The Adaptation of Artwork in *Lust for Life* and *Mr. Turner*

Rachel Walisko

Abstract:

A film can be adapted from almost any source, including literature, history and art. One specific kind of adaptation, the artist biopic, often draws directly from the work of the artist featured to recreate a similar visual style on screen. Directors of artist biopics, who have an understanding of their subject’s defining aesthetics, are able to replicate the artist’s style visually in a film, through sets, costumes, colour, and light. In his article “Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest,” André Bazin states, “All it takes is for the filmmakers to have enough visual imagination to create the cinematic equivalent of the style of the original, and for the critic to have the eyes to see it” (20). When directors have the creativity to reconstruct the aesthetics of artwork on screen, and the audience has the historical knowledge to recognize the featured visuals, a new layer of dimension is added to the artist biopic. In the films *Lust for Life* (1956) and *Mr. Turner* (2014), filmmakers successfully adapt the paintings of Vincent Van Gogh and J. M. W. Turner to create the mise-en-scène of the films.

In his essay “Adaptation,” Dudley Andrew describes the distinctive feature of film adaptation and all representational cinema as “the matching of the cinematic sign system to prior achievements in some other system” (28). In order for a film to be an adaptation, it must have some overlapping content unique to the original source. Although “the problem of digests and adaptations is usually posed within the frameworks of literature” (Bazin 19), all biopics or biographical films are adaptations, because they feature elements of the real lives of their subjects. A popular subcategory of the biopic is feature films about actual artists. Of this subgenre, Lynda Nead comments, “given the overwhelming presence of artists on film, it seems fair to categorize these works as a cinematic genre, complete with specific codes and conventions” (74). This statement indicates the widespread popularity of artist biopics and that the similarities they share...
could be considered trademark characteristics of the genre. In the book *Art and Artist on Screen*, John A. Walker discusses biopics of artists and points out that “like all histories, such films are schematic reconstructions based upon whatever evidence – works of art, photographs, letters, memoirs, anecdotes and so forth – remains in existence” (13). When filmmakers adapt literature for screen, they often have a single, self-contained source from which to work. However, in the case of artist biopics and all films about historical events or persons, the source material is anything relevant still in existence, all of which the directors must consider and interpret.

When filmmakers choose to adapt the history of an artist’s life to screen, Charles Tashiro writes, they can appeal to “historical knowledge as a set of names, places, and dates” in order to re-create the past, but also “to a sense of the past as a group of appearances and images” (“When History” 19). In other words, artwork of artists is a reliable source for the creators of artist biopics to reference. Due to their value, these works have usually been very well preserved over the years in museums and private collections, and are readily available source material. Once a filmmaker decides to reference artwork when creating a biopic, the aesthetics of paintings are easily transferred to film, because as Nead notes, “if a painting could imitate reality, then the film could go one better and actually animate the picture and transform it into a living form” (76). Nead explains that, as paintings are a representation of reality created by artists, films are able to depict that representation of reality in a more developed and life-like way through moving images. In the opinion of Tashiro, the biography of an artist “is probably only one circumstance in which the conscious evocation of an artistic style can be justified as the ‘sight’ of the diegesis” (“When History” 27). Indeed, this stylistic technique, in which filmmakers match the visuals of an artist biopic to the aesthetics of the subject’s artwork does seem fitting; it is almost as though the artists themselves have a hand in the creation of the mise-en-scène of the film, and therefore, the telling of their own biography.

*Pretty Pictures*, written by Tashiro, describes director Peter Watkins’s desire to achieve identification with the painter Edvard Munch for his biopic *Edward Munch* (1974) and his decision to ignore “traditional notions of history, historical representation, and narrative structure in an effort to mirror on film the intense subjectivity of the painter’s work” (129). In the case of Watkins’s *Edward Munch*, the painter’s art was a key asset in the creation of the biopic’s aesthetics and a crucial component in telling the unique story of the subject. In *Framing Pictures: Film and the Visual Arts*, Steven Jacobs describes how the cinematography of *Munch* “is characterized by a spatial flatness through the use of zoom lenses as well as pale colours and blue shades acquired by using stock for artificial light in daylight without corrective filters” (14). *Edward Munch’s* visual style is composed of deliberate artistic choices used to mimic the palette and composition of Munch’s paintings. This technique, which is used frequently in the creation of artist biopic films, played a significant role in *Lust for Life* and *Mr. Turner*.

