Turner (1775-1851) '*Rain, Steam and Speed - The Great Western Railway*' 1844

Key facts:
Medium: oil on canvas
Size: 91 x 121.8cm
Location: The National Gallery (London)

ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject matter: The dominant bridge in the painting is recognisable as the brick Maidenhead railway bride across the Thames between Taplow and Maidenhead, designed by Brunel in 1837, for the newly laid Great Western Reailways (GWR) line to Bristol and Exeter. The bridge seen on the left is Taylor's stone road bridge, of which the foundation stone was laid in 1772. The view is to the east towards London. A skiff is on the river far beneath, with girls dancing on the shore, and in the distance to the right a ploughman with horses stoically turns his furrow to symbolise the traditional world that is being transformed. A hare bounds along the tracks in front of the train, the symbol of modernity. It is about the confrontation between man and nature. The hare, proverbially the swiftist of animals at the is unlikely to outstrip the new Firefly-class steam train, symbol of new industrialisation. We doubt it will win the race and escape with its life. There is a clear constrasts between an old rural England and a new industrial England in this late Turner sublime Romantic landscape.

The Sublime: Today the word is used for the most ordinary reasons, for a 'sublime' tennis shot or a 'sublime' evening out. In the history of ideas it has a deeper meaning. Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry* (1757) introduced the sublime as a new aesthetic concept in contrast to the beautiful.
"For sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small: beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy; beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid and massive. They are indeed ideas

of a very different nature one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure." The sublime is the result of the strongest emotion the mind is capable of feeling. "Whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime." For example raging storms, noise (such as artillery), bitter taste, intolerable stench, glaring brightness, vacuity, silence, solitude, pain and danger, i.e. disturbing qualities that go beyond our control and comprehension. The stress on the disturbing gives emphasis to the suggestive qualities in art. Burke saw nature as the most sublime thing, capable of generating the strongest sensations in its beholders. What Turner has done in 'Rain, Steam and Speed' is to transfer this sense of the sublime from nature to the steam train. It should be remembered that the first trains provoked reactions of fear and terror amongst the 19th century public. Passengers travelled in open-air carriages, exposed to the elements. Fears were felt that travelling at speed in these conditions were dangerous. *"As the title of the picture makes clear, Turner was painting not a view of the Great Western Railway, but an allegory of the forces of nature."* (John Gage)

Formal analysis: The immediate impression is of atmosphere, sky, water and movement, much of the painting is unreadable. One can almost feel the damp of the day (the carriages were open and so people really would have felt that) and hear the train hurtling towards us. The only image of real clarity is the black iron chimney of the train, the focal point two-thirds of the way across the painting with its white hot interior suggesting the boiler is fully fired. There is exaggerated yet accurate use of mathematical one-point linear perspective with orthogonals provided by the lines of the two bridges.

The steep foreshortening of the viaduct leading to the back, is used to suggest the speed at which the train erupts into view, through the driving rain, headlights blazing. Strong colour of the viaduct ensures that it stands out and dominates the painting. The engine of the train is described with spots of red, slightly demon like. All linear definition of form is lost, apart from those of the bridge and the engine's chimney. Turner's way of suggesting that mechanical, man-made power is dominant. "*Through the visual metaphor of Turner's artistic medium, nature and machine are strangely analogised*." (Brian Lukacher)

CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

Turner was sixty-five years old when he painted this, a Royal Academician and a small shareholder in the GWR. Born in Covent Garden Turner was *"a somewhat eccentric, keen-mannered, matter of fact, English-minded gentleman… hating humbug of all sorts, shrewed, perhaps a little selfish, highly intellectual."* (John Ruskin, critic and friend). The 1840s was the period of 'railway mania'. This painting was created at a time when the railway was really starting to criss-cross the British landscape. A brand new way of travelling and of connecting cities and people to each other. It was to change both landscape and society enormously. The restless Turner appreciated the speed and comfort of this form of travel. An unreliable anecdote by the critic Ruskin, Turner's champion, records the origins of this picture as a train ride during a rain storm. From the testimony of Mrs Simon who had been surprised when a kind-looking old gentleman, sitting opposite her in the train, had put his head out of the window during a torrential downpour, and kept it there for nearly nine minutes. He then withdrew it, streaming with water, and shut his eyes for a quarter of an hour. Meanwhile the young lady, filled with curiosity, put her head out of the window, was

duly drenched but had an unforgettable experience. Excited as ever by strong sensations, Turner then replicated this experience in paint.

Begun on Brunel's design in 1837 and finished in 1839, the viaduct was the subject of controversy, critics of the GWR saying that it would fall down. It utilises two arches to cross the river - at the time the widest and flattest arches built anywhere in the world. Brunel was instructed to leave the wooden scaffolding in place, for fear of the bridge falling down. He did so, but lowered it so that it wasn't actually supporting the bridge. It was eventually washed away by the tide. The train was one of the most potent symbols of industrialisation if one remembers the speed at which people were used to travelling: walking, horse and cart etc. Part of the painting is a nostalgia for what has been lost; a notion of this hulking, iron monster ripping through the landscape.

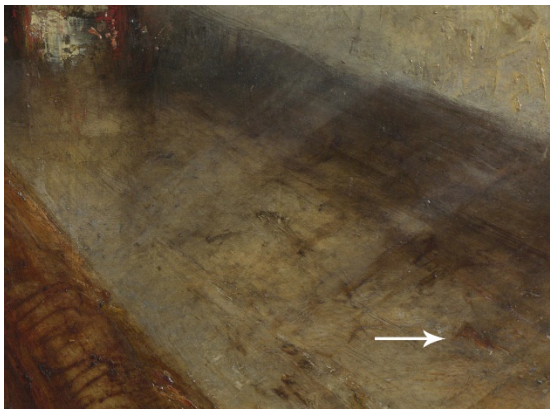
DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

This painting is as much about the technique and practise of painting as it is about the subject. It would have been a very different painting had it been painted differently. In some places the oil is so thin it is used in the manner of a watercolour, in others there is heavy impasto. The characteristically expressive brushwork, colour scheme of gold, blue and brown often applied with a palette knife communicate to us directly through the varied paint surface. Thickest at the centre the virtuoso swirls, slashes, smears and sprays of paint, stimulate rain and speed. The textures and colours and dissolution of form communicates the ideas of rain, atmosphere, speed and sound. There is scumbled pigment on the front of the engine car of the train. The graphic fragility of the hare, ploughman and boat recollect the preindustrial human relations to the world; un-disruptive and almost passing unnoticed. Possibly also a reminder that one should look more closely at the landscape when social and industrial change is about to overtake it.

WAYS IN WHICH ART HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

It was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1844. The critic and novelist W.M. Thackeray (1811-1863) wrote: "*He has made a picture with real rain, behind which there is real sunshine, and you expect a rainbow. Meanwhile, there comes a train down upon you, really moving at the rate of fifty miles an hour… The rain… is composed of dabs of dirty putty slapped on the canvas with a trowel; the sunshine scintillates out of very thick and smeary lumps of chrome yellow.*" He concluded "*The world has never seen anything like this picture.*" Constable, his fellow landscape painter at the Royal Academy, and rival, said it was "*painted with tinted steam*". The abstracted nature of this work had a profound impact on Monet when he visited London in the 1870s.

More recently…Brian Lukacher "*These* (the hare, the skiff, the ploughman) *may appear to be like comic sleights of hand and eye; but in part because of their graphic fragility and visual tentativeness, these wry pictographs recollect the preindustrial human relations to the natural world, undisruptive and almost passing unnoticed within the technological landscape.*"



Detail of the hare

Monet ‘Gare Sainte Lazare’ 1877