Krzysztof Majer

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Krzysztof Majer
University of Łódź

GOULD / BERNHARD / GIRARD: A THEME AND TWO VARIATIONS

Abstract

The enigma of Glenn Gould has reverberated in the artistic and literary world, and not only in his native Canada. In my paper, I address two notable refractions: the 1983 novel *Der Untergeher (The Loser)* by Austrian author Thomas Bernhard, and Canadian director François Girard's *Thirty-Two Short Films About Glenn Gould* (1993). Successfully resisting the urge to biographize, both assert "the Gould problem" in fascinating, circuitous, and strikingly different ways. I argue that Bernhard chooses the strategy of ironic appropriation and homogenization, essentializing the Canadian pianist into an "art machine," which distances itself from humanity and strives for unreachable transcendence. Girard, on the other hand, pluralizes his subject, envisioning him as a sequence of potential, divergent, and often incongruous selves. However, both works constitute outstanding attempts at intermediality (or what Werner Wolf describes as "musicalization"). Hence, in my analysis, allowing for the fundamental divergence between the languages of the three media, I also engage with the tensions which they generate.

Résumé

Le mythe de Glenn Gould reste toujours vivant dans le monde artistique et littéraire, en dépassant, de cette façon, les frontières de son pays natal, le Canada. Cet article propose de décrire deux créations artistiques significatives : le roman *Der Untergeher* (*Le Naufragé*) de 1983, rédigé par l'écrivain autrichien Thomas Bernhard, ainsi que l'œuvre cinématographique *Thirty-Two Short Films About Glenn Gould* (*Trente-deux courts métrages sur Glenn Gould*) de 1993, réalisé par le metteur en scène québécois François Girard. Tout en évitant d'être des biographies, les deux œuvres envisagent « le problème Gould » d'une manière tout aussi fascinante que complètement différente. L'article veut démontrer que la stratégie d'appropriation ironique et d'homogénéisation choisie par Bernhard met essentiellement l'accent sur la présentation du pianiste canadien en tant que « machine artistique », le distanciant

ainsi de l'humanité et soulignant son besoin d'atteindre une transcendance. De son côté, Girard représente Gould comme un sujet pluriel, une séquence de personnages potentiels, divergents et souvent incongrus. Pourtant, les deux ouvrages constituent une tentative remarquable d'intermédialité, ou plutôt une tentative de « musicalisation » selon Werner Wolf. En prenant en considération la divergence fondamentale entre les langues des trois médias mentionnés, cette analyse évoque aussi les tensions que ceux-ci génèrent.

This paper is an attempt to bring together two highly idiosyncratic artistic approaches to the enigma of Glenn Gould. Namely, I intend to supplement an extensive analysis of Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard's 1983 novel *The Loser* (*Der Untergeher*) with references to a 1993 cinematic work by Quebecois director Francois Girard, *32 Short Films About Glenn Gould.* Ten years apart, the two works offer divergent strategies of dealing with the Canadian pianist's life and cultural significance. In their attempts to represent their problematic subject, the two authors refuse to employ the means which may be regarded as traditional for the modes in which they operate. Strongly resisting the urge to biographize, they follow the paths of what I describe as ironic appropriation (or "misuse") and pluralisation, respectively.

As I intend to demonstrate, Bernhard has his narrator homogenize Gould into an "art machine," a formidable force whose impact is as destructive as it is creative; here, I draw on the findings of Reinhild Steingröver, who claims that Bernhard makes Gould his example in a critique of the Romantic notion of genius. Girard's film paradoxically provides a much more reverent approach, as David Scott Diffrient has shown, in that it seeks cinematic analogues to Gould's philosophy and aesthetics, while challenging the notion of a consistent subjectivity. As a result, Girard pluralizes Gould into a number of impressions: the film is, after all, composed of thirty-two episodes or vignettes, including staged material with Colm Feore as the pianist, actual interviews with friends and family, and animation. It is worth noting that, despite their divergent strategies, the two works are unmistakably products of formally trained musicians whose thinking about the word and the image, respectively, is musically inflected. What underlies *The Loser* and *32 Short Films*, albeit in different ways, is the concept of theme and variations, invoking Gould's most famous recording—the 1955 version of Bach's *Goldberg-Variationen*—described in *The Canadian Encyclopedia* as "the bestselling solo-instrumental classical album ever made" (Bethune).

A world-famous Canadian, Gould is indisputably one of twentieth century's originals. Some approve of the austere, precise renditions of his beloved repertoire (chiefly Bach), disregarding the quirks of his performances, often preserved in the recordings, such as his ceaseless humming or the

creaking of his chair. Others write him off as an eccentric who mesmerized the masses with his idiosyncratic personality. But even his detractors will rarely question his technique; rather, they disapprove of the strictures which Gould imposed on himself and his art, as well as his absolute dedication to the latter. Furthermore, they are troubled by his unusual aesthetics: his dismissive treatment and wilfully iconoclastic interpretations of some composers (e.g., Mozart or Beethoven), and his almost perverse championing of others, often regarded as marginal (e.g., Hindemith).

