Nabokov's Cinematic Sensibility and Film Strategy in *The Defense*

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> You will see that this little clicking contraption will make a revolution in our life — in the life of writers. […] We shall have to adapt ourselves to the shadowy screen and to the cold machine. A new form of writing will be necessary.[1]

Introduction

Lev Tolstoi's comments on the importance of film and the challenges it presented to literary convention were made just over a decade after the first screenings of moving pictures, his words anticipating the role cinema was to play in modernist art in both Russia and the West in the first decades of the twentieth century. In terms of its role in Nabokov's fiction, critical studies have so far concentrated on the influence of cinema that was immediately contemporary to particular works, for example, German Expressionist and Soviet silent film on *The Eye* and *Despair*, or American *film noir* on *Lolita*.[2] This article, however, will explore a broader range of cinematic influence that extends back to Nabokov's formative years in pre-revolutionary Russia. It will argue that his cinematic sensibility was

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[1] 'Lev Tolstoy: A record by I. Teneromo of a conversation with Tolstoy on his eightieth birthday, August 1908', quoted in Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*, 3rd edn, London, 1983, pp. 410–11 (p. 410). English translation by David Bernstein first published in the *New York Times*, 31 January 1937 (hereafter, 'Conversation with Tolstoy').

[2] See, for example, Alfred Appel, Jr., *Nabokov's Dark Cinema*, New York, 1974, and Barbara Wyllie, *Nabokov at the Movies: Film Perspectives in Fiction*, Jefferson, NC, 2003.

not only formed long before his arrival in émigré Berlin, but was also foundational to an interaction with cinema that continued throughout his career. At the same time it will focus on his third novel, *The Defense* (*Zashchita Luzhina*), a work that has not yet been explored in terms of cinema, to reveal the ways in which he deployed the themes, styles and techniques of film in his portrayal of a protagonist who has until now been considered primarily in terms of chess.

The 'story of a chess player who [is] crushed by his genius'[3] was written between February and August 1929, published serially in the émigré quarterly, *Sovremennye zapiski*, in October 1929 and in book form by Slovo in 1930. That Nabokov should have chosen to write a novel that focused on the struggles of a chess genius is unsurprising, considering that he had been involved in the game from a young age, not merely as a casual player, but as someone who, during his time in Berlin, participated in tournaments and published chess problems in the émigré press.[4] While planning his second novel, *Korol′, Dama, Valet* (*King, Queen, Knave*), during the autumn of 1927, Nabokov was already conjuring ideas for new protagonists, inspired by the battle taking place between José Capablanca and Alexander Alekhine at the World Chess Championship in Buenos Aires.[5] In October, he composed a poem about a chess grandmaster, who as he plays becomes 'part of the sixty-four-celled black and white world of the chessboard'.[6] By the time *King, Queen, Knave* came out the following

[3] Letter from Vladimir Nabokov to James Laughlin, 27 November 1941, in Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli (eds), *Vladimir Nabokov: Selected Letters 1940–77*, London, 1991, p. 39. In his foreword to the 1964 English translation of *Zashchita Luzhina*, Nabokov described Luzhin's genius as 'sterile' and 'recondite' (*The Defense*, New York, 1990, p. 10), echoing Vladislav Khodasevich some thirty years before, who 'perceptively remarked [that] Luzhin's tragedy lies in the fact that he is a "talent" and not a genius' ('V. Sirin. "Zashchita Luzhina"', *Vozrozhdenie*, 11 October 1930). See Aleksandr Dolinin, 'Istinnaia zhizn′ pisatelia Sirina: pervye romany', in Vladimir Nabokov (V. Sirin′), *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh: Stoletie so dnia rozhdeniia, 1899–1999. Tom. 2: 1926–1930*, compiled by N. I. Artemenko-Tolstoi, St Petersburg, 1999, p. 35.

[4] The chess theme first appears in 'Christmas', a story written at the end of 1924, which Nabokov described as 'oddly resembl[ing] the type of chess problem called "selfmate"'. Vladimir Nabokov, *Collected Stories*, London, 2001, p. 647. Nabokov refers to Luzhin's suicide as a form of selfmate, or 'sui-mate'. *The Defense*, New York, 1990, p. 8. All subsequent references are to this edition.

[5] Nabokov played Alekhine, as well as the grandmaster Aron Nimzowitsch, in Berlin in 1926. See Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, London, 1993, p. 259. Alekhine won the World Championship in 1927.

[6] James Murray Slater, 'Chess as a Key to Solving Nabokov's *Korol′, Dama, Valet*', unpublished MA thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC, 2009, pp. 46–47 (p. 1) <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/210603874.pdf> [accessed 9 April 2023]. 'Shakhmatnyi kon'' ('The Chess Knight', 1927) was first published in *Rul′*, 23 October

autumn, however, Nabokov was thinking not only about chess, but also about film. He tried writing an article,[7] but turned instead to a poem, 'Kinematograf' ('The Cinematograph'),[8] which he published in the émigré newspaper, *Rul′*, on 25 November 1928,[9] just two months before he began working on *The Defense*.

While Nabokov's more implicit treatment of film in *The Defense* sets it apart from the other more explictly cinematic early novels — *Mary* (*Mashen′ka*, 1926), *King, Queen, Knave* and *The Eye* (*Sogliadatai*, 1930)[10] — its particular manipulation of camera eye perspective establishes it as a direct precursor to *The Eye*. *The Defense* can therefore be considered as one of a sequence of works in which Nabokov explores the creative implications of cinema, encompassing style, narrative technique and characterization, inspired by a fascination with film that extended from contemporary cinematic culture to film technology and its impact on ways of seeing.

Key to understanding Nabokov's relationship with film is to recognize that his fascination with the medium began in St Petersburg before the revolution. In terms of *The Defense*, it is important to place it, as an example of Nabokov's early cinematic work, within a late-nineteenth-century movement that began to privilege the visual and which developed into an explicit response to and direct engagement with cinema in the

1927. Also collected in Vladimir Nabokov, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, Moscow, 1997, pp. 410–11, and Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda*, pp. 558–59. For commentary on this and a set of three chess sonnets Nabokov wrote in 1924, see 'Cards and Chess: *King, Queen, Knave* and *The Luzhin Defense*', in Thomas Karshan, *Nabokov and the Art of Play*, Oxford and New York, 2011, pp. 82–106 (pp. 92–95). For background on the genesis of the novel and commentary, see Boyd, *The Russian Years*, pp. 275, 289, 321–40, and Dolinin, 'Istinnaia zhizn′ pisatelia Sirina', pp. 26–41. For commentaries on *The Defense* as a 'chess novel', see Brian Boyd, 'The Problem of Pattern: Nabokov's *Defense*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 33, 4, 1987, pp. 575–604; 'Text and Pre-Text in *The Defense*', in D. Barton Johnson, *Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*, Ann Arbor, MI, 1985, pp. 83–92; '*The Defense*: Secret Asymmetries', in Leona Toker, *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures*, Ithaca, NY, 1989, pp. 67–87; '*The Defense*', in Vladimir E. Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld*, Princeton, NJ, 1991, pp. 58–83; 'The Evil Differentiation of Shadows', in Julian Connolly, *Nabokov's Early Fiction: Patterns of Self and Other*, Cambridge and New York, 1992, pp. 75–100; Strother B. Purdy, 'Solus Rex: Nabokov and the Chess Novel', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 14, 4, 1968–69, pp. 379–95, and Luke Parker, 'The Gambit: Chess and the Art of Competition in *The Luzhin Defense*', *Russian Review*, 76, 2017, pp. 438–57.

[7] See Luke Parker, *Nabokov Noir: Cinematic Culture and the Art of Exile*, Ithaca, NY, 2022, pp. 55 and 209, n. 98.

[8] Rather than the non-literal translation, 'Cinema'. 'Cinematograph' is the original term for 'a motion-picture camera, projector, theater, or show'. Mirriam-Webster online <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cinematograph> [accessed 14 October 2023].

[9] See Nabokov, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, pp. 412–13, and Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda*, pp. 595–96. Future references will be to this edition.

[10] For commentary, see Wyllie, *Nabokov at the Movies,* chapters 2–3.

early modernist era. In order to demonstrate this, the article will begin with a discussion of critical responses to cinema in Nabokov's work in the light of his comments on film and the record of his own movie-going. It will then turn to an exploration of the origins of Nabokov's cinematic sensibility in pre-revolutionary Russia, set against Russian and European literary responses to the advent of cinema at the turn of the twentieth century. The second half of the article will focus on *The Defense*, discussing the contemporary influence of Pudovkin and Shpikovskii's *Chess Fever* (*Shakhmatnaia goriachka*, 1925) and American slapstick comedy, concluding, by way of 'Kinematograf', with an analysis of Nabokov's deployment of cinematic technique in the novel, paying particular attention to the close-up, the novel's image system and camera eye perspective.

Nabokov's cinema: Reference and influence

Responding to Alfred Appel Jr.'s 1974 study of film in his fiction, Nabokov remarked that '[y]our basic idea, my constantly introducing cinema themes, and cinema lore, and cinema-metaphors into my literary compositions cannot be contested of course'.[11] Despite a number of subsequent studies ranging from textual and theoretical analyses to comparisons of the cinematic adaptations of *Lolita* with both novel and screenplay,[12] critics

[11] Letter to Alfred Appel, Jr. dated 8 November 1974 in Nabokov and Bruccoli (eds), *Selected Letters*, p. 537. See also, Appel, *Nabokov's Dark Cinema*.