*Lust for Life*

Director Vincente Minnelli was deemed an auteur by *Cahiers du Cinéma*, meaning he was categorized as an artist and filmmaker able to “work...
The Adaptation of Artwork

through and transform the resources and constraints of the industry to express” his unique vision (Vacche 13-14). In his book, Directed by Vincente Minnelli, Stephen Harvey characterizes the filmmaker’s signature as “a lush and daring use of colour, the seamless fusion of music and camera movement, and a decorative scheme that mates the cast with inanimate objects in voluptuous counterpoint” (15). These unique features of Minnelli’s films were developed through his training in the visual arts as a painter at the Chicago Art Institute. This education “enabled him to develop a filmic style that would transcend the routine look of an MGM production, without going against the fundamental tenets of the industry” (14). Minnelli’s passion for the arts shaped not only his form, but also content, as he “continued to tackle the theme of painting as creativity” (15) throughout his career as a film director. Minnelli’s artistic style and love of painting are proof of a personal connection to the story of artists and substantiate his decision to direct a biopic about Vincent Van Gogh.

The screenplay for the film Lust for Life was adapted from Irving Stone’s biographical novel by the same name, written in 1934. Although the plot of the film was directly influenced by Stone’s book, Minnelli was intent on recreating the vibrant aesthetics of Van Gogh’s art in the mise-en-scène of the biopic. Minnelli wanted the scenery in Lust for Life to be as close as possible to the settings featured in Van Gogh’s art, and as Van Gogh painted in Holland and France, the crew shot on location throughout Europe during the summer of 1955 (Walker 43). When Minnelli was not filming on site in Europe, he tried to keep the production as true to the art as possible through “period clothes and by the construction of sets from the visual information supplied by the artist’s paintings” (43). All efforts were made to recreate settings in which Van Gogh lived and worked, either by filming on location in the places where the art was actually created, or by building sets inspired by his creations.

Another element of the film that was taken directly from the paintings is the “uncanny likeness of its star, Kirk Douglas, to self-portraits by Van Gogh” (Nead 76). The physical appearance of Kirk Douglas on screen (Fig. 1) was designed from the self-portraits that Van Gogh painted of himself, such as Self-Portrait with Straw Hat (Fig. 2). Not all critics are convinced of this resemblance, however. In “Lust for Lifeliness,” Tyler Parker states:

…the spectacle of Kirk Douglas made up and posed to look like Van Gogh in a self-portrait with the artist in a straw hat, Douglas’ photograph being placed next to a reproduction of that painting, would be enough to make the

![Fig. 1: Kirk Douglas as Vincent Van Gogh. Lust for Life. Minnelli, 1956.](image1)

![Fig. 2: Self-Portrait with Straw Hat. Vincent Van Gogh. 1887.](image2)
artist cut off his other ear. (133)

Parker feels that Van Gogh would see Douglas’s costume as offensive, as though mocking his self-portraits and memory. Walker disagrees and claims, “with his hair cut short and his beard dyed ginger, Douglas closely resembled Van Gogh” (41).

Walker’s observation cannot be denied, as the side-by-side comparison of Douglas in costume and Van Gogh’s self-portrait are remarkably similar. Douglas’s likeness to Van Gogh was influenced by the artist’s own vision of himself, and his self-portraits became the basis for the actor’s on screen appearance.