Along with his music recordings—which tend to have a polarizing effect—and a few rarely performed compositions of his own, Gould left behind scattered writings on music; yet, as Leroux points out, the pianist never had sufficient patience to systematize his philosophy in a book (59). Another part of his legacy are television and radio programs, made for the CBC, where he held forth not just on music but also on such notions as Canadianness (e.g., *The Idea of North*); interestingly, this was also an environment in which he tended to impersonate characters of his own devising.

Whatever one's attitude to Gould, his cultural presence is impossible to ignore, and his philosophy, aesthetics as well as his unusual life choices have attracted much attention: even the likes of Agamben and Said have felt compelled to address the Gouldian phenomenon. Nevertheless, handy formulas fail to contain him: a recluse from the modern world who was one of the pioneers of sound manipulation in the recording studio; a passionate supporter of the Canadian North, who wore gloves, scarves, and hats in midsummer; a strict aesthete who often found Mozart and Beethoven wanting, yet praised Petula Clark's international hit, "Downtown." It is therefore hardly surprising that the enigma should also have inspired artistic and literary responses, not only in Canada—apart from the novel and film discussed in this article, I should mention at least two short stories: John Gould's "Hum" (1996)[1] and Lydia Davis's "Glenn Gould" (1997).

What I have chosen to describe above as Thomas Bernhard's ironic appropriation of Gould must be considered in the context of the writer's entire project. In German-speaking Europe, Bernhard (1931-1989), novelist and playwright, is often regarded as one of the most important writers of the post-war period, and he enjoys a well-established position in countries such as Italy, Spain, or indeed my native Poland. However, his works have apparently not fared equally well in the Anglo-Saxon context (Cousineau 11). Nevertheless, an overview of Bernhard's complex poetics is necessary in order to explain his interest in the Canadian pianist and to enable an analysis of the literary treatment to which he subjects the latter.

[1] As I was able to establish through e-mail communication with John Gould, he is not in fact related to the pianist.

Arguably, a body of work as obsessively dedicated to a set of ideas as Bernhard's is a rare occurrence. Mordecai Richler once opined that "[e]very serious writer has . . . one theme, many variations to play on it" (10). This metaphor certainly applies to the claustrophobic, musically-inflected works of Bernhard, who himself stated in an interview: "Of course one always has the same theme. Everyone has his theme. He should move around in that theme. Then he does it well" ("From One Catastrophe"). Between the mid-1960s and late 1980s, this tireless provocateur, often described in his native country as "*ein Nestbeschmutzer*," or "one who defiles his own 'nest'" (Lorenz 29), reminded his fellow Austrians of the part that their state had played in the Holocaust. As Konzett observes, while Germany was forced to confront its role as the chief perpetrator of wartime atrocities, Austria was able to recover its stability more quickly, and as early as the 1950s attempts were made to reconstruct the pre-war or even turn-of-the-century image of Vienna or Salzburg as, primarily, sites of art and culture ("Introduction" 4-7). Such strategies met with suspicion from the Austrian literary and artistic avant-garde, who saw them as masking a blood-soaked landscape with the frills of polite culture. Thus, Konzett argues that Bernhard's work ought to be interpreted alongside, for instance, the transgressive practices of the Viennese Actionists in the 1960s and 1970s ("Introduction" 6-9). It is also for this reason that Bernhard remains a point of reference for some of Austria's most daring contemporary writers (e.g., Elfriede Jelinek) and filmmakers (e.g., Michael Haneke). The former famously began her eulogy in *Die Zeit* with the words "An diesem toten Giganten wird niemand mehr vorbeikommen." The verb phrase might be translated as "no one will ever surpass," "pass by" or "get past," but there is no mistaking the powerful noun phrase: "this dead giant" (my trans.).

Bernhard's novels almost always feature a bilious first-person speaker, who delivers a masterfully sustained rant, often in just a few paragraphs which continue unbroken over hundreds of pages. Jelinek described Bernhard's novels as "atemlos" ("breathless"; my trans.), alluding as much to the writer's lifelong illness of the lungs, which cut short his promising career as an opera singer, as to his interminable sentences; his novels seem to operate according to the formula "Solange ich spreche, bin ich" ("as long as I speak, I am"; Jelinek; my trans.). Consequently, launching into their furious tirades, Bernhard's narrators lay heaps of abuse on their compatriots as well as their places of habitation: major cities such as Salzburg or Innsbruck are equally subject to vilification as smaller towns and villages in the picturesque Alpine landscape.

