Even if he did "dress funny," Glenn Gould is celebrated uncritically in Thirty-Two Short Films...  

BY Rod Schumacher  

There is a line from Canadian history that has been etched into the minds of all Canadians: the 1885 photograph commemorating the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railroad. This photograph seems to appropriate the name for the call of the 1885 photograph commemorating the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railroad. This photograph seems to appropriate the name for the call of the

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For most Canadians the driving of the last spike has become synonymous with the emergence of Canada as a nation born "on a high” and set against that of people who have brought this incredible project to completion. The two days of the first identified in the photograph, and who are therefore holders of the railroad's rich history, stand out in memory of this era, and it is likely that the general public is utterly responsible for overseeing construction in the west. We realize, of course, that it is

The thirty-two short films about Glenn Gould.
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**Proving the Proof:**

*Thirty-Two Short Films about Glenn Gould*
My focus is on three ideological signifiers that serve to promote the vested interests of dominant culture in Western society. Classical music, the piano, and the role of the artist. The figure of Gould represents the quintessential site wherein modernist constructs of human desire and technology, theory and practice, and art and life, are hailed as achieving a perfect balance. My intention is to reveal how these three cultural centres are implicated in modernity’s self-declared claim to authority, and how dominant culture privileges them over other cultural forms in order to sustain its social and political status.

The very mention of classical music immediately brings to mind a specific segment of society. It is virtually impossible to think of a person such as Bach without associating his music with European aristocracy, the magnificence of cathedrals, luxurious concert halls, and very particular notions of human refinement. We do not, upon hearing his name, contemplate the working class, town halls, affordable housing projects, or illiteracy. Bach, along with Mozart and Beethoven, Milton and Shakespeare, has been positioned by the cultural elite as a canonical and rarefied being. Having achieved such a privileged status in the minds of those who tend to view themselves as the purveyors of “culture,” Bach has been granted at the top of the cultural hierarchy and has been invested as one of the principal signifiers of Western culture. Therefore, Gould’s remarkable ability to interpret and perform Bach’s works places him within a similar rarefied realm.

However, classical music does not speak to the aspirations of all those who come into contact with it. We may believe that there is some “natural” or semi-routine exercise that sets classical music apart from other forms of music—this is the position taken by high-modernists and the cultural elite—but such a belief is implicit in the imperial design of modernism.

Classical music, like a literary text, requires a certain level of intellectual sophistication in order to be fully appreciated; however, an individual begins to develop his or her mind in this particular Eurocentric, cultural way. He or she must first be instructed in the desire to consider such a pursuit worthwhile. Let us create a fictional subject who fulfills the above criteria and is striving to become educated in the complexities of classical music. I will call him Joe, and in order to stimulate him in our minds, I will present him as a fifteen-year-old Cree from the Poundmaker Reserve in Saskatchewan. If we are beginning to work our way out of a modernist mindset, we will be wanting to know why Joe is motivated to align himself with Western culture rather than Native culture. In addition, we may wonder how he will acquire the finances to support his pursuit, how he will defend his position against those in his own community who will criticize him, and finally, why he would not view his own cultural music as an inspirational source.

The simple association between Gould and Bach feeds into a vast network of cultural signifiers that assist in positioning Western culture as a monolithic construct. We need to remind ourselves that viewing Western classical music as superior to other musical expressions can also become a form of cultural colonization. There is no more cultural imperialism in fifty musicians filling the air of Roy Thompson Hall than there is in a single Native person tapping a drum by fire and singing a traditional song. To consider Western classical music as the grand anthem of human emotion...
Mr focus is on three ideological signifiers that serve to promote the vested interests of dominant culture in Western society: classical music, the piano, and the role of the artist. The figure of Gould represents the quintessential site wherein modernist constructs of human desire and technology, theory and practice, and art and life, are hailed as achieving a perfect balance. My intention is to reveal how these three cultural centres are implicated in modernity’s self-declared claim to authority, and how dominant culture privileges them over other cultural forms in order to sustain its social and political status.

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However, classical music does not speak to the aspirations of all those who come into contact with it. We may believe that there is some “natural” or semi-natural essence that sets classical music apart from all other forms of music, but in the position taken by high-modernists and the cultural elite, but such a belief is implicit in the imperial design of modernism.

Classical music, like a literary text, requires a certain level of intellectual sophistication in order to be fully appreciated; however, before an individual begins to develop his or her mind to this particular Eurocentric, cultural way, he or she must first be introduced to the desire to consider such a pursuit worthwhile. Let us create a fictional subject who fulfills all the criteria and is striving to become educated in the complexities of classical music. I will call him Joe, and in order to stimulate his mind I will present him as a fifteen-year-old Cree from the Poundmaker Reserve in Saskatchewan. If we are beginning to work our way out of a modernist mindset, we will be wanting to know why Joe is motivated to align himself with Western culture rather than Native culture. In addition, we may wonder how he will acquire the finances to support his pursuit, how he will defend his position against those in his own community who will criticize him, and finally, why he would not view his own cultural music as an inspirational source.

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is akin to believing that those individuals who have the materiel advantages derived from the productive or artistic activities are those who have the real talent. The problem is that in the world of high culture, certain cultural products also have the right to catalyze the aesthetic tastes of the rest of society. When we observe Gosid's fascination with Petula Clark singing "Downtown," we should take it as a clue to consider the way the film privileges classical music as an emblem of Western progress. At the same time we can ask ourselves what investment dominant culture would have in Gosid had he been an astounding interpreter of Gambol folk music.

