

STAN B. AND MR TURNER

by Tim Cawkwell

Resumé of the essay:

- Stan Brakhage and visual culture, including JMW Turner
- Turner mania: 'Late Turner' and *Mr Turner*
- Mike Leigh's dramatic art
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- Turner's specs and Brakhage's abandonment of specs: their reaction against Renaissance perspective
- Turner and Brakhage as theoreticians
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- *Mr Turner's* beginning and end
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"What I really wanted to do was to be a poet," the American film-maker Stan Brakhage told an interviewer two months before he died in 2003, but early in life he switched his loyalties from poetry to film, where he discovered he had real gifts (unlike with poetry) and in which medium he produced a massive body of work. On the other hand Brakhage continued to use words unstoppably throughout his life, in statements of film poetics, in interviews, in texts, and in free-flowing performances in front of an audience. Often he would talk about filmmakers. His lectures on Méliès, Griffith, Dreyer and Eisenstein, published in 1972, all focused on heroes of the silent cinema – no accident for a film-maker who made hardly any sound films. In 1989 he published a book of reminiscences ('Film at Wit's End') on the independent film-makers he had encountered in the 1950s, praising their radical approach to the medium. His 'history' of cinema is idiosyncratic (to put it mildly – he was an independent among independents) and while he admitted in later life, without embarrassment, to going to the commercial cinema, he credited its purposes as solely for entertainment – which was his way of discrediting it.

A natural cultural voraciousness – his writings indicate the breadth of his reading, his listening and his looking – extended to the other arts, music especially. Less obvious, but no less important to him, is the inspiration he drew from painting. He would naturally refer to the heroic modernists of postwar America, especially Jackson Pollock, as a source of inspiration for the idea of the all-enveloping artwork, the originality of whose imagery was a necessity for the stripping of the viewer's senses, for making 'it' new – art, the world, mankind.

In 1990, in a formal one-to-one interview, the interviewer mused that no other film-maker or painter had dealt with light as he had. Brakhage's correction is instant: "Turner," he blurts out, and goes on to talk about him "painting light as best he is able", especially in the watercolours tossed off free of commercial considerations. "It was in his watercolours, across his life, where he was freely doing something from which he might make an oil-painting later. Because they had no commercial value, he was free," and these were therefore the greatest expression of his art.

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Turner mania, of a different kind, has gripped British museum-goers and patrons of arthouse cinema in the 'Late Turner: painting set free' exhibition at Tate Britain in London and with the release of the film *Mr Turner*. Very many of the paintings have been visible in public collections, but 'Late Turner' gathers them in one place, charges a hefty fee to visitors, and in the process enthuses a newly re-engaged audience. At the same time - and no doubt the two have been linked for publicity purposes - Mike Leigh's film *Mr Turner* has gone on general release in the UK at the end of October 2014, attracting strong expressions of appreciation - and dislike too. It is striking that such a remarkable addition to the genre of the biopic should have attracted such interest. Right at the end of the end credits we are told that the film is 'based on certain facts', a coy reference to the use of both certain fact and uncertain anecdote in telling its story. For example, we see Turner being lashed to the masthead of a ship during a snowstorm, which commentators tell us is of uncertain historical truth. Immediately following the shot Leigh shows Turner painting 'Snow Storm - steam boat off a harbour's mouth', the emotion of Turner's experience recollected in the tranquillity of his studio. Whether true or not to the facts of Turner's life, it is certainly plausible, not to mention dramatic - the very stuff of a narrative filmmaker's art. (Personally I was hoping that Leigh would follow the shot of him tied to the masthead with something like the stargate corridor sequence in Kubrick's *2001*, as a way of making visible the elemental experiences of light and dark that Turner masochistically enjoyed by being put in the eye of the storm. But Leigh is not that kind of film-maker.)

The film is tellingly achieved in various ways, certainly as an account of the latter part of Turner's life, allowing reference to earlier incidents in it, but also as a portrait of mid-Victorian Britain, regional accents and all - and a delight in Turner's imagined turn of phrase: 'brook your ire', 'heinous travail', 'may I peruse the room?', 'a somewhat conundrous question' and so on. But Leigh is a film auteur: his exceptional ability in directing actors and actresses, his comic sense, his deft use of words, his sequencing of events, are all subjugated to his theme, the tensions and disorders inherent in family relationships. At its heart this is a three-cornered drama between Turner the man, the

amour of his maturity, Mrs Booth, and his housekeeper mistress, Hannah Danby. This story is counterpointed with two other dramas. First, where Turner stood in the public realm, as shown for instance in his visit to Petworth House, and the three sequences that take place in the Royal Academy, the first of which is shot in bravura style, marked by the displacement on the soundtrack of keening strings with loud and rapid drumbeats. The second context is a new strand in Leigh's work, namely human mortality, and even the vanity of human achievement. This long and seemingly rambling story can then be broken into three acts. The height of Turner's fame darkened by the death of his father; second the battle for his reputation, sometimes won but increasingly lost, lightened by his liaison with Mrs Booth; third the death of Turner in Mrs Booth's house, and the tragedy of his housekeeper's life. This tripartite division satisfies the dramatist and gives us a proper beginning, middle and end.