Thoughtful consideration was given as to which medium would be the most appropriate to record Lust for Life, as “any film about Van Gogh had to be in colour” (Walker 40). It was shot in Cinemascope on Metrocolor, “the trade name used by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer for films process in their laboratories and shot of Kodak’s Eastman Colour film, developed in the 1950s,” which allowed the biopic to exploit “this new colour film to almost hallucinogenic levels” (Nead 76). Van Gogh’s use of colour is such a significant element of his paintings that only colour film would be able to accurately convey the saturation of his paints. Again, critic Parker voices an adverse opinion. He says, “the idea that colour-photography can do anything but remotely suggest the true optical import of Van Gogh’s oil paintings is fraudulent when based on more than simple ignorance” (132). While Parker feels that Van Gogh’s colour could never be justly imitated by any medium other than in its original form, colour film provides a closer representation of Van Gogh’s paintings than black and white film. In her article “Minnelli’s Yellows: Illusion, Delusion and the Impression on Film,” Kate Hext describes another important function of colour in the biopic:

Blacks, browns and greys define the sets of the film’s first half, when van Gogh is searching for artistic inspiration, living in poverty and sketching in charcoal on paper; it is only when he begins to paint in oils and watercolours, and moves to Arles that the screen becomes saturated with colour. (13)

In the adaption of Lust for Life, colour plays a double role. In addition to replicating the imagery of the paintings, it is also strategically placed throughout the film to mirror the phases of Van Gogh’s life. The colour used in Van Gogh’s art is representational of his emotional state at the time it was painted. By recreating the paint colours in the mise-en-scène of the film, Minnelli conveys Van Gogh’s altering mindset and creative vision.

The colour yellow features prominently in Minnelli’s films and has significant weight in the representation of Van Gogh’s art and life. Hext feels yellow “is the keynote colour of Lust for Life and it is used to explore the relationship between imagination and madness so prevalent in fin de siècle art and culture” (13). As the film evolves from the blacks, browns, and greys of the beginning to vibrant colour, yellow appears more frequently as the progression of Van Gogh’s artistic inspiration parallels his descent into madness. One of the final moments in Lust for Life (Fig. 3), featuring Van Gogh’s last painting Wheatfield with Crows (Fig. 4) epitomizes this representation of the colour...
yellow. In the wheat fields of Auvers, yellow appears as “great wash of colour” (13), which mimics the painting of the same scene. The colour fills the frame, just as Van Gogh’s insanity reaches a breaking point. Soon after putting down his paintbrush, he walks over to the shade of a tree and shoots himself, demonstrating the link between yellow and mental illness.

In addition to the overwhelming presence of yellow, other elements of the painting *Wheatfield with Crows* are reproduced on screen. Walker points out, “since the canvas used was a long oblong, this painting is one of the few which matches the elongated shape of the CinemaScope screen” (45). The similar shape of the canvas and the frame allows the imagery of the painting and screen to align almost perfectly when overlapped. Nead recognizes the crows in flight as another common feature to both works; “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” (76). The metaphorical nature of the crows in the painting, which represent Van Gogh’s imminent death, means that the birds are a vital component of the mise-en-scène in *Lust for Life*. Walker writes, “six hundred crows were bought and tethered by lengths of monofilament.

---

**Fig. 3:** The wheat field scene inspired by Van Gogh’s last painting, *Lust for Life*. Minnelli, 1956.

**Fig. 4:** *Wheatfield with Crows*. Vincent Van Gogh, 1890. Oil on canvas.
Men hiding in the cornfield made noises to make them fly and then pulled them down again” (41). Minnelli intentionally recreated significant visual features of *Wheatfield with Crows* in *Lust for Life*, because a key component of a successful adaptation is the transfer of symbolic elements between the original source and the adapted content.

A cinematic device, used by Minnelli to reinforce the aesthetic ties between the mise-en-scène of the film and Van Gogh’s art, is the fading of the film set (Fig. 5) to a photograph of the real painting upon which that scene was based (Fig. 6) Walker feels the connection between the two is immediate and states “when Van Gogh’s paintings – in fact colour photos of them – were introduced into these scenes, the correspondence between set and painted image was, naturally enough, exact” (43). Minnelli, perhaps knowing his audience may not be familiar with all of Van Gogh’s artwork, or that they would not immediately identify the painting upon which a scene was replicated, sought to prevent this lack of recognition by visually linking the artwork and the mise-en-scène of the film. Nead describes the result of this side-by-side comparison:

