



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

# Proving the PROOF:

*Thirty-Two Short Films  
about Glenn Gould*

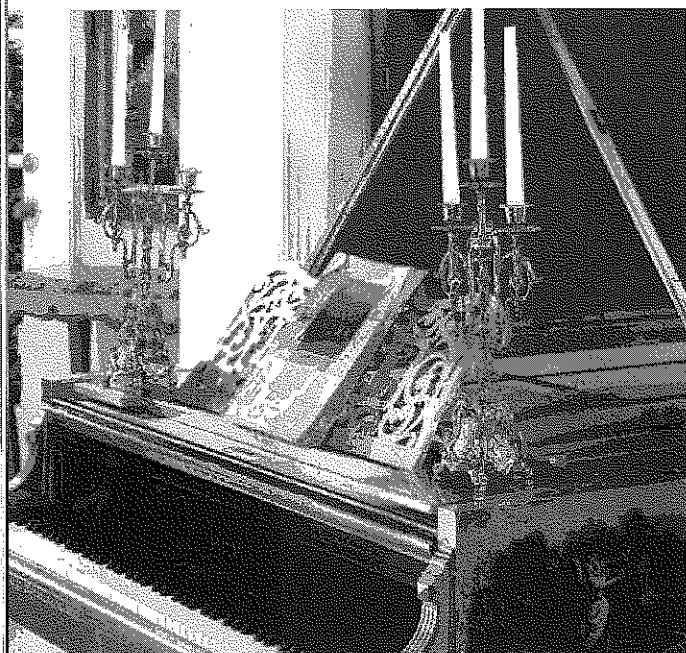


**BY  
Rod  
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**T**here is an image from Canadian history that has been etched into the minds of all Canadians: the 1885

photograph commemorating the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railroad. This photograph seems an appropriate choice in that the saga of the CPR has been developed extensively in Canadian culture: there is, therefore, little need to accentuate my discussion by relying on critical evidence to make my point. In fact, it may be argued that the realm of dominant discourse, given its invisible nature, is dependent on just such a non-critical perspective. The whole notion of cultural inscription is, of course, founded on common or public knowledge. In this regard I will do little more than discuss those aspects of the photograph that lie within this accessible realm.

For most Canadians the driving of the last spike has become synonymous with the emergence of Canada as a nation from "sea to shining sea." I suspect that the photograph has much to do with how Canadians identify the central figures who brought this incredible project to completion. The two men most often identified in the photograph, and who are deemed the builders of the railroad, are Lord Strathcona, a major investor in the CPR, and Willam van Horne, the general manager responsible for overseeing construction in the west. We realize, of course, that it is sheer nonsense to claim that these men built the railroad; their real work was done behind a desk, not at the end of a shovel. The men who actually cleared the forests, moved mountains, and framed the trestles are represented in the photograph by the nameless crowd that surrounds Lord Strathcona. However, even this representation is not very accurate. Certainly most of these burly men were indeed railroad workers, but a very substantial segment of the labour force is



noticably absent from the photograph. Where, for example, is there any evidence of the seventeen thousand Chinese labourers who were enticed to come to British Columbia in order to insure a cheap source of labour for the final leg of the railroad's construction? If we are unaware of their significant contribution, it is because the compilers of our "official history" have always been eager to portray the van Hornes and Lord Strathconas as the heroic representative of progress. As Toni Morrison asserts, the question that arises from all

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dominant cultural narratives is, "What intellectual feats had to be performed . . . to erase [Blacks, Chinese, Native Indians, etc.] from a society seething with [their] presence . . . What are the strategies to escape from knowledge?" These "strategies" are not necessarily contrived by a select group of individuals who busy themselves insuring that all dominant narratives valorize the ruling class. In other words, the strategies are not the result of any conscious plan to erase or ignore the contributions of the Chinese or any other marginalized segment of Canadian society; instead, they are the consequence of the authority invested in the ideological centres of modernism. We cannot "blame" the photographer for not insisting that there be Chinese workers in the crowd any more than we can "blame" the chairman of the Exxon Corporation for an oil spill. Striving to place blame on some individual or group tends to do little more than deflect the problem of cultural representation away from the ideological structures that have always already colonized discourse. If we wish to discover why the Chinese are absent from this photograph we need to identify the ideological centres that determine how certain cultural representations become privileged over others.

In *Thirty-Two Short Films about Glenn Gould*, the authority of dominant culture is similarly sustained. Uneasiness about the representation of such a glorified figure as Gould can, perhaps, be understood as another persuasive influence of dominant culture. All of us have, after all, already been inscribed by our public institutions with the imperative to accept and defend a variety of complex ideological positions.