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Beginnings, middles and ends were something Brakhage detested, to use a deliberately strong word. And I fear that detestation would have been Brakhage's reaction to Leigh's film, had he lived to see it. As indeed it may be to the filmmakers listed in a brief but welcome piece in 'Tate Etc.', the Tate house magazine, by Jonathan P. Watts about filmmakers influenced by Turner's work. These include William Raban, Chris Welsby, John Smith and Rosa Barba, but at the top of this list is Brakhage. Watts quotes Marilyn Brakhage, Stan's widow, as saying that Stan "often spoke publicly about Turner's importance to him". Watts cites two of Brakhage's films in particular as Turneresque: *Text of Light* (1974) and *The God of Day Had Gone Down Upon Him* (2000). In the former, "the film's image," writes Watts, "is seared by layered textures of shattered light and colour, in a feedback loop between the camera's optics and the filter [which was a crystal ashtray] before it." In *The God of Day* Brakhage "relishes varied oceanic light, dramatized by rhythmic camera movements and edits, attention to visual textures and forms, and the consequent moods". Substitute references to camera and film with references to the paintbrush and canvas, and one can see how Brakhage and Turner are kindred spirits. For a description of Turner's method, try "the canvas is seared by layered textures of colour" and "oceanic light is dramatized by brushstroke, attention to visual textures, and the consequent mood."

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In 'Late Turner' there is an exhibit of Turner's spectacles, an object of some intrigue because they pose the question of how Turner in old age saw the world. There had been a lifetime of demands on his eyes, seeing the landscape from afar, looking into the sun, and

gazing on watery landscapes in constant flux, and also looking close up at his sketchbook or at his canvas. He was emphatically not blind, but what service did his spectacles perform? Surely his preoccupation with light as the elemental ingredient in the world stemmed from seeing it without spectacles, from what we would now think of as visual impairment, but in truth from a new way of conceiving it, which became deeply congenial to the modernist intention to reshape how we see.

In his painting Turner often (although far from always) saw his subject through a force field of light, especially in the square pictures of his late period (which the exhibition instructively gathers into one room). This force field makes the painting swirl before our eyes, and in a painting like 'Snow Storm' the paint is applied with brush and palette knife in order to create layers, made bolder by their being layers in movement. Turner is taking the radical step, and indeed contradictory one for someone who had started his career doing architectural pictures, of saying goodbye to Renaissance perspective.

Such perspective, or as he sometimes called it, 'Western compositional logic', was an idea which Brakhage, early on, came to hold in deepest suspicion. In the interview Hollis Frampton conducted with him in 1972 he refers to the poorness of his sight (in the adult diagnosis), the correction of which entailed the wearing of thick spectacles. The liberating moment came in throwing them away, triggering a crisis because "I literally could not see to cross the road safely," whereas "everyone else had an easy referential relationship with Renaissance perspective." But he did find out for himself ways of crossing the street safely, so that he could assert to Frampton that he could see perfectly well with the eyes he had. It is likely that this encouraged him to respond so favourably to the all-over canvases, with no point of focus, of the Abstract Expressionists, and by the time of the Frampton interview he had begun to laud a filmmaker like Méliès who, with the flat scenes in his studio used to make his magic films, had struck a blow against the tyranny of perspectival vision.

There are no photos that I can find of the adult Brakhage wearing spectacles. Much better proof of his revolt against perspective is to be found in his own film-making practice. In 'Metaphors on Vision' he celebrated his revolt: "By deliberately spitting on the lens or wrecking its focal intention, one can achieve the early stages of Impressionism." In the same paragraph he writes about using the filters of the world, fog, downpours, unbalanced lights and so on in a way that Turner would surely have approved, even more so when Brakhage writes of photographing an hour after sunrise or an hour before sunset, "those marvellous taboo hours when the film labs will guarantee nothing."