[12] See Beverly Gray Bienstock, 'Focus Pocus: Film Imagery in *Bend Sinister*', in J. E. Rivers and Charles Nicol (eds), *Nabokov's Fifth Arc: Nabokov and Others on His Life's Work*, Austin, TX, 1982, pp. 125–38; Marie Bouchet, '"L'image-mouvement" nabokovienne: paradoxes de l'écriture cinématique à travers l'étude des œuvres de Vladimir Nabokov', in J. Nacache and J. L. Bourget (eds), *Cinématismes: La littérature au prisme du cinema*, Bern, 2012, pp. 293–313; Yannicke Chupin, '"A Most Pleasurable Antiphony": Dialogues d'auteurs et aspects de la réflexivité dans *Lolita* de Vladimir Nabokov et Stanley Kubrick', *Études anglaises*, 62, 4, 2009, pp. 415–27; Lara Delage-Toriel, *Lolita de Vladimir Nabokov et Stanley Kubrick*, Paris, 2009; Galya Diment, 'From Bauer's Li to Nabokov's Lo: *Lolita* and Early Russian Film', *Cycnos*, 24, 1, 2006 <https://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/582>; Tatyana Gershkovich, 'Self-Translation and the Transformation of Nabokov's Aesthetics from *Kamera Obskura* to *Laughter in the Dark*', *Slavic and East European Journal*, 63, 2, 2019, pp. 206–25; Marina Grishakova, *The Models of Space, Time and Vision in V. Nabokov's Fiction: Narrative Strategies and Cultural Frames*, Tartu, 2012; Yuri Leving, 'Filming Nabokov: On the Visual Poetics of the Text', *Russian Studies in Literature*, 40, 3, 2004, pp. 6–31; Yuri Leving, 'Eystein or Eisenstein? Tricking the Eye in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*', *Nabokov Online Journal*, 6, 2012 <http://www.nabokovonline.com/uploads/2/3/7/7/23779748/26_leving_nabokov_and_eisenstein_pdf.pdf>; Gavriel Moses, *The Nickel Was for the Movies: Film in the Novel from Pirandello to Puig*, Los Angeles, CA, 2005; Thomas Allen Nelson, 'Kubrick in Nabokovland', in *Kubrick: Inside the Film Artist's Maze*, Bloomington, IN, 2000, pp. 56–81; Parker, *Nabokov Noir*; Péter Tamás, 'The Attraction of Montages: Cinematic Writing Style in Nabokov's *Lolita*', *Nabokov*

hesitate to acknowledge the extent of Nabokov's engagement with the medium, tending instead to focus on the tension between cinema and literature as valuable and enduring artistic forms, as he expressed, for example, in a 1931 essay:

> People like to say to themselves that the most impersonal writer, making the best possible portrait of his century, cannot tell us as much as the little gray gleam of an old-fashioned film. Wrong. Contemporary cinematographic methods which seem to our eyes to give a perfectly exact image of life will probably be so different from the methods used by our great-great-nephews that the impression that they will give of the movement of our era […] will be rendered false by the very style of the photography.[13]

Nabokov's primary concerns were that the worlds of his novels should be true — 'the good memoirist […] does his best to preserve the utmost truth of the detail' — and that his art should not date: 'there can be no question that what makes a work of fiction safe from larvae and rust is not its social importance but its art, only its art.'[14] Here he demonstrates a key understanding of cinema and photography as evolving forms, as technologies that are constantly changing and adapting, but which, in doing so, can render their past incarnations 'false', or redundant. Literature, he contends, has a greater ability to offer a more accurate and vital record of time and place, as it does not rely on equipment that is subject to the vagaries of 'style', as well as physical deterioration or obsolescence. Critics, however, seem to be more comfortable with the idea of film as 'insidious technology' that 'bolster[s] memory artificially'[15] (even though Nabokov

Online Journal, 10, 2016 <http://www.nabokovonline.com/uploads/2/3/7/7/23779748/5_tamas.pdf>; Barbara Wyllie, 'Experiments in Perspective: Cinematics in Nabokov's Russian Fiction', *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, 2002, pp. 277–88; Wyllie, *Nabokov at the Movies*; Barbara Wyllie, 'Nabokov and Cinema', in Julian Connolly (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*, Cambridge and New York, 2005, pp. 215–31; Barbara Wyllie, '"My Age of Innocence Girl": Humbert, Chaplin, Lita and Lo', *Nabokov Online Journal*, 9, 2015 <http://www.nabokovonline.com/uploads/2/3/7/7/23779748/4_9_2015_barbara_wyllie_age_of_innocence_girl.pdf>.

[13] Vladimir Nabokov, 'Writers and the Era' (1931), in Brian Boyd and Anastasia Tolstoy (eds), *Think, Write, Speak: Uncollected Essays, Reviews, Interviews, and Letters to the Editor*, London, 2019, p. 105. Luke Parker argues that '"the little gray gleam of an old-fashioned film" is echoed across [Nabokov's] work of the 1930s', with its origins in 'Tolstoi', a poem written in 1928, in which 'Tolstoy's fiction is more real than the illusory verisimilitude of technologically mediated reproductions of his image'. See *Nabokov Noir*, pp. 17–19.

[14] Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, New York, 1990, pp. 186 and 33.

[15] 'Tolstoi', quoted in Parker, *Nabokov Noir*, p. 17.

qualifies this statement with the word 'sometimes'), and on the notion that cinema is an artistically valueless form of commercialized mass entertainment (Nabokov 'is usually remembered for the broad satire he aims at the surface contents of popular cinema — "for it is always windy in filmland"'),[16] than acknowledging the multidimensional role that film plays in his art, as he also openly stated.[17]

This position could be said to have emerged from the first critical responses to film, and particularly the intense debates amongst Russian émigré intellectuals during the 1920s,[18] yet there is no evidence that Nabokov participated directly in these arguments. Nevertheless, this tendency to focus on the dissenting voices, to which Nabokov may or may not have aligned himself, exemplifies a reluctance to concede that he had a genuine artistic interest in film. Similar presumptions have been made about other contemporary modernist writers, for example, T. S. Eliot. David Trotter has pointed out that critics have tended to take one of two positions, either to insist on the absence of any 'formative effect' of cinema on his writing, or to emphasize Eliot's 'powerful aversion to cinema', ultimately choosing 'to quote his remarks about cinema at their most dismissive, and in isolation'.[19] Yet, Trotter argues, Eliot 'was a good deal more interested in cinema […] than he was in film. The genres which most exercised his imagination — the Western; slapstick comedy — were all in the mainstream; indeed, they *were* the mainstream'. Not only this, but he '*chose*, in certain texts, or in certain episodes or scenes, the "disembodiment of perception by technique"', that is, to deploy the mechanisms of film in his work.[20]

[16] Moses, *The Nickel Was for the Movies*, p. 43, quoting Vladimir Nabokov, *Laughter in the Dark*, New York, 1991, p. 118.

[17] Parker, for example, contends that '[m]uch of Nabokov's engagement as a writer with the cinema was practical and strategic, and […] directly related to the rapidly changing material circumstances of exile in interwar Europe. At the same time, this writerly engagement certainly includes within it his stylistic and intellectual engagement with the medium of film' — essentially in terms of 'the roles of spectator and actor', and 'how studio and screen interact as a metaphor of exile'. *Nabokov Noir*, pp. 20–21.

[18] For commentary, see ibid., ch. 2.

[19] David Trotter, 'T.S. Eliot and Cinema', *Modernism/Modernity*, 13, 2, April 2006, pp. 237–65 (p. 237). Emphasis in the original.

[20] Ibid., p. 241, quoting from 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', 1919. Emphasis in the original. The notion of the 'disembodiment of perception by technique' echoes Viktor Shklovskii's theory of 'ostranenie', or 'making strange' (a term he first used in 1917 in the essay, 'Art as Device' ['Iskusstvo kak priem']), which was 'first and foremost an urgently required and utterly relevant theoretical answer to the tremendous impact early cinema had on the early avant-garde movements in pre-revolutionary Russia'. Annie van den Oever, 'Introduction: Ostran(n)enie as an "Attractive" Concept', in eadem (ed.), *Ostrannenie: On*

It is important, therefore, to acknowledge the distinction between Nabokov's response to cinema as a popular medium of inconsistent quality and an unreliable means of recording time, and his interest in film, which through its privileging of vision and its mechanistic extension of visual capacity, tests and expands our sensory experience such that our way of interacting with the world is both profoundly challenged and radically altered.

Another problem hindering investigation of cinema in Nabokov's work is the difficulty in identifying specific allusions to contemporary films. Nabokov's single objection to Appel's study was that:

> You and I and other Nabokovians will readily realize that stylistically you are slanting my works movieward in pursuit of your main thought; yet it would be rather unfair if less subtle people […] were to conclude I had simply lifted my characters […] from films which you know and I don't.[21]

This level of doubt, and there being barely any record of what Nabokov had seen — in interviews he listed a handful of American comedies from the 1920s and '30s, as well as a few silent French and German films from the same era, one American *film noir*, one Lubitsch and one Hitchcock comedy[22] — has served as a major disincentive for scholars, who have found the process of mining literary allusion in Nabokov's work far more productive than searching in vain for references to particular films. There is the description of the instantly recognizable image of Harold Lloyd in *The Defense*, for example,[23] while Charlie Chaplin makes appearances in Nabokov's work from the early poetry and short stories to *Lolita* and *Pnin*,[24] but otherwise the allusions are more oblique — to Edward G.

'Strangeness' and the Moving Image, The History, Reception, and Relevance of a Concept, Amsterdam, 2010, pp. 11–18 (p. 11). See also, 'Art as Device (1917/1919)', in Alexandra Berlina (ed., trans.), *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, New York and London, 2017, pp. 73–96.

[21] Nabokov, *Selected Letters*, p. 538.

[22] Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, Charlie Chaplin, the Marx Brothers, Laurel and Hardy; Carl Theodor Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928) and René Clair's *Sous les toits de Paris* (1930), *Le Million* (1931) and *À Nous la Liberté* (1931), all of which Nabokov described as 'a new world, a new trend in cinema' (*Strong Opinions*, pp. 163–64); F. W. Murnau's *The Last Laugh* (1924), Robert Weine's *The Hands of Orlac* (1924) and Josef von Sternberg's 1932 *Shanghai Express* (Appel, *Nabokov's Dark Cinema*, pp. 137 and 58); Greta Garbo in Ernst Lubitsch's 1939 *Ninotchka* (although Véra remembered them also seeing her in Clarence Brown's 1926 *Flesh and the Devil*); Robert Siodmak's *The Killers* (1946), and Alfred Hitchcock's 1955 *The Trouble with Harry* (Appel, *Nabokov's Dark Cinema*, pp. 41, 187, 208, 129).

[23] Nabokov, *The Defense*, p. 247.

[24] See Wyllie, '"My Age of Innocence Girl"', pp. 10–11.

