

Mike Leigh and J. M. W. Turner as Body Artists

As an author who worked for television in the 1970s and 1980s and who is also a playwright, Mike Leigh may superficially strike some commentators as someone who is not particularly interested in media specificity. Indeed one of his most successful productions was the BBC film based on his play *Abigail's Party*, a film he himself criticised as one of his least satisfactory efforts in terms of cinema. Conversely, one might see the various experiments Leigh made in his long career as attempts to examine the specificity of cinema or television as a medium. Witness his “five-minute films”, a planned series of one hundred short films that was eventually rejected by the BBC. In this paper we will use Leigh’s latest film as a test of this hypothesis by exploring its relationship with the media of music, photography, the theatre and – obviously – painting.

In the course of Mike Leigh’s film, J. M. W. Turner (Timothy Spall) is variously confronted with the experience of music (he sings an aria from Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas*), photography (his “likeness” is taken), the theatre (he attends a play that satirises him): in other words, his body is engaged in a diversity of transformations that imply encounters with media other than painting. At another level, Mike Leigh, as a filmmaker, combined this series of experiments with a further experiment of his own, making his first digital feature-length film with the specific purpose of recreating the palette of Turner’s oeuvre. This paper will examine the implications of those choices in terms of a possible vision of filmmaking as centred on the body of the actor.

Keywords: Mike Leigh, Painting, British Cinema, Media Specificity, Photography.

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