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### Glenn Gould, the Eccentric Artist

The scene fades in and the camera seems to be lost in a blanket of white, maybe somewhere in Antarctica. Slowly in the distance a faint figure can be seen, maybe a man, maybe something different. In the background is music: “the very faint sounds of Glenn Gould playing one of Bach’s Goldberg Variations in 1955,” (Review, Faith 1) and as the figure walks closer to the camera the music grows louder. Finally, as the man (as it is clear by this point) is just about to the camera and the music is more than loud enough to be heard the scene cuts out and the second film begins. So begins the unique 1993 portrayal of the highly celebrated Canadian pianist Glenn Gould titled *Thirty-Two Short Films about Glenn Gould*, by director François Girard. The disjunctive structure and style of the film reflected Gould’s personality in life. Girard’s film celebrated, honored, and valued the simple fact that Gould was different and through his interpretation of Gould, he tried to install the same feeling into his audience. It should be mentioned that although Girard valued Gould’s eccentric nature, he also made sure to emphasize the impact he made on those around him with his music. But before I speak about the film and the way it portrays Gould, let us first learn a little bit about the man named Glenn Herbert Gould and in the same fashion as the film.

### **8 Short Biographical Notes about Glenn Herbert Gould**

1. “Glenn Gould was born in Toronto on 25 September 1932 into a musical family...[he] died in Toronto on October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1982, after having suffered a stroke” (Official).
2. As pointed out in the movie, Gould was first introduced to music while still in the womb, proving that it is never too soon to teach a child new skills.
3. “At five, he began to compose, and played his own little compositions for family and friends. At the age of six Gould was taken to his first live musical performance” (Official). Gould was definitely a child prodigy just as Mozart had been in his early days of music, a point that is not touched on in the film.
4. Gould's first public performance was in 1945 on the organ, a concert which was reviewed under the headline "Boy, age 12, Shows Genius As Organist" (Official).
5. “From 1955 to 1964, he gave concerts throughout North America and made three overseas tours (1957-1959) playing in USSR, West Europe (including London) and Israel” (Sadie). Gould loved to tour in his earlier years so that he could reach out to the public; strangely enough, this fact is not hit on in the film.
6. In 1964, Gould retired from performing live, “citing moral and musical objections to the concert medium” (Sadie). Friends and critics believe that there may be other reasons.
7. After his retirement, Gould focused his career on “produc[ing] radio and television recitals and other programs for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC)” (Sadie). He took a different approach as to how to present his music to the public.
8. When it came to types of music, Gould preferred music from specific periods including “Baroque, Classical, Late-Romantic and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Austro-German repertoires” (Sadie).

## The Fractured Structure of the Film

The film, or “semiexperimental quasi - documentary” as Shlomo Schwartzberg – critic for “Performing Arts & Entertainment” in Canada – puts it, is unlike most films in the way that its flow is not linear. Girard goes out on a limb with the film, trying to reach the tasty and ripe fruit in the distance and in the end it pays off. Girard takes the number 32 “from Bach’s 32 Goldberg Variations, the two recordings of which bookend Gould’s career” (Steyn, paragraph 2). In 1993 when the film was released, the most reviews agreed that through its unique style, “it [was] as brilliant and inspiring as the person it [brought] to life [Gould]” (Schwartzberg, paragraph 2). The portrayal of Gould in the film, through its different and disjunctive style, is what appeals to me. The use of color, style, and music in a different way made it interesting to watch. The juxtaposition of scenes, with that of the music, helps the viewer step into Gould’s world at various times throughout the film. Each film, or story, has a distinct flavor to it and each one touches on a different aspect of his life. Not all of the films feature Gould and not all are about music. Some are as short as 25 seconds and others are longer than 5 minutes. Through all these dissimilarities though, the effect of the film is still tremendous and it keeps the audience’s attention.