Robinson in *Transparent Things*, or to what appears to be a film by either Pudovkin or Eizenshtein in *The Gift*.[25] Elsewhere there are only indications of general film genres, for example in *Lolita* to gangster movies, musicals and Westerns, and references that are 'almost exclusively the product of secondary sources', as in *Ada*.[26] Yet in 1932 when confronted by the real prospect of turning one of his stories into a Hollywood film, Nabokov remarked that he 'literally adored the cinema and watched motion pictures with great keenness'.[27] In his first decade in Berlin, Nabokov and his wife Véra would go 'about once a fortnight […] to the cheap corner [movie] theatre',[28] and on trips to Paris during the 1930s he would visit a cinema owned by an old school friend.[29] In Berlin he would go even more frequently with another friend, Georgii Gessen, who wrote film reviews for *Rul'*, taking advantage of the free tickets on offer.[30] Apart from being an audience member, Nabokov worked as a film extra, at one time considered becoming a movie star, wrote slapstick-inspired scenarios with his friend, Ivan Lukash, for Berlin's Bluebird cabaret theatre, and negotiated the rights to his novels and stories with film producers and agents.[31]

Nabokov's son Dmitri also confirmed that his father 'loved the cinema', and remembered going with him to local movie theatres in Boston and Cambridge when they were first in America, especially the Saturday morning screenings of comedy 'shorts' featuring the Marx Brothers, the Three Stooges, Abbot and Costello, and 'an occasional Buster Keaton'.[32] Nabokov may have claimed to have a 'rotten memory' when it came to recalling 'names and numbers',[33] but biographers have described him being able to cite specific films and scenes in precise detail,[34] indicating that

[25] See Wyllie, 'Nabokov and Cinema', p. 221.

[26] Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, edited by Alfred Appel, Jr, New York, 1991, p. 170, and Appel, *Nabokov's Dark Cinema*, p. 59.

[27] Boyd, *The Russian Years*, p. 376. Nabokov also discussed the possibility of turning *The Defense* into a film with the émigré Russian theatre director Nikolai Evreinov in Paris in 1932: 'I'll talk with […] Evreinov about the chess film.' See Nabokov, *Letters to Véra*, 1 November 1932, p. 202. It was eventually adapted by director Marleen Gorris and screenwriter Peter Berry as *The Luzhin Defence* (2000).

[28] Boyd, *The Russian Years*, p. 363. See also, Parker, *Nabokov Noir*, pp. 32–34.

[29] Leving, 'Filming Nabokov', p. 7.

[30] See Parker, *Nabokov Noir*, pp. 30–37, and 'Appendix: Georgy Gessen's Film Reviews for *Rul'* (1924–1931)', pp. 187–94.

[31] See Boyd, *The Russian Years*, pp. 205, 232–33, 227, 231, 233–34, 254 and 376. Also, Parker, *Nabokov Noir*, chapters 3 and 4.

[32] Dmitri Nabokov, correspondence with the author, 1 July 1996.

[33] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 140.

[34] Ibid., pp. 163–64, and Appel, *Nabokov's Dark Cinema*, p. 206, where Appel describes Nabokov re-enacting the opening of Siodmak's *The Killers*.

he was paying far more attention than has generally been acknowledged, which also becomes apparent when looking back to his accounts of his experiences of film in pre-revolutionary Russia.

Nabokov's cinematic sensibility: Origins and context

While Nabokov may have been a regular film-goer in Berlin and Paris, his interest in the industry and its product did not begin in emigration. In his autobiography, he introduces a key connection between film technology, memory and art by depicting the succession of tutors hired by his parents between 1900 and 1911 as a sequence of magic lantern shows. These culminate in the rather chaotic, and not particularly adept, 'Educational Magic Lantern Projections'[35] that his last tutor, Lenski, would subject them to on winter Sunday afternoons in St Petersburg. Nabokov describes how they commandeered a disused nursery, and moved various pieces of furniture out to make space for the projector at one end, with seating 'arranged for a score of spectators' and curtains drawn to block out the light.[36] Although Lenski is projecting slides rather than film, this arrangement typifies the initial use of private homes for screenings, where rooms were turned into nascent cinema auditoria by tearing down walls and introducing heavy black-out curtains. It is interesting that Nabokov mentions the 'fire-hazard considerations' of using this kind of equipment, revealing his awareness of the frequent and sometimes serious cinema fires caused at the time by highly combustible film stock and faulty projectors.[37] Despite the boredom Nabokov describes during these 'sessions', he nevertheless concludes the episode by drawing an explicit link, retrospectively, between the magic lantern and the microscope that establishes the critical role of optical tools in his art:

> Now that I come to think of it, how tawdry and tumid they looked, those jellylike pictures, projected upon the damp linen screen […] but, on the other hand, what loveliness the glass slides as such revealed when simply held between finger and thumb and raised to the light. […] In later years, I rediscovered the same precise and silent beauty at the radiant bottom of the microscope's magic shaft. […] There is, it would seem, in the

[35] Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, New York and Toronto, 1999, p. 124.

[36] Ibid., p. 125.

[37] Ibid. See Yuri Tsivian, *Early Cinema in Russia and Its Cultural Reception*, Chicago, IL and London, 1994, pp. 51–52, and Denise J. Youngblood, *The Magic Mirror: Moviemaking in Russia, 1908–1018*, Madison, WI, 1999, pp. 36–38.

> dimensional scale of the world a kind of delicate meeting place between imagination and knowledge, a point, arrived at by diminishing large things and enlarging small ones, that is intrinsically artistic.[38]

Gavriel Moses has argued that Nabokov's already acute visual sensitivity, nurtured during his childhood by his mother and his art teacher, Mstislav Dobuzhinskii, and further refined by his early lepidopteral pursuits, is enhanced by his interest in 'the mediating optical apparatus'.[39] Here, it is a magic lantern slide, but elsewhere it could be any number of optical tools, used consistently to extend and intensify the experience of vision, and especially the potency of memory. Moses also makes the connection between Nabokov's deployment of optical media in his work and the manner in which he presents the operation of artistic consciousness — the poet's 'capacity of thinking of several things at a time', or 'cosmic synchronization'.[40] Drawing on a 1969 interview, in which Nabokov outlined the close association between the 'power of pure imagination' and the 'apparatus to reproduce those events optically within the frame of one screen', i.e. a 'video camera',[41] Moses shows how Nabokov 'transcends the traditional opposition between seeing with the eyes of a scientist and seeing with the eyes of an artist'.[42] This ability to synchronize visually and then project a simultaneously-generated collection of images as a coherent, imagined construct also enables Nabokov to accumulate details that reinforce the significance of particular individuals and events in his autobiography. It is a process epitomised by an episode at a St Petersburg cinema in 1915.

As a teenager, Nabokov frequented the numerous cinemas that sprang up during the 1910s in pre-revolutionary St Petersburg, a city that was equally charged with the cosmopolitan cinematic glamour of 1920s Berlin, which was described by a British visitor as 'one big movie, like an impossible dream'.[43] Similarly, but over a decade earlier, Nevskii Prospekt

[38] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p. 128.

[39] Moses, *The Nickel Was for the Movies*, p. 45. Greta Slobin similarly argues that in *The Gift* (*Dar*, 1937), the mnemonic 'device of [cinematic] double exposure, discovered by Khodasevich a decade earlier', had become 'a part of the writer's arsenal'. Greta N. Slobin, *Russians Abroad: Literary and Cultural Politics of Diaspora (1919–1939)*, Boston, MA, 2013, pp. 86–90 (p. 89).

[40] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p. 169.

[41] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 154.

[42] Moses, *The Nickel Was for the Movies*, pp. 45–46.

[43] Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing About Cinema in the Modernist Period*, Oxford and New York, 2007, p. 333, quoting film critic Kenneth Macpherson writing to the American writer and poet, H.D., in October 1927. Both wrote for *Close Up* (1927–33),

had turned into 'a continuous strip of cinemas extend[ing] from Nikolaev Station to Anichkov Bridge':

> In the evening, when the noisy, brightly lit Nevsky Prospect hardly contains an infinite flow of people, among the uncountable lights of cinemas the bright electric star on one of the enormous central buildings of the needle-shaped avenue remains visible from the distance. This star is the 'mark' of one of the best cinemas in Russia, The Royal Star.[44]

The Royal Star, which opened in 1909, was one of the first of a number of lavish cinemas that introduced a level of luxury and spectacle which for most could only be dreamt of. This boom in cinema-building democratized movie-going, making not only film — national and international — but the cinematic environment, complete with state-of-the-art technology, available to all.[45] The popularity of this new film culture was even sanctioned by the imperial family, who had their own cinema constructed at Tsarskoe selo.[46] By 1914, St Petersburg/Petrograd had 229 cinemas, with '15 on Nevskii Prospect alone'.[47] Nabokov mentions two of them in his autobiography, the Parisiana and the Piccadilly,[48] where he would

the English-language journal which focused on film as an art form.

[44] Quoted in Anna Kovalova, 'The Film Palaces of Nevsky Prospect: A History of St Petersburg's Cinemas, 1900–1910', in Birgit Beumers (ed.), *A Companion to Russian Cinema*, Chichester, 2016, pp. 21–44 (pp. 23 and 27). The Royal Star (Roial Star, no. 48 Nevskii prospekt) changed its name in 1911 to the Soleil′, and continued to function until 1917. See Anna Kovalova, *Kinematograf v Peterburge 1907–1917: Kinoproizvodstvo i fil′mografiia*, St Petersburg, 2012, pp. 365 and 367, and Kovalova, 'The Film Palaces of Nevsky Prospect', pp. 26–28, 38.

[45] See Tsivian, *Early Cinema in Russia*, pp. 19–20.

[46] Leyda, *Kino*, p. 67. See also, Oksana Chefranova, 'The Tsar and The Kinematograph: Film as History and the Chronicle of the Russian Monarchy', in M. Braun, C. Keil, R. King, P. Moore and L. Pelletier (eds), *Beyond the Screen: Institutions, Networks and Publics of Early Cinema*, Bloomington, IN, 2012, pp. 63–70.

[47] Youngblood, *The Magic Mirror*, p. 12. In comparison, 'before 1910, Charlottenburg [where Nabokov lived in the 1920s and '30s] had been a quiet and distinguished bourgeois residential area, but by the end of the decade it developed into a cinema centre second only to Potsdamer Platz (Berlin-Mitte), with eight picture palaces of more than 1000 seats and ten other cinemas.' Brigitte Flickinger, 'Cinemas in the City: Berlin's Public Space in the 1910s and 1920s', *Film Studies*, 10, Spring 2007, pp 72–86 (p. 80). By 1925, Berlin had 342 cinemas, nearly 40 of which were located in Charlottenburg. See Parker, *Nabokov Noir*, pp. 32–34.