Accompanied by a melodramatic musical score the film revels in the equal brilliance of the landscape and of Van Gogh’s canvases; environments reconstructed from the paintings frequently 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 patent and absolute. (76)

According to Nead, Metrocolor film shot against the vivid sets in *Lust for Life*, paired with the photos of Van Gogh’s art allows for a direct connection to be made between the paintings and the biopic, and therefore, a greater appreciation of the similarities between the two. Both Walker and Nead believe that the success of this technique allowed them to perceive the merging of the paintings with the aesthetics of the film. Through the synthesis of art and film, the audience is able to see subjectively from Van Gogh’s perspective and understand what he saw when creating his art.

**Mr. Turner**

Like Minnelli, director Mike Leigh was also educated in the arts. His time at London’s Camberwell College of Arts in the 1960s led him directly to the work of J.M.W. Turner, of whom he would later make the artist biopic *Mr. Turner*. Commenting on his developing relationship with Turner, Leigh says, “once I started to see him and understand him, from the point when I was in art school, it took off. But it was a long journey” (45). Leigh’s introduction to Turner while in art school, followed by additional research on the artist, facilitated his interpretation of the work from an artistic point of view. This insight allowed Leigh to take the necessary steps to recreate Turner’s unique style of painting on screen, which “emphasize pure light, intense, swirling colour, and the elemental forces of nature” (Quart 34). The method chosen to record the film paralleled Turner’s own ideals in the rapidly changing world in which he painted.

Leigh felt it was crucial that the colours on screen match those of Turner’s artwork, so that the audience would be able to draw parallels between his paintings and the visuals of the film.

Quart describes the time period of early to mid nineteenth century London:

It’s an England where new technologies like railways, the tugboat, and the camera have begun to appear. The film takes full cognizance of this aspect but the last word on the subject comes from Turner: ‘The past is the past. You’re observing the future! Smoke. Iron. Steam!’ As a painter and a man, Turner is willing to embrace change and the future. (35)

Turner was an artist who embraced the new, which is shown explicitly in the scene where he slabs a streak of vibrant red onto his muted green painting of ships at sea, titled *Helvoetsluis*. He proceeds to turn the red spot into a buoy, but not before shocking half his colleges in the Royal Academy with his avant-garde methods. Turner’s approach to working on the cusp of innovation inspired Leigh’s filmmaking process. The director says “it’s also important that we shot the film on a digital camera, which meant that we were able to use, during filming and in postproduction as well, all the new techniques and possibilities of this twenty-first-century tool” (Quart 36). Leigh’s use of the modern digital camera to film *Mr. Turner* reflects his progressive style and desire to create art with the latest technology. Leigh also comments that there are “places in the film where Dick Pope has been able to enhance and develop what he photographed by digital techniques” (36). A benefit of working in a digital workflow is that Leigh and his cinematographer, Dick Pope, were given more flexibility in postproduction to accurately replicate the style of Turner’s paintings on screen.
The colour on Turner’s canvases is one aspect of the mise-en-scène the filmmakers felt crucial to replicate. Leigh believed that the look of the film had to be informed by “a sense of palette and actually hit the moments that became Turner images” (Shattuck). In other words, Leigh felt it was crucial that the colours on screen match those of Turner’s artwork, so that the audience would be able to draw parallels between his paintings and the visuals of the film. Hubert explains, “with cinematographer Dick Pope, Leigh looked at Turner’s paintings and colour charts to get a better sense of the palette they would use in the film” (45). In order to match the colours on screen as closely to the paintings of Turner as possible, Leigh and Pope studied his colour palette and determined that “Turner used warm yellow in the highlights and blue/teal in the shadows as his two main, complementary colours” (B. 67). Yellow and blue are used as the two main colours in the paintings, and so they became the two main colours on screen, often produced by tailored lighting techniques. Pope describes how the lighting scheme was crafted in Turner’s house:

