

“Indistinctness” in J. M. W. Turner's Paintings of Steam Power

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Abstract

The paper surveys Turner's employment of indistinct forms of expression in his paintings to convey the new experience of steam power and speed, frequently in combination with the elemental forces of nature. Up to the 1830s, Turner's clear images of the sea dissolved into indistinct ones, though the elemental destructiveness of the sea persisted. *Staffa, Fingal's Cave* (1832) represents a breakthrough in this new direction. Its waves still project a massive energy but they are indistinct in form while the outlines of the steamship are reduced to a blur. It is noteworthy that the vagueness with which the steamship is depicted in *Staffa, Fingal's Cave* anticipates the archetypal form for later works such as *The Fighting 'Temeraire'* (1838), *Peace--burial at sea* (1842), and *Snowstorm* (1842). The study of Turner's use of steam power as a subject is further extended to *Rain, Steam and Speed* (1844), his sole painting of a steam locomotive. The study argues that in this particular painting, Turnerian indistinctness achieves its climactic expression in an esthetic unification of form and content, which could be called the “industrial sublime.”

I.

A survey of Turner's work reveals that sometime after 1800 his paintings grew more brilliant and luminous. Side by side with a still somewhat conventional style of painting, a new type of work, characterized by its “indistinctness” in terms of form, started to emerge. Eventually, after the 1830s, a style anticipating Impressionism became his characteristic form of expression and was recognized as the most prominent feature of his work. Bright light without a definite source and the blurring of objects constitute this Turnerian indistinctness. This special indistinctness signaled a break with the classical conventions prevalent in the Academy of his time. {1} Intriguingly, Turner also applied this blurred form of expression to a subject new in his time: the depiction of machines powered by steam. This combination of new form and new content produced an esthetic effect without precedent before Turner's time. To clarify this point, the study will investigate four of Turner's sea-pieces which have a steamboat as the central subject: *Staffa, Fingal's Cave* (1832), *The Fighting 'Temeraire' tugged to her last berth to be broken up* (1838), *Peace--burial at sea* (1842), and *Snowstorm--steam-boat off a harbour's mouth making signals in shallow water, and going by the lead* (1842). {2} The study of Turner's use of steam power as a subject is further extended to *Rain, Steam and Speed--The Great Western Railway* (1844), his sole painting of a steam locomotive. In this particular painting, as the study will argue below, Turnerian indistinctness achieves its climactic expression in a unification of form and content. Besides, Turner's avant-garde spirit in elevating modern invention to the status of esthetic object will be mentioned as well.

II.

The sea, like other subjects in Turner's work, also underwent an evolution in its form. A sea-piece like *The Shipwreck* (1805) presents a typical image of the early Turnerian sea. Huge waves, crowned with foam, look like Neptune's ferocious tripod, and above the surface of the sea, people

and boats strive to avoid the last stroke of Death. This classical scene of imminent danger is frozen into a static moment by Turner in this painting and is visually and immediately apprehended by the viewer. Up to the 1830s, Turner's clear images of the sea dissolved into those of indistinctness, though the elemental destructiveness of the sea persisted. *Staffa, Fingal's Cave* represents a breakthrough in this new direction. Its waves still project a massive energy but they, portrayed as part of a distant scene, are supposedly kept far from the implied viewer and therefore lack the immediate impact of the early sea-pieces. Because of the great distance between the scene and the implied viewer, one can suggest that it is natural that what is seen is indistinct. The outlines of the steamship are now reduced to a blur. It is noteworthy that the vagueness with which the steamship is depicted in *Staffa, Fingal's Cave* anticipates the archetypal form for those which Turner will later create. However, as the following anecdote with regard to *Staffa, Fingal's Cave* implies, this blurred style of expression was rather incompatible with the contemporary concept of art and was thus not well accepted: "After it remained unsold for thirteen years. C. R. Leslie chose it for James Lenox, whose first reaction was disappointment at its indistinctness. When Turner heard this he made the famous reply: 'You should tell him that indistinctness is my forte'" (Reynolds 156).

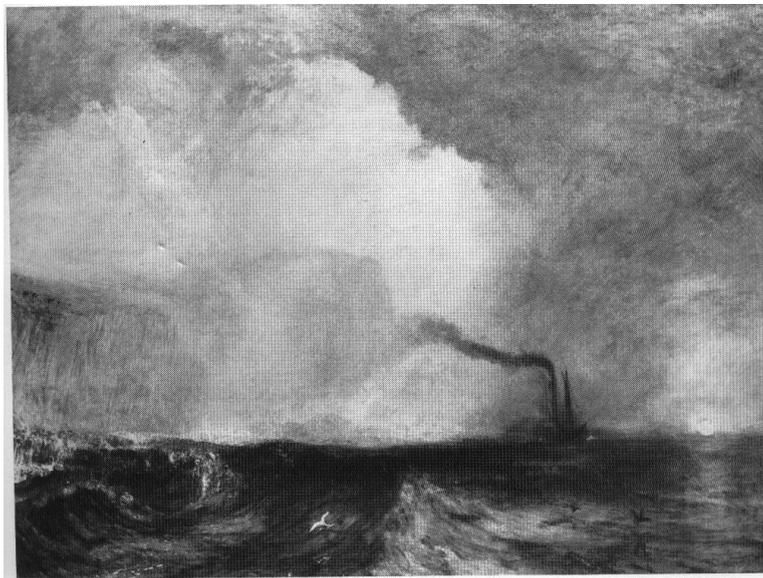


Fig. 1. *Staffa, Fingal's Cave*, 1832, Oil on canvas, 91.5x 122 cm. Paul Mellon Collection, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven. A reprint digitally made from William Gaunt, *Turner* 19.

One important point which has hardly been mentioned by critics with regard to *Staffa, Fingal's Cave* is that it is not only Turner's first oil painting to deal with a steamboat but also one of the very few of his time which treated the steamship as an esthetic object. Though the painting depicts a black steamboat sailing on the rough sea, it does not serve to convey sentiments of terror, as was common in his early sea-pieces of a similar sort: fatal surges and fragile boats. By the manipulation of perspective, the steamboat in this painting is deliberately dwarfed while the surges are aggrandized. The steamboat is placed on the horizon, rolling steadily forward next to the setting sun while a long puff of smoke from its funnel freely brushes the sky. William Gaunt observes, "*Staffa, Fingal's Cave* . . . is a majestic adjunct to a pictured state of weather that bears out the verbal description. The trail of smoke from the tall funnel merges into the vapour of storm cloud, nature and machine come into accord" (18). A confidence inheres in this stable gesture of newly achieved motion. The dark tone of the painting, normally associated with the negative side of things, suggests, rather, a poetic composure echoing the steamboat's confidence. In other words, both this new mode of transportation together with Turner's peculiar expression provoke a

new emotion. It would be a different story altogether if the place of the steamboat were to be taken by a traditional white sailboat.

III.

This implicit confidence in *Staffa, Fingal's Cave* turns more explicit in the painting *The Fighting 'Temeraire.'* In this case, confidence is built mainly on the manifestation of a new kind of power. One can easily identify it in the relatively small size of the steamboat which pulls the mammoth warship. The ease of the steamboat movement corresponds to the peacefulness of the entire scene. The tugging operation disturbs the water very little and only insignificant waves are raised.



Fig. 2. *The Fighting 'Temeraire' tugged to her last berth to be broken up, 1838, Oil on canvas, 91 x 122 cm, Clore Gallery of the Tate Gallery, London. A reprint downloaded from <http://familiar.sph.umich.edu/mirror/www.cat.nyu.edu/fox/art/turner/temeraire.jpg.html>*

The most extraordinary aspect of the imagery in this painting might well be the brightness of the smoke in contrast to the darkness of the steamship's funnel. The steamboat, though as obscure as the one in *Staffa, Fingal's Cave*, is yet sturdy of structure. This impression is mainly portrayed by its two colors of red and black, a traditional juxtaposition denoting strength. On the contrary, the fading whiteness of the ship *Temeraire* connotes the weakened state of old age and impending death (breakup), as noted in the full title of the painting.

This old-versus-new imagery of the two ships testifies to Turner's ingenuity in the description of the transition from one age to another. While exalting the new era of steam power, Turner did not intend to ignore the alternative--that of the past. *Temeraire's* comparatively large size suggests the glory of the past. Her noble posture seems to say that she is approaching a glorious retirement rather than the final destiny of defeat. Exaltation of the new mode of power is also implicit in the positive tonality of the whole picture. The gorgeous sunlight illuminates the sky and the sea like two pieces of a mirror, neatly duplicating each other in oranges and reds. In association with the theme of the glorification of steam power in Turner's work, one might wonder if this painting could not just as well represent the sun rising as setting. Bearing in mind this hopeful tonality, one should note that it is not the imitation of a natural gradation of light but

rather a creation of Turner's own notion of light in terms of color. In his brief comment on this painting, Ruskin is right to say: "That picture will not, at the first glance deceive as a piece of actual sunlight..." (68). Rothenstein further points out that "both form and space [of *The Fighting Temeraire*] are expressed not through chiaroscuro but colour" (58). Actually, this observation is applicable to all of Turner's paintings with steam power as subject.

IV.

Peace--burial at sea may not be as historically significant as the previous two. Nonetheless, it attains a higher level of esthetic expression. "It's severe contrast and the density of black," according to William Gaunt, "were adversely remarked on by contemporary critics. Yet this was an intended vehemence in which the 'expressionist' side of Turner's art appears" (19). While, as usual, the form remains shadowy, a strong contrast of dark (black) and light (white and pale gray) substitute for the harmony of color, characteristic of *Staffa, Fingal's Cave* and *The Fighting Temeraire*. This forcible juxtaposition produces an overwhelming gloom which precisely suggests the atmosphere of a burial. On the other hand, in the "heart" of the picture, the fire burns brightly, resisting the overflow of gloom. Indubitably, the fire, symbolic of hope, love, and blessings, functions here to counterbalance the pervading gloom. This synthesis of two moods of polar opposition miraculously creates a poetic serenity and contributes to a very successful Romantic elegy. Without this "flower" of fire blooming in its center, the steamboat would have been turned into a ghost ship, especially given the prominence of its mast of black sails.



Fig. 3. *Peace--burial at sea*, 1842, Oil on canvas 86.9 x 86.6 cm, Clore Gallery for the Turner Collection, London. A reprint downloaded from <http://familiar.sph.umich.edu/mirror/www.cat.nyu.edu/fox/art/turner/peace.jpg.html>

In *Peace--burial at sea*, for the first time in Turner's works depicting steam power, the

steamship truly becomes the sole esthetic focus. It is invested with a nobility derived from its supreme stability and strengthened further by the tiny sailboat to the right. It is a master's touch for Turner to have painted the central subject in colors of soft, dark ambiguity while leaving the overall canvas in pale gray. One can hardly find a comparable treatment in paintings earlier than Turner's. Interestingly, this is nearly a reversion to the practice of classical paintings such as those of Rembrandt, well known for imposing strong contrasts of light and dark on a central subject and its background. In addition, it is rare to see the gloom of death expressed not through the depiction of the human beings but of inanimate objects.

V.

With *Snowstorm* (1842), Turner is probably the first one in the history of art to portray a steamship in danger. Basically, its composition recalls that of early sea-pieces such as *The Shipwreck*. Only this time the steamboat replaces the sailboat. However, the confidence, the new power, and the nobility of the steamboat in the painting previously discussed are no longer to be found in *Snowstorm*. One would wonder if Turner had a new perception of the steamboat when he was at work on this painting. By wrapping the comparatively tiny ship in the huge vortex of a storm at sea, Turner seems to suggest that the steamboat--merely another human construction--scarcely outdoes the sailboat in its confrontation with the elemental forces of nature.



Fig. 4. *Snowstorm*, 1842, Oil on canvas, 91.5 x 122 cm. A reprint downloaded from <http://familiar.sph.umich.edu/mirror/www.cat.nyu.edu/fox/art/turner/snwstorm.jpg.html>

The basic composition of the sea in *Staffa, Fingal's Cave* is adopted and made yet more blurred in *Snowstorm*. Nonetheless, this indistinctness is not employed to represent the distance of the scene as in *Staffa, Fingal's Cave*. Instead, it intends to show the indiscernible speed of the wind and the water. The close-up of *Snowstorm* has the impact of total immediacy. Comparatively speaking, the distance between the scene and the implied viewer in *Snowstorm* is a step closer and the impact correspondingly greater in degree. That is, *Snowstorm* positions the implied viewer inside the sweep of a whirling of wind and water. This perspective is thought to have been derived from Turner's personal experience of a snowstorm. Turner recalled: "I wished to show what such a scene was like; I got the sailors to lash me to the mast to observe it; I was lashed for four hours, and I did not expect to escape but I felt bound to record it, if I did" (quoted

from Reynolds 190).

In *Snowstorm* one can see nearly all the indices of Turner's new approach to form and color. The vortex represents the latest version of a conspicuous motif which Turner had begun to work with in such early works as *Snowstorm: Hannibal and his army crossing the Alps* (1812). It was elaborated further in the two experimental paintings with the subjects named in their titles: *Shade and Darkness* (1843) and *Light and Colour* (1843).^{3} The full maturity of indistinct form as seen in *Snowstorm* had already been achieved a bit earlier in such works as *Interior at Petworth* (1837). In association with this ambiguity of form is light with no defined source, an indication of Turner's rejection of the technique of chiaroscuro. Freed from the restriction of this classical technique, Turner is able to develop his personal vocabulary of color.

The use of random illumination and quick brush work transposes into visual form the rapid movement of the snowstorm. This mode of expression in visual terms, corresponds to the blur caused by high speed. It is noteworthy that for the first time in the history of art the idea of speed is represented by its true effect with respect to the visual capacity of the human eye, rather than by its intellectual effect, as captured and frozen in imaginary static moments as shown in classical paintings, including Turner's own early works. This treatment of speed is fully developed in *Rain, Steam and Speed*. Such images have come to dominate in the paintings down to our time.

Ruskin claims that *Snowstorm* is “one of the very grandest statements of sea-motion, mist, and light, that has ever been put on canvas, even by Turner” (158). But this painting was not well understood in its time. The audience was confounded by it, as Ruskin explains in *Modern Painters*, “for few people have had the opportunity of seeing at such a time, and when they have, can not face it” (158). Still, this explanation can not account for the apparent mysticism of *Snowstorm*. Actually, what troubled the viewer was its modernity of expression. Nobody, not even Ruskin himself, was in a position to recognize it. In other words, he and his peers were not yet cognizant of still another level of the effects of motion with respect to the human eye. Ironically, Ruskin was strongly oriented towards modern science in his study of “modern” painters. In particular, when one becomes aware that Ruskin hardly mentions *Rain, Steam and Speed* in *Modern Painters*, one realizes the lack of a chapter “Of Turnerian Speed.”

VI.

In the spirit of the avant-garde again, Turner treated the steam locomotive as an esthetic object in *Rain, Steam and Speed*, probably his most recognizable painting for its distinctive subject and expression. John Gage truthfully observes: “A number of railway guidebooks had already appeared, illustrated sometimes with engravings of exceptional quality...; but among the more ambitious and the more imaginative painters there seems to have been no response; with the single exception of J. M. W. Turner, who at this Academy of 1844 showed his *Rain, Steam and Speed: The Great Western Railway...*” (Gage 1972: 13). Turner's pioneering in the esthetization of the steam engine can be further highlighted by the fact that a second oil painting of such creative endeavor did not appear in England until William Powell Frith's *The Railway Station* of 1862.



Fig. 5. *Rain, Steam and Speed*, 1844, Oil on canvas, 90.8 x 121.9 cm. National Gallery, London. A reprint downloaded from http://familiar.sph.umich.edu/mirror/www.cat.nyu.edu/fox/art/turner/rain_steam_speed.jpg.html

Those few who were likewise attracted to these new “monsters” were inclined to represent them merely by their physical appearance and in some cases, these new machines would be set incongruously in a background of classical landscape. {4} In this sense, their paintings achieved only a superficial modernity in the selection of a modern subject but, on the other hand, they had not yet attained a true modernity of expression. Frith's *The Railway Station*, for instance, is very successful in realistically portraying an overpacked train behind a busy scene of “modern” life. However, his portrait of the steam engine failed to transcend classicism in style and technique. To put it simply, modernity in Frith's painting is restricted to its content, but does not extend to its form of expression. Considered only with regard to superficial modernity, Turner's *Rain, Steam and Speed* remains the grandest among such attempts for scope and variety. Turner did not seem satisfied merely with documenting the surface of his modern subjects. Handling the same subjects others treated, he was acutely conscious of the transition between the old and the new. Therefore, he was inclined to bring what was old into contrast with what was new. *The Fighting Temeraire* has been shown to be a pre-eminent instance in this regard. In *Rain, Steam and Speed* this thematic opposition explodes into complexity through a variety of contrasts: new and old bridges, locomotive (new power) and ploughing horses (old power), locomotive (new speed) and hare (old speed).

