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VAN GOGH REDUX: “LOVING VINCENT”

From Quest to Pilgrimage, Games to Gravitas

A Review of the film “Loving Vincent” by Prof. Cliff Edwards, Powell-Edwards Distinguished Professor of Religion and the Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, January, 2018 (cedwards@vcu.edu)

The painted film “Loving Vincent” certainly fulfills Dorota Kobiela’s hopes for the outcome of seven years of labor creating an innovative approach to Vincent van Gogh’s life, letters, and paintings. While many have praised the film’s thousands of Van Gogh-style oil paintings that flicker across the screen in the artist’s bricks and swirls of color, I would like to carry you beyond these innovations in form to the gravity of the narrative and the deeper levels of meaning it suggests. I hope to focus on the weight of the narrative’s struggle to understand the urge to create and decision to die of the Dutch artist whose work with a brush barely covered eight years following his earlier failures as art clerk and evangelist.

I invite you to sit with me in the small theater in Richmond, Virginia, where I viewed the film just a few weeks ago, and I will share my own sense of the experience as it transformed from an interest in following the plot of a quest

narrative to joining in Kobiela's personal pilgrimage. Though my viewing began as a series of cinema games encouraged by the film, it transformed into the attempt to uncover a deeper current of meaning that brought together a philosophy/theology of guilt, the locating of responsibility for the life and death of others, and our own challenge to realize that the meaning of our death belongs to those who finally assume responsibility for re-membering our sacrifices and our dying.

From the opening credits, we find ourselves drawn into the moment of creation. The film locates us in Van Gogh's starry night sky as great swirls of blue and white, yellow and orange, are applied to the screen. Excitement and bewilderment likely follow as the camera lowers us to the earth below that starry sky, and we find ourselves on a street corner some may recognize: the corner outside the northern gates of Arles in Provence where Vincent van Gogh rented an abandoned Yellow House he intended as a "monastery for struggling artists." We witness a fist-fight between a Zouave in uniform and a young man named Armand, son of the postal worker Joseph Roulin, famous as the subject of several Van Gogh paintings. We learn the fight has to do with conflicting views of the recently dead artist. In the brawl, a letter is dropped that had been given to Armand by his father, an un-mailed letter by Vincent to his younger brother Theo in Paris. Not realizing that Theo has also died, the postman has insisted that his reluctant son seek to find Theo in Paris and give him the letter. That is the quest, and as in any good quest story there are wise guides along the way, puzzles to be solved, and seemingly impossible obstacles to be overcome.

But there in the theater, I was already playing a cinema game offered me by the film. What Van Gogh painting would next pop up in some surprising

and unexpected place, what confusions of time and site was I being invited to correct? The film title itself already suggested double meanings. It tells us that many are "Loving Vincent," but its origin is in a letter-closing by the artist who could sign himself to Theo, "Your loving Vincent." Apparently, I was being alerted that there would be transpositions and double meanings in the film that may have a significance of their own. The camera lowered us to earth from the sky Vincent painted from his barred asylum window in the town of Saint-Remy. But as we landed on earth, Saint-Remy had morphed into the city of Arles. We find the famous "Night Café" in the same building as the Yellow House, but we may know that was not its proper location. A cinema trick is played in that same scene, a surprise "quotation" from Vincente Minelli's film "Lust for Life." Minelli had shown the postman Roulin coming into a bar to wake a dazed Van Gogh and deliver a much needed letter with money from Theo. As the camera widened its scope, we realized that Minelli had placed us inside Vincent's familiar painting of the Night Café with its glaring gaslights and red and green colors. Vincent had called that painting his "ugliest" but perhaps "most important work." Kobiela creates the double surprise of the Minelli scene and our presence in that same famous painting now hanging at Yale University. Surprises and confusions continue, not least of which is the presence of the Roulin family in Arles at all, as the postman had been transferred to Marseille while Vincent was still in Arles. Later, once Armand's quest leads him to the north of France, he meets a peasant on a ladder repairing a thatched roof in the village of Auvers. As the villager turns full-face toward us, we recognize and perhaps can even name him: he is Patience Escalier, the old peasant or herder from the south, not the north, painted twice during Vincent's time in Arles. Soon after, when Armand begs a ride in a farmer's wagon in Auvers, we pass three of Van Gogh's most famous scenes from the far south, not north: a southern

Harvest scene, the Sower with a tree and large round sun, and the one southern painting Vincent later sold at an exhibition in Belgium, the Red Vineyard. I began to realize that these apparent confusions were not errors, but were intended to tell me that Kobiela was insisting on her own artistic freedom to pick and choose as she wished in a narrative where all Van Gogh sources were available for her film mosaic, or perhaps better, her intentional film "bricolage," and I was free to join the freedom and willingly move toward deeper levels of the meaning of Vincent's creative life and death.