Bernhard's relentless assault on social conformity and corruption must be seen in the light of his philosophy, encapsulated in an infamous response to one of his numerous prizes: "Everything is laughable when one thinks of death" ("Alles ist lächerlich, wenn man an dem Tod denkt"; qtd. and trans. in

Demel 138). More specifically, Bernhard rejects all transcendence and vehemently opposes the idea of solace found in religion, which he sees as helping produce intellectual passivity. Therefore, death becomes the crucial, inescapable fact of the human condition. Nevertheless, as Dowden demonstrates, in centering upon mortality, Bernhard neither follows the German Romantics by glamorizing or mystifying death, nor aligns himself with the existentialists in believing that authenticity and autonomy can provide provisional consolation. According to Dowden:

> In Bernhard's universe autonomy diminishes the self and severs its lines of connection to the larger human community, especially to family and national identity. And even if these lines were intact, it would not make any difference. History, which for Bernhard almost always refers to the end of Austria-Hungary followed by the catastrophe of the Third Reich, has already debased the Austrian national identity. Authenticity would mean rootedness in that blighted history, which for Bernhard is a morally intolerable identity. In short, autonomy and authenticity do not redeem the individual: they crush him. (7)

Central to his writing project is the inimitable Bernhardian voice, described by Cousineau as "incantatory vociferation" (19). As indicated by the title of one of Bernhard's most celebrated novels, *Correction* (*Korrektur*, 1975), his narrators constantly rephrase their statements: typical for these narratives is a deep-seated distrust of language and its capacity for conveying thought. These narrators are forever dissatisfied with their verbalizations; the Bernhardian landscape is littered with abandoned or destroyed treatises on various philosophical matters, as well as botched suicide notes (Dowden 6). Aiming for perfect enunciation, the narrators constantly discipline themselves and are forced to begin again. The same applies, macroscopically, to Bernhard's entire project: each novel suggests a reformulation of an earlier, "unsuccessful" endeavour which is thus, in a way, "erased." It is perhaps no surprise that this endless self-correction should culminate in a novel titled, in German, *Auslöschung* (1986).[2]

In addition to this merciless self-correcting, Bernhard's narrators obsessively report other characters' utterances, often just as convoluted, seemingly verbatim. According to Marek Kędzierski, Bernhard's novels, full of attributions such as "so Roithamer" or "said Wertheimer," are characterized by a mixture of direct speech, free indirect speech, and quotation. In effect, Kędzierski maintains, "the narration becomes artificially, unnaturally decentralized, while the plots undergo stratification and relativization" (337; my trans.).

[2] Although rendered in English as *Extinction*, the title translates literally as "erasure," "effacement," or "blotting out."

While Bernhard's early novels do not feature Jewish characters, in the late 1970s and especially in the 1980s one may observe what Konzett describes as a "cautious return" of those ("Introduction" 15), either as voices whose perspective is embedded in the main narrative or as objects of intellectual study. And thus, Roithamer in *Correction* (1975) is loosely modeled on Ludwig Wittgenstein, a constant point of reference for Bernhard; in *Concrete* (*Beton*, 1982), the subject of the narrator's musicological analysis is Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy; in the autobiographical novel *Wittgenstein's Nephew* (*Wittgensteins Neffe*, 1982), the eponymous character, hospitalized in a mental institution, is Paul Wittgenstein, a relative of the Viennese philosopher.[3]

It would be intriguing to consider *The Loser*—published in 1983, soon after Glenn Gould's death—as part of this sequence of novels featuring Jewish characters. It must nevertheless be stated that the pianist's Jewish ancestry is mere conjecture, based principally on the family name change from Gold to Gould around 1939, when Glenn was seven years old, and anti-Semitism was on the rise in Toronto. Glenn's father was in the fur trade, where Jews constituted 60% of the labor force and a substantial number of owners and managers were Jewish (Bazzana 25). Most likely, however, the Methodist-Presbyterian family of English and Scottish extraction (Ostwald 35; Bazzana 30) wished only to avoid association with Jewish communists.[4] Gould himself offered this oft-quoted, teasing self-identification: "When people ask me if I'm Jewish, I always tell them that I was Jewish during the war" (qtd. in Bazzana 24-25). Nevertheless, despite these uncertainties, the treatment of the pianist is analogous to that of the Wittgensteins or Mendelssohn-Bartholdy in novels from that era. This suggests a positioning of Gould as a Jewish genius, who engenders in the narrator and the other protagonist a sense of inferiority and guilt. In addition to the nebulous Jewish aspect, Bernhard explores (and considerably adds to) the brief Austrian connection in Gould's history: the momentous Salzburg concert in 1959.

Cousineau argues that *The Loser*, like several other key Bernhard novels—e.g., *The Lime Works* (*Das Kalkwerk*, 1970) or the aforementioned *Correction*—contains a "triangular pattern," i.e. it is constructed around a relation between "protagonist, obstacle and scapegoat" (13); somewhat

[3] Importantly, he is not Ludwig's identically named brother Paul, the famous pianist maimed in the First World War, at whose commission foremost composers, such as Maurice Ravel, Sergei Prokofiev, or Richard Strauss, wrote piano concertos for the left hand.