For example, in the first scene (depicted in the first paragraph) Girard incorporates a technique of abruptly ending the scene to transcend into the next. He continues to do this throughout the remainder of the entire film, and each time it is just as unexpected as the last. By doing this, Girard forces the viewer to think about what was just shown in the last scene. At one

time after watching one of the scenes, I asked myself: “what was the whole point of that ‘film?’ Was there suppose to be something more to it?” It made me want to rewind it and watch it again, an effect I am sure Girard was aiming for. Musicians, writers, and painters create to entertain and in doing this they try to produce works of art that people want to listen, read, or view over and over again. A good song is one that people can listen to numerous times and not get tired of. I am sure that if people had the control when in theaters they would have rewound the film numerous times just like I did the first time I watched the film.

### **The Man Who Filled Glenn Gould’s Gloves**

In casting for this film Girard had his work cut out for him: finding someone who could fill Gould’s gloves on the big screen would not be an easy task. Not only did the actor have to look like him and dress like him – in the movie he always looked like a hobo with layers of clothes, a beanie on his head, and huge gloves on his hands – the actor also had to develop his traits and personality. Girard honored Gould for his unique dressing habit and personality, so the person needed to be someone who could not only play the part, but become it. Fortunately, one man took on this challenge and ran for a touchdown with it in his hands. This man’s name is Colm Feore (other movies include: Chicago, Paycheck, and the Chronicles of Riddick). In preparation for this film, Feore spent months beforehand “studying all the videos and audios on the musician, as well as some 6000 letters that Gould wrote and kept” (Schwartzberg, paragraph 6). This was an arduous task but by doing this, Feore slowly started to understand Gould and who he was behind the music. There was no other way to play Gould correctly unless Feore knew him for who he really was behind closed doors. By the end of the film, Feore was one and the same with Gould and the two had indistinguishable personalities.

In the film, it is clear that Feore is just as passionate about music as Gould was when he was alive. He would move his hands around as if to conduct an orchestra; he would raise his head, close his eyes and slowly move his head from side to side all the while still keeping the beat with his hands. It was pointed out during Film 15 “Crossed Paths,” when Bob Phillips, a friend of Glenn Gould was speaking, that all the time while talking to him, “he was using his hands and conducting...I [Bob Phillips] was his orchestra for that hour.” Feore evokes this sort of emotion when the camera is on him and he is very believable when it comes to thinking that he has this crazy passion for his music and for the people who listen to it. Borrowing the words from A.O Scott (NY Times 10/29) Feore’s performance is “inventive, intuitive, and supremely intelligent...you get the sense that he is not just pretending to be [Glenn Gould] but that he understands him completely and knows how to communicate this understanding through every word and gesture, without explaining a thing.” Feore viewed his part as Gould just as Gould viewed his music: not just for the 88 keys on the piano, but the feeling that it evoked in people.

### **Up Close with Some of the 32 Films**

Some of the films help convey the overall flow of the entire movie better than other and by considering just a few of them hopefully you can get a better feel of not just Glenn Gould as an artist, but also of Girard as a director.

One of the best “films” Girard creates, titled “Gould meets Gould (text by Glenn Gould),” features a comical skit about Gould and some of his uncommon actions as a person. Before the scene is shown the viewer is already thinking one of two things: either this is an interview with Glenn Gould with his father, or he is somehow interviewing himself. As it shortly becomes apparent, it is the latter. The whole scene is conducted in the shadows of a recording

studio and is juxtaposed with fast paced music in the background. The music adds effect to the conversation by making seem faster than it really is. The figure of Gould is visible as both the reporter and the pianist, but there is a silhouette on their faces. Already Girard is portraying Gould in a way where he is both visible and yet in the dark. Had it been constructed any other way, it would have failed. As the scene progresses, Gould the pianist seems to be taking control of the conversation. At one point after being asked if there was a subject that he would like to discuss, Gould responds by saying: “what about native rights in Alaska?” Who would be crazy enough and to ask such a question, especially one as off-the-wall as this one is, but Gould. He seems to have a swagger with him throughout the entire “film” by not directly answering all the questions. It soon becomes apparent that Gould is not just another musician who spends a majority of his time locked in a room all day and night. Girard valued Gould for not being this type of musician. By the end of the interview, Gould’s character came out as a very bombastic and enthusiastic speaker – this all being the first real insight to Gould’s real brilliance.

