

Touched by Turner

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Abstract

This is a personal reflection on an encounter with the works of the 19th century painter J.M.W. Turner in London's Tate Britain exhibition 'Late Turner: Painting Set Free'. The article discusses the deeply subjective nature of engaging with artworks, and touches upon theories that might account for the ineffable but moving experiences that sometimes occur in such situations, often unexpectedly, and the associations that might prompt them – in this case the details of dogs in some of Turner's works. There is a discussion of the theoretical frameworks that may provide an insight into these deeply subjective, personal and yet significant encounters, and how they can provide a means to a richer understanding of an artwork. The article considers the conditions that might be conducive to these contemplative, affective experiences, and how they occur in educational settings with appropriate forms of pedagogy. The article concludes by contrasting slow, idiosyncratic and subjective learning through artworks, with the dominant, data-based and reductive trends that currently prevail in education.

A recent Liverpool biennial festival of contemporary art had 'touched' as its theme. This choice was deliberately ambiguous, retaining the physical meanings, but also evoking the emotional sense of being moved and affected. Although any theme has its limits, and cannot possibly suit all of the myriad artworks in a huge international and intercultural exhibition like the biennial, it did nonetheless provoke in me an awareness of what it means to be engaged with an artwork to the extent that one is stirred in some ineffable way, and the moment of the encounter acquires a memorable poignancy. It may be inevitable that most works will be passed by without much impression being made. This is not to say that these works aren't important or significant in other ways, as many clearly are, and I have enjoyed many exhibitions without being affected on anything other than an intellectual level, in the same way that one can be engaged in a game of chess, say, without being exposed to any memorable emotional experience. However, some encounters with works occasionally do puncture my conscious musings and are, for want of a better word, transformative, and this happened unexpectedly in the exhibition 'Late Turner: Painting Set Free' of J.M.W. Turner's paintings that I visited at Tate Britain in London.

I had known Turner's painting for many years, having studied them at school for my A-levels, lived with reproductions of his paintings in my bedroom as a child, and grown accustomed to the ubiquitous use of his paintings for the general utilities and

accoutrements of life: tea trays, calendars, mugs, pictures hanging in school corridors, and album covers. Despite this overexposure, I had long enjoyed his work, and had on many occasions visited the Clore Gallery in Tate Britain which houses his extensive bequest to the nation. I had at one time harboured ambitions of being a painter myself, and favoured landscapes, so perhaps it was inevitable that I would be drawn to Turner's work.

I arrived at Tate Britain on a bright September afternoon prior to the opening of the exhibition, but was fortunate enough to be admitted to a private view that was occurring at the time. This meant that I had the privilege of space and time to view the works on display, and I took full advantage of this, moving back and forth through the exhibition, looking several times at some paintings that caught my eye, sometimes for long periods. In the first room of the exhibition there was a rather grisly exhibit of Turner's plaster death mask, which immediately set my thoughts to the contrast with the ephemeral nature of the phenomena of light and air that so interested Turner. Perhaps because of the brilliance of the early autumn afternoon outside, or perhaps because of my sudden discovery of time in which to contemplate and reflect, I found myself engaging with the works with an unusual intensity, and my familiarity with many of the images did not prevent me from experiencing a sense of freshness and vivacity in the works, notwithstanding the effects of age upon the paintings. As with Barthes' and Proust's writings on perception, it was the details in the works that caught my attention, in a highly subjective and seemingly random manner.

After a short time in the gallery I noticed that many of Turner's works contain dogs. This had a surprising effect on me in two distinct ways: firstly because I hadn't noticed before that Turner included dogs in so many of his works, and secondly because I keep dogs myself and like their company. The dogs depicted in the paintings are usually very small and are often part of a subplot in the narrative of the work, so that even a work celebrated as profound and atmospheric, such as the iconic watercolour 'The Blue Rigi' (1842), has a tiny dog leaping through the water and driving a group of ducks to flight. I think it was the liveliness of the tiny dog figures that I discovered in his paintings that, like this one, touched me; the vitality, the comedy, the lightness of touch in these depictions reached across the years to me, and I momentarily imagined the water lapping against my boots as I looked out over the lake at this mist shrouded mountain, while a spirited dog breaks this surface

of the placid waters, and with it the peace. I smiled to myself, and felt myself moved, or rather, touched by Turner, in our affinity with these unruly but loveable beasts.