[4] According to Bazzana, Glenn's father and uncle may have been particularly worried about the association of their name with that of Ben Gold, a "charismatic, rabble-rousing [American] communist leader," who descended upon Toronto in 1937 and incited "gang warfare among downtown fur workers" (26).

similarly, Trabert mentions a "Dreieckskonstellation" (163). Cousineau argues that *The Loser* is perhaps the purest incarnation of this pattern. Thus, the novel in question may be seen as a point, late in Bernhard's career, where certain key aspects of his writing are rewardingly intertwined, and where his musical imagination is allowed to impose an even stronger formal structure on the text than is usually the case. The pattern mentioned by Cousineau and Trabert is here embodied by a constellation involving a fabricated version of Gould and two fictitious pianists. The latter—Wertheimer and the unnamed narrator—are both former Mozarteum students who abandoned their careers after hearing the soon-to-be-famous Canadian play Bach's *Goldberg Variations* in Salzburg. The narrator, who has struggled for years to arrange his thoughts about Gould into a coherent philosophical treatise, reports: "When we meet the very best, we have to give up . . ." (Bernhard, *Loser* 9).[5] As is often the case in Bernhard's novels, the occasion for this outpouring of thought is another character's death—in this case, both Gould's natural demise and Wertheimer's suicide. Since, as the narrator announces in the first sentence, all three were friends, the lone "survivor" undertakes a characteristically long-winded explanation of their uncomfortable dynamic.

It is insufficient to say that Bernhard's portrait of Gould is fictionalized. As already suggested above, the treatment resembles that of Ludwig Wittgenstein in *Correction*; despite naming that novel's protagonist Roithamer, Bernhard famously commented in the précis prepared for the publisher: "He is not Wittgenstein, but he is Wittgenstein" (qtd. in Klebes 66).[6] In both cases, the differences between the actual subject and the literary construction are distinct, and yet the contour—"the shape of a life," to borrow Georges Leroux's terminology (180)—remains seductively similar. However, commentators of *The Loser* tend to agree that, despite retaining the original name, Bernhard's "obfuscating rendition" of Gould is more a means of addressing the general notion of artistic genius than of analyzing the Canadian pianist's particular contribution (Olson 77). For instance, as Steingröver notices, while many of the novel's facts are subject to a typically Bernhardian, endlessly corrective analysis (139), Gould's status as "the most important piano virtuoso of the century," offered in the first sentence (Bernhard, *Loser* 3), is one of the novel's few absolute givens. Indeed, Steingröver maintains, "Gould's genius appears as a construction that is as arbitrary as it is destructive" (141). Rather than nurture and uphold mankind—i.e. achieve

[5] All quotations are taken from Mark M. Anderson's excellent translation of the novel, published under the pseudonym "Jack Dawson."

[6] Klebes also quotes Bernhard's comment in German: "Wer ist Roithamer, Mathematiker, Physiker? Die Antwort ist: er ist nicht Wittgenstein, aber er ist Wittgenstein" (66).

goals of which the real-life Gould believed music to be capable—Bernhard's genius pianist leads two very accomplished performers to professional and mental ruin because his own performance engenders a binary logic according to which not achieving "*the highest*" (*Loser* 6; emphasis in orig.) is tantamount to losing. Hence, the narrator admits: "Glenn is the victor, we are the failures" (21). This reductive dynamic is of course suggested as early as the original title, the semantic scope of which is broader than that of the English equivalent. In fact, the verb *untergehen* connotes going under, sinking, being destroyed, perishing, vanishing, coming to an end—undoubtedly, a high price to pay for an encounter with "true" genius.

As argued earlier, Bernhard's narrators repeatedly muse on the near-impossibility of an authentic and autonomous existence, with art as the only (temporary) consolation. In *The Loser*, this argument is couched in mechanistic imagery.[7] The narrator liberally quotes his friend Wertheimer, who describes human life as the "existence machine" (43) and constantly reproaches his parents, reminding them that:

> they had thrown him up into that awful existence machine so that he would be spewed out below, a mangled pulp. His mother threw her child into this existence machine, all his life his father kept this existence machine running, which accurately hacked his son to pieces. . . . We're so arrogant to think that we're studying music whereas we're not even capable of living, not even capable of existing, for we don't exist, we get existed. . . . (43, 47)

The argument is far removed from the customary opposition between the inhuman machine and impermanent, yet human flesh. It appears that only another machine can provisionally withstand the mechanism of existence. Therefore, Bernhard's Gould desires—and apparently manages—to become the piano:

> The ideal piano player (he [Gould] never said pianist!) is the one who wants to be the piano, and I say to myself every day when I wake up, I want to be the Steinway, not the person playing the Steinway, I want to be the Steinway itself. . . . All his life Glenn had wanted to be the Steinway itself, he hated the notion of being *between* Bach and his Steinway as a mere musical middleman and of one day being ground to bits between Bach on one side and his Steinway on the other, he said. . . . My ideal would be, *I would be the Steinway, I wouldn't need Glenn Gould*, he said, I could, by being the Steinway, make Glenn Gould totally superfluous. . . . To wake up one day *and be Steinway and Glenn in one*, he said, I thought, *Glenn Steinway, Steinway Glenn, all for Bach*. (82; emphasis in orig.)

[7] On the preponderance of machine-related vocabulary in Bernhard's work, see Part.

