

Artists' lives make good films; or so it would seem from the number of films that have taken the artist as their subject. From the earliest years of silent cinema to the coming of sound and Hollywood; from mainstream cinema to independent and avant-garde directors, film has shown itself to be endlessly fascinated with the lives and works of artists and with bringing to life their charisma and creativity. The history of cinema is punctuated with bio-pics about real artists featuring memorable star performances: Charles Laughton as Rembrandt in Alexander Korda's 1936 film (figure 1); José Ferrer as Toulouse-Lautrec in John Huston's 1952 *Moulin Rouge* (figure 2); Kirk Douglas as Vincent van Gogh in Vincente Minnelli's colourful *Lust for Life* (1956; figure 3); Charlton Heston as Michelangelo; the list goes on and includes less mainstream titles such as Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio* (1986) and, far more unusually, the very occasional woman artist such as the French film of *Camille Claudel* (1988), starring Isabel Adjani (figure 4). Given the overwhelming presence of artists on film it seems fair to categorise these works as a cinematic genre, complete with specific codes and conventions and comparable to other film genres such as westerns or melodramas.

What is it about the figure of the artist that seems to fit the big screen so well? What draws directors and audiences to the celluloid (or digital) stories of their lives? Can films capture and reveal a truth about the meaning of art that other media cannot, or do they simply mythologise and sensationalise? In the first years of cinema filmmakers drew on the generic figure of the artist, rather than on well-known named individuals, and their irreverent portrayals of artistic creativity stand in marked contrast to the respectful and celebratory depictions that have characterised bio-pics since the 1930s.

Films around 1900 were short, usually little more than a couple of minutes and the type of films that depicted the artist were trick, or transformation films, in which a range of camera techniques were used to summon magical effects of appearance, disappearance and transformation. Fine art in the 1890s had much greater cultural status than the new, popular medium of cinema, but these trick films about artists can be seen as one way in which the first filmmakers asserted their technological superiority and exceptional visual skills. Thus if a painting could imitate reality, then film could go one better and actually animate the picture and transform it into a living form. In Thomas Edison's 1901 film *The Artist's Dilemma* (figure 5) an artist is shown attempting to paint a female model's portrait but is constantly outdone by a clown with a bucket of paint and a huge paintbrush and the trickery of the motion camera. With a few rapid strokes the clown covers the canvas and, to the distress and amazement of the artist, achieves a perfect likeness of the model. And there is more. The clown goes over to the painting and brings the painted woman to life; together they ridicule the artist who is finally left alone, with a blank canvas. In these trick films the artist's studio becomes a battleground for a fascinating struggle between art and film. It is worth bearing this media war in mind, perhaps it is still being waged when film directors in the twenty first century choose the artist as their subject.

Things have changed significantly, however, since the anarchic treatment of the artist in these first short films. With the emergence of mainstream institutional cinema and feature-length sound films, artists have been treated far more reverentially in films that have reinforced prevailing myths of artistic genius. Within Western culture and philosophy, there is a long tradition of the image of the artist as a misunderstood genius; an outsider who

eschews or cannot be contained by social norms and decorum, a recalcitrant type of masculinity whose sexual desire is channelled into artistic expression. Perhaps the most popular and well-known instance of this image of the artist is Vincent van Gogh.

The most striking visual feature of Vincente Minelli's 1956 bio-pic *Lust for Life* is the intensity of the colour. The film was shot in Metrocolor, which was the trade name used by Metro Goldwyn Mayer for films processed in their laboratories and shot on Kodak's Eastmancolor film, developed in the 1950s. The film exploits this new colour film to almost hallucinogenic levels. Accompanied by a searing musical soundtrack the film revels in the equal brilliance of the landscape and of van Gogh's canvases; frequently environments reconstructed from the paintings dissolve back into colour photographs of the painted canvases. The conflation, within the film, between what van Gogh apparently saw and what he painted is clear cut and absolute. Minelli's film adopts the reading of van Gogh offered in Irving Stone's novel, *Lust for Life*, from which it was adapted. The pictures 'illustrate' van Gogh's increasing desperation, madness and creativity and like nearly all bio-pics the audience is shown the artist in the process of painting subsequently well-known canvases. Most famously, towards the end of the film, we see van Gogh painting the wheatfields in Auvers, which were believed to be the final canvases he painted before committing suicide. In *Lust for Life* van Gogh is shown at his easel in a field with crows; as his desperation grows he stabs with his brush at the canvas, adding the crude black marks of the crows, which are the signs of his impending tragedy. There can be no doubting the serious intent of the film; it is visually memorable and an exemplary celebration of the myth of artistic genius.

Lust for Life is convincing because of its resemblances, the way that it uses familiar paintings and the uncanny resemblance of its star, Kirk Douglas, to self-portraits by van Gogh (figure 6, poster advertising *Lust for Life* with Kirk Douglas?). In preparation for the role (which Douglas was keen to play) he dyed his beard and studied van Gogh's letters and paintings; this referencing of the real and of acknowledged archival sources is a key component of artist bio-pics; it gives them their distinctive blend of fiction and fact and the sense that they offer both a reiteration of the familiar and the possibility of something new. Conventionally, the new perspective that the bio-pic offers derives from the artist's life and its unique expression in the work.

