

Timothy Spall Unearths the Man Beneath *Mr. Turner's* Gruffness

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If you've ever loved a terrible person, Mike Leigh's quietly sensational *Mr. Turner* — a biopic, of sorts, covering the last 25 years of the life of the great 19th-century British painter J.M.W. Turner — is the movie for you. In his seascapes and landscapes, Turner found the perfect visual language for every possible combination of weather

isn't the sort you'd necessarily want to cuddle up to. Only occasionally does he use actual words to communicate. More often, he makes his feelings known using a vast vocabulary of grunts and growls that emerge from the depths of his throat. Presented with a visitor he doesn't wish to see, Turner makes the sound of a bear snuffling through



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atmospherics, from soft swirls of ochre sunlight to the powdery whites and grays of treacherous ocean storms. Human beings don't figure largely in Turner's work, particularly in the later years of his career; when they appear at all, they're often small, blurred figures at the mercy of the sky above and the sea below. You can read that as a lack of interest in human nature, or as a kind of personal humility in the face of the vast range of colors and textures — and, by extension, sounds and smells and feelings — that make up the world around us.

As a person, Turner tended toward eccentricity and solitude. And as played in *Mr. Turner* by Timothy Spall, he

garbage and finding nothing of worth; admiring the thousands of shades of brown and gray in a piece of driftwood, he's like a contented pig who has discovered a particularly tasty truffle in the forest.

Turner appears, especially at first, to care little for human beings except on those rare occasions when he needs them: His housekeeper Hannah (played, with guarded tenderness, by the British stage and theater actress Dorothy Atkinson) welcomes his gruff sexual advances, even though he treats her thoughtlessly. A mysterious and rather angry woman (Ruth Sheen, quivering with indignation) appears at his door with her two daughters — who, it

turns out, are also *his* daughters — to show him his first grandchild. He grunts at the little cherub in her white bonnet, wanting nothing to do with her.

But only at first: A few minutes later, he comes around to admire the infant in all her powder-pink glory, albeit in a rather businesslike way. Yet it's the first moment in when we realize that maybe we're not as expert at reading this man's heart as we think. He's intractable, uncommunicative, dismissive. But he is also, as Spall and Leigh show us, capable of delicate gradations of emotion. This is less your standard-issue biopic than a foray into the mystery of human feeling.

Mr. Turner, majestic in its stubbornness, may be Leigh's finest picture, or, at the very least, a picture different from any other he's made. Leigh, Spall, and cinematographer Dick Pope — who borrows lots of lighting tricks from Vermeer and Ingres and even Turner himself, to glorious effect — have gently atomized Turner's character, breaking it into small, potent fragments that affect us in ways we don't see coming. We see how he reserves his affection only for a worthy few: for his father (played, wonderfully, by Paul Jesson), a gregarious and generous man who has somehow failed to pass those qualities on to his son; and for a widow he meets late in life, Mrs. Booth (the marvelous Marion Bailey) — when she first meets the already famous painter, she doesn't even know who he is, though despite his surly demeanor, she takes to him immediately.

Leigh favors a quasi-improvisational approach to filmmaking, and he defines the chief relationships in Turner's life without writing them into convenient little boxes. The younger Turner addresses the elder as "daddy," with such offhanded tenderness that it throws you off guard a little each time you hear it. On the day Turner and Mrs. Booth meet — she has rented him a room in his favorite painting retreat, the seaside town of Margate — she sets dinner on the table, apologizing in advance if it's too salty. His grumbly-flirtatious response probably comes as more of a surprise to us than it does to her. She giggles with delight, shooing him off and scuttling away. Her enjoyment of this little game is an unfettered embrace of life, the kind of thing we don't think 19th-century English people would be capable of.

But of course they were — and in the movies, as well as life, they should be allowed that joy and freedom. That's where Leigh's gifts as a grouchy humanist come in. He's not one for what the Victorians would call sentiment; he prefers all-out feeling, even when it's wrapped in tender protective layers of tissue. Spall, so often a key player in Leigh's ensemble films, is his dazzling treasure here. He has always been a terrific actor, but this is the performance of his career, wholly without vanity: As Turner, he has a chin that doesn't know where his neck begins; he carries his somewhat portly frame like he's more preoccupied with light and color than with grace of movement. This Mr. Turner is no one we'd go out of our way to know; he may be historically significant, but he's anti-charismatic, a walking negative charge. And yet somehow, we come to

love a man we don't even like. As Mrs. Booth says of him, with perceptiveness that has nothing to do with flattery or even with mere kindness, "I believe you to be a man of great spirit and fine feeling." She's heard the heartbeat beneath the growl.

A version of this review appeared earlier this year in our coverage of the Cannes Film Festival.