I had acrylic sheets of Full CT Orange made up for all the windows in order to imbue the house with a warm, corrected light. That’s the daytime feel I wanted for the film: this soft, warm light reflecting Turner’s work… (B. 69)

In addition to synthetic light, Leigh also used a filming process “that skewed the actual colours of what he was shooting toward a Turneresque palette of yellow highlights and teal shadows,” in which “lenses from the 1950s and ’60s, fitted onto his digital camera, served as an atmospheric elixir” (Shattuck). This method imbedded a desired texture and glow to all of the film’s images, aligning more closely with the aesthetics of Turner’s paintings. In order for Turner’s light and colours to appear consistently throughout the film, Leigh and Pope would often have to embrace unique filming techniques and design lighting so that these traits appeared artificially.
While matching the light and colour of Turner's artwork was a key component in recreating his aesthetics, the filmmakers also designed sets to match the settings featured in his paintings. The film’s production designer, Suzie Davies, drew inspiration directly from Turner's own renditions of the landscapes he came across, and used his “own palette and architectural sketches” to conjure the homes he lived in (Shattuck). An example of the deliberate reconstruction of a space featured in Turner’s art (Fig. 7) is that of his watercolour The Artist and His Admireds (Fig. 8). Of this shot, Pope says it “was in the old library at the top of Petworth House, and it was one of the few times we had a go at recreating a famous ‘Turner,’ a watercolour he painted in that very same room” (B. 72). To reproduce the scene in this watercolour as closely as possible, the crew shot on location and designed the room to appear exactly as it had when Turner painted it. By placing the camera in the exact same direction as Turner looked when painting, the frame of the film and canvas of the watercolour align perfectly down the centre.

Even though some instances of imitation in Mr. Turner are manmade, other times Turner’s paintings were captured naturally, “like the steam locomotive that blew a perfect smoke ring as it huffed along in northern Wales, or the three wild ponies that galloped up behind Mr. Spall as he walked toward a stone chapel in Cornwall” (Shattuck). Another example is the perfect replication (Fig. 9) of The Fighting Temeraire (Fig. 10), a scene that was shot “almost in the same place as where the painting was depicted, bringing the Temeraire up the Thames to be broken up” (Cipriani). Commenting on this shot, Pope says “the image is very similar to the painting, including the position of the sun. We weren’t carrying a reference with us, but that moment just happens to match [his canvas]” (B. 68). In this scene, Leigh and Pope were able to capture the sun setting above the water at just the right moment, so that the colours of the light reflected off the clouds and water match those of the painting. The only non-natural element of the scene is the CGI ship, which brings the scene as close to the original painting as possible.

By mirroring the location, colour, and light of Turner’s art in the biopic, Leigh aims to show exactly what Turner saw when he painted. Of the efforts to show the world from Turner’s perspective, Pope says:

[We were] certainly trying to evoke what he saw...looking through him, through his eyes, in terms of camera movement. One thing is lighting and the other thing is where we put the camera, because that’s what’s more important in one of Mike’s films, more than anything else, is where do you see it from? A lot of the vantage points in the film are from Turner looking at what he is observing. (Cipriani)

In addition to lighting, Leigh and Pope illustrate Turner’s point of view through the camera itself, using it as a lens to reflect exactly where Turner was within landscapes and what he saw while in them. Scott Macaulay writes, “Together, Leigh and Pope have made Mr. Turner, a rare artist biopic that imbues within its visual strategies a sense of its subject’s own ways of seeing.” He goes on to describe the opening shot, which shows a peasant woman walking past a windmill in the setting sun, and explains that this scene exemplifies how the film contains “a sense of how the artist’s visual consciousness was shaped by both