Allied to these tactics Brakhage exploited in the most radical way imaginable the fact that celluloid film is made in frames, so that by using the speed of vision experienced by seeing

a single frame in 1/24th of a second, he found a way not of making the frame unseeable but, paradoxically, more intensely seen than if the frame was held for a few seconds. By this means a photographed image could lose its representational purpose and register on the optic nerve. While a painter adopts a quite different method of intensification, Turner was surely aiming to achieve that in his visions of light. One astounding moment in 'Late Turner' is coming across his canvas of around 1844, 'Sunset from the top of the Rigi', comprising marks and squiggles on a luminous ground and conventionally labelled as unfinished. One can pay tribute to those who handled the Turner Bequest after his death that this canvas was never thrown away, because the marks on it rhyme with Brakhage's single frames, tiny specks of abstraction that evoke a universe.

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One of Leigh's tragicomic scenes in *Mr Turner* is of him lecturing to an audience of his peers, the cream of London's artistic establishment. Turner's delivery of his words is atrocious: gruff, in a monotone, and disjointed by the way he loses his place among his notes. This is comic. But as he speaks Leigh's camera travels over the faces in the audience, whose interior thoughts are opaque (but likely to be on the lines that Turner's argument is as lost on them as it is on us). Instead the camera takes pleasure in the faces, and all that Victorian hair. But there is a more profound distraction from the words spoken by the sight of his father in the audience having a coughing fit, and causing even Turner to pause and give a scowl that wonderfully conveys both irritation and concern. Here is a clever expression of the film's theme of human mortality. And yet the sight of him lecturing has great biographical importance for our understanding of the painter, for he was a theoretician as well, a person for whom the practice of painting stimulated thought and philosophising.

This makes a further link with Brakhage, who wrote extensively in an idiosyncratic prose of considerable opacity and often far from lucidly, as if logical thought was too allied with his *bête noire* of Western compositional perspective, and undermined further by his taste for obfuscatory puns. (He talked extensively too – this is something of an understatement – and many of those addresses were recorded in writing, or on tape, or latterly on film. One has the firm impression that he spoke better than he wrote, especially in his later years when a warmth of personality began to emerge, revealing a confidence in his place in the scheme of things.)

Yet this written theorizing not only shows, like Turner's, his 'thoughtfulness' but is also profoundly original, nowhere more so than in 'Metaphors on Vision', which in its second part (the first being the interview with the P. Adams Sitney, and the third extracts from his

letters and writings between 1954 and 1963) is as radical a manifesto for the cinema as Eisenstein's 'Film Form' and 'Film Sense' and Bresson's 'Notes for the Cinematographer'.

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It would be entirely appropriate to advertise a retrospective of Brakhage's films as 'Film Set Free', just as the sub-title of the 'Late Turner' exhibition, 'Painting Set Free', so neatly captures the experience of seeing his late paintings gathered together. Turner progressed to a radical aesthetic by stealth, painting throughout his life in a way that was acceptable to his patrons, using his technical mastery to awe his peers, and yet by the 1840s he is 'revealed' and reviled as a mere dauber, a moment Leigh brilliantly captures in the episode (again not historical?) of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, on a private tour of the Royal Academy, expressing their utmost disrespect for Turner's paintings, a moment when Leigh, in the benign maturity of old age, reveals a venom about British class society of which he was capable early in his career. For us now, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see the prophetic way Turner foreshadowed not just Impressionism but the enterprise of 20th-century abstraction and the exploration of 'paint for paint's sake'.

Brakhage's version of 'film set free' derives from his understanding of the power of the edit, its alchemy one might almost say, and of the power of the single frame, as mentioned, in a film like *Mothlight* (1963), and of the wondrous discovery of the light existing in all objects, a substance as much as an accident. *The Wonder Ring* (1955) pushes at the boundaries of seeing that lead to his child's vision of the world in *Scenes from Under Childhood* (1967-70) and well beyond. Late in his career the 49 minutes of *The God of Day* creates an immersive experience, as do the hand-painted films of his last period, where 'film set free' becomes 'film set freer', and satisfyingly linking his career to painting, and thus a painter like Turner. The fact of their being handmade is significant as this is yet another means of eschewing the lens ground to the requirements of perspective. In 1996 he explained to an audience that he had taken to taping blank film leader to a board of glass, naturally transparent, which he could use to paint, aiming to make one second a day (24 frames, each one an intense labour). In a 1995 essay in 'Telling Time', he explains further: "For color ('magic markers', dyes, India inks) I choose greens, yes, but vein them with yellows and ruffled shadow-black, applying isopropyl alcohol on a twisted pointed kleenex to thin dye lines, smudge the tones (with alcohol flicked from a thumbbed toothbrush) create circles to dab into partial-circle-curves or (with weakened, spit-diluted alcohol) do manage filigrees midst mixtures of conglomerate color. Sometimes varieties of tone are marked directly upon the transparent 'palette' (or clip-board which holds the film strip) so that I can then make toned puddles of alcohol to dip the film into, feathering the shapes with quick twists of the wrist, pressing the film so that the dyes collect as edges to

half-dried shapes, and so on. More often than not the alcohol is used to erase an entire frame or collection of frames which have, so it seems, come to naught."