Even though these pronouncements are fabricated, they do resonate with the real Gould's highly paradoxical championing of artistic anonymity. One of the reasons for which he abandoned his concert activities in 1964—apart from wanting to focus on perfecting his interpretations—was the notion that the artist's ego and his desire to impress crowds get in the way of true music-making. An "ideal audience-to-artist relationship," the actual Gould believed, is "one-to-zero" in the sense that the artist "should be permitted to operate in secret . . . and . . . abandon his false sense of 'public' responsibility" (qtd. in McIlroy 187).

The actual Gould's embracing of technology—especially the possibilities offered by the recording studio—suggests the influence of Marshall McLuhan, and therefore an extension of the human into the realm of "super-nature" (Glassman and Loiselle in McIlroy 187). However, in Bernhard's novel, this desire to transcend the human element is translated into the aforementioned machinistic discourse, as seen in the following fragment:

> . . . during the trip [Wertheimer] continually let me know that he basically detested artists who, in Wertheimer's own words, had taken their art as far as Glenn had, who destroyed their personalities to be geniuses, as Wertheimer expressed himself then. In the end people like Glenn had turned themselves into *art machines*, had nothing in common with human beings anymore, only seldom reminded you of human beings. . . . But Wertheimer continually envied Glenn this art, he wasn't capable of marveling at it without envy, even if not admiring it. . . . (92; emphasis in orig.)

Furthermore, in Bernhard's text, Gould's studio in the middle of the woods becomes his "*desperation machine*" (38; emphasis in orig.). Despite this mechanistic imagery's diffusion across the text, its oppressive nature is readily felt. In consequence, the notion of a meaningful, autonomous life seems an impossible project. An ordinary, non-creative individual is simply "hacked . . . to pieces" (43) by the existence machine, while a creative one either becomes an art machine—thus separating himself from the human community, in fact severing all human ties—or risks being "ground to bits" (82) between another true genius and his own creative implement.

To Bernhard's narrator, the latter choices still seem preferable, and it is through this logic that he attempts to explain Wertheimer's suicide. However, the logic itself is a result of an intellectual operation of which so many of Bernhard's characters are guilty: namely, what they do is "misuse" other human beings—in this case, both Gould and Wertheimer—for their own purposes. "Misuse" seems to be the key word in *The Loser*, and in the narrator's relation it attaches itself to all three characters in turn, its semantic scope darkening gradually. The word's first instances in the text are relatively innocent: as already mentioned, after the revelation of Gould's genius both the

narrator and Wertheimer abandon their virtuoso careers and, compelled to engage in a different activity, apparently begin to "misuse" philosophy and "the so-called human sciences," respectively (13). Here, the word merely suggests a less-than-perfect handling of an occupation for which one lacks enthusiasm and/or capacity, but it must be noted that in the Bernhardian universe that is already a capital offense.

The subsequent instances are more ominous, since they introduce the notion of misusing an idea, or a set of ideas, against another person. The narrator admits that, despite his considerable talent, he never truly wanted to be a "virtuoso"—a concept which he detested—but "misused" his virtuosity and his Mozarteum education against his bigoted parents, to whom the very idea of the artist was odious.[8] The tendency becomes clear with the next occurrence, where the object of "misuse" is human. After the death of Wertheimer's parents, his sister leaves the residence which she has shared with him, belatedly deciding to pursue her own life instead, and Wertheimer admits that he had "*misused* [his] sister *as a page turner*" for his piano playing (45; emphasis in orig.). When he finally commits suicide, he does so near his sister's new house in the Swiss town of Zizers, evidently to implicate her in his decision; indeed, the "misuse" of his sister extends much further than that to which Wertheimer confesses.

The final instances of the word take its meaning even further, touching directly the novel's central, triangular constellation. Of the complex interweaving of his own fate with those of Gould and Wertheimer, the narrator says the following:

> At first we thought we'd become famous and indeed in the easiest and fastest way possible, for which of course a music conservatory is the ideal springboard, that's how the three of us saw it, Glenn, Wertheimer and I. But only Glenn succeeded in doing what all three of us had planned, in the end Glenn even misused us for his own purposes, I thought, misused everybody in order to become Glenn Gould, although unconsciously, I thought. The two of us, Wertheimer and myself, had had to give up to make room for Glenn. (56)

Even if the narrator soon rejects this reasoning as absurd, it seems to underlie his interpretation of Wertheimer's suicide and to offer a tempting opportunity to lay blame at Gould's feet, with the sister's perceived betrayal as a fallback option. But it is quite possible to read these strategies as the narrator's

[8] The motif of a scion of landed gentry avenging himself in one way or another on his narrow-minded family runs through a number of Bernhard's novels, notably *Correction* and *Extinction*, where the ancestral mansions—Altensam and Wolfsegg, respectively—are finally inherited by the estranged son, thus forcing him to confront anew his rejected rootedness in a particular social order.

covering of his own guilty conscience over ignoring his friend's morbid letters, sent in a time of urgent need.

