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## Lust for Life

Directed by Vincent Minnelli with Kirk Douglas, Anthony Quinn, James Donald, Everett Sloane and Lionel Jeffries, 122 minutes, color, 1956

**Best Actor** (Nominated), Academy Awards, 1956 - Kirk Douglas

**Best Supporting Actor** , Academy Awards, 1956 - Anthony Quinn

**Best Screenplay Adaptation** (Nominated), Academy Awards, 1956

**Best Actor in a Drama** , Golden Globes, 1956 - Kirk Douglas

Vincent Van Gogh is considered by many to have been the greatest painter of all time: an artist whose oeuvre abounds in masterpieces of brilliantly colored, intensely emotional works with bravura brushwork.

Van Gogh, however, was not successful during his lifetime and was tormented and was a misfit.

His passionate struggle to do something fine with his life is agonizing and even when he finally blossoms as an artist he is beset with severe mental problems, so much so that even in a flurry of incredible creativity he shoots himself.

His life is about unrequited love, a savage thirst to be "used" and to contribute somehow to alleviating humanity's harshness, and the passion to capture the beauty of life. It is also about the very, very touching love of his younger brother, Theo, who supported him unstintingly.

Because of his remarkable artistic genius, Van Gogh's suffering is extremely fascinating. One might be tempted to attribute his great artistic achievements to his suffering, but his suffering did not end with the maturing of his talents. So much for the psychiatric notion that understanding the nature of one's problems leads to their solutions.

Van Gogh apparently was a "manic depressive," and also a very impatient, abrupt, self-centered individual, consumed with his "persona," his destiny, and "at ease" only when feverishly working on his drawings and paintings.

His quest was the fundamental, basic search for a "meaningful" existence and perhaps because he was the son of a minister such meaning was equated to a great extent with "good works," the aiding and salvation of others. For a while, he thought of following in his father's footsteps but his unorthodoxy did not sit well with religious hierarchies although he did work for a while as a minister in a coal-mining village.

"Lust for Life" is the film version of Irving Stone's same-named biography of Van Gogh, which was based in large part of the letters of Van Gogh to his brother.

It is a spectacular achievement. Many of Van Gogh's original paintings are shown and the film faithfully recreates many of the scenes in some of his most famous works. Kirk Douglas as Van Gogh and Anthony Quinn as Paul Gauguin are uncannily like some of the artists' self-portraits and their performances are very, very memorable. (Also uncanny in resembling the subjects of famous Van Gogh portraits is the casting of Everett Sloane as Doctor Gachet, and Niall MacGinnis as Roulin.)

Douglas ranges from forlorn sullenness to hysterical rage, from tender nuance to joyous exhilaration. He is a caged animal, full of nervous energy and anguish, and very lonely. His crazed intensity animates almost every scene.

Inconceivably, he lost out to Yul Brynner in "The King and I" for the best actor Oscar. (Brynner was wonderfully flamboyant and histrionic, but Douglas, who was also nominated for best actor for his roles in "The Champion" in 1949 and "The Bad and The Beautiful" in 1952, gives the performance of a lifetime and one completely different from his superb title role in "Spartacus" (see [The City Review article](#)). (He finally received an Oscar, albeit an honorary one, in 1995.)

As portrayed by Douglas, Van Gogh is agitated but not ambitious, restless and unable to control his passions, yet decisive and bold. Although one of the great heroic, "action" actors in film history, here he is, in essence, an ineffective individual, incapable of conforming to established mores, yet not a rebel with a cause, incapable of sustaining relationships, except with his brother Theo, incapable of controlling or understanding his mental states.

One is tempted to attribute the boldness and forcefulness of Van Gogh's paintings to his driven personality but the film and Douglas's performance do not adequately explain them artistically, and indeed such explanation is probably not possible. Certainly they are the product of tremendously focused concentration that perhaps only the lonely can achieve.

The movie's greatest scene is a dialogue between Van Gogh and Gauguin who has just arrived to stay with him in Arles where Van Gogh hopes to create a "Studio of the South," the title of a great art exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2002 on the two artists.

Gauguin, another eccentric, was far more famous at the time than Van Gogh, and his approach to art was diametrically opposed to Van Gogh's. He painted what was in his mind, not the glories of nature that absorbed Van Gogh.

Gauguin is impressed with Van Gogh's recent work when he arrives and Van Gogh is eager to see Gauguin's recent paintings from his stay in Brittany. Gauguin's personality is much more reserved than Van Gogh's. He is, of course, full of gusto and passion, but artistically he is much more intellectual and disciplined and derides Van Gogh's impasto-rich brushwork. Van Gogh argues that he is pre-occupied with emotion and wants his emotional response to what he sees to ooze out to those who see his work.

"You paint too fast," Gauguin chides.

"You look too fast," Van Gogh retorts. "I want to create things that touch people," he proclaims.

Both artists smoke pipes and drink and lust after women and are unconcerned about convention.

In this classic clash of these titans of the mind and the heart there is no winner: Gauguin eventually leaves after Van Gogh slashes off his ear concerned that his continued presence might be fatal to Van Gogh. History, of course, places Van Gogh's art higher than Gauguin's, but Gauguin is indubitably great and the bold palettes of both led to many later artistic revolutions. Their "competition" may be likened to that between Michelangelo and Raphael, between voluptuousness and classicism. Michelangelo and Raphael, of course, worked within the "system" with great patronage, while Van Gogh and Gauguin were "outsiders."

Gauguin was convinced to join Van Gogh in Arles by Van Gogh's brother, Theo, who was willing to give his financial support to the visit in the hopes that Gauguin might be the person to "calm" and nurture his brother. Theo worked for Goupil, the famous Parisian art dealer, and he strongly supported many of the "newer" artists such as the Impressionists. He introduces his brother to the "new" artists and Van Gogh discovers the glories of color and in one scene, he takes his brother to visit Pissarro who extols about the virtues of not focusing one individual colors but a scene's entire light environment while, on a separate visit, they hear Seurat expound on the virtues of his scientific Pointilism.

Anthony Quinn deservedly won an Oscar for best supporting actor for his very powerful performance. It was his second such Oscar for he won for his role in "Viva Zapata" in 1952.

Theo is played by James Donald (who was also featured in "The Bridge On The River Kwai") with tremendous empathy and saintliness. Long suffering but undeterred in his devotion to his older brother, Theo at first is only concerned about his brother's welfare and finding happiness, but comes to believe that he has the potential to become a great artist.

In supporting roles, Lionel Jeffries, Pamela Brown and Noel Purcell are fine as Doctor Peyron, Christine and Anton Mauve, respectively.

The score by Miklos Rozsa, who also did the scores of "Spellbound" and "The Lost Weekend," is quite good.

Although the movie is a little slow in the beginning in Van Gogh's pre-artistic days, it gains momentum with his explosive paintings. Vincent Minnelli has able to photograph many original Van Gogh paintings and some are shown as works in progress. Minnelli's direction is quite tight and extraordinarily sensitive to Van Gogh's art and he makes luscious use of color in the film.

Irving Stone, the author of the book on which the film was based, also wrote "The Agony and the Ecstasy," about Michelangelo, which was also made in a movie.

Touching and tragic, this is a glorious, brilliant film that memorializes the world's greatest painter and perhaps the world's most loving brother.

While its early scenes have a Hollywood look about them, much of the film is shoot outdoors and has a great breath of air and the free spirit that somehow led Van Gogh to his incredible and indelible visions.