...Leigh visualizes Turner’s creative moments by placing the audience in the landscapes from which he drew artistic inspiration.
geography and the historical currents of the Industrial Revolution” (Macauley). By recreating the aesthetics of Turner’s paintings on screen, Leigh visualizes Turner’s creative moments by placing the audience in the landscapes from which he drew artistic inspiration. Leigh confirms this objective, saying there are many moments throughout the film when the audience is “looking over his shoulder, looking at what he’s painting, what he’s sketching, the viewpoint of his world” and that those artistic decisions are intended to show viewers “what he was inspired by” (Shattuck). Yet, even after all of the efforts to convey exactly what Turner saw when he was painting, Leigh feels the creative moment of an artist cannot be completely shown on screen. He says, “You can evoke it, you can imply it, you can present the justification of images, but the actual creation itself is elusive and I would say, in strict terms, unfilmable” (B. 70). While exposition and camera angels give the audience an opportunity to draw parallels between the landscapes Turner inhabited and his artwork, Leigh believes that Turner’s internal moment of inspiration is intangible and cannot be captured in the mise-en-scène of a film.

Conclusion

While paintings are valuable source material to filmmakers in the creation of artist biopics, there are implications to this creative choice. Walker describes how films with aesthetics influenced by paintings reverse “the artist’s original process by turning his two-dimensional images back into their three-dimensional models. This device, so typical of films about artists, often generates a sense of the uncanny” (32). Sigmund Freud defines uncanny as “something which is secretly familiar, which has undergone repression and then returned from it” (245), or something, which even through transformation, resembles itself in a previous form. Walker believes that when the audience sees the aesthetics
of a well-known painting in the mise-en-scène of a film, they may experience a sense of the uncanny, because of the effect of recognizing a two-dimensional image so familiar to them in three-dimensional form. Further, Freud states that the highest degree of uncanny can be achieved “when an inanimate object – a picture or a doll – comes to life” (246). Films with aesthetics imitating artwork are uncanny, as they effectively bring an inanimate picture to life through moving images. *Last for Life* evokes a sense of the uncanny, due to Kirk Douglas’s close resemblance to Van Gogh in his self portraits, set against the familiar, live action backdrops of his landscape paintings. Similarly, *Mr. Turner* can be described as uncanny when the colours and settings of the film perfectly align with the artwork of J.M.W. Turner.

The awareness that comes about through the identification of artwork redirects the audience’s attention away from the forward momentum of the film, and instead, reflexively, to the specific moment in which they noted the resemblance between the two works and the filmmakers themselves. Nead states that in *Mr. Turner*, “Leigh evokes the century-old struggle between art and film that has been part of cinema from its earliest days: ‘I have again turned the camera round on ourselves, we who try to be artists,’ he states, ‘with all the struggles our calling demands’” (78). Just as the artwork of the artists featured in the biopics is examined, so too is the film itself, as the audience is given time to reflect during the moments of pause. Of this process, Tashiro writes, “Even a small-scale image such as Van Gogh’s bedroom cannot be literally recreated on camera without calling attention to the process at work, as obvious visual design makes us aware that the movie has been staged” (“When History” 29). As directors who have created films about artists, both Minnelli and Leigh bring awareness to their own creative backgrounds and their craft as art. Tashiro believes that the more the audience experiences pauses of reflexivity when watching an artist biopic, the more successful that film is in conveying the story and aesthetic of the artist subject. However, the reflexivity of an artist biopic is “dependent on the viewer’s double sophistication: recognition of the point of reference and of the productive forces at work necessary to stylize the film image” (29). Therefore, the success of an artist biopic when measured by reflexivity is conditional to the audience’s knowledge of history and

...there is an unavoidable halt, which occurs when an audience recognizes the artwork in the mise-en-scène of a film.

Related to the uncanny, another phenomenon of the artist biopic is reflexivity. As stated by Tashiro, “A narrative film cannot become a painting without putting the story in pause” (“When History” 20). He believes that there is an unavoidable halt, which occurs when an audience recognizes the artwork in the mise-en-scène of a film. Tashiro goes on to explain:

As the dynamic forces within the frame come together to find that privileged instant evoking a canvas, the actors, camera, and décor cease to move to the logic of forward movement and seek, rather, a point of static fixity. This self-consciousness is the measure of success; the moment of spectacle pushes the viewer outside to savor the image and temporarily forget the narrative to refer to a commodity beyond itself, crowing the story with a public image. (20)
art, and their ability to recognize the artist's work on screen.