Oddly enough, one would think that since the purpose of this film was to portray a pianist in all his glory, that there would certainly be at least one scene where the main focus would be on Gould actually playing the piano. Well, Girard intentionally neglected to take that point into consideration because not one scene actually showed Gould playing the piano. It would be too typical to show a scene of him playing especially since Girard wanted to portray him as an eccentric artists, not a classic one. A few “films” came rather close to showing Feore (Gould) play, but it was always implied and never visibly seen. Girard most likely did this for one reason, out of respect since that is what Gould would have liked had he been alive. Since Gould gave up performing in 1953, Girard made it a point to not show him. Like Gould, Girard probably felt that it would not have the same effect if he were to actually show Feore play the piano. The

audience would not see the real Gould and the music would be very hard to duplicate. Instead Girard emphasizes how Gould loved to listen to music, and at times was very emotional about it. The one scene that comes close to showing Gould playing the piano is in a film titled “Diary of One Day” when the whole scene is conducted under an x-ray and all that can be seen is a bony hand playing the piano. However, the viewer most likely does not even notice this since the main purpose of the scene is to emphasize how Gould is highly concerned with his health. It is noted in the script that “a number of specialists pronounced him [Gould] to be a hypochondriac [and] throughout his life...he nurtured a daunting medical regime” (Girard, pg 148). Girard did not actually convey this in the film because it did not fit under what he wanted to portray Gould as, but it is a fact that explains most of his uncommon actions.

In another “films,” titled “practice,” Gould manages to practice an entire song without touching a single note on the piano. Instead he practices it all in his head while standing up and moving his hands around. He is in a recording studio with a grand piano by him the whole time, but he never actually plays any music. Comically at the end though, Gould walks over to the piano and shuts the lid as if he had just played the music out loud. Scenes like these give the viewer a great insight into just how Gould’s mind worked: he was unorthodox, but at the same time brilliant, even if everything he did, did not make sense.

Throughout the sequencing of the films Girard never failed to come up with new ideas for “films.” When the film numbers started to ascend through the twenties, the films started to get shorter and more abstract. For instance, film # 21, titled “Gould meets McLaren (animation by Norman McLaren),” features nothing but a series of spheres multiplying and dividing to the sound of Fugue # 14 from “The Well-Tempered Clavier.” It starts off with one, then two, which soon split left and right to become four and before long the whole screen is dancing with these

circles as they move back and forth about the clouds in the background. If anything this “film” serves nothing more than to entertain, or at least it seems this way at first glance. It turns out that Norman McLaren, “in 1969...created three short animations, called “Spheres,” for inclusion in ‘The Well-Tempered Listener’, a programme created and produced by Glenn Gould” (Girard, pg 118). With this in mind, it becomes apparent that in fact this “dancing” of the spheres is one of the different ways Gould, with the help of McLaren, tries to present music to the public.

Ironically, although not as apparent, throughout most of the entire film, Girard is doing more or less the same thing. In most of the scenes, there is always music in the background, but the speed and volume of the piece changes depending of the feeling Girard tries to portray in that particular scene. In all instances, the music adds that extra element, or feeling to the film that made it such an entertaining movie to watch.

Hopefully from these brief synopses, it becomes clearer about how well Girard, or more specifically Feore, portrayed Gould in this film. Even though the music is never seen played, Gould’s music can always be heard playing in the background and its effect is still as powerful to the audience. One critic liked the film, and Gould’s music for that instance, so much that he wrote:

“To hear Glenn Gould play piano is to walk the beaches of the sublime. Those resonant sounds are like angels and devils scuttling under a table, giggling or mourning. One grasps at metaphors to capture the feelings conjured up when he played, only to see them fall short of their mark. Simply put, his music inspires a small gasp and the whispered response of, ‘That’s beautiful. . .’”  
(Kipp)

The critic, Jeremiah Kipp, could not have put it better especially when he states that after listening to his music one cannot help but murmur “That’s beautiful.” Only a true artist can evoke such feelings as these in those that listen to their art. Gould tried hard to evoke such feelings in his art and Girard followed up well when he created this film in his honor.