I later discovered that Turner's association with dogs was well known, at least as far as some prominent instances go. The English National Gallery in London notes Turner's use of a cut-out dog silhouette to give depth to his oil painting 'Mortlake Terrace' (1827). Turner's act of gluing the paper dog onto his painting at the Royal Academy indicates his penchant for theatrical performance as well as interest in dogs to liven up his pictures:

A black dog barks at the Lord Mayor's flag-decked barge. This dark accent, which enhances the summer evening's hazy paleness, was a last-minute addition. Just before the Royal Academy show opened in 1827, Turner cut the dog out of paper, stuck it onto the wet varnish, and touched it up with highlights and a collar. (National Gallery, 2014)

The depictions of dogs had provided a way into some of the paintings for me, into an unexpectedly high level of personal engagement. I was completely rapt for a time in the exhibition; I shared with Turner a liking for dogs and landscape, and for a while I believe that this opened up the pictures for me directly. Dogs seem to represent liveliness and mischief for Turner, and this was evident and in the many of the 'Late Turner' exhibits; the dog in the watercolour 'Lucerne by Moonlight, Sample Study' (c.1842-3, Tate) awaits the person attending the boat just off the shore, perhaps its owner; the dog is a tiny figure on the dock, adjacent to a strip of reflected moonlight. Even though it's small, the dog is depicted as alert, with its tail erect as it perches on the very edge of the quayside, and Turner has provided enough of its character for me to gain a purchase on the animal's relationship to its owner. I felt that the dog waited eagerly, just as my dogs would, and this conjured an image of my own dogs waiting for me at home at that very moment, and I imagined Turner being similarly captivated by his own intimate encounters with animals. A similar episode occurred with his painting 'Story of Apollo and Daphne (1837), where a dog chases the hare in the foreground, and much later with the 'Dawn after the Wreck' painting (c. 1841, London Courtauld Gallery), where a dog is the solitary life on the soaked sky-reflecting beach. None of this distracted me from the paintings as a whole, quite the opposite; after being hooked in by the dog in 'Lucerne by Moonlight' I became even more sensible of the cool evening atmosphere that Turner had generated through his limited palette of blues and greys, and the deftness of his brushwork. Dogs represent

a significant presence in my domestic life, and seeing them scattered through the exhibition captured me and reaffirmed my engagement with Turner's works on many levels.



Figure 1. Dog waiting on the shore; author's sketch after a detail of J. M. W. Turner's watercolour 'Lucerne by Moonlight: Sample Study c.1842-3', cat. no. 158 in the 'Late Turner: Painting Set Free' exhibition, Tate Britain, 2014–15.

Subjective emotional encounters with images have been theorised at length, and Roland Barthes' (1980/2000) theory of the 'punctum' in photography, is one of the best known. Barthes constructed this particular theory after the loss of his mother, and therefore death, and the ephemeral, transient and ultimately fragile nature of life underpins his text. His theory the punctum, as some highly subjective component of the image which, through a combination of personal memory, association and visual acuity, strikes through our intellectual, cultural or linguistic rationalisation (the 'studium') and momentarily forces an acute emotional response. Barthes likens the photograph to an entity that travels across time, in the way that starlight reaches us many years later:

From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star. (Barthes 1980/2000: pp. 80-81)

This is perhaps a mixture of longing for times lost, or of life's fragile temporality; such moments may be either painful or pleasurable, but they are always potent and moving. Often it is the detail of a photograph that provides Barthes with the punctum, such as his example of the Andre Kertesz photograph 'The Puppy' (1928) Where a boy is shown staring at the camera whilst holding a puppy up to his chin; the punctum for Barthes is the hard stare of the boy, in contrast to the sentimentality of the image: 'He is looking at nothing; he retains within himself his love and his fear' (1980/2000 p. 114). Although Barthes' based his theory on photography, where the photograph brings about authenticity through the knowledge that an actual person or object reflected the light and cast the shadows that produced the image, establishing a very direct relationship with a spectator, the theory still seems appropriate to my experience of being transported in Turner's exhibition. Sontag's idea of a depiction being like the 'delayed rays of the star', which seem to bridge time, describes well my discovery of Turner's dogs. Even though they merely comprise tiny smudges and streaks, and were painted a century and a half ago, they encapsulate for me the movements and attitudes that only someone intimate with these domestic beasts could know. The affinity thus generated 'pricked' me, irrespective of the burgeoning cultural and historical content and of the paintings.

Barthes' writing about his experiences through photographs resemble those poignant moments in Proust's work (Dillon 2011), where time is telescoped through a momentary contact with a long vanished past, brought about by a sensory encounter (taste, smell, sight or touch), famously in Proust's 'In Search of Lost time' (1913/2002) in the taste of a madeleine cake dipped in tea which evokes a powerful involuntary memory, bringing forth the original experience from childhood, and transporting the narrator there. For Proust the visual perception of everyday phenomena could symbolise ineffable and elusive thoughts, eliciting intense concentration in an attempt to translate, or rather unlock, the visual apparition that seemed to be speaking to him (Proust 1913/2002 pp. 216-218). Similarly, Gerhard Richter's paintings, of which I had seen in exhibition at Tate two years before (Adams 2012), explores many of these ideas through visual phenomena, mass produced photographs, and the impact on our memory and subjectivity often oblique

associations with visual details, generating palimpsests of unresolved meanings. In 'Family' (1964), a painting based on a black and white photo, Richter depicts himself a boy clutching his pet dog in the foreground, surrounded by family members. The domestic cheerful scene, symbolised by the smiles and the intimacy with the pet, belie the troubled context of German history that had engulfed his family.