[48] See Kovalova, 'The Film Palaces of Nevsky Prospect', pp. 28–32. The Parisiana (1914), at no. 80, is also mentioned in Nabokov's 1933 story, 'The Admiralty Spire', in which the narrator 'remember[s] dressing like Max Linder'. Nabokov, *Collected Stories*, p. 350. Linder, the world-famous French film comedian, visited St Petersburg in 1913. On Linder as a popular phenomenon in pre-revolutionary Russia, see Yuri Tsivian, 'Russia

settle into the 'last row of seats' on winter afternoons with his girlfriend, Valentina Shul′gina ('Tamara').[49] By choosing what would have been the cheap seats at the back of the stalls (presumably for privacy) rather than the more exclusive, expensive seats higher up in the auditorium, Nabokov participated directly in the democratic turn of St Petersburg film-going:

> The cost of tickets on Nevsky certainly blocked access for the 'common people,' but in the halls of first-rate cinemas an officer and a milliner, a student and a salesman, an official and a lady of light conduct would sit next to each other. Such combinations were most of all characteristic for the tram. […] In front of the screen everyone had equal rights, and class and property distinctions were insignificant.[50]

Nabokov's focus when recalling this episode with Tamara is not on her, however, or their interactions, or their surroundings, or even the films being shown, but on the current state of Russian cinema:

> The art was progressing. Sea waves were tinted a sickly blue and as they rode in and burst into foam against a black, remembered rock (Rocher de la Vierge, Biarritz — funny, I thought, to see again the beach of my cosmopolitan childhood), there was a special machine that imitated the sound of the surf, making a kind of washy swish that never quite managed to stop short with the scene but for three or four seconds accompanied the next feature — a brisk funeral, say, or shabby prisoners of war with their dapper captors. As often as not, the title of the main picture was a quotation from some popular poem or song and might be quite long-winded, such as *The Chrysanthemums Blossom No More in the Garden* or *Her Heart Was a Toy in His Hands and Like a Toy It Got Broken*. Female stars had low foreheads, magnificent eyebrows, lavishly shaded eyes. One famous director had acquired in the Moscow countryside a white-pillared

1913: Cinema in the Cultural Landscape', in Richard Abel, *Silent Film*, London, 1999, pp. 194–214 (pp. 198–203). Pnin favoured Linder, along with his compatriot, André Deed (aka Pan Glupishkin), over the 'clown', Charlie Chaplin (Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin*, London, 1960, p. 67). The Piccadilly (1913), nicknamed the '*bonbonnière*', was the first purpose-built cinema on Nevskii Prospekt (at no. 60). It had an 800-seat auditorium, designed so that the screen could be seen from anywhere, a ventilation system that pumped air through the ceiling, purple ramp lights and a state-of-the-art projection booth. See Kovalova, 'The Film Palaces of Nevsky Prospect', p. 30, and Anna Kovalova, 'Avenue du cinema: Nevskii Prospekt (1896–1917 godov)', *Seans*, 20 April 2011 <https://seance.ru/articles/avenue-du-cinema/> [accessed 20 October 2022].

[49] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p. 184.

[50] Edgar Arnoldi [Arnol′di], quoted in Kovalova, 'The Film Palaces of Nevsky Prospect', pp. 37–38.

> mansion (not unlike that of my uncle),[51] and it appeared in all the pictures he made. Mozzhuhin would drive up to it in a smart sleigh and fix a steely eye on a light in one window while a celebrated little muscle twitched under the tight skin of his jaw.[52]

It is easy to dismiss this description as Nabokov denigrating what at first seems to be a primitive, unsophisticated, rather hackneyed medium (a perfect example of his 'poshlust'),[53] but the passage contains a number of elements that reveal a close engagement with its every aspect, from technology to styles of directing, even to identifying Russia's most famous star, Ivan Mozzhukhin, by his signature 'steely eye' and the 'celebrated' twitch of his jaw. Not only this, but the film titles Nabokov refers to were actual releases. The first, *Ottsveli uzh davno khrizantemy v sadu* (1915) was adapted from a *romans* written in 1910, directed by Aleksandr Arkatov and starring Mozzhukhin and Zoia Karabanova,[54] while *I serdtsem, kak kukloi, igraia, on serdtse, kak kuklu, razbil* was made in 1916 by Czesław Sabiński, also with Karabanova in the lead female role.[55]

Although Nabokov's opening statement could be read as ironic, it could equally be read literally, demonstrative of his awareness of the actual development of film technology in two key areas; first, film colouring and second, the use of sound. Technicians had been experimenting with colour and sound since the mid 1900s.[56] Tinting film stock was a common

[51] Nabokov is referring to Rozhdestveno, the 'neo-classical manor' belonging to his uncle, Vasily Ivanovich Rukavishnikov (Uncle Ruka), which was left to Nabokov in 1916 as part of the inheritance he was never able to claim. See Boyd, *The Russian Years,* p. 121.

[52] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, pp. 184–85.

[53] Nabokov's transcription of *poshlost´* (vulgarity), which he defined as 'not only the obviously trashy but also the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive'. Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol*, New York, 1961, pp. 63–74 (p. 70). See also his definition in *Strong Opinions*, pp. 100–01: 'Corny trash, vulgar cliches, Philistinism in all its phases, imitations of imitations, bogus profundities [etc.]' (p. 101).

[54] See Veniamin Vishnevskii, *Khudozhestvennye fil´my dorevoliutsionnoi Rossii (Fil´mograficheskoe opisanie),* Moscow, 1945, p. 72, entry 841. By 1916, Mozzhukhin's 'fame reached its apogee', while 'film entrepreneurs [were] throwing onto the market in immense quantities […] dramatizations of the most popular romances like "Chrysanthemums"'. A. Garri, *I. I. Mozzhukhin*, 2nd edn, Moscow and Leningrad, 1927, pp. 7–8. With thanks to Julian Graffy for locating these sources.

[55] See Vishnevskii, *Khudozhestvennye fil´my dorevoliutsionnoi Rossii*, p. 97, entry 1151. Karabanova left Russia in 1920 and eventually went to America, where she continued her acting career. In 1957 she played Mrs Volotoff in fellow émigré Rouben Mamoulian's *Silk Stockings* (a remake of Lubitsch's *Ninotchka* — one of Nabokov's favourite films), with Cyd Charisse and Fred Astaire. She died in Los Angeles in 1960. With thanks to Julian Graffy for identifying these two films.

[56] See Tsivian, *Early Cinema in Russia*, pp. 97–98 and 100–03, and Philip Cavendish, 'The Hand that Turns the Handle: Camera Operators and the Poetics of the Camera in

practice, so the 'sickly blue' that Nabokov describes would have been a familiar sight. That he recognized the extent to which it typified the visual style of film at that time is confirmed by his transposition of this same scene into 'The Assistant Producer', a story written some thirty years later. Here the projectionist/narrator describes himself 'technicoloring and sonorizing' his memories, as if they were 'some very ancient motion picture where life had been a gray vibration […] where only the sea had been tinted (a sickly blue), while some hand machine imitated offstage the hiss of the asynchronous surf'.[57] Meanwhile, Nabokov's memory of the 'special machine' at the cinema on Nevskii Prospekt almost exactly replicates its description in a 1916 publication:

> If at the moment when a wave on the screen was about to crash on the shore you flexed a piece of tin rapidly back and forth with both hands, and at the same time someone else turned the handle of the box, you would get the sound of breaking waves. If you then rapidly tipped the box in the opposite direction the stones would slide down, striking the nails and producing a noise that sounded just like waves ebbing back into the sea, taking pebbles and shells with them.[58]

Despite the difficulty in controlling the timing of the sound with such a cumbersome piece of equipment, this particular machine was expensive, and generally used only in larger cinemas, such as the Piccadilly or the Parisiana. 'The smaller cinemas', as Yuri Tsivian points out, 'made do with a metal bowl, a toy pistol and a police whistle'.[59] However, by 1916 Nabokov's 'special machine' had been succeeded by a new 'universal sound machine', which not only resolved the problem of synchronization, but could also reproduce the sound of thunder and cannon-fire, breaking glass, the 'chugging' of a car, the trampling of hoofs, horses neighing, dogs barking, cats meowing, all contained in something the size of a typewriter.[60] That the difference in the sophistication of sound-effect technology could be measured in only a matter of a year confirms both the accuracy of Nabokov's depiction of the cinema experience in 1915 and the attention he was paying to its means of production.

Pre-Revolutionary Russian Film', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 82, 2, 2004, pp. 201–45 (p. 210).

[57] Nabokov, *Collected Stories*, p. 551.

[58] See Evgenii Maurin′, *Kinematograf v prakticheskoi zhizni*, Petrograd, 1916, pp. 181–82 (p. 182), quoted in Tsivian, *Early Cinema in Russia*, p. 100.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Maurin′, *Kinematograf v prakticheskoi zhizni*, p. 182.

Nabokov also demonstrates sufficient knowledge of the contemporary Russian cinema industry to recognize the style of director Evgenii Bauer, who was renowned for his grand sets and outdoor locations.[61] Galya Diment has commented that '[a]mong all the directors working at the time, Bauer was probably the closest to young Nabokov's sensibilities and interests'.[62] Nabokov's oblique allusion to Bauer, which establishes a link to his Uncle Ruka via the film-maker's opulent settings, triggers the revelation of a mnemonic system whereby Nabokov uses seemingly random visual details to trace the patterns of his life. Childhood summers on the beach at Biarritz and at his uncle's estate are made vividly present by the moving images on the screen, both to Nabokov as a 16-year-old spectator and to the middle-aged writer sitting in his 'lawn chair at Ithaca, N.Y.'. The images transcend time, interconnecting like the 'tentacles' of consciousness that 'reach out and grope' for meaning in the pattern.[63] Compounding this is the vision of Mozzhukhin, whom Nabokov was to encounter in real life on a film-shoot in Crimea less than three years later,[64] and thus an additional future aspect, embedded within a past moment already brought vividly into the present, is introduced. The cinema screen, therefore, is the vehicle that generates Nabokov's 'cosmic synchronisation', offering him, in all his past, present and even future incarnations, an 'instantaneous and transparent organism of events' in which he, 'the poet, is the nucleus'.[65]

Nabokov's experience of pre-revolutionary Russian cinema, which was technically 'on a par with the American and European industries by the middle of the 1910s',[66] served as the foundation of his experience of silent

[61] One critic, reviewing Bauer's *A Life for a Life* (1916), commented on the film's 'colossal extravagance': 'Columns, columns and more columns… Columns in the drawing-room, by the fire in the office, columns here there and everywhere.' See *Silent Witnesses: Russian Films 1908–1919*, eds Paolo Cherchi Usai, Lorenzo Codelli, Carlo Montanaro and David Robinson, London and Pordenone, 1989, pp. 326–28 (p. 326). Bauer's columns had a practical function, however, as they 'were used to hide the equipment of the auxiliary lighting'. Yuri Tsivian, 'Evgenii Frantsevich Bauer', in ibid., p. 548.

[62] Diment, 'From Bauer's Li to Nabokov's Lo', p. 4 of 9.

[63] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p. 169. Moses refers to this process as 'self-projections', and focuses his analysis on *Speak, Memory*'s Biarritz episode. See *The Nickel Was for the Movies*, pp. 51–58.

[64] *Speak, Memory*, p. 193. During the revolution most of the Russian film industry decamped to Crimea, which had served until then as an ideal place for location shooting because of its climate and light.

[65] Ibid., p. 169.

[66] Cavendish, 'The Hand that Turns the Handle', p. 203. Cavendish focuses on the innovations of camera operators in terms of set design, lighting, tracking and panning shots, whilst directors like Bauer and Iakov Protazanov experimented with cross-cutting, flashbacks and close-ups. See Youngblood, *The Magic Mirror*, p. 66; Rachel Morley,

era film in emigration, from London and Cambridge to Berlin.[67] Silent film, 'in the absence of spoken dialogue', naturally 'placed tremendous emphasis on the visual'.[68] It was the form that Nabokov preferred: 'The viewer of a silent film has the opportunity of adding a good deal of his own inner verbal treasure to the silence of the picture', he commented.[69] Not only this, but the visual poetics of silent film also complemented the privileging of vision in Nabokov's art. 'I think in images', he stated. 'Images are mute, but presently the silent cinema begins to talk and I recognize its language.'[70] *The Defense* was written before the first fully synchronized sound film, or 'talkie', came to Berlin in late 1929,[71] so still very much belongs to the silent era, but the range of cinematic devices it deploys, particularly related to point of view, and specifically, the camera eye, which are expressive of early twentieth-century modernism, can also be traced back to a movement that began over two decades before. As Christian Quendler contends:

> The camera eye has become emblematic of cinematic modernism, which regards cinema as a hub that connects to a great variety of intellectual inquiries and aspects of cultural life. At the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, psychology, theories of art and literature, philosophy, sociology and cultural theory evolved in mutual exchanges with cinema.[72]

'Gender Relations in the Films of Evgenii Bauer', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 81, 1, 2003, pp. 32–69, and Rachel Morley, *Performing Femininity: Woman as Performer in Early Russian Cinema*, London, New York and Dublin, 2017.

[67] See, for example, stanza 6 of 'Universitetskaia Poema' ('The University Poem', 1926) in Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda*, pp. 560–86 (p. 562), and Vladimir Nabokov, *Collected Poems*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov, ed. Thomas Karshan, London, 2012, pp. 29–54 (p. 31), in which Nabokov describes visiting the cinema in Cambridge as a student.

[68] Cavendish, 'The Hand that Turns the Handle', p. 210.

[69] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 165.

[70] From a February 1977 interview. Nabokov, *Think, Write, Speak*, pp. 479–80. See also, *Strong Opinions*, p. 14.

[71] Alan Crosland's *The Jazz Singer* (1927), starring Al Jolson. See Thomas J. Saunders, *Hollywood in Berlin: American Cinema and Weimar Germany*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA and London, 1994, p. 224. The film was reviewed by Gessen on 27 November 1929 for *Rul'*. See Parker, *Nabokov Noir*, p. 193.

[72] Christian Quendler, *The Camera-Eye Metaphor in Cinema*, London and New York, 2017, p. 4. The camera-eye metaphor has its origins in Dziga Vertov's 'theoretical manifesto', 'Kinoks: A Revolution' (1923) — 'I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it' — first demonstrated in the 1924 film, *Kinoglaz* (Kino-Eye). See Annette Michelson (ed.), *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, trans. Kevin O'Brien, Berkeley & Los Angeles, CA and London, 1984, pp. xxiv, 11–21 (p. 17). As Levora Gruic Grmusa and Kiene Brillenburg Wurth argue, '[t]he emergence of the modernist novel is roughly contemporaneous with the birth of film — and with a modernist "frame" of mind that casts the mind as "cinematographic."' 'Cinematography

The advent of cinema at the end of the nineteenth century coincided with an 'onslaught of [sensory] stimulation' brought about by rapid industrialization, urbanization, technological advances and burgeoning commercialization. These elements combined to 'generate a perceptual climate of overstimulation, distraction and sensation', characterized by 'the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions'.[73] This emphasis on the predominantly visual aspect of the 'hypersensory' state recalls the rush of images on a cinema screen, their fleeting, jerky, elusive quality expressive of the 'mobility and ephemerality' that was to become the essence of modernity.[74] Nabokov, however, posited that the emergence of a refined visual perspective, operating not merely as a mode of sensory experience but also as a medium of artistic expression, pre-dated the modern era:

> the development of the art of description throughout the centuries may be profitably treated in terms of vision, the faceted eye becoming a unified and prodigiously complex organ and the dead dim 'accepted colors' (in the sense of '*idées reçues*') yielding gradually their subtle shades and allowing new wonders of application.[75]

'All the great writers', he continued, 'have good eyes'.[76]

as a Literary Concept in the (Post)Modern Age: From Pirandello to Pynchon', in Kiene Brillenburg Wurth (ed.), *Between Page and Screen: Remaking Literature through Cinema and Cyberspace*, New York, 2012, pp. 184–200 (p. 186). See also, 'Beginnings' in David Seed, *Cinematic Fictions: The Impact of the Cinema on the American Novel up to the Second World War*, Liverpool, 2012, pp. 7–25.

[73] Quoting George Simmel (1903) in Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (eds), 'Introduction' to *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA and London, 1995, p. 10; Leo Charney, 'In a Moment: Film and the Philosophy of Modernity', in ibid., quoting 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in Kurt H. Wolff (ed., trans.), *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (1913), Glencoe, IL, 1950. See also, Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1935), in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn, London, 2015, pp. 211–44 (esp. pp. 226–30).

[74] Charney and Schwartz, 'Introduction', p. 10. See also Gor´kii's description of the first Lumière Brothers' screening at the Nizhnii Novgorod fair in 1896 in his 'Kingdom of Shadows' review in Leyda, *Kino*, pp. 407–09. The speed of early moving pictures tended to vary depending on the consistency of cameramen operating hand cranks, and also adjustments made by projectionists who were trying to reduce optical flicker. See James Card, *Seductive Cinema: The Art of Silent Film*, New York, 1994, pp. 52–55, and Kevin Brownlow, 'Silent Films — What Was the Right Speed?', in Thomas Elsaesser (ed.), *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, London, 1990, pp. 282–89.

[75] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, Orlando, FL, 1981, pp. 24–25.

[76] Ibid., p. 141.

While Nabokov is commenting here on the evolution of literary description, this ability to accurately capture the tiniest nuance of detail — essentially conjuring the mechanistic quality of the camera lens — can also be aligned with a developing form of narrative perspective in nineteenth-century literature that is identifiably proto-cinematic. Eizenshtein was the first film-maker to recognize the ways in which literature anticipated cinema — 'this apparently unprecedented art' — especially in the 'nearness' of Dickens's fiction 'to the characteristics of cinema in method, style, and especially in viewpoint and exposition'.[77] Critics have identified other literary precedents, particularly in the work of Flaubert, Henry James and Joseph Conrad.[78] In his examination of *Madame Bovary*, Alan Spiegel argues that Flaubert adopts a 'reified narrative' that 'replaces the voice of an omniscient novelist with the seeing eye of a man and introduces visual perspective into the novel'. Thus a scene is 'limited by the way [a character's] eyes choose to see it; that truth itself now depends as much upon the angle of vision as upon the object of vision'.[79] Hugh Epstein has argued that the work of Thomas Hardy and Joseph Conrad is predicated on such experiences of 'encounter', whereby their protagonists are 'drawn to sensation, to surfaces, to the meeting point of self and the surrounding world', particularly through vision.[80] Conrad, for example, declared his central artistic aim to be 'by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel', and 'before all, to make you *see*'.[81] Epstein's study demonstrates the extent to which

[77] Sergei Eisenstein, 'Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today', in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, edited and translated by Jay Leyda, San Diego, CA, New York and London, 1977, pp. 195–255 (p. 206).

[78] See, for example, Alan Spiegel, 'Flaubert to Joyce: Evolution of a Cinematographic Form', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 6, 3, 1973, pp. 229–243; Susan M. Griffin, *The Historical Eye: The Texture of the Visual in Late James*, Boston, MA, 1991; Kendall Johnson, *Henry James and the Visual*, Cambridge and New York, 2007, and Daniel Dufournaud, '"Queer as Fiction": Seeing and Being Seen in Henry James's *The Ambassadors*', *Studies in the Novel*, 54, 1, 2022, pp. 80–99; Hugh Epstein, *Hardy, Conrad and the Senses*, Edinburgh, 2021, and '*The Rescue*: The Physiology of Sensation and Literary Style', *Conradiana*, 43, 2/3, 2011, pp. 25–50. By his teens, 'besides hundreds of other books', Nabokov claimed to have 'read or re-read all Tolstoy in Russian, all Shakespeare in English, and all Flaubert in French'. Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 46. For an overview of Nabokov's cultural influences during this time, see Barbara Wyllie, 'Childhood', in David M. Bethea and Siggy Frank (eds), *Nabokov in Context*, Cambridge and New York, 2018, pp. 28–34.

[79] Spiegel, 'Flaubert to Joyce', pp. 231 and 232.

[80] Epstein, *Hardy, Conrad and the Senses*, p. 4. Nabokov identified, similarly, a 'close association of the visible and the heard, of shadow light and shadow sound, of ear and eye' in Tolstoi and Proust. See Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, San Diego, CA, 1980, pp. 220–21.

[81] Joseph Conrad, 'Preface' (1897) to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, London, 1988, p. xlix. Emphasis in the original. Nabokov mentions Conrad and James in interviews

'Hardy's and Conrad's investigations of how the external world is felt to be "in us", essentially, how we *see*', was informed by related contemporary investigations into 'epistemological sensationism'.[82] These ideas could well have reached the young Nabokov via his father, who had two of the key works by one of the leading sensationist thinkers of the time, Alexander Bain, in his library in St Petersburg.[83] Nabokov's early years in Russia, therefore, which were so guided by his mother's instruction to remember — '*Vot zapomni*'[84] — and her emphasis on the importance of visual attention, need to be set against not only the emergence of a hypersensory trend at the turn of the twentieth century, but also the shifts in philosophy and scientific understanding that underpinned it, all of which coincided simultaneously with the advent of moving pictures.

In 1908, Tolstoi commented on the challenges this new art form posed to traditional literary conventions:

> But I rather like it. This swift change of scene, this blending of emotion and experience […]. It is closer to life. In life, too, changes and transitions flash by before our eyes, and emotions of the soul are like a hurricane. The cinema has divined the mystery of motion. And that is greatness.[85]

(see *Strong Opinions*, pp. 42, 43, 57, 64, 103, 127, 139 and 147). Joyce became a favourite in emigration (ibid., p. 46) — Nabokov met him in Paris in 1939 (Boyd, *The Russian Years*, p. 504). Hardy's *Return of the Native* (1878) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895) were also in his father's library. See *Sistematicheskii katalog biblioteki Vladimira Dmitrievicha Nabokova*, St Petersburg, 1904, entry no. 592, p. 25, and 1911, entry no. 2658, p. 14 (with thanks to Tat´iana Ponomareva, former director of the Nabokov Museum in St Petersburg).

[82] Epstein, *Hardy, Conrad and the Senses*, p. 85. Emphasis in the original. Epstein's book features extensive discussion of Bain's philosophy set against that of his peers, including Karl Pearson and William James, whom Nabokov also read as a boy (see Boyd, *The Russian Years*, pp. 90–91). See also, M. Gail Hamner, 'Alexander Bain', in *American Pragmatism: A Religious Genealogy*, Oxford and New York, 2003, pp. 73–88, and Cairns Craig, 'Alexander Bain, Associationism, and Scottish Philosophy', in Gordon Graham (ed.), *Scottish Philosophy in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Oxford and New York, 2015, pp. 95–117.

[83] Entry numbers 2194: 'Bain, Alexander. *Education as a Science*, London, 1896', and 2264: 'Bain, Alexander. *Les émotions de la volonté*, Paris, 1885', in *Sistematicheskii katalog*, 1904, pp. 104 and 109. Bain argued 'against any sort of innate, a priori, intuitive, or underived common-sense cognition'. Rather, he saw sensation 'as the beginning of conscious life, both intellectual and emotional, and as the foundation of our knowledge, both of the world and of ourselves'. W. J. Mander, quoting *The Senses and the Intellect*, in *The Unknowable: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Metaphysics*, Oxford, 2020, p. 133. *The Five Senses in Nabokov's Works* (Cham, 2020), a collected volume edited by Marie Bouchet, Julie Loison-Charles and Isabelle Poulin, provides extensive coverage of Nabokov's treatment of sensory experience, but makes no mention of sensationist thought.

[84] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p. 25.

[85] 'Conversation with Tolstoy', p. 410.

Following his concession that same year to the young film-maker, Aleksandr Drankov, who was given exclusive access to film him on his estate, Tolstoi deemed cinema to be 'a good thing'. In 1910 he gave the industry its most meaningful endorsement by announcing that he had 'decided to write for the cinema'.[86] Developments in film techniques and production quality were by then attracting a number of prominent writers to the industry, including Maksim Gor´kii, whose initial reaction to moving pictures had been categorically negative.[87] Others, like Tolstoi, whose *Anna Karenina* 'was soaked in the burgeoning camera culture', were consistently positive. Aleksandr Blok and Andrei Belyi were 'incorporating jagged film syntax into their writing' and 'delighting in the earthiness of cinema culture',[88] while Leonid Andreev who, along with Vladimir Maiakovskii, had begun writing for film, claimed to 'really love the cinema and believe in its future (not greatly, but colossally)'.[89]

Nabokov's position, though, remained ambivalent, balanced between his first-hand experience of the industry in emigration, the ways in which he interacted with the medium in his work, and the delight he took in singling out 'an inept American film' — 'the more casually stupid it was, the more he would choke and literally shake with laughter, to the point where on occasion he had to leave the hall.'[90] The distinction that has to be made here, however, is between a bad film and a good film. Those that Nabokov listed as his favourites, for example, fell into the latter category.[91] Not only this, they featured a selection of classic American slapstick comedies. As we will see in the following section, this genre was to inform

[86] See Margarita Vaysman, 'Tolstoy as the Subject of Art, Painting, Film, Theater', in Anna A. Berman (ed.), *Tolstoy in Context*, Cambridge and New York, 2022, pp. 323–35 (p. 330); Youngblood, *The Magic Mirror*, p. 65, and Jay Leyda, *Kino*, p. 44.

[87] In his 'Kingdom of Shadows' review. By 1916 Gor´kii was developing plans for 'an entire film production unit attached to the [Moscow] Art Theatre'. Ibid., p. 77. His initial reaction was shared by many other spectators, who found the early cinema experience 'deeply alienating', although also, like Tolstoi, simultaneously 'exciting and strange'. The 'mute, two-dimensional world' of these moving pictures, in their 'bleak black and white made all this seem slightly ghostly and uncanny, animate and inanimate at the same time. All was familiar, yet it was "made strange" by the new "cinema machine"'. Annie van den Oever, 'Ostranenie, "The Montage of Attractions" and Early Cinema's "Properly Irreducible Alien Quality"', in eadem (ed.), *Ostrannenie: On 'Strangeness' and the Moving Image*, pp. 33–58 (p. 35).

[88] Stephen Hutchings, *Russian Literary Culture in the Camera Age: The Word as Image*, Abingdon and New York, 2004, pp. 39 and 58. Hutchings discusses the influence of photography on nineteenth-century Russian writing, from Gogol´ to Turgenev, Tolstoi, Dostoevskii and Chekhov.

[89] Youngblood, *The Magic Mirror*, pp. 65 and 67. Andreev was commenting in 1915.

[90] Boyd, *The Russian Years*, p. 363.

[91] See *Strong Opinions*, pp. 163–64.

the themes and motifs of *The Defense*, along with a contemporary Soviet comedy whose influence has so far been only the subject of conjecture.

'The Defense' and contemporary cinema

One of the key film influences that has been generally assumed by Nabokov scholars is Vsevolod Pudovkin and Nikolai Shpikovskii's 1925 silent comedy, *Chess Fever*.[92] In its visual style it closely parallels *The Defense*, with its chess-obsessed hero surrounded by objects that mirror the black and white squares of a chessboard. These range from patterns on socks and handkerchiefs, hats and cigarette boxes, to the floor tiles in the lobby of his fiancée's apartment block, reminiscent of the final image in Nabokov's novel as Luzhin stares down into the 'chasm' from his fifth-floor bathroom window that obligingly 'divides' beneath him 'into dark and pale squares' (p. 256). Nabokov would no doubt have been curious to see *Chess Fever*'s real-life footage of the First International Chess Championship, held in Moscow between 10 November and 8 December 1925, which was reported on daily in the Berlin émigré press, as well as Capablanca's cameo appearances, in which he plays with a miniature chessboard identical to Luzhin's,[93] but cinema historians have so far concluded that the short film was not amongst the raft of Soviet exports distributed during the late 1920s, and was not shown abroad until it was acquired by New York's Museum of Modern Art Film Library in 1937.[94]

More recent scholarship, however, has changed this picture. Rather than concentrating their exports in the period following the Berlin premiere of Eizenshtein's *Bronenosets Potemkin* (*Battleship Potemkin*) in June 1926, and contrary to the contention that German import restrictions and censorship regulations obstructed the distribution of Soviet films,[95] Russian film

[92] See, for example, Charles Nicol, 'Did Luzhin Have Chess Fever?', *The Nabokovian*, 27, 1991, pp. 40–42; Ol′ga Skonechnaia in *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda*, p. 716 n. 440, and Don Barton Johnson on *NABOKV-L*, 24 October 1997 and 31 July 2000 (<https://thenabokovian.org/node/32549>; <https://thenabokovian.org/node/29477>). In his 'Filming Nabokov', Yuri Leving argues that *Chess Fever* influenced *The Defense* (pp. 9–10), but provides no evidence to support this contention.

[93] Valentinov, Luzhin's chess mentor-cum-movie producer, wants him to make a similar cameo appearance in his new film that will feature a '"real tournament, where real chess players would play with my hero. Turati has already agreed, so has Moser. Now we need Grandmaster Luzhin…"'. *The Defense*, p. 248. For commentary on Nabokov's modelling of Valentinov on the 'regal corpse' of the American film idol, Rudolph Valentino, who died in 1926, and Valentinov's role in the movie business, see Parker, *Nabokov Noir*, pp. 90 and 93–98.

[94] See Leyda, *Kino*, p. 157.

[95] See Denise Hartsough, 'Soviet Film Distribution and Exhibition in Germany, 1921–1933', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 5, 2, 1985, pp. 131–48.

exports began in earnest from April 1922 following the Treaty of Rapallo.[96] Indeed, the initial survival of the Soviet industry was essentially dependent at that time on its trading relationship with Germany.[97] *Chess Fever* was produced by Mezhrapbom-Rus′, a joint German-Russian film company set up in 1924, which worked primarily with Lloyd-Film (Lloyd-Kinofilms G.m.b.H), a Berlin-based company that acted as an agent, purchasing export licences and handling distribution. Establishing whether *Chess Fever* was ever shown in Berlin is difficult, however, primarily because of the scant attention short films were paid in the German film press and the Russian émigré papers, which consigned them to the *raznoe* (miscellaneous) columns in favour of reviews of longer, feature-length releases.[98] Compounding this was the tendency to 'consistently ignore everything in Soviet film art that could be understood as "real" cinema', a contention supported by a contemporary German journalist who bemoaned the silent vanishing of new Russian films from German press reviews.[99] Reports in German trade papers, however, indicate that there was an interest in Pudovkin and Shpikovskii's comedy, particularly because of its coverage of the Moscow International Chess Tournament. It was first mentioned in the Berlin-based *Film-Kurier* two days before its Russian release,[100] and at the beginning of 1926, *Kinematograph* announced that 'the little comedy' would be coming to Germany with a number of other new Soviet productions.[101] Although it was indeed one of thirteen films

[96] See Kristin Thompson, 'Government Policies and Practical Necessities in the Soviet Cinema of the 1920s', in Anna Lawton (ed.), *The Red Screen: Politics, Society, Art in Soviet Cinema*, London and New York, 1992, pp. 19–41.

[97] See Nataliya Puchenkina, 'What is so (Un)Exceptional About Soviet Cinema? The Pragmatics of Soviet Film Exports to Germany and France in the 1920s', *Images*, 32, 41, 2022, pp. 45–63.

[98] Luke Parker's listing of the reviews in *Rul′* confirm this: 'Appendix', *Nabokov Noir*, pp. 187–94. See also, Oksana Bulgakova, 'Russische Film-Emigration in Deutschland: Schicksale und Filme', in Karl Schlögel (ed.), *Russische Film-Emigration in Deutschland 1918 bis 1941: Leben im europäischen Bürgerkrieg*, Berlin, 1995, pp. 379–98 (p. 380). For an overview of the machinery of the German film press, see Thomas J. Saunders, 'The Setting: Weimar Germany and the Motion Picture', in *Hollywood in Berlin: American Cinema and Weimar Germany*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1994, pp. 34–47.

[99] Rainer Rother, 'In Deutschland entschiedener Erfolg: Die Rezeption sowjetischer Filme in der Weimarer Republik', in Günter Agde and Alexander Schwarz (eds), *Die rote Traumfabrik: Meschrabpom-Film und Prometheus 1921–1926*, Berlin, 2012, pp. 22 and 21, and Bernard von Brentano, *Wo in Europa ist Berlin? Bilder aus den zwanziger Jahren*, Berlin, 1981, p. 220.

[100] '"Das Moskauer Schachturnier im Film": Von der Mejrabpom-Ruß wurde im Rahmen eines Grotesk-Lustspiels das Moskauer Schach-Turnier und alle an im betelligten Meister aufgenommen.' *Film-Kurier*, 298, 19 December 1925, p. 6.

[101] 'Von den neueren Filmen des Meshrapbom Ruß sind noch zu erwähnen […]

sold by Mezhrapbom-Rus′ to Lloyd-Film in 1925,[102] it seems that *Chess Fever* was not released nationally, but had only a limited screening in Berlin.[103] This accumulation of new information does, however, make it seem more likely that Nabokov could have seen the film, or at least heard about it, as it would have found a ready audience in the city's large and culturally dynamic Russian émigré community.

The film genre with which *Chess Fever* is most closely aligned is contemporary American slapstick comedy. It is a feature noted by a Russian critic writing in January 1926, who compares the film's style of humour to that of Charlie Chaplin, commenting that *Chess Fever* borrows from the 'infinite continuity' of gags from 'a whole raft of comic films', producing 'almost as many of them as Ford cars: 8 per minute'.[104] In Nabokov's novel slapstick both underpins and serves as a release from the darkness of Luzhin's experience.[105] Its presence is explicitly signalled by a still of Harold Lloyd in *Safety Last* (1923), which Luzhin spots on Valentinov's desk — the 'white-faced man with lifeless features and big American glasses, hanging by his hands from the ledge of a skyscraper' (p. 247) — an image that not only anticipates, but even possibly 'suggests' to Luzhin his potential 'means of suicide'.[106] Elsewhere, incidental descriptions point to specific films. For example, when Luzhin's fiancée imagines introducing him to her parents, she visualizes him 'with a clumsy motion of his shoulder [knocking] the house down like a shaky piece of scenery that emitted a sigh of dust' (pp. 103–04), an image that recalls the house that collapses around Buster Keaton in *Steamboat Bill Jr.* (1928). Luzhin's tumble from the tram at the end of the novel is reminiscent of the perilous stunts of both Keaton and Charlie Chaplin. Luzhin, like Chaplin's tramp, who falls, drunk, from a moving tram in a sequence from the 1922 short, *Pay Day*, displays the same death-defying nonchalance:

das kleine Lustspiel "Schachfieber"'. 'Aus der russischen Filmindustrie: Von unserum Moskaues Korrespondenten', *Kinematograph*, 993, 28 February 1926, p. 7.

[102] Oksana Bulgakowa, 'Russische Filme in Berlin', in Oksana Bulgakowa (ed.), *Die ungewöhnlichen Abenteuer des Dr. Mabuse im Lande der Bolschewiki. Das Buch zur Filmreihe 'Moskau – Berlin'*, Berlin, 1995, pp. 81–94 (p. 84). See also listings in ibid, p. 209, and Agde and Schwarz (eds), *Die rote Traumfabrik*, p. 215.

[103] See Rainer Rother, 'In Deutschland entschiedener Erfolg: Die Rezeption sowjetischer Filme in der Weimarer Republik', in ibid., pp. 10–23 (p. 22).

[104] V. Pertsov, 'Smekh skvoz′ smekh', *Kino*, no. 2 (122), 12 January 1926, p. 3.

[105] Although Nabokov's humour tended to be dark. See his comments about sharing Alfred Hitchcock's '*humour noir*' in Appel, *Nabokov's Dark Cinema*, p. 129. Nabokov was in correspondence with Hitchcock in 1964 and 1970. See ibid., and *Selected Letters*, pp. 361–66.

[106] Appel, *Nabokov's Dark Cinema*, p. 161.

> when suddenly the car filled up with a horde of schoolboys, a dozen old ladies and fifty fat men, Luzhin continued to move about, treading on people's feet, and finally pushing his way onto the platform. Catching sight of his house, he left the car on the move; the asphalt swept by beneath his left heel, then turned and struck him in the back, and his cane, after getting tangled in his legs, suddenly leapt out like a released spring, flew through the air and landed beside him. Two women came running toward him and helped him to rise. He began to knock the dust from his coat with his palm, donned his hat, and without looking back walked toward the house.[107]

In Chaplin's films, the comedy often turns 'on the fact that people and objects share the same condition of physicality, and that the dominance of one over the other is not automatically assured'. Chaplin will be seen 'vying with doors, tables, rugs and beds, each of which refuse to submit to his ascendancy'.[108] Luzhin demonstrates a similar difficulty when faced with strangely animated everyday objects, for example, when he first arrives at his fiancée's parents' flat:

> To a faceless taxi driver he read aloud the address on the postcard […] and having imperceptibly surmounted the dim accidental distance, he cautiously tried to pull the ring out of the lion's jaws. The bell leapt into action immediately: the door flew open. [He] suddenly noticed that his left hand, already extended to one side, held an unnecessary cane and his right his billfold […]. His cane dived safely into a vaselike receptacle; his billfold, at the second thrust, found the right pocket; and his hat was hung on a hook. (pp. 118–19)

Nabokov's use of personification in this passage communicates Luzhin's sense of disconnection from both the unfamiliar and familiar — his cane and his billfold — as he nervously contends with this new environment. These objects take on a force of their own, as if conspiring against him to comically subvert what would otherwise be a mundane ritual of arrival.

Slapstick comedy is also produced by mistakes and misapprehension. The two drunks who pick Luzhin up off the street during his breakdown think he is one of them, and this qualifies the rest of the episode as a piece of slapstick, with Luzhin bundled into a taxi, then bundled up the stairs to

[107] Nabokov, *The Defense*, pp. 249–50. Page numbers will be given in all subsequent passages quoted from this edition.

[108] Alex Clayton, *The Body in Hollywood Slapstick*, Jefferson, NC, 2007, p. 33.

his fiancée's parents' flat, with everyone falling over everybody, in a kind of choreographed comic chaos. Meanwhile the two 'strangers' (the drunks Kurt and Karl) who along with Luzhin end up in a heap in the back of their taxi, so that 'when the driver opened the door he was unable at first to make out how many people were inside' (p. 147), again seem to multiply across the apartment:[109]

> In the darkness everything swung, there was a knocking and a shuffling and a puffing, someone took a step backwards and invoked God's name in German, and when the light came on again one of the strangers was sitting on a stair and the other was being crushed by Luzhin's body […]. The young strangers […] were seen at once in all the rooms. […] They were found on all the divans, in the bathroom and on the trunk in the hallway, and there was no way of getting rid of them. Their number was unclear — a fluctuating, blurred number. (p. 148)

The distortions of the strangers' alcohol-impaired vision are projected into the surrounding space, magnifying the scene's surreal absurdity. Visual misapprehension is generated across the novel by both internal and external actors, from the psychological and emotional to the play of light and shade on glass-fronted picture frames and doors, mirrors and windows. As they do across Nabokov's fiction, and especially in *The Defense*, these reflective surfaces also function as apertures, revealing the spaces that exist beneath or behind them. Buster Keaton explored the potential of this motif in *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), in which he plays a movie theatre projectionist who falls asleep in his booth and dreams that he sees his sweetheart in the film he is showing. He runs to her aid, jumping through the screen's fantastical transparent meniscus and into the action of the film.[110] Here Keaton extends the motif of the camera's aperture from the visual framing of the projectionist in his booth and the window through which he sees the screen, to the framed action on the screen itself, while the world beyond the cinema screen mirrors the aperture of

[109] Andrew Field described these scenes as 'pure Keystone comedy'. *Nabokov: His Life in Art*, Boston, MA and Toronto, 1967, p. 176.