Invoking the structural idea of theme and variations, itself rooted in the work by Bach most readily associated with the pianist's name, Bernhard's Gould is clearly a "variation on the theme," where some prominent details of the Canadian's actual life have been retained, while others have been manufactured in ways instantly detectable to those familiar with the pianist's aesthetics and disposition: for instance, Gould is depicted as physically fit, whereas the actual pianist's health was always fragile. Interestingly, Leroux observes that Bernhard's portrayal of the musician resembles "yet another 'impersonation' in the vast gallery of Gouldian figures" (64) presented by the pianist himself during his broadcasts, where he would disguise himself, affecting a certain rhetoric and a particular voice, and implicitly offer the resulting figure as an object of ridicule. It must also be noted, however, that like all of Bernhard's prominent, artistically-minded characters, his Gould is also a variation on the writer's own public persona and private self. Some of the added or altered details are deeply meaningful: all three principal characters in *The Loser*, Gould included, suffer from Bernhard's lung illness; also, Gould dies not at fifty, but at fifty-one, i.e. Bernhard's age at the time of writing the book. On a microscopic scale, in this particular novel, the various subjects undergo rhetorical treatment, which numerous critics have described as musical (consisting of insistent repetitions, juxtapositions, etc.).[9] Thus, one could easily describe *The Loser* as an example of what Werner Wolf terms "musicalized fiction." Macroscopically speaking, however, *The Loser* is one among many variations on certain ideas to which Bernhard returns obsessively in his works, such as individualism, artistry, or perfection.

It is fascinating to place Bernhard's novel alongside *32 Short Films About Glenn Gould*—arguably the most critically acclaimed work of François Girard, a Quebecois director who has enjoyed success in the Anglophone environment since the 1990s. With the exception of his first feature-length, *Cargo* (1990), his films have been made with predominantly Anglophone and increasingly high-profile, international casts. Apart from his Gould film, he has authored *The Red Violin* (1998), *Silk* (2007, an adaptation of Alessandro Baricco's novel) and, more recently, *Boychoir* (2014). Himself a musician, he does not perform publicly, but—as is evident in some of the titles—his films have shown a consistent interest in musical themes and structures. Arguably, *32 Short Films* enjoys a privileged position among his works, having invited both domestic and international interest, and attracted praise from the likes of Don DeLillo.

[9] See especially Bloemsaat-Voerknecht's analysis (177-227).

As mentioned earlier, the film—co-written with Don McKellar—is a collection of 32 short episodes or vignettes, which effectively present Gould as a number of conflicting, irreducible selves. However, at least two vignettes highlight the Canadian pianist's obsession with technology, and possibly channel Bernhard where his Gould's eerie wish to become one with his instrument is concerned. In a vignette titled "CD318," the viewer is offered several clues which suggest that the piano is to be treated as a stand-in for the performer. Firstly, the previous episode ("The L.A. Concert," portraying Gould in conversation with an admirer) provides the information that this is to be his last public performance of this kind; muted applause is heard, while that vignette segues into the one under discussion, dramatizing a certain continuity between the concert hall and the studio. The choice of music is telling. It would be difficult to find a more forceful example of Gould's relentless staccato—which to his detractors sounds mechanical, inhuman—than the rendition of Bach's Prelude no. 2 in C minor from the first volume of *Das Wohltemperierte Klavier*, itself an epitome of precision and elegance. Paradoxically, despite the added applause, the recording used in the film is the studio version, familiar to every Gould aficionado. What is crucial, however, is that the pianist never appears in this episode except metonymically, through the movements of the piano hammers: the entire vignette is composed of close-ups of the instrument's mechanism and the functioning of its various parts. Interestingly, the vignette's title refers to the actual model of Gould's piano, Steinway CD318, but perhaps it also playfully hints at the idea of the compact disc as a then-futuristic method of distributing recordings and effectively supplanting the idea of an artist performing on the stage in real time. Therefore, the episode flirts with the notion of Gould's renouncing his human qualities so as to blend with his instrument and disappear from vision into sound.

The marked difference from Bernhard's treatment of this motif is that in Girard's cinematic multiverse this is offered as one among many possibilities of reading and representing the Canadian pianist. As Girard himself stated, "It was clear that there was no way to make only one film and say what it was to think and know about Glenn Gould" (qtd. in McIlroy 187). Thus, the mechanistic depiction described above contrasts visibly with other vignettes, especially those which suggest music's capacity for spiritual uplift, showing Gould himself in a trancelike state (e.g., "Passion According to Gould"), or depicting the impact which his music has on others: McIlroy points to an episode entitled "Hamburg," where Gould entices a chambermaid to listen to one of his recordings on a gramophone and is delighted with her gradual enchantment (188). Emphasizing Gould's quirky behavior—Turan compares his movements around the room to Groucho Marx's (127)—the scene also suggests the possibility of human connection through music and,

paradoxically, technology. It literalizes the relationship that the real Gould envisioned between his listeners and himself, a one-to-one or perhaps "one-to-zero" connection, made possible by the recording studio and a sound system.