Most importantly, biopics that recreate the characteristics of an artist's paintings give the audience a chance to see from that artist's point of view. Jacobs states:

By emphasising visual correspondences between the artists' works and the world around them, such biopics imply that these artists represent the world as they are perceiving it. The artist's vision may be distorted but his art remains firmly based on his perception of the world and is not presented as the result of an artificial construction. (14)

In addition to being a historical reference in the conception of a biopic, artwork produced by the subject can be used to design a representation of what the artist saw when looking at the world, by recreating the same aesthetic characteristics in the mise-en-scène of the film. Through this presentation, the filmmakers are able to provide context to the creation of the artists' work from the subject's perspective. By developing this understanding, the audience is able to engage with both the artist and the artwork on a more in-depth level, resulting in a greater appreciation for the life and work of the featured subject.

In summary, director Vincent Minnelli's education in the arts and signature as an auteur made him the ideal candidate to direct the artist biopic Lust for Life about Vincent Van Gogh. In order to replicate the setting of the paintings as authentically as possible, the crew filmed on location in Europe and designed sets of scenes straight out of his paintings. Kirk Douglas cut and dyed his hair red to resemble Van Gogh's self-portraits as closely as possible. Minnelli chose to film in Cinemascope on Metrocolor so that the elongated frame of the screen would align with the oblong canvases Van Gogh used, and to represent the vibrant colours of his paints as clearly as possible. The colour yellow and crows were used prominently in one of the final scenes, which depicts Wheatfield with Crows. This was done in direct reference to the imagery of the painting, and also as a metaphor for Van Gogh's descent into madness. Minnelli uses the technique of fading the film set to a photograph of the real painting upon which that scene was based, in order to connect what is seen on screen to Van Gogh's art. All of these creative decisions were influenced by Van Gogh's aesthetics and work to bring paintings to life on screen.

Mike Leigh was exposed to the work of J.M.W. Turner while in school for the arts and later directed the biopic Mr. Turner. Inspired by Turner's belief in embracing the new, Leigh recorded the film using the latest digital technology, which gave him greater ability to recreate Turner's aesthetics in postproduction. In order to replicate Turner's aesthetics as closely as possible, Leigh and cinematographer Dick Pope worked from Turner's colour palette of blue and yellow, and constructed lighting schemes to capture the golden light that appears in his paintings. They also recreated the scenes in Turner's artwork, by filming on site or designing sets to match, in addition to using the camera as a lens to reflect exactly what Turner saw while immersed in different landscapes and settings. By mirroring the location, colour and light of Turner's art in the biopic, Leigh is able to convey Turner's vision.

Film adaptation that draws on the visual aesthetics of the subject's art has three outcomes. First, it can evoke a sense of the uncanny when an audience sees the familiar aesthetics of a well-known painting on screen. Second, the film becomes self-reflexive by drawing attention to itself as an art and to the filmmakers as artists. Third, the film presents a vision of the world from the perspective of the artists, which gives context to the creation of the artists' work. When making bio-
graphical films about artists, filmmakers must draw inspiration from all aspects of the artists’ lives, including their artwork, because paintings are an artist’s depiction of their worldview. A successful artist biopic will incorporate the aesthetics of the subject’s work in the mise-en-scène of the film, giving the audience unique insight to the inner consciousness of the subject and allowing them to develop a greater understanding of the life and work of the featured artist.

The Adaptation of Artwork

Works Cited


Edward Munch. Directed by Peter Watkins, Norsk Film, 1974.


Mr. Turner. Directed by Mike Leigh, performance by Timothy Spall, Film4, 2014.


Turner, J.M.W. The Artists and His Admirers. 1827, watercolour and bodycolour on paper, Tate, London.

---. The Fighting Temeraire. 1838, oil on canvas, National Gallery, London.


Van Gogh, Vincent. Anvers Town Hall. 1890, oil on canvas, private collection, Spain.

---. Self-Portrait with Straw Hat. 1887, oil on canvas, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation).

---. Wheatfield with Crows. 1890, oil on canvas, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation).