

Thirty-Two Short Films about Glenn Gould

A production of Rhombus Media Inc., Toronto, released August 1993; 90 minutes, color, in English and French. With Colm Feore as Glenn Gould. Written by François Girard and Don McKellar. Produced by Niv Fichman. Directed by François Girard. Currently available on video from Sony Classical (SVH 66350). Script published in 1995 by Coach House Press, Toronto.

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Thirty-Two Short Films about Glenn Gould has attracted large and enthusiastic audiences around the world and has received almost universal critical praise: it has been a hit at a score of film festivals; it appeared on countless Ten Best lists at the end of 1993; and it has won numerous awards, including four Canadian Genie awards (for best motion picture, direction, cinematography, and editing). It is without question a virtuoso piece of film making, enormously interesting, provocative, and entertaining, and its arty and unconventional style, so strikingly different from conventional film biographies, has been justly admired. But as a *Gould* film it has many flaws, some of them fundamental, and to my knowledge these flaws have never been explored or even noted. So it is in the interest of balance that I offer the following review, from the point of view of a serious student of Gould's work.

Glenn Gould has been dead some fourteen years and is the subject of a large and growing body of literature; at this late date, the prevailing "official truths" about his life and work are too well known to need rehearsing. Moreover, many of these "truths" (Gould the hermit, Gould the Puritan, Gould the autodidact, Gould the anti-Romantic, Gould the formalist, Gould the anti-pianist) are really simplified, sanitized legends extracted from complicated facts, legends that Gould himself

helped to create and that have only recently begun to receive much-needed revision. But the young director of *Thirty-Two Short Films*, François Girard, serves up the Gould clichés straight and only rarely transcends them. The film's stylishness cannot mask its highly conventional, at times credulous, view of its subject. I had misgivings about the tone of the film as soon as I saw the ads: "Artist. Philosopher. Madman. Genius." (Would you believe "Pianist"?) Girard has said that being French-Canadian gave him a certain distance from his subject, but that distance seems to have precluded original insight, instead leading him inevitably toward convenient common-places.

The structural peg of the film—the thirty-two short films—has been much praised, and it *is* refreshing to see a film biography that avoids so many narrative conventions. But this particular peg disturbs me, for two reasons. First, it revives the tiresome but persistent knee-jerk association of Gould with Bach's Goldberg Variations, a cliché that should have been retired years ago. For the thirty-two films are, of course, meant to recall the thirty-two movements (framing Arias and thirty variations) that make up that work. The Goldberg motif is endlessly repeated throughout the Gould literature: the first posthumous book about him, in 1983, was already titled *Glenn Gould: Variations*, and Otto Friedrich's 1989 biography has the subtitle *A Life and Variations*; Manuel Hueriga's 1992 documentary film from Hungary is titled *Les Variacions Gould*; Michel Schneider's 1988 book *Glenn Gould piano solo* and David Young's 1992 play *Glenn* both use a thirty-two-part structure; photographer Don Hunstein felt obliged to call his 1992 exhibit of Gould photos *The Hunstein Variations*; Thomas Bernhard's novel *Der Untergeher* (*The Loser*) and Richard Powers's novel both feature Gould and his recordings of the variations; the variations are referred to in countless article titles, and so on. But the Goldberg Variations was never a central work for Gould; it was not representative of his aesthetic preferences; it was not his favorite piece, or even his

favorite Bach. It *was*, however, the first piece he recorded for Columbia Records, and he *did* die a few days after the release of his second recording of it—some minds find such coincidences poetic. The Aria *da capo* from that second recording was played at Gould's funeral, and now the work just follows the poor man around, like "Thanks for the Memory" follows Bob Hope. Girard's reference to the Goldberg Variations is merely cute, a Gouldian calling card accepted at face value. And besides, there are really only thirty-*one* short films (has anyone bothered to count?): the closing "Aria" is no. 31; no. 32, apparently, is the credits.

My second objection to the Goldberg peg is more significant. By incorporating this cliché uncritically into the fabric of his film, Girard actually did a disservice to his subject. The film is not really a set of variations, as the Bachian structure would seem to suggest, because its view of Gould is too scattershot to permit central themes of his life and work to come clearly into focus. Girard's expressed intent (accepted by many critics) was that the structure of the film should reflect Gould's obsession with counterpoint. But a potpourri of vignettes—an "impressionistic mosaic," to cite the press kit—is in no sense contrapuntal; it's actually the *opposite* of contrapuntal. There is no interweaving of independent but interrelated strands of thought, no interplay of complements and contradictions, no gradual accumulation of a comprehensive image of the subject, just bits and pieces of Gould stood up in a row. (For a good example of dramatic counterpoint, Girard needed to look no further than Young's play, which he surely knows, since Young himself has a small role in the film. The play features four actors, all on stage simultaneously, playing Gould at different ages, and their monologues and dialogues create precisely the interplay of related and contrasting ideas—the counterpoint—that the film lacks.) Only in a vignette like "Truck Stop" (no. 15) is there any real counterpoint, and then only because counterpoint itself is the subject matter.

Moreover, Girard misses some good opportunities for meaningful contrapuntal interplay. Rather than simply showing us a performance of an excerpt from Gould's neo-Romantic String Quartet (no. 13, "Opus 1"), Girard might have played that soundtrack against one of Gould's many diatribes against Romanticism, bringing together the self-professed Perfect Bachite with the sucker for Bruckner and Strauss. Rather than simply reading us an uncharacteristically confessional love letter from Gould's last years (no. 19, "A Letter"), Girard might have played it off against some aspect of the Puritanism emphasized in the Gould legends, or at least accompanied it with something more telling than the jaunty nineteenth Goldberg variation. In fact, just combining the text of no. 19 with some of the soundtrack of no. 13 might have produced a more resonant vignette than either as it stands. Girard might have taken instruction from Gould's own "contrapuntal radio documentaries" of the 1960s and 1970s, electronic tapestries of spoken word, sound effects, and music that are models of the dramatic possibilities of counterpoint. But had he simply shown more interest in the contradictions within Gould's character, and in the limitations of the Gould legends, an appropriate contrapuntal structure might naturally have followed. (One of my friends suggested that the anthology approach would have been more fruitful had thirty-two different directors been induced to make three-minute films about Gould—a fascinating idea.)

This relatively short film actually wastes precious time, since many of the vignettes, though showy in style and possibly convincing on paper, have remarkably little substance and so can seem pretentious—and dull besides. (Could this be a symptom of excessive earnestness?) Consider Short Film about Glenn Gould no. 3. It's titled "Forty-Five Seconds and a Chair," and that's what it amounts to: as Bach's Two-Part Invention in A Minor plays on the soundtrack, the camera slowly closes in on Gould sitting in a chair, and with the final cadence of the piece Gould, in close-up, shuts his eyes. I don't

for the life of me know what this vignette is supposed to convey, and I wonder how many professed fans of the film's structure and style could tell me. (I wonder if Girard could tell me.) The central image is unremarkable: it recreates an old album cover and just shows Gould goofing off, playing Buddha. Surely forty-five seconds of film is wasted if it tells us nothing but how great a pianist Gould was.

Other of the short films strike me as comparable mistakes—long on style, short on substance. I am thinking of the opening and closing "Arias" (nos. 1 and 31), which show Gould walking alone across the frozen wastes of the Canadian North (where, for all his wishful thinking, he spent very little time); of "CD 318" (no. 10), which shows the innards of Gould's favorite Steinway during a performance of a Bach prelude; of "Variation in C Minor" (no. 7), which shows two variations from Beethoven's WoO 80 transcribed as waves that record changing amplitude. These vignettes tell us nothing about Gould, and the images quickly lose their appeal once they have made their point. Even in a vignette like "Diary of One Day" (no. 25), in which the sheer cinematic showmanship is astonishing, one is hard pressed to find a kernel of meaning that illuminates the ostensible subject of the film. We see X-ray images in motion of several pianists playing the Gigue from Schoenberg's Suite, op. 25, and these images alternate with private jottings in which Gould records his blood pressure readings and medications he has taken. (There is a credit at the end for "Irradiated people," and God bless them, every one.) The X-ray images are striking, to be sure, but if Girard intended them as a comment on Gould's hypochondria (as some critics contend) then he has failed: he hasn't illuminated this topic, he has only raised it. In such vignettes, he circles around rather than penetrates his subject, shirking the really difficult task of bringing Gould to life and contenting himself with high-tech glosses that create a superficial aura around the pianist without communicating how and why he was special as a person and artist. (I know it sounds uncharitable to say so, but I can't help

thinking that some of the praise this film has received has come from critics too cowed by its art-house pretensions to admit that they find much of it empty.) I feel throughout the film that I'm supposed to consider Gould a Great Man, but the case for that position is never successfully made.

In two cases, Girard reproduces filmed material that is already accessible to the public. "Gould Meets McLaren" (no. 20) is simply a screening of *Spheres*, an animated short subject from 1969 by the great Canadian filmmaker Norman McLaren, for which Gould's performance of a Bach fugue provides the soundtrack. No. 12, with the embarrassing title "Passion According to Gould," conflates two scenes from a 1960 National Film Board of Canada documentary titled *Glenn Gould: On the Record*. The scenes show Gould recording and listening to playbacks in the studio. In the original film, the music is Bach's Italian Concerto; here (unaccountably) it is the Gigue from the English Suite in A Minor, which Gould recorded only in 1971. It would take too long to explain why the original film is so charming and revealing, and Girard's re-staging of it so one-dimensional and sentimental. The vignette is simply unnecessary. To his credit, Girard (like Young) does make the very wise decision never to have his lead actor ape Gould at the piano—an image too well documented to suffer imitation.

The emptiness of some of the vignettes would not be so obvious were it not that Girard's cinematic technique sometimes does serve his subject brilliantly well. In "Pills" (no. 23), for instance, Gould's alarming dependency on medication in his later years is revealed with startling directness and economy. The vignette consists of nothing but shots of Gould's prescription medications, as he reads off their various uses and side effects, but Girard's clever arrangement of items brings into high relief the dangerous combinations in Gould's pharmacopoeia. It is surely no coincidence that this vignette, which succeeds so well, happens to tarnish the Gould myth while revealing an important truth. In "The Tip" (no. 21), Girard's fast-paced,

neatly edited docudrama montage is entirely appropriate to the subject matter: Gould's virtuosity in the frenetic world of the stock market. The music, too, is chosen intelligently: the propulsive 7/8 finale from Prokofiev's Piano Sonata No. 7, the best possible choice from Gould's discography. In a series of quiet, autumn-hued vignettes near the end of the film—"Motel Wawa" (no. 26), "Forty-Nine" (no. 27), and "Leaving" (no. 29)—Girard offers a telling image of the later Gould, of his isolation, his melancholy, his superstition. But unfortunately, such successes make up only a minority of the film.

Gould's sense of humor—at once charming and infuriating, frequently self-deprecating, but never far from the surface—is perhaps the most important aspect of his character slighted in *Thirty-Two Short Films*. That streak of humor was so pronounced that he could not even be prevented from appearing *in maschera* playing awful ethnic characters on disc and in commercials and programs on Canadian radio and television. Humor was even an important part of Gould's work as a performer. He was, among classical musicians, unusually interested in exploring comic elements, even parody, in the music he played (you can't listen to his Mozart sonatas with a straight face), and there was something profoundly ironic in his whole relationship to conventional and historical performance practices. The Gould writings quoted in the film are sometimes funny, and some of the colleagues interviewed refer to his humor. But the one vignette that does show a little of this side of Gould—"Personal Ad" (no. 22)—only manages to make him seem weird. (The 1960 documentary mentioned above makes much of Gould's self-deprecating humor, but you wouldn't know it from Girard's restaging.) Girard treats his subject too reverently: his Gould is too much the Philosopher and Genius, not enough the Naughty Boy. Colm Feore's performance as Gould, convincing in so many ways, is beholden to Girard's conception in this respect: he gives us a Zen-like Gould, seemingly detached from mortal concerns, and his



Colm Feore as Glenn Gould

somnolent voice betrays none of Gould's clipped phrasing or arch wit.

Thirty-Two Short Films has been praised as a welcome departure from the campy, sentimentalized film biographies of yore (biographies of musicians being among the worst). Yet the film does its own sentimentalizing, its own myth-making. In a number of vignettes, Girard can't resist over-interpreting situations in order to elevate Gould—and I don't mean just enhancing dramatic effect. In "The L.A. Concert" (no. 9), Gould signs a stagehand's program "Glenn Gould: the final concert," though it is well documented, in letters and elsewhere, that at the time of that last concert in 1964, Gould did not *know* he had given his last concert. Girard heightens this event but also simplifies it, declining to show us the uncertainties and difficulties in Gould's transition from a concert career to a musical life devoted entirely to electronic and print media. Subtle signs of Girard's reverence for his subject appear already in "Lake Simcoe" (no. 2). Part of the vignette recounts an authentic anecdote in which the teenaged Gould weeps at a radio broadcast of *Tristan*, here with his simple parents gazing at the marvel in their midst. But so many more interesting aspects of Gould's youth—like the loneliness of his school days, to which the narration only alludes, or his precocious (and often pretentious) early creative efforts—are ignored.

Indeed, most of the psychologically interesting struggles that Gould went through never appear in this film. Girard's adherence to the usual myths leaves little room for the very human ambiguities and problems that Gould was subject to. We learn nothing of his sheltered, provincial, old-Toronto upbringing, or the stern moralism of his Scotch Presbyterian roots, both of which influenced his aesthetic; of his difficult relationship with his teacher Alberto Guerrero, from whom he learned much more than he would admit; of his many travails as a famous touring virtuoso; of his frequently controversial relationships with musical colleagues; of his struggle to educate himself as a thinker (he never graduated from high school); of

his insecure efforts as writer, lecturer, composer, and conductor. Girard doesn't touch the death of Gould's mother in 1975, which profoundly affected the performer, and he does not mention the (perhaps related) period around 1976 when Gould suffered mysterious physical problems in his hands that made it virtually impossible for him to play the piano properly. In "Questions Without Answers" (no. 18), Girard concludes with an unidentified young woman who says into the phone, "Why didn't you answer my calls? Why did you stop calling me?" That teaser, and the letter read in the subsequent vignette (no. 19), are all we get on the subject of Gould's relationships with women, yet surely this is a subject for courageous exploration by a dedicated biographer (and there *is* enough documentation on the matter to allow for informed speculation). As is so often the case, Girard contents himself with a hit-and-run approach, creating a superficial air of mystery and profundity but avoiding the hard work of investigating Gould's character thoroughly and communicating it clearly. (This is a pity, since he certainly introduces enough *topics* to create a rounded portrait.) One can't help thinking in such cases that a conventional narrative structure might actually have been preferable: Girard bears too many stylistic fardels to portray Gould in depth.

Perhaps predictably, the interview segments are among the most informative and entertaining in the film. It is in the interviews that we really see something of Gould's humor and humanity, and his control mania and self-centeredness. Moreover, the interviews tell us much about Gould's relations with other people, a subject too little treated in the dramatized vignettes. Girard's vision is all Gould the loner, soaring above the real world, thinking Big Thoughts, alone in his room conducting private orchestras in transports of ecstasy. The interviews make plain, as the rest of the film often does not, that Gould was a *person*, not just an artistic temperament.

At the very end of the film, in "Voyager" (no. 30) and its companion vignette, the closing "Aria," Girard miscalculates especially badly—and revives another awful cliché of the

Gould literature. He seems to make much of the fact that a Gould recording of Bach is included among the samples of Earth's sounds and music on a recording affixed to the two *Voyager* spacecraft launched in 1977. Other Gould films and literature have mentioned this incident, the facts of which hardly suggest a sentimental reading. On the *Voyager* record, Gould's five minutes of Bach (a Prelude and Fugue in C Major from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*—Book I in the film, Book II according to NASA documents, official published accounts, and the timing of the pieces) appears seventeenth among twenty-seven selections, among them *The Rite of Spring*, a pygmy girls' initiation song from Zaire, bagpipe music from Azerbaijan, and "Johnny B. Goode." But the way Girard appropriates this bit of trivia, you would think that Gould's work alone had been sent off into space to represent the best that mankind can offer.

I have noted at least one example (the Prokofiev) of a beautifully apt soundtrack in *Thirty-Two Short Films*, but much of the music was not chosen particularly well. Often timing alone seems to have been the operative criterion (this was surely the case with "A Letter"). The musical selections don't necessarily do harm to the vignettes they accompany, but it isn't often that a significant point is made musically. The film's last audio image of Gould—the music played over the credits—is Contrapunctus 9 from Bach's *Art of Fugue*, taken from his one-and-only (and not very successful) organ recording. I can't imagine a less characteristic note to end on. (Oh well, at least it's not the *Aria da capo*.)

I doubt that scholarship was something Girard was concerned about, but there are instances in which a dollop of musicology might have improved the film—especially its soundtrack. "Hamburg" (no. 6) recounts an incident in the fall of 1958 when Gould, on tour in Europe, spent a month at the Vier Jahreszeiten hotel in Hamburg laid up with bronchitis—a month which he later warmly recalled as the best, because most solitary, of his life. In the vignette, Gould detains a

chambermaid and impresses her by playing a just-released recording. Girard chooses the Scherzo from Beethoven's Sonata in E-flat Major, op. 27, no. 1, which Gould in fact recorded in 1981 (it was released posthumously). There's nothing wrong with this sort of anachronism if it makes dramatic sense, but it seems wrong here because the Scherzo is, frankly, a poor choice for music that elicits a shushed "Danke schön" from a nervous girl. Far more effective would have been the historically "correct" choice: one of the early recordings of Gould the brash young whippersnapper, precisely the artist who was making such a big noise in places like Hamburg in the late 1950s. And in fact, his buoyant recording of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 1 in C Major, featuring his own bizarre fugal cadenza in the first movement, was released by Columbia just days before he was stricken in Hamburg, and was sent to him at his hotel (just like the record in the film). This is not the only case in which a little research would have ferreted out a truth that is more interesting—and more dramatically apt—than Girard's fiction.

I have no real argument with the many critics who consider *Thirty-Two Short Films about Glenn Gould* to be a fine film, but I do think that the great Gould film biography remains to be made. Given the existence and reception of Girard's film, another Gould film any time soon is probably unlikely—a pity, since there is no doubt that Gould makes a fascinating subject for a biographer. In any event, if it ever is to come to pass, that great Gould film will require a conception of the pianist that is more probing (like Young's), more skeptical (like Friedrich's), perhaps even irreverent (like Bernhard's). It will require a writer and director with a fondness for debunking myths, someone with an especially sensitive bullshit detector—someone like Robert Altman. It will probably require an outwardly more conventional, chronological narrative structure, and a less arty style, in order to achieve a revealing contrapuntal interplay of themes and incidents from Gould's life. It will require a more subtly and thoughtfully conceived soundtrack, perhaps one

which moves gradually from the cocky Baroque and Classical recordings of Gould's youth to his brooding late recordings of Brahms, Wagner, Sibelius, and Strauss. It will require a strict prohibition on all references to the number thirty-two. Oh yes, and it will require that, at some point in the film, Gould laugh.