If Bernhard's novel is an appropriation and transformation of Gould's persona for particular reasons, then one might argue—as Diffrient does—that Girard's fragmented, dispersed "antibiopic" is paradoxically more 'reverent' towards its subject in that its poetics draws substantially on the pianist's various obsessions, and thus the director seeks to approximate the 'spirit' of Gould by formal means (95). For instance, several critics have indicated the unusual lucidity, or even "crystalline" nature of the images (Turan 127)—courtesy of camera operator Alain Dostie—which can be seen as an attempted analogue of Gould's obsession with absolute clarity in music performance. Thus, in his brief analysis of the film, the celebrated American writer Don DeLillo defends the work's startling omissions and peculiar thematic choices: "Here is the artist in idiosyncrasy and seclusion. It is his film on his terms, even if made by others, eleven years after his death. We don't have to know everything about the man. Less-than-everything may be the man." Similarly, McIlroy argues that "Girard keeps true to Gould by using his own words as much as possible and working around them visually" (188).

The theme-and-variations structure itself is treated by Girard more literally than it was by Bernhard. As several commentators have pointed out, the number of "episodes" in the film clearly corresponds to the thirty variations in the Goldberg sequence, bracketed by two instances of the aria that supplies the theme (McIlroy 187; Diffrient 92).[10] Nevertheless, the decision to structure a film so that it resembles a particular work of music is far from mere gimmickry. As both of the aforementioned critics note, the subsequent episodes (variations) offer contrapuntal "takes" on Gould, jointly forming a notional approximation of musical polyphony, where no single voice is privileged or final. This aspect of multivocality is repeatedly pointed to within the work itself, especially in the episode entitled "Truck Stop," where Gould imagines himself conducting the voices of random customers at a roadside diner. Another example is the next vignette, which portrays him recording his avant-garde radio broadcast, *The Idea of North*, consisting of polyphonically arranged human voices which describe their experiences in the Canadian Arctic. According to Diffrient, this postmodernist decentring and dispersal of Gould as subject allows Girard to broaden his perspective and convey something distinctly Canadian: a permanent and productive tension between

[10] Some critics (McIlroy; Turan; Diffrient) have also suggested a connection between the number of vignettes in Girard's work and the age at which Gould renounced his concert career. This would indeed resonate with other possible examples of playful numerological arrangements in the film.

the fragment and the whole. To strengthen this argument, the commentator argues that, through its concise, almost self-standing episodes, Girard's work references *Canada Vignettes*, a cycle of short films produced by the National Film Board in the late 1970s (Diffrient 92).

It is interesting to consider the theme/variation dynamic in *32 Short Films* more closely. In Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, the aria provides rich thematic material, which is subsequently built upon and transformed in the following segments; Girard also arranges a recognizable frame. As DeLillo observes, the opening shots (echoed in Zacharias Kunuk's cinematic retelling of the Fast Runner legend) are mirrored in the last scene:

> [The] film begins in near monochrome, with a figure approaching from the deep distance across a vast expanse of ice. He is not Atanarjuat, the naked runner, but Glenn Gould, the classical pianist. . . . At the end . . . a figure moves across the permafrost, away from the camera and toward the icy horizon. The sky is slate blue and faded rose and the image is the idea of north.

As the figure progresses towards us across the landscape of the opening scene, the aria from the *Goldberg Variations* is heard faintly in the background. I would argue that there is thematic (or perhaps symbolic) richness here, too: the Arctic landscape is shot in such a way that the axis of symmetry runs precisely through the middle of the screen, and there is much similarity between the sky and the land, as though the ideas of the celestial and the mundane were oddly congruent or could be made to cohere—perhaps by means of artistry. Indeed, this scene gestures towards the Romantic concept of the artist, mediating between the two domains, especially in how the approaching figure is filmed: at every point in its progress, it appears stretched between the two planes, belonging to both and neither. In a number of ways, the final episode offers a reversal of the opening scene: the sky is now darker (though certain symmetries can still be observed), the figure is walking away into the distance and is filmed in such a way that four fifths of the figure's shape are claimed by the bottom half of the screen, as if it were gravitating towards earth. The soundtrack this time is the first prelude from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, accompanied by a voiceover which reminds us that this particular recording was selected for inclusion in the Voyager 1 rocket.

As a theme for variations, this is both slight and profound. The approaching figure is never seen clearly—it remains distant and is placed in an empty, alienating scenery as if cut off from a social context; indeed, the mention of Voyager (first introduced in the previous vignette through a snippet of footage from its launching) increases the otherworldly or even lunar quality of the Arctic landscape. Undermining the profundity—or perhaps the biographical accuracy of the narrative about to unfold—is the fact that,

although we readily interpret the location as embodying Gould's beloved "idea of north," he himself had never set foot in the Arctic. Also, the person approaching and departing, who plays (imitates?) Gould in the staged portions of the film, is Colm Feore, famous for his seasons with the Stratford Shakespeare Festival or his starring role in the mini-series *Trudeau*. Considering that Girard's film is composed as much of actual interview footage as of staged material, it is telling that Gould himself is not present in the opening "aria." Thus, the theme for variations seems to be composed in equal measure of ideas such as artifice, distance, or discourse, all of which are explored in one way or another in later portions of the work. Like Bob Dylan in Todd Haynes's famous anti-biopic, Gould is—quite simply— "not there."