Its almost Imagist title “sufficiently indicates the intention of the artist, which was evidently to give the idea of ‘Rain, Steam, and Speed’, much more than the portrait of a steam-engine or a view of the Great Western Railway.” {5} In other words, as far as the new subject is concerned, what intrigued Turner was the essence of the steam locomotive--its motion, power, and speed. What is the proper form of “steam and speed”? These formless objects must have motivated Turner, a constant researcher of light and color, to look for new ways of expression appropriate to them. In another words, a new form was needed for a new content. Turner did not revert to the classical technique to which he had previously resorted in his early paintings for rendering the elemental forces of nature. Undoubtedly, the right choice was the indistinctness of *Snowstorm*, which stands out as a successful expression of motion at high speed. As a matter of fact, indistinctness is the general appearance of formless things such as rain and speed. With this in mind, the blurring of the locomotive can be construed not only as an esthetically satisfying evocation of its essence but as an authentic phenomenon of motion so fast that it exceeds the capacity of the normal human eye. This conclusion can be again supported by noting Turner's

representation of rain with long, slanting brush strokes of translucent white. They convey the same effect as that caused in the human visual field by fast moving objects. Not incidentally, these long streaks of rain are deliberately put on in such a way as to cut across the path of the locomotive along its track. This intersection of two types of movement enhances the viewer's sense of the speed of the locomotive. Meanwhile, the glistening confusion of the lighting adds a final touch to crown this unprecedented image of speed.

The thoroughgoing modernity of *Rain, Steam and Speed* is finally clear: A “modern” subject (speed) is rendered by “modern” technique of expression (indistinctness). Artistically, it achieves a unity of form and content by translating the intrinsic formlessness of “rain, steam and speed” into visual indistinctness. In retrospect, one finds that this new concept of art evolved over a long period and its full maturity came late in Turner's career. Turner did not undertake the subject of steam power before he did *Staff, Fingal's Cave* in 1832. His characteristic technique of expression--indistinctness--achieved full development only as late as 1837 in *Interior at Petworth*. The perfect combination of new form and new content was first seen in *Snowstorm* in 1842. A fresh epoch of artistic expression thus opened up. Eventually in *Rain, Steam and Speed* of 1844, this esthetic unification reached its peak, which could be called the “industrial sublime.”

Notes

1. Some critics, however, contend that Turner's indistinctness is anticipated by the indeterminate forms of John Robert Cozens (1752-c1797/9). See Brennan 101.
2. Pictures of Turner's which feature a steamboat also include *Havre, Tower of Francis I* (1832), *Rockets and blue lights* (1840), *Steamboat in a storm* (1841). The reason for excluding *Rockets* from discussion is that its steamboat is only partly shown. *Havre* is done not in oil but in gouache, which renders invalid any comparison with respect to color and general effect with the paintings selected here. As for *Steamboat*, it is just a sketch done in watercolor.
3. In Lindsay's opinion, the vortex in Turner's work suggests “a rich and yet simple unity..., which derives...from two factors: his elimination of all intellectualized attitudes from the treatment of colour, and a realization of the pure identity of colour and light; his concentration on essential structures of movement, which are to be seen most powerfully in wind and water, but which dominate and control all forms” (200-1).
4. For illustrations of works on the steam locomotive in Turner's time, see Klingender's *Art and the Industrial Revolution*.
5. The words are P. G. Hamerton's, quoted from Finley's article. See Finley 29, note 1, for the original source.

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----. *Rockets and blue lights*. 1840.. 1840.

----. *Steamboat in a storm*. 1841.. 1841.

----. *Peace--burial at sea*. 1842.. 1842.

----. *Snowstorm--steam-boat off a harbour's mouth making signals in shallow water and going by the lead*. 1842.

----. *Shade and Darkness*. 1843.. 1843.

----. *Light and Colour*. 1843.

----. *Rain, Steam and Speed--The Great Western Railway*. 1844.. 1844.



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