The method had come out of necessity as it allowed him to continue making films following his operation for cancer of the bladder: he could sit at a table working intently with materials to hand rather than struggle with the lifting and movement of a camera.

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Mr Turner uses Western compositional logic, and it might be incomprehensible to Leigh that there could be any other kind. That logic (Brakhage would call it Aristotelian, used as a word of criticism) requires a beginning, a middle and an end to his story, and indeed the deft use of bookends to it. The film opens with a dawn scene of two Dutch women walking diagonally towards us along the edge of a dyke; the camera pans left with them to reveal the figure of Turner in long shot at the top of the dyke, ignored by the women as he sketches the sun lifting its red light into the sky. The film ends, expectedly enough, with Turner on his deathbed speaking his last words "The sun is God" before expiring. But unexpectedly that episode is followed by a shot, in silence, of Turner, in silhouette again, on a headland sketching the setting sun. The film then cuts to the everyday life it had started with in showing the two Dutch women walking and talking: Mrs Booth, now a widow, is assiduously cleaning the windows of her front door, and out of the silence the sound of the cloth rubbing on glass begins to be audible, bringing us back to the physical world from Turner's metaphysical one. Yet neither is that a final end. This is a film about the tragedy of human existence: the true end of the film is of Hannah his housekeeper, now outrageously raddled with psoriasis, pottering about Turner's empty London house – and weeping in her misery. Leigh's very first film in 1971 was called *Bleak Moments*, an appropriate description of this final shot.

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Mike Leigh is resolutely a secular, post-romantic filmmaker, and as such a gulf away from Stan Brakhage who in 1990, when told that his critics described him as a Romantic, said he was proud of it, for the world was open-ended and that one thing could not be detached from another, taking the interconnectedness of the universe as romantic in its inspiration. Even the pain of cancer was a gift he felt to aid his Promethean endeavour to create.

So will a biopic ever be made of Brakhage's life? It might be some time (two centuries, at a guess) before the funding is available for such a project, but there are possibilities. He had a long career with a massive output, and his friendships and combats would make a good portrait of American bohemian life in the second half of the 20th century. There would

also be a complicated (to all appearances) family life, and at the end serenity. He was very taken with a story told about the poet, Ed Dorn, who when asked if he considered himself an American poet, replied: “What?! You expect me to swear allegiance to this tiny set of rings called the solar system?!” For once the American hyperbole is magnificent, and one might adapt the phrasing to Brakhage who might have said, when asked if he was Romantic, modernist, or whatever: “Do you expect me to swear allegiance to a single time-freighted label? I’m like Turner. I am linked to the infinity of creation.”

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Sources

- The exhibition ‘Late Turner: painting set free’ opened at Tate Britain, London, on 10 September 2014 and is due to run until 25 January 2015.
- Brakhage wanting to be a poet: interview with Pip Chodorov of January 2003, printed in ‘Brakhage at the Millennium’ (Millennium Film Journal nos 47/48/49, Fall/Winter 2007-2008, page 164).
- Brakhage’s praise of Turner occurs in a filmed interview from 1990 with the Boulder Arts Commission, available on ‘By Brakhage: an anthology volume two’ in the Criterion Collection (2010).
- Jonathan P. Watts’s essay ‘Into the Light’ appears in ‘Tate Etc.’ issue 32 (autumn 2014), pages 100-101.
- The interview with Brakhage by Hollis Frampton is printed in ‘Artforum’ January 1973. See page 73 for Brakhage’s reference to childhood troubles with his eyesight.
- ‘Metaphors on Vision’ was published in ‘Film Culture’ number 30 (Fall 1963).
- The description of how he hand-painted film late in his career comes in his essay ‘Painting Film’ in ‘Telling Time’ (Documentext 2003) page 78.
- The Ed Dorn anecdote is retailed in ‘A Sense of Sight: a special issue [of the Toronto Canadian Journal of Film Studies] devoted to Stan Brakhage’, edited by William C. Wees, volume 14 number 1 (Spring 2005).