True to the Art

by Leonid & Larisa Alekseychuk

The surest way to destroy a painting is to film it. To break up the harmony of the composition through a variety of close-up and medium shots; to drag the lens across its surface, horizontally on a boat, vertically on the surface of a canvas, and with such vivid richness of social and cultural connective— their thoughts and probes about film on art, is an inspiration to those committed to film as art.

Harry Gulkin

The most distinguished and innovative team of writer-directors. Left the Soviet Union in 1977 following the suppression by the authorities of their most recent film—a feature ballet musical. The Heart of Polichinelle, based on the life of renowned Leningrad choreographer Leonid Jacobson.

The Alekseychuks had been widely acclaimed in their homeland as filmmakers who interpreted and celebrated the arts. Among their outstanding and frequently prize-winning achievements were a two-part TV special on the Leningrad ballet (distributed widely in the West); a one-hour film about famed Leningrad architect, Flannery, and a two-hour drama on the life of Vincent Van Gogh.

In Rome, in the late winter of 1977 they encountered the work of William Kurelek, the renowned Canadian painter. Kurelek’s portrayal of Canadian life as seen in “Lumberjacks,” “A Prairie Boy’s Winter,” “Oh! Toronto!” his profound spirituality as expressed in his 160 paintings “Passion of Christ,” and his determined sense of the artist’s role in Canadian society evident in his autobiography contributed to the Alekseychuks coming to Canada. In November 1978, they became Canadian citizens.

Having completed some film work with CBC-TV and TV-Ontario, the team is now embarking on a one-hour film on the life and work of William Kurelek.

The following essay illuminates their filmic approach to the project.

Certainly the phenomenon of filmmakers taking the trouble to not only describe their approach and reasoning in such great detail, but to also think through and express so eloquently—and with such vivid richness of social and cultural connective— their thoughts and probes about film on art, is an inspiration to those committed to film as art.

Just as the painter conveys his message to the canvas, so must the filmmaker fine-tune his imagination and his craft to receive it. Given the fantasy, all things are possible...
emotions thus establishing his own 'temperature of perception' - a quality without which any communion with the arts is meaningless. If not impossible. Only in the magnetic field of our vibrating sensations does a work of art work. In film, we often neglect this basic necessity, and opt for bombarding the viewer with the so-called 'objective information.' A usual result is a cold-as-\textbullet{}s-nose lecture, instead of an unforgettable drama.

But now, let us imagine the realization of our theoretical principles in a concrete example: the work of William Kurelek. Let us film in a usual way a Kurelek self-portrait: the painting is that of a boy hunched over from despair, in the face of a dreadful future which his incurable eye disease forebodes. He is seen from inside somebody's eye. No doubt this exquisite composition would lose much of its power without these unblinking eyelids. (See Illustration.)

Any ideas about filming? Zoom in or zoom out, that's it. Or maybe a series of still shots, a staccato whose movement (retreat or approach) would be essentially the same. With these methods, at their best, one can only retell what has already been told.

A slight switch of a railway point sends a train into another direction. Let us do it.

What about moving closer to the boy... without leaving the watching eye? Perhaps so very close that the desperate boy's eye will fit into the eyeocket of his watcher. Just imagine this slow, mesmerizing movement, at the end of which the desperate eye will be peering into our very depth; imagine, perhaps, a sad closure of the eyelids is much more passionate action than a usual fade-out, and you will readily take the trouble to execute such a shot. With this method then, we actually exploit the zoom-in technique - going so far as to maintain that a banal zoom-out should precede it, to let the viewer get a full impression of the drawing before the other cinematic meanings come into play. We use the mocked technique deliberately because we are hoping that the difference between an idler playing with a lens handle and the pursuit of artistic content will be clearly apparent.

William Kurelek envisaged his series of paintings entitled 'The Passion of Christ' as one day being produced on film. He therefore used a standard format for the paintings which would match that of a television screen. The compositions themselves are ideal from a cinematographer's point of view. They are bold and economical, and yet rich in detail.

Kurelek has succeeded in making our work easier for us. However, there is a danger here; for these conveniences for the filmmaker may lead him to be ob\textbullet{}vious.

There is no place for the timid camera when we approach the mercilessly whipped back of Christ in "The Passion of Christ" series. We are obliged to compose this bloody mosaic on the screen stroke by stroke. Only by doing this can we gain from using the actual sound of whips. The cadence of their whistling as they bite into the mutilated flesh makes us hear the emotional metronome of our shot...

Big lies begin with small ones, on the sensory level. Who is not familiar, for example, with the kind of image-sounding association frequently found in films: a frozen image of soldiers marching - the sound of footsteps, armies in combat, the sound of rifles.

Listen instead to your basic sensations, and you will be surprised how much more meaningful a silence can be.

We cannot merely reproduce the painting of the high priest who has torn open his robe and, with outstretched arms, hovers like a hawk; for this painting is not only one of a series, it is the beginning of a motif. It is the first of three crucifixions: the high priest is being crucified on the cross of fanaticism; later we see Pontius Pilate pointing toward Christ on one side and Barabas on the other, his arms extended on the cross of his indifference; and then, we see Christ on the cross, the cross built upon both intolerance and indifference.