Alternating with the painted sequences of the film are flickering black and white scenes staged with actual human actors. Vincent as a young boy is pictured as rejected by his mother who stands in the Dutch parish cemetery grieving her first child, a still-born Vincent. Kobiela has begun gathering a variety of psychological studies, including this "replacement child theory" found in numerous books on Van Gogh over the past 128 years. The film presents us with a series of possible but often incompatible explanations of the artist's inner conflicts. The first page of the recent Neifeh and Smith biography, *Van Gogh: The Life* (2011), may have led Kobiela to suggest a rejecting mother as well as the view later voiced by some of the film's characters that Vincent did not commit suicide, but was shot by a young man playing cowboy. To my mind, the Neifeh and Smith book is deeply flawed. I challenge you to test that opening page of Chapter One for accuracy. We are told that Hans Christian Andersen's "The Story of a Mother" was "obsessively" told and retold by Vincent, focused on "maternal love gone awry," and is the key to Vincent's "unique injury." Actual evidence is that Vincent told the story exactly twice in his lifetime, and a reading of the story itself, I believe, will tell you that Andersen's tale is an amazing story of a mother's love and sacrifice, not the twisted story of a mother's rejection as Neifeh and Smith

interpret it. They misunderstand Vincent from the start. But again, Kobiela's method, I believe, is "bricolage," and we will be treated to a variety of theories and perspectives which we are invited to choose or reject. We are being warned that there is no simple and obvious route to understanding the life and work of Van Gogh.

The film continues with Armand Roulin sent on his quest by his Postman father, a compassionate friend and defender of the memory of Vincent the artist. The skeptical Armand's reluctant trip to Paris brings him to another wise guide for continuing the quest, Vincent's friend the Paris color-merchant, Father Tanguy. Tanguy gives us a taste of the Paris art scene, and tells of the high hopes he had for Vincent's painting and his sorrow at what he is sure was Vincent's suicide. He gives Armand the sad news that Theo soon collapsed and died after his brother Vincent's death. How can Armand deliver a dead man's letter to a dead man? The quest will not be simple. Perhaps the doctor who was with Vincent at his death will have some answers, and so Armand is directed to the country village about 20 miles northwest of Paris, the village of Auvers where Vincent died and is buried.

Auvers with its thatched roofs, wheat fields, hills, and river, was described in Vincent's first letter from the site on May 20, 1890. He writes Theo that Auvers is "profoundly beautiful," and he looks forward to painting there. During his 70 days in Auvers, housed in an attic room of the Ravoux Inn, Vincent wandered the village and countryside and painted what many believe to be 70 masterpieces. It is Auvers that becomes the key site for Armand's careful search for the meaning of Vincent's life and death, and it is the inn-keeper's daughter, Adeline, painted three times by Vincent, and the daughter of Dr. Paul Gachet, Marguerite, painted twice, who are presented

as key sources closest to the artist, along with Dr. Gachet himself. The secret of Vincent's life and death seem hidden in the memories of those two young women and the doctor. Each of the three has a view of the true character of the artist, and perhaps each holds some secret regarding the artist's death. Over against their admiration and love for Vincent, Kobiela makes of the housekeeper of the strange mansion and gardens of the Gachet residence a counter-force, a woman who sees Vincent as an "evil" outsider intent on stirring up trouble in the village and in the Gachet home in particular. Even the expression of Vincent's face in flashbacks related to the housekeeper, are given a sinister look. There may be more than a hint of the influence of Kurosawa's great film "Rashomon" with its flashbacks and conflicting evidence regarding the death of a samurai and possible rape of his wife, just as the entire theme of one segment of Kurosawa's film "Dreams" may have influenced the very premise of "Loving Vincent" with its Japanese art student who dares enter Vincent's paintings in order to interview him.

Armand, no longer a skeptical and reluctant messenger but rather a serious seeker, presses his own questions regarding Vincent's last days and death on Adeline, Marguerite, the housekeeper, and Dr. Gachet. He spends a night in the very room of the Ravoux Inn where Vincent lived and died, and for a moment the presence of Adeline seems to move toward a romance with Armand, but the possibility is rejected as a distraction from the serious inquiry regarding the artist. Armand sleeps alone in the death-room and dreams of the artist bleeding, suffering, and perhaps eluding him in ripples of blue paint. I might have suggested one more mystery element to the attic room scenes. In the film, the walls are bare, but we know that Vincent carried to Auvers with him his own painted copy of Delacroix's famous painting, the Pieta. That intrusion of a Christian work of art would have raised another

difficult question about the artist. Could it be that this artist who did no traditionally religious paintings of his own, nevertheless wished to see his copy of one such painting on his bedroom wall? What was the failed evangelist's view during his last year of the role of Christianity in his life? I tried to solve this issue in my own book *Van Gogh's Ghost Paintings*, but mention it here as but one more layer of mystery regarding the artist and his inner life.