[110] The trope of jumping through the screen (this time in righteous indignation) was famously used by Władysław Starewicz in his 1912 animated film, *Mest´ kinematograficheskogo operatora* (The Camera Operator's Revenge), which Nabokov may have seen as a boy. The film would perhaps have interested him both as an early parody of the cinematic melodrama and because the animated protagonists are insects. With thanks to Julian Graffy for bringing this to my attention.

the camera lens and the realms contained within it.[111] In this way Keaton exploits the dynamics that are unique to the cinematic experience, the notion of 'cinema as window and frame' that 'offers *special, ocular access* to an event', and 'the (real) two-dimensional screen' that 'transforms in the act of looking into an (imaginary) three-dimensional space which seems to open up beyond the screen'.[112] Meanwhile, the film's abstract quality 'corresponds to Buster's somewhat alien perspective, to his greater interest in physical properties than in the nuance of social interaction. To see the world as an intricate configuration of shape and movement', as Keaton and Luzhin do, 'is to see it at one remove'.[113]

As a major star of the genre, Keaton was unusual in that he was both a 'peerless physical comedian and a pioneering cineaste'. Over and above the extraordinary stunts he performed, his films often depicted 'deceptive landscape[s] of surrealistic transformations, misunderstandings, and implacable tricks of Fate':[114]

> Buster Keaton s'invente mille manières de pousser toute expérience jusqu'à l'absurde sans que son 'visage de pierre' traduise la moindre appréhension. L'impassibilité réelle ou simulée au contact d'un monde qui se désarticule, caractérise ce burlesque […]. Empêtré dans la machine et l'environnement, Keaton survit néanmoins, même s'il ne montre pas qu'il est heureux.[115]

Dubbed the 'Great Stone Face', Keaton's attempts to navigate a baffling, elusive and often sabotaging material environment, whilst showing barely any reaction, are reflected in Luzhin's faltering and precarious interactions with 'the incompletely intelligible world' that surrounds him, almost always in 'sullen' and 'bowed' silence.[116]

Ultimately, however, the key aspect of the slapstick comedian is their ability to defy mortality — 'the comedy hero cannot die, these deaths have

[111] It is a conceit that Nabokov was subsequently to deploy in *Glory* with the painting of the path into the woods which Martin dreams of climbing into, and which alludes to a similar painting that hung over Nabokov's bed as a boy. Gavriel Shapiro has linked Keaton's movie to a 1924 story, 'La Veneziana' (*The Sublime Artist's Studio: Nabokov and Painting*, Evanston, IL, 2009, p. 73), although the film was not reviewed in *Rul′* until the following year. See Parker, *Nabokov Noir*, p. 188.

[112] Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses*, 2nd edn, London, 2015, p. 15 (emphasis in the original).

[113] Clayton, *The Body in Hollywood Slapstick*, p. 52.

[114] David Kalat, *Too Funny for Words: A Contrarian History of American Screen Comedy from Silent Slapstick to Screwball*, Jefferson, NC, 2019, p. 64.

[115] Daniel Royot, *L'humour et la culture américaine*, Paris, 1996, pp. 168–69.

[116] Nabokov, *The Defense*, pp. 134 and 234.

to remain in the realm of fantasy and their reality is denied by a narrative twist: suicides are narrowly averted, hanging fails because of an elastic rope, murders and accidental deaths turn out to have been only dreams.'[117] At the end of *The Defense* there is a suggestion that Luzhin, like his slapstick counterparts, does not in fact die, but is instead presented with a vision of his 'eternity' as he readies himself to jump (p. 256). The darkness of the yard below is reminiscent of 'the bottomless space' which, as Nabokov describes, lies 'beyond the chessboard',[118] indicating that he might be about to enter 'the same world he touched during the peak moments of his games'. As Vladimir Alexandrov notes, 'Nabokov once implied this possibility himself when he said: "As I approached the conclusion of the novel I suddenly realized that the book doesn't end."'[119]

'Kinematograf': Film as illusion

There is a sense, in Nabokov's portrayal of movie-going in his 1928 poem, 'Kinematograf', that the cinematic world it describes also exists like a 'bottomless space', set apart from real life, in an infinite void filled with ever-repeating scenarios that somehow continue even after the music stops, the house lights go up, and the 'melted fiction' of the on-screen world is replaced by the noise and cold of the street outside. Although 'nothing there trembles with life',[120] the world of 'Kinematograf' and its depiction of generic silent film melodrama nevertheless reveals a fascination with the improbability of its 'luxurious' but 'vulgar' storylines.[121] As Tatyana Gershkovich argues, Nabokov 'confesses to "love the spectacles of light" ("liubliu ia svetovye balagany"), and describes cinema's outlandish tricks — eavesdropping devices, captivating car chases — with a mix of irony and

[117] Muriel Andrin quoting Jean-Pierre Coursodon in 'Back to the "Slap": Slapstick's Hyperbolic Gesture and the Rhetoric of Violence', in Tom Paulus and Rob King (eds), *Slapstick Comedy*, New York and Abingdon, 2010, p. 233.

[118] See Nabokov's interview with Pierre Dommergues for *Les Langues Modernes*, 62, 1, January–February 1968, pp. 92–102 ('Entretien avec Nabokov'): 'Il n'y a pas de temps sur l'échiquier. Le temps remplacé par un espace sans fond… […] J'ai pensé moi-même à des thèmes d'échecs, à des problèmes qui comprennent cette possibilité du cavalier qui s'envole; et puis qui revient d'un espace' (p. 99).

[119] Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld*, pp. 82 and 83, citing a comment Nabokov made to his biographer, Andrew Field, in *VN: The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov*, New York, 1986, p. 132. Boyd and Voronina also describe Luzhin's suicide, his 'sui-mate', as 'virtual', essentially unfulfilled. See Vladimir Nabokov, *Letters to Véra*, edited and translated by Olga Voronina and Brian Boyd, London, 2014, p. 699 — note to a letter dated 6 June 1939.

[120] 'Kinematograf', in Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda*, p. 595 (hereafter, 'Kinematograf', translation mine).

[121] 'speshit roskoshnoe voobrazhen´e / samouverennogo poshliaka.' Ibid., p. 595.

admiration'.[122] While he 'always acknowledged the potency of the artistic devices Hollywood had mastered and the implacability of the appetites it fulfilled', she continues, Nabokov 'neither wanted nor expected readers to transcend such delights altogether […]. But by making readers respond more selfconsciously to them, he hoped that they might enjoy these devices without being entirely in their grip'.[123]

There is, however, a key element to Nabokov's poem that critics have missed, something which Walter Benjamin identifies as the 'illusionary' quality that is unique to film. The 'equipment-free aspect of reality' that only film can project, essentially its ability, unlike theatre, to hide the machinery of its production — from cameras and lighting equipment to the processes of editing — brings it to the 'height of artifice', rendering it 'a work of art'.[124] It is the same artifice that Nabokov so celebrated, a form of 'magic', a 'game of intricate enchantment and deception'[125] that, he argued, 'characterize[d] all worthwhile art':[126]

> deception […] in art, is only part of the game; it's part of the combination, part of the delightful possibilities, illusions, vistas of thought, which can be false vistas […] a good combination should always contain a certain element of deception.[127]

In 'Kinematograf', as he sits beneath the film projector's 'twirl of mirror darkness' ('vrashchenie zerkal´noi temnoty'),[128] Nabokov briefly exposes this very artifice by granting his audience a privileged, behind-the-scenes glimpse of the action taking place on the other side of the screen, whilst revealing his insider's knowledge by reference, in a kind of industry

[122] Gershkovich, 'Self-Translation and the Transformation of Nabokov's Aesthetics', p. 217. So far, none of the available English translations agree, although Diment, Gershkovich, Grishakova and Leving render the Russian in its closest sense. Only Luke Parker has translated the poem in full, and in more than one version. See Grishakova, *The Models of Space, Time and Vision*, p. 187; Leving, 'Filming Nabokov', pp. 7–8; Parker, *Nabokov Noir*, pp. 56–57, and Luke Parker, '"This Fairground Farce of Light": Vladimir Nabokov's "The Cinema" (1928)', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 19 December 2022 <https://lareviewofbooks.org/short-takes/this-fairground-farce-of-light-vladimir-nabokovs-the-cinema-1928>.

[123] Gershkovich, 'Self-Translation and the Transformation of Nabokov's Aesthetics', p. 217.

[124] Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', pp. 226, 227.

[125] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p. 95.

[126] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, pp. 160–61.

[127] Ibid., pp. 11–12.

[128] Grishakova, *The Models of Space, Time and Vision*, p. 187; 'Kinematograf', p. 595.

shorthand, to a specific piece of studio equipment — the 'Jupiter' lamp:[129] 'Vot spal´naia ozarennaia… Smotrite, / kak eta shal´ upala na kover. / Ne viden oslepitel´nyi iupiter, / ne slyshen razdrazhennyi rezhisser (Here is a lit bedroom… / Look how that shawl has fallen onto the rug. / The dazzling Jupiter is invisible / the irritated director inaudible).[130] The brightness of the light and the shouts of the director contrast starkly with the quiet stillness of the scene being filmed, the camera focusing simply on the shawl, with the viewer/reader left to wonder on the possible sequence that has played out in the empty room. These four lines epitomise the 'equipment-free aspect of reality' that only film can depict, qualifying Nabokov's cinema as another form of artistic deception, functioning implicitly, like the commotion behind the camera, such that the viewer is utterly beguiled by its 'illusionary' surface.

In his foreword to the English translation of *The Defense*, Nabokov reveals, in a rare move, much of the novel's 'combination' by detailing its 'fatal pattern' of themes that accumulate in a conspiracy of destruction.[131] Nabokov's unusually explicit mapping of the novel's 'nerves'[132] offers the reader a seemingly ready-made solution to what they are encouraged to believe is a straightforward story constructed along the lines of two chess strategies — the 'sui-mate' and 'retrograde analysis'.[133] It is, however, misleading. As Don Barton Johnson points out, 'neither of the problem types specifically discussed by Nabokov [in his 'booby-trapped' Foreword] seems to fit the events of the novel',[134] thus presenting the first elements of Nabokov's creative deception. It could be said therefore, that the Foreword's purpose is to divert the reader's attention away from

[129] Jupiter was a well-known brand name of studio lighting manufactured in Berlin from the 1920s to the 1970s. Nabokov would have been familiar with it from his work as an extra in Berlin's film studios during the 1920s. So far, however, published translations of the poem have missed the significance of this detail. Luke Parker, for example, translates 'iupiter' as 'blinding projectors' (*Nabokov Noir*, p. 56) or 'klieg projector' ('"This Fairground Farce of Light"'). The American-made 'Klieg' light was a floor-mounted spotlight used in both theatre and film, whereas the Kliegl Light Projector was