bailey) has become a widow. An awkward romance develops, perhaps the only real relationship the painter ever enjoyed, with Turner living for years with his mistress as "Mr. Booth," apparently for reasons of privacy and Victorian morality.

Art critic Roberta Smith has called *Mr. Turner* one of her favorite films on the subject of art, because, she maintains, it shows how art is made. While the technical aspects and painstaking work are obviously crucial, painting is above all the product of looking, of observation, Smith insists. Most often in *Mr. Turner* we look at scenes from the artist's vantage point, rather than at the artwork itself.

Perhaps the most important theme in this treatment of Turner's art is that of the relationship between man and nature, bound up with the relations between human beings. Many of Turner's paintings deal with this subject. *The Slave Ship*, dating from 1840 and now at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, was originally titled *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon Coming On*. The artist was inspired to paint this after reading a book on the history and abolition of the slave trade. This account included the incident in which a slave ship's captain threw slaves overboard in order to collect insurance payments. In the film, this idea is discussed in more general terms. Turner's Margate landlord, Mr. Booth (Karl Johnson), tells the painter about his early experience working as a carpenter on a slave ship: "such terrible suffering I did see … It changed my life."

Turner's famous painting *The Fighting Temeraire*, also shown in the film, dates from 1838, when the old warship was tugged to its final berth to be broken up for scrap.

A close look at two of Turner's most famous paintings at the Frick Collection in New York, *The Harbor of Dieppe* and *Cologne: The Arrival of a Packet Boat*, underscores the insistence with which the artist combined his study of landscape and light with that of social life. Both of these works, which date from 1826, approximately when *Mr. Turner* begins its story, are magnificent studies of light. But they are also both populated with literally scores of people—ferry passengers, townspeople, fishermen and other port workers, all engaged in the struggle for existence, as part of nature and in struggle to master it.

We also get an idea of Turner's fascination with science, and some tantalizing hints of the artist's own scientific outlook. He meets with Mary Somerville (1780-1872, played by Leslie Manville), the renowned Scottish scientist and one of the first women members of the Royal Astronomical Society, with whom he discusses and participates in experiments on magnetism and other subjects. "All things on this earth are connected," explains Mrs. Somerville, to Turner's evident approval. "Nothing on this earth exists in isolation."

If there is one obvious false step in *Mr. Turner* it comes in the form of a bit of comic relief. The young John Ruskin (Joshua McGuire), who was already one of Turner's great champions, arrives with his parents to meet the painter and purchase some of his work. Leigh is apparently contrasting a foppish, lisping and effeminate Ruskin with Turner's seriousness, experience and steady plebeian purpose. But Ruskin, the writer and critic who lived for more than another half century after the scene depicted in the film, was a major figure who doesn't deserve the mockery.

Special mention should be made of some of the other performances in *Mr. Turner*. Paul Jesson as the painter's father and Dorothy Atkinson as the unfortunate Hannah Danby are fine, as is Marion Bailey as the widow who brought some companionship and stability into Turner's life. Ruth Sheen and Leslie Manville, in the small but very memorable roles of Sarah Danby and Mary Somerville, respectively, have been regulars in Leigh's films over the past quarter-century, and in fact have performed together in five of them (*Another Year*, *Vera Drake*, *All or Nothing*, *Secrets and Lies*, and *High Hopes).*

Dick Pope's cinematography is another one of the film's excellent qualities. Pope used a technique that has given *Mr. Turner* a look that resembles the magnificent paintings. Instead of lingering on the finished product, we see the artist at work, the world as Turner saw it.

Towards the end of his life, Turner adopts a style that seems almost abstract, a development that was met with bewilderment if not outright hostility. Though somewhat out of favor, the painter still had admirers. A wealthy businessman offers him a great deal of money for all his work. Turner is not even tempted, explaining that he wants to leave his work to the British people as a whole.

Although Turner's wishes were not fully honored, the Tate Museum's Clore Gallery in London contains some 20,000 of his works, including paintings, watercolors and sketchbooks. Some of Turner's work can also be seen in the US museums already mentioned, as well as in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven, Connecticut, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.