**M**y 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.

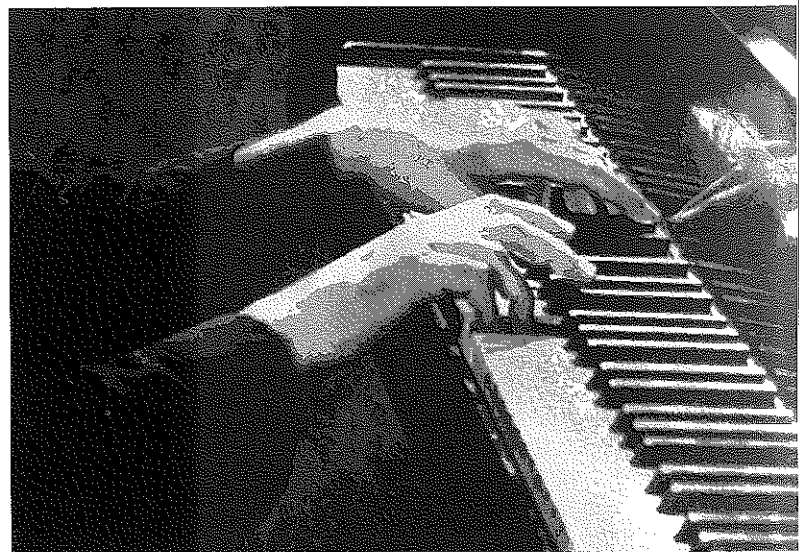
The very mention of classical music immediately brings to mind a specific segment of society. It is virtually impossible to think of a person such as Bach without associating his music with European aristocracy, the magnificence of cathedrals, luxurious concert halls, and very particular notions of human 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 a place at the top of the cultural hierarchy and has been inscribed as one of the principal signifiers of Western culture. Therefore, Gould's remarkable ability to interpret and perform Bach's work 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 soul-sustaining essence 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 designs 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 in this particular Eurocentric, cultural way, he or she must first be inscribed with the desire to consider such a pursuit worthwhile. Let us create a fictional subject who fulfils the above criteria and is striving to become educated in the complexities of classical music. I will call him Joe, and in order to situate 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 mind-set, 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 importance in fifty musicians filling the air of Roy Thompson Hall than there is in a single Native person tapping a drum by a fire and singing a traditional song. To consider Western classical music as the grand anthem of human emotion

**"Would we ever have heard of Glenn Gould had he chosen to play the tuba, the accordion, or the harp?"**



is akin to believing that those individuals who have the material resources to become educated in the worship of certain cultural products also have the right to colonize the aesthetic tastes of the rest of society. When we observe Gould'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 Gould had he been an astounding interpreter of Gambian 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 musicologists 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 instrument of Gould's era 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 situate ourselves in the presence of the entire tonal schemata of Western music. It is also true that the first or second instrument of virtually every performer of classical music is the piano. Finally — and perhaps most importantly, given modernity's valorization of individualism — the piano is "the" primary instrument for solo performance. Aside from the pipe organ — which has always been sluggish to human touch, enormously cumbersome, and prohibitively expensive — there is not other acoustic instrument capable of producing and sustaining such a subtle and dynamic range. By acknowledging the stature of the instrument, it is possible to understand how the segment in Girard's film entitled "CD 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 elaborate mechanical network of wire, felt, cast iron, and wood. Bach's music and Gould'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 nuances of the human hand. This

correspondence is impressed on us by the film's determined focus on the elaborate machinery of the piano in action. Although I have no intention of examining the mechanism 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 Gould's status as a musician does not stem from his ability to compose music but from his ability to interpret it. In other words, Gould's reputation is directly linked to his being able to exploit the achievements of technology. In "CD 318," the piano and, by extension, technology become the site wherein 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 Gould's ability to use the full resources of the instrument places him in such a distinguished position within the hierarchy of Western culture. The piano is no longer just the site wherein Bach and Gould 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 had he chosen to play the tuba, the accordian, or the harp?

Of course the focus of Girard's film is not classical music, even though we hear it throughout the film. Nor does Gould, the musician, claim a significant degree of our attention. It is Gould, 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 Gould's public grandeur into a similar private grandeur. In fact, Girard's film does a remarkable job of positioning the viewer's attitude towards Gould within the very matrices of modernist ideology. Our sense of awe about his "genius" is very much constructed by the film's representation of his life. We are neither challenged nor encouraged to critique Gould: he is simply given to us fully inscribed with significance.