The motif beckons us toward other images, suggests new juxtapositions, leading us to a central theme that pierces the artist's life and works. It will reappear in thematically unsimilar works, in the most paradoxical orchestrations. The small child who has burned his face upward to joyfully greet the snowflakes, so that instead of his eyes, we see his wide nostrils - does this not rhyme with the image of Christ's sorrowfully uplifted face in the Passion series? And the happy image of childhood, of a boy lying in the grass with outstretched arms can become a visual metaphor for the death of the artist who, despite his fifty years and five children, died a teenager.

But let us return to the painting lying in the grass, concealed beneath the leaves. Let us make a little window in the leaves and discover a pair of enticing eyes. We should approach too closely with our camera. We allow the circle of leaves to preserve the mystery.

Or, instead of leaves, let us surround the eyes with a soft haze, in which, like in a newly-sown field, we await the first shoots of life. Perhaps the eyes belong to one of several figures. Let's discover who they are, one at a time. Let their appearance unexpectedly. Let a figure be revealed only in its outline, perhaps from a preparatory sketch by the artist. Let us fill in the contours with music, its timbre suggesting the colors, as we did many years ago in our black-and-white TV program on Van Gogh - when we discovered that a monochrome rendition of the artist's palette can be more faithful to the original colors than even quality posters or albums. For, the imagination is penetrating and holistic, as opposed to printing techniques which are imitative in essence.

Certainly our approach does not prevent mistakes, extreme cases of poor quality - these things depend on the filmmaker's skills - but it opens up...
countless ways to a truly creative, personal treatment of the subject.

The authors have often been rewarded in portraying the life of a great artist more through personally experiencing his work than through reliance on any actual film chronicles. What a wondrous wealth of metaphors and paradoxes yield themselves to us when we yield to them!

Some years ago, we began making a feature documentary film about the Russian classical writer of the nineteenth century, Ivan Turgenev. We had a few magazine cartoons, some photographs and portraits, and the author's own writings to work with. The extreme lack of visual materials literally forced us to be innovative.

We brought the cartoons to life through animation. And what delightful stories they were able to tell!

Turgenev is well-known for his sensitive and vivid descriptions of the countryside. They are filled with the movement of wind and rain, mist and sun. We used time-lapse photography to capture this motion on the screen and let it flow with the prose.

But what were we to do with the portraits of Turgenev? There were a dozen or so, showing a portly, somewhat stiff gentleman, plus some equally eye-catching photographs of him. During our research however, we discovered that a great many of Turgenev's contemporaries - including the disappointed painters (most of them of great stature) who had tried to portray him - complained that Turgenev's witty, subtle and powerful personality eluded any attempt to capture it visually. And suddenly this unresolved riddle became a revelation. What the viewer likes above all the giant Turgenev? How can you picture him? What better way to involve him in the search for the "real Turgenev" than by suggesting that nobody had yet found him?

By lining up the portraits and panning across them, and by letting the contemporaries express their grievances, we immediately made the viewer the authority on Turgenev, knowledgeable enough to dismiss the pictures and increasingly curious to continue his pursuit.

Our image of the writer was created not with the assistance of photographs, but in spite of them. We never referred to a photograph of Turgenev as "Turgenev," but as "a photograph of Turgenev." This seemingly minor play on words was, in fact, a key issue.

Pauline Viardot, the object of Turgenev's long and unhappy love, was one of Europe's foremost sopranos. She was praised by most of the leading composers of the first half of the nineteenth century.

How could the beauty of her voice be brought to the screen? How could the impression she made on the young Turgenev, and the rapture he felt for her as a member of the audience, best be expressed?

At first, the answers to those questions seemed obvious: as a singer; she would have to sing. Perhaps something from "The Barber of Seville." Who would sing her part? No problem, there were many beautiful sopranos available. How easy it would have been to fall into the banal. There were many beautiful voices to choose from, but not one of them was Viardot...

Not by dispelling mystery, but by submitting to it. Not by presenting the spectator with answers, but by involving him in an exciting search for them. In the final moments of the film, we waited in a forest for this man, the author of Hunter's Notes, to appear. His approach was heralded by the sound of distant guns. They grew louder and louder as he was about to appear. But of course, he did not. Because even a resurrected, historical Turgenev, emerging from the great beyond, would have "not like that at all..."

But, you ask, does all of this not interfere with the individual's personal, intimate experience of a painting? This question overlooks a simple fact: by the very act of filming a work, we are already interfering with the viewer's direct contact with it. The camera, by its existence, is a middleman. A sneaky floor is more worrisome if it is rippled on; just as a furtive camera - if in no other way than by boring the viewer - becomes more obvious. To truly involve the viewer, we must boldly involve the camera, and be noticeable in order to achieve invisibility. To do justice to the painting on the screen, we must not be afraid to be subjective.

In our culture, a film about art, such a turn seems all but impossible.

Films about giants are made mostly by dwarfs. It is their stronghold. The business is saturated with stunted concepts that have acquired the status of law. Fortunately, this growth handicap is not some incorrigible whim of Mother Nature. For it is not a growth, but a growth in knowledge and responsibility that is needed to cure the disease - provided, of course, we know the symptoms. Here are some:

1) The surest way to film a painting is to Rob the gallery...

2) Beware of the "leave-it-up-to-the-viewer" attitude. Given such a freedom, the viewer might well decide that he does not need you at all - and he will not always be wrong.

3) The surest way to film a painting is... to watch a painting face with bated breath, let a fly crawl across it...

Are you convinced? Are you almost ready to take the risk? But you are not sure whether the curator will let you take the paintings? Rob the gallery.