...three ideological signifiers that serve to promote the vested interests of dominant culture in Western society (are) classical music, the piano, and the role of the artist.

Virtually everything stated so far regarding the associations attached to classical music can also be said of the piano, which has historic connections to dominant culture. It is, also, a signifier of technology. Most people would agree that it was invented in the early years of the eighteenth century by an Italian named Cristofori. Thus, the date of its inception situates the instrument as a product of modern technology. There were, and still are, many other instruments similar to the piano—the harpsichord, the virginal, the clavichord—but they have all remained period instruments. The piano is the only member of this family that continues to be considered contemporary: it is also the only one that has received the constant attention of inventors throughout the centuries. There is virtually no similarity between the development of the piano and the one created by Cristofori, simply because no other musical instrument has been scrutinized so rigorously.

There are a number of obvious reasons for the attention that has been given the piano, but not all of them have to do with music. It is true that when we sit at the keyboard we instantiate ourselves in the presence of the entire oral schemata of Western music. It is also true that the first and second instrument of virtually every performer of classical music is the piano. Finally—and perhaps most importantly—given modernity's valorization of individuality and investment for solo performance. Aside from the pipe organ—which has always been sluggish to human touch, enormously cumbersome, and prohibitively expensive—there is no other acoustic instrument capable of producing and sustaining such a subtle and dynamic range. By acknowledging the nature of the instrument, it is possible to understand how the segment in Girard's film entitled "C.D. 318"—a title that clearly designates the instrument as its focus—directs our attention away from the world of music and situates the piano squarely in the world of technology.

There is a separate narrative developed within this vignette that valorizes modernity's ambition to master the physical world. The figure of the artist and the music being performed are both positioned as products of an elaborative machinelike network of wire, flue, cast iron, and wood. Bach's music and Gosid's performance are both dependent on an instrument whose existence speaks to humanity's ability to create a machine capable of corresponding to the incredible muses of the human hand. This correspondence is impressed on as by the film's determined focus on the relationship of the woman to the piano itself. Although I have no intention of examining the mechanisms that permits such a sensitive affinity between the human hand and the piano's action, we should at least be aware that it took over two hundred years of concentrated attention to develop.

We should also remind ourselves that Gosid's status as a musician does not stem from his ability to compose music but from his ability to interpret it. Gosid's reputation is directly linked to his being able to exploit the achievements of technology. In "C.D. 318," the piano and, by extension, technology itself, are the entity in human desire achieves fruition. As with classical music, complexity becomes synonymous with sophistication and intelligence. When we consider how the piano is the most important musical product of the Enlightenment, it is little wonder that Gosid's ability to use the full resources of the instrument places him in such a distinct and privileged position within the hierarchy of the piano culture. The piano is no longer just the site wherein Bach and Gosid come together; it is also the site at which human ingenuity and desire find expression through technology and where the privileged achievements of the past are reinforced in the present. The investment that modernism and dominant culture have in the piano is perhaps best understood if we posit yet another question: Would we ever have heard of Glenn Gould if he had chosen to play the tuba, the accordion, or the harp?

Of course the focus of Girard's film is not classical music, even though we are more or less assured that this is the case. The musician, claim a significant degree of our attention. It is Gosid, the person who holds centre stage, but not as a performer of music so much as a performer for the camera. After he withdrew from public view, his private life was a mystery to us. Girard's film is an attempt to interpret his absence and to transfer Gosid's public facade into a similar private grandeur. In fact, Gosid's private life is the focus of the film. We are witness to a life challenged not encouraged to critique Gosid: he is simply given to us fully inscribed with significance.

It seems peculiar that we should invest so much meaning in a person who was so determined to keep his own tribe at a distance should be held in such high regard. However, this paradox is understandable when viewed from a modernist perspective. For many viewers, Gosid's life is a kind of life that does not demand interpretation as its own. It represents a rite of passage. Gosid is given the indulgence of the autonomous, self-determining hero of the modernist era.

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is akin to believing that those individuals who have the materiel resources to engage in the worship of certain cultural products also have the right to colonize the aesthetic tastes of the rest of society. When we observe Giral’s fascination with Petula Clark singing “Downtown,” we should take it as a cue to consider the way the film privileges classical music as an emblem of Western progress. At the same time we can ask ourselves what investment dominant culture would have in Giral had he been an astonishingly introspective Gombrow folk music.

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There are a number of obvious reasons for the attention that has been given the piano, but not all of them have to do with music. It is true that we sit at the keyboard and unseat ourselves in the presence of the entire formal schema of Western music. It is also true that the piano is the most important musical instrument of our culture, as it is the one that every virtuoso player of classical music has been trained on. Nearly every major composer of classical music has been trained on it, and nearly every major composer of contemporary music has been trained on it as well. The piano is the most important musical instrument of our culture, and it is the one that every musician is trained to play. Nearly every major composer of classical music has been trained on it, and nearly every major composer of contemporary music has been trained on it as well. The piano is the most important musical instrument of our culture, and it is the one that nearly every major composer of classical music has been trained on. Nearly every major composer of contemporary music has been trained on it as well.

Perhaps the most obvious reason for the prominence of the piano is its role in defining the classical period. The piano is the most important musical instrument of our culture, and it is the one that nearly every major composer of classical music has been trained on. Nearly every major composer of contemporary music has been trained on it as well.

What Is Your Substrate? What Is Your Border/lines?