It seems peculiar that an individual 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, Gould's life is something to rejoice about because, as the film suggests, he is the manifestation of the autonomous, self-determining hero of the modernist era. What he represents to Western civilization is nothing short of the fulfilment of individualism. For the ninety-three minutes it takes to view the film we can luxuriate in our own desires for free agency. We may argue that the film is very conscious of itself as a biographical project and that it acknowledges how fact and fiction, art and life, cannot be kept apart; nevertheless, the film remains, whether intentionally or not, firmly committed to presenting Gould as the self-made hero of the Enlightenment project. Everything he involves himself in,

whether it be mathematics, dabbling in stocks, or writing newspaper advertisements, is seemingly worthy of our awe. He lives in his own world; his mind is free to follow its own course; he chooses whom he will interact with, and when such interactions will occur. In short, Gould has the freedom that we have all been encouraged to fantasize about, but, in truth, will never have. This notion of striving for the unobtainable is very much at the centre of modernism. By glorifying it in the film, the director causes the figure of Gould to become associated with a transcendental being.

Such a pleasurable illusion is innocent in itself; we all need to step into the fantastic now and then. However, we should at least be aware of the investment that modernism has in sustaining such a notion. We may choose to view modernity's "self-made man" as an affirmative doctrine granting every individual the right to succeed. This is certainly the view that Western ideology encourages us to have. However, it is not the only position worthy of consideration. Supporting the notion of free agency also validates the position of dominant culture, in that it can be claimed that the possibility for success is available to all people.

Popularized versions of modernity's hero are so heavily stressed in Western culture that we tend not to interpret how and why the terms governing their presentations came into being; we simply assume that what we are influenced by comes from some natural or given order. When we fail to consider how the many levels of dominant cultural discourse act upon us, we are unknowingly aligning ourselves with modernity's agenda. Perhaps the most obvious example of how the film valorizes individualism is in its vivacious presentation of Gould's private life. The film works very hard to deny that Gould suffered by being alone. There are, it is true, a number of vignettes — such as those that show the enormous number of pills he has in his bathroom and the interviewer who asks him if he is homosexual — which at least hint at some kind of anxiety; however, the film leaves no hard evidence to verify them.

The whole notion of his neurosis, not to mention his drug use, is virtually dismissed in the subsequent segment, in which a friend claims never to have seen him display any of the typical symptoms associated with either mental illness or chemical dependence. The question of his sexual orientation is similarly dismissed by the next sequence in which appears a love letter to some mysterious woman. Even the fact that he always wore a hat, scarf, gloves, and overcoat, regardless of the weather, is presented more as an artist's right to eccentricity, a sort of endearing trait, rather than as a deleterious obsession. In short, the film goes out of its way to keep Gould's character well within the "proper" and "civilized" norms of dominant culture. Gould may have turned his back on society, but we are encouraged to believe he still maintained the standards of the status quo.

The film also reveals itself as a modernist project by attempting to provide some form of imaginative evidence that Gould was a mystical channel to the unrepresentable vastness of the universe. If we believe, as Jean-François Lyotard suggests, that "modernity takes place in the withdrawal of the real and according to the sublime relation between the presentable and the conceivable," then it is no wonder we are left knowing little

more about Gould than when the film began. The imaginative evidence is distilled in the film by positioning classical music as a kind of meta-narrative of human emotion, the piano as the perfect synthesis of human ingenuity and sensitivity, and Gould as a mysterious and rarefied being whose inspiration and destiny lay beyond this earthly realm. If what we have been shown of Gould's life is shrouded in obscurity, it is because Girard's film has inscribed Gould with a sublime presence. In order to instil this feeling, the film forbids us from gaining knowledge of Gould that would leave us with a sense of incompleteness. By presenting thirty-two separate vignettes, Girard succeeds in achieving the kind of vagueness that is required to restrict our understanding of Gould's private nature. We are encouraged to imagine some transcendental quality in Gould, and at the same time to remain incapable of apprehending his mystifying presence.

To reiterate, it is important to recognize how the film glorifies technology (that is, the piano) and an elitist form of music as powerful centres of meaning. When an individual such as Gould exemplifies the necessary degrees of devotion and accuracy to fuse these two ideological centres, the results are hailed as evidence of modernity's success. The rules that define this ideological evidence are sustained by those who have the most to gain from them.

As the stark and brilliant landscape of the film's two framing scenes suggests, Gould has come to us from some transcendental and infinite realm, but not simply to dazzle and mystify us with news from the great beyond. He has also come to congratulate modernism on its achievement, and, finally, to tip his peculiar hat in the direction of dominant culture. Having turned everything he has touched into gold, he is now free to return — figuratively through the barren landscape of the final scene, and literally in the Voyager spacecraft, which firmly positions him as a figure of technology — to the infinite reaches of his true home.

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