In common with most bio-pics *Lust for Life* shows the artist at work on his unfinished canvases, which is arguably one of the most challenging and flawed moments within this film genre. How can the film recreate the uniqueness of the making of the art work? If it is the work of genius, it surely cannot be recreated and if it is done poorly it risks reducing the film to bathos. The paradox of the artist bio-pic is the image of the unfinished canvas and the representation of its making, which can never be good enough but can never be bad; it is doomed to failure. It is a problem within the genre that is unresolved in even the most recent artist bio-pics.

The question of how to represent artistic creativity was the subject of a documentary about Picasso made in 1955 by the French director Henri- Georges Clouzot (figure 7; studio set from *Le mystère Picasso*, Filmsonor). The title of the film, *Le mystère Picasso*, casts a romantic tone, hinting at secrets of creativity that may be uncovered by seeing the great artist at work. According to the director, Clouzot, the moving image is able to reveal these

secrets better than any other medium. Rejecting conventional films on art, particularly those which attempt to analyse an artist's work by guiding the spectator's gaze around the finished work, from one detail to the next, Clouzot developed a new way of filming that would represent the chronological development, the process of art making rather than simply filming the finished object. The changes, the hesitations, the choices and the decisions of the artist were to be shown, thus revealing the actual mechanisms of artistic creativity.

The technical gimmick that enabled this revelation was the use of a new type of coloured ink that soaks through paper and makes the surface transparent. The paper was stretched upright, with the artist on one side of the screen and the camera on the other, so that Picasso's picture making could be filmed with the marks appearing on the paper screen without the artist himself being visible. The images thus appear as if by magic, without any apparent manipulation or mediation by the artist. During the film Picasso executes a number of drawings and a large-scale canvas using this method. Paradoxically, then, Clouzot's claim to unravel the secrets of Picasso's genius simply serves to heighten the artist's mystery. As the artist, critic and collector, Roland Penrose wrote: 'although cameras have recorded thousands, perhaps millions of pictures of him, there remains a desire to know more, a desire which is based on our lack of understanding of how the mind of an artist works.'¹

Here we begin to draw near to defining the attraction and meaning of films about artists. The gap between representation and understanding is essential. We need not fully to understand the mind of the artist; we need a mystery that is in excess of visibility and

comprehension. Since genius is partly defined as that which is unknowable and unmasterable, the project of revealing Picasso's mystery *must* fail or it risks upsetting one of the most potent and pervasive mythologies within Western art.

As demonstrated by the names and film titles listed at the beginning of this article, British artists do not figure greatly in either the canon of art history or the genre of artist bio-pics. J. M. W. Turner is perhaps the most notable exception to the absence of British artists in the litany of great art and with the release in October of Mike Leigh's new film, *Mr Turner*, he now also joins the pantheon of artists who are the subjects of major feature films.

Explaining his interest in this subject Leigh evoked the century old struggle between art and film that has been a part of cinema from its beginning; he states: 'I have again turned the camera round on ourselves, we who try to be artists, with all the struggles our calling demands.' Directors want to associate their own creativity with the greater mysteries of artistic creativity; he continues: 'moving [people] to experience the profound, the sublime, the spiritual, the epic beauty and the terrifying drama...few of us ever achieve it, much as we try. Turner achieved all of it, of course.' There is both deference and aspiration in Leigh's engagement with filming the life and work of Turner.

In many ways, *Mr Turner* departs from the usual conventions of the artist bio-pic. To start with it focuses only on the last twenty-five years of Turner's life, until his death in 1851; the structure is episodic and seems at times more like a dramatized documentary than a coherent biographical narrative. Infamous moments from his life are shown: Varnishing Day at the Royal Academy of Arts; the artist lashed to the mast of a boat in a snow storm at sea; and the rambling cockney delivery of his lectures on perspective.

The film also focusses on his private life; the man whom Leigh describes as: ‘eccentric, anarchic, vulnerable, imperfect, erratic and sometimes uncouth...capable of great passion and poetry.’ In other words, all those qualities that we have come to associate with that unique and special form of masculinity: the artist/genius. In other ways, however, Turner, as played by Timothy Spall, does not conform entirely to the mythology. Although he is a social outsider and eschews conventional emotional and sexual relationships (he is shown on a number of occasions clumsily fornicating with his housekeeper Hannah Danby), the film is attentive to the nuances of his class and cultural background. The context of early nineteenth-century art institutions – aristocratic patronage, or the realities of paint shops and studios – is portrayed with great care. Perhaps these details are another instance of the film director’s respect for the materiality of the world of the great painter.

Mr Turner creates a vivid and intensely corporeal portrait of the artist; it is less successful in evoking the power of the art. Like nearly every previous film about art, when it comes to representing the paintings themselves it is as though the brilliance has been toned down; they pale in the presence of the personality of the artist. Whether showing the artist at work on an incomplete canvas or a well-known finished painting, the power of art is somehow lost. Film, it seems, can capture the life of the artist, but the impact of the art remains elusive. It is, indeed, a mystery.

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¹ Cited in Edward Quinn, *Picasso: Photographs from 1951-1972* (New York, 1972) p. 4.