For Gould, like all artists, there is always another side to the story contrary to all their glories. For instance, one interesting point to note about Gould’s performances was the fact that “he would only play concerts whilst sitting on a folding chair his father made. He continued to use this chair even when the seat was nearly worn through” (Glenn). In addition, he would not always wear the appropriate concert attire because he did not feel that it was necessary, this including his huge, thick fingerless gloves.

### **Glenn Gould as an Artist Not Sitting at the Piano**

As it was pointed out earlier, on April 10<sup>th</sup> 1964, at the age of thirty-two, Gould performed his last concert in it Los Angeles. He died in 1982, at the age of fifty, some eighteen years after his last performance. During this time Gould made other types of contributions to the music world. Although he did stop the live concerts, he still continued to record music in studios. Gould, as a friend points out in the film, “was a perfectionist when it came to recording,” In “film” number 13, titled “Passion According to Gould,” the viewer gets a great first-hand look at how critical Gould is when listening to his own music. The scene begins as he finishes recording, and he is now waiting for playback. As the music starts to play, Gould starts to move about the studio. While he is walking around analyzing his own music, the two men inside the recording booth start to have a very comical conversation about coffee and cream. This juxtaposition of his passion with the simplicity, and in some

senses, stupidity, of other people around him, puts in to perspective just how far from the “real world” Gould was, even though in this scene, the only thing separating them was a piece of sound proof glass. Gould did not bother caring about stupid things like what type of cream and sugar went into his coffee, especially since he was creating music.

Gould loved to recreate the classics and through some of those eighteen years “he influenced a new generation of performers and listeners through his illuminating interpretations of the music of a variety of composers, and in particular, of Bach” (Foundation, biography). Other methods he used to present music to the public included radio performances, but Gould “broke new artistic ground with his documentaries on radio and his television essays and performances” (Foundation, biography). At this time, not many musicians were performing the way Gould did especially since around the 1950s, the television was a fairly new idea that was still being worked on. It was only in 1950 that the FCC approved the first color television (Bellis) so music on the television was just becoming a new idea around that time.

With his retirement from performances followed many other changes in his way of being though these changes did not stray too far from his eccentricities. For example, Gould would not conduct interviews in person. All interviews were to be conducted on the phone. The real reason behind this is unknown, but it probably has something related to the fact that Gould loved to speak over the phone. In an interview on the film, Elyse Mach talks about how she was sitting at home one day when the phone rang, Gould was on the other end and he said, “Hi, this is Glenn Gould and I feel like talking” (Girard). Other friends spoke about how he would talk for hours on the phone and put them to sleep, but Gould would just continue talking, never knowing and probably not caring that they were not listening. He

would sing on the phone and even recite entire operas. Lastly, there are a couple examples in the film where Gould actually pulls over on the side of the road to call a friend or cousin to speak about what was on his mind. Although not many critics and biographies spoke about this topic in particular, in the film it appears to be a key aspect of Gould's life.

It was once speculated that Gould's eccentricities could have been closely related to the fact that he might have had Asperger's Syndrome, but at that time, no such results could have been determined, although it could explain him better in the fact that he was both brilliant and crazy. It could also explain why he liked the phone so much: he could not stand looking at other people's faces, since most people with Asperger's Syndrome cannot. Lastly, near the end of the film, Gould speaks about his fear of the number 49 because when added together it becomes thirteen. He did make it to see his fiftieth birthday, but did not live long after that.

Through his long and crazy life, Gould definitely contributed to the transcendence of music to higher levels. Girard could not simply portray and honor him in one film or as he puts it, "I did not want to reduce him to one dimension" (Glenn). This is why there were 32 short films, each trying to show a glimpse of who Gould really was when he was alive. Today, in his honor and name, the Glenn Gould Foundation has created an award that it gives out every three years to those upcoming musician who have not only shown their talents like Gould did, but have done it on a national scale. It is not with the passing of most artists to create an award named after them, so it is apparent as to how much of an impact he made on everyone. As an artist, he tried to help everyone see music the way he saw it: not so much for the way it is performed in public, but by the way it is presented and the emotions that it evokes inside everyone who listens to it. It is not the music someone remembers in the end, it is the emotions that are evoked by it.