As Diffrient points out, throughout the film Girard violates the rules governing the biopic, mostly because he allows his subject to be kept at a distance. At one point, however, he reverses his strategy dramatically in order to mock the illusion, inherent in the biopic genre, that one is able to look at the subject up close—to separate the important information from the unimportant, the events from non-events—and perhaps also to locate the essence of a person's greatness. The particularly memorable episode no. 25, entitled "Diary of One Day," features white, scribbled inscriptions against a black background, interspersed with x-ray footage of a body in motion. The soundtrack throughout is the frenetic final Gigue from Schoenberg's Suite for Piano, op. 25; guided by the uneasy music, one connects the dancing skeletal fingers and joints, the rotating skull, and the heavings of the chest to the fragmented movements of a pianist. Coupled with the scribbles—blood pressure measurements and names of pharmaceuticals—the episode is at once a wordless allusion to Gould's actual hypochondria and obsessive fear of death, and a grotesque parody of biographical closeness. It is fruitful to juxtapose it with "CD318," which essentially substituted the body with the piano, the unerring mechanism. There, the selected music—Bach's C minor prelude—was relentlessly precise and elegant in its almost unvarying tempo, an epitome of organization. At first, the Schoenberg piece in "Diary of One Day" seems to contrast with it in every conceivable way: by turns furious and restrained, it is anxious, jagged, disorienting, and as typical of the Second Viennese School as the prelude is of the Bachian aesthetic. Yet one should acknowledge the less obvious connections between them, beyond the fact that Bach and Schoenberg were Gould's beloved composers. After all, Schoenberg's path to modernity, alternative to the Neoclassical school—his effective rerouting of music from the late Romanticism of Mahler and Strauss—leads through Bach. The dodecaphonic method embraces elements of Baroque polyphony such as the counterpoint; famously, Schoenberg claimed, only half jokingly, that Bach was "(paradoxically speaking) the first twelve-tone composer" (qtd. in Stephan 138).

To drive the point home, it seems, Girard chooses a movement from a larger work which recalls the form of the suite. The form itself, of course, survived long into the twentieth century, but Schoenberg's unmistakably Baroque inspiration is obvious precisely through the choice of its components, among which are a gavotte, a minuet, and—naturally—a gigue. However, it is a modernist, expressionist gigue, one which hardly resembles the lively dance to which its name alludes; and much like Schoenberg's frenzied, anxious, disillusioned take on the Baroque form, the episode inverts the man-machine dynamic of "CD318" to reveal the corporal element behind the genius, the reliance of the supposedly transcendent spirit on the finite, fragile body. The first several seconds brilliantly encapsulate this in a sombre, prolonged piano chord, the low frequencies of which resolve themselves into a heartbeat that will persevere throughout "Diary of One Day," keeping time in more ways than one.

As I hope to have demonstrated, Bernhard and Girard emphasize, and often exaggerate, different aspects of the enigmatic Gould persona. For Bernhard, the essence of Gould—which allows the writer to appropriate him for his musings on creativity and the notion of genius—seems to be the Canadian pianist's unflinching resolve to attain perfection. Girard, conversely, refuses to entertain the notion of essence, pluralizing the pianist into a number of selves, invoking Gould's own playful theatricality and fondness for artifice. Interestingly, while these approaches produce two very different works, both are informed (within the confines of their respective generic boundaries) by musical thinking. Neither work relies on a naive belief in literary or cinematic mimesis and neither promises to deliver the "real" Gould. Despite their divergent paths, Bernhard's and Girard's creations are both highly discursive and self-conscious: variations on a radically uncertain theme.

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Krzysztof Majer is an Assistant Professor of American Literature at the University of Łódź. His academic interests include contemporary Canadian literature, North American Jewish culture, and musico-literary intermediality. His doctoral dissertation was devoted to Mordecai Richler; he contributed to the Richler issue of *Canadian Literature* (2010). He has also published on Vladimir Nabokov, Steven Millhauser, Rawi Hage, Mark Anthony Jarman, the Coen Brothers and Jack Kerouac. With Grzegorz Kość, he co-

edited *Tools of Their Tools: Communications Technologies and American Cultural Practice* (2009). He is also a translator, e.g. of Allen Ginsberg's letters (2014, awarded the *Literatura na Świecie* prize), the Kerouac/Ginsberg correspondence (2012), Patrick deWitt's *Undermajordomo Minor* (2016), and Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (2016). In 2015, he was a co-resident with writers Madeleine Thien and Rawi Hage at the Banff International Literary Translation Centre. In 2016, his translation of Andrzej Stasiuk's short prose into English was awarded the 2nd prize in the John Dryden Translation Competition, organized by the British Centre for Literary Translation and the British Comparative Literature Association.