My unexpected and highly personal engagement with Turner's dogs was also to precipitate a more conventional learning experience. Once intently focused on the works, I was more amenable to one of the broader aims of the exhibition which, according to Smiles (2014), was to rehabilitate Turner as a Victorian painter fully integrated into the social fabric of his era, whose subjects and methods were less an aberration, awaiting to be appropriated by later modernists, and more a singular expression of the values and ideas of his time. Interestingly, I had arrived at the art historical dimension to this exhibition via a very personal journey, a route that I could not have predicted in advance.

I was fully aware that these rambling imaginings were mine alone, and have grown from my cultural upbringing and the contextualisation of my particular social world. My new interest in Turner and his dogs is the product of my subjective responses, and the event demonstrated how idiosyncratic and unpredictable our relationship to art can be, even when we believe we are confident in our understanding of a work, and how equally unpredictable our emotional responses are: the simplest associations found in a work can trigger deep and memorable chain reactions. It is difficult to predict what might engage a person when encountering a work of art, and no end of art historical knowledge can be of much assistance in the matters of our subjective and inter-subjective perceptions.

Given the complexity of my experience, and the subjective foundation of it, I began to speculate on what form pedagogy might take that would allow for similar experiences with young people confronted with artworks produced in different times and cultures, an alien context to the one they inhabit now. I thought about the research that our centre RECAP (Research into Education, Creativity and Arts through Practice) has conducted into the conditions necessary to engender affective and creative education; the programmes Tate run which explore co-creation with young people, and the professional development workshops that NSEAD provide the time and space for teachers to engaged with artworks. As a great deal of research into contemporary art and galleries in education has demonstrated (e.g. Hyde 2011;

Herne *et al* 2013; Hiett & Riding 2011; Fröis & White 2013), the gallery is a site where the learner's voice can be foregrounded, and the traditional authority of the art-historian's voice is more easily circumvented in the contemporary gallery where artworks can take on forms that are often more contentious in their interpretation; in these spaces meaning-making occurs in a more democratic learning environment. Even so, bringing forth subjective associations in such a way that the learner does not feel vulnerable or exposed requires an imaginative pedagogy, one that is predicated on experiment and exploration, and where the teacher is part of that experience as a fellow traveller in the co-creation experience, rather than evoking the authoritative voice of the instructor.

Whilst this democratic learning situation often occurs in the contemporary gallery, it is less common in more traditional exhibitions. It may be that my familiarity and confidence with Turner's work, developed over a long period of time, enables me to declare my thoughts and feelings and discuss the artworks in such an idiosyncratic way. Above all, as the studies on galleries and contemporary art cited above have demonstrated, predetermined learning objectives with corresponding high-stakes assessments are not only inappropriate for such an environment, they are highly likely to destroy learners' confidence to voice ideas. Personal introspection and the acknowledgement of the oblique associations and references that are precipitated by our subjectivity can only be developed in the contemporary art space through sensitive pedagogical approaches. There is no reason why this should not apply to the traditional art gallery as well as the contemporary space since, as I've tried to demonstrate here, insights into any artwork are only produced once the learner has made the initial engagement with the work on their own terms. This might entail personal associations being established that may appear arbitrary to others; but an astute educator will recognise the significance of the engagement, and nurture the line of enquiry through shared interest rather than authority,

After my experience in the gallery with Turner's works and his miniature depictions of dogs, I was abruptly returned to the desolate educational landscape of my contemporary western world whilst glancing through my newspaper. A quote read: 'In the last 10 years we've been able to measure annual progress of kids systematically. If there's one thing that would improve the UK education system, it's data.' (Douglas Lemov, quoted in Weale 2014), followed by a discussion about the importance of predetermined lesson objectives that are easily measurable, and from which there should be no deviation. It may be unfair to juxtapose these very different conceptions

of education, as there may well be some situations, and some disciplines, in which that kind of measurement and pedagogical strategy is appropriate. However, I worried about the confidence with which an educationalist could assert such a notion, and expect it to apply across the vast range of cultural and social learning experiences that constitute education. All the kinds of deep, subjective cultural learning which I had experienced and valued for myself on this day could not possibly have a place in this dominant ideology of educational metrics and data.

I am concerned that the drive to test, measure and classify educational outcomes that is so dominant in the US and the UK today is in fact designed to eradicate artistic modes of expression from education completely. Through the unimaginative lens of the calibrator, artistic discourse and production in education must appear not only subjective but also aberrant and subversive; take for example the UK's Secretary of State for Education, Nicky Morgan's recent utterance, declaring that for school students the choice of arts subjects could 'hold them back for the rest of their lives' (quoted in Hutchison 2014). This desultory conception of the arts in education is completely at one with a bleak neoliberal ideology. Bereft of values or principles beyond those of standardisation and monetary profit, this new homogenising conformism is the antithesis of the heterogeneous diversity found in the arts and cultural worlds. An educational world where it is possible to be moved by works of art, and to share and exchange those experiences, needs not only to be created and maintained, but also actively defended against the ruinous effects of metrics and markets.

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