But it is Dr. Gachet and his daughter who are presented as closest to the mystery of the artist, and Armand now focuses his search on them. He carries a chair into the famous wheatfield with crows on the hill near the Auvers cemetery. He will spend time with that critical painting. He purposefully stirs up the crows in a scene taken directly from Kurosawa's "Crows" in the film "Dreams." There in that wheatfield Armand meets Marguerite who is carrying flowers to place on Vincent's grave, her daily ritual. She realizes Armand has linked her life and Vincent's death to each other. She tells him that she "is not important" and asks, "Did you know he was a genius?" She muses, "No detail of life was too small or humble for him." We have a flashback to the Gachet garden, and see Vincent painting her there while a disturbed Dr. Gachet peers out at the scene. Marguerite notes how her would-be-artist father is jealous of this rough artist's work, and spends hours trying to copy Vincent's paintings, but without success. She admits to Armand that Dr. Gachet told her that her friendship with the artist "distracted" him and "kept many masterpieces from being born." From then on she sought to hide herself from the artist. She muses, "If only I had acted differently," and answers Armand's questions with an admission of guilt: "Blame me, blame my father."

From that crucial scene in the wheatfield we join Armand in his only face-

to-face meeting with Dr. Gachet, presented as Vincent's Gachet portrait in its melancholy pose coming to life in the Gachet garden. The doctor receives the quest-letter from Armand and promises to send it to Theo's wife Jo, who is collecting the artist's letters. He explains that Vincent's melancholia could easily have moved him from calm and creativity to depression and suicide surprisingly rapidly, notes the artist's fear of the future, and praises "each new canvas" as a "shining star." Finally, the doctor takes full blame himself for Vincent's suicide: "Who is to blame? Me." Dr. Gachet explains that he confronted Vincent with brother Theo's ill health and danger of dying. He told Vincent that he had burdened his brother with the heavy expenses necessary to buy his own opportunity to immerse himself in his art. Vincent, doctor Gachet explains to Armand, fled and took his own life out of guilt to pay his debt and to save Theo. One might even suggest that there is the thought that the apparently worthless paintings by the strange living artist would now become treasures of a dead martyr's brother, sister-in-law, and god-son.

Kobiela's pilgrimage celebrating the humble genius of Vincent and his final sacrifice for his brother's family becomes clearer. Even art itself may be voluntarily sacrificed for those who raise the new generation and foster its dreams. Guilt, and admission of guilt, whether the guilt of Marguerite, Dr. Gachet, or Vincent himself, is to be openly admitted and seen as the very debt that binds persons of good will, including those who love Vincent. We are all called to admit and accept our debts to those who struggle for new and creative ways of seeing and so of living. We have not paid attention to the humble and creative persons who pioneered new ways of living together on this earth. We have not attended to their deaths and our responsibility for remembering them and daily honoring their graves. Even Vincent's free

choice of death becomes a part of the great human response to the guilty debt we owe to the past and the freedom we offer future generations.

The philosophic sources behind Kobiela's celebration of Van Gogh's art are not known to me. But I wonder if Heidegger's sense of the power of our truly realizing our mortality, the power released in our freedom to choose death, plays some role. After all, it was Van Gogh's painting of old shoes that became a revelation to Heidegger of the meaning of art itself as a meditative presence in the face of our journey toward death. The name of Emmanuel Levinas also comes to my mind in relation to Kobiela's film and its willingness to leave unanswered questions and ambiguities. Levinas insisted that we must not over-interpret art and rob it of its essential "obscurity." Art, for Levinas, should not be demystified at its deepest level of "ineffable mystery", its "invasion of shadow." I would also posit the work of Gilles Deleuze as a source for Kobiela's vision, a vision that encourages a laboratory's daring experimentation with art as more becoming to our dealing with masterpieces than seeing them in an "illusory state of immutability." My own musings on Kobiela's film have puzzled over these issues, especially the mystery element in traditional paint on canvas art. I felt myself wishing that several of Van Gogh's paintings would simply be placed before me as paintings for an extended, meditative viewing. Is the silent, all-at-onceness of an encounter with a hanging canvas part of the "ineffable mystery" of its art? Did I lose something in that landscape when its locomotive in the background began moving across the screen? Was there more to see of Dr. Gachet in his melancholic pose in the garden when viewed silently over time than in his sitting up to talk with Armand? Did Van Gogh's use of heavy layers of paint in many of his works already introduce us to movement, though we as viewers moved and so created the changing light and shadow of those sur-

faces? Perhaps I am saying that the tradition of the hanging canvas with its “illusory state of immutability” and the daring experiments in the arts of our day are part of the richness of art itself as changing expressions of changing inner and outer worlds.

To return to the film, of course there is Armand’s return to Arles to report to his father Joseph Roulin. He seems to have told his father that an accidental shooting had taken the artist’s life, perhaps an easier answer than the truth of melancholia and suicide. His father has already heard from Theo’s wife Jo that she received the letter that led to the quest. As her thanks, she copies out for Armand the letter by Vincent that must seem to her to be the appropriate gift for one who completed such a quest. It is read for us by Armand who is seated under a starry sky with his father: “In the life of the painter, death may not be the most difficult thing. For myself, I declare that I don’t know anything about it. But the sight of the stars always makes me dream... . Just as we take the train to go to Tarascon or Rouen, we take death to go to a star.” The quest started with a letter and ends with the reading of the letter. Kobiela’s focus on both paintings and letters as our best bet for meeting the elusive artist himself becomes clear. Don MacLean’s “Starry, Starry Night” accompanies the film credits that appear in the form of a “scrap-book” of words and pictures, appropriate to the “bricolage” that is the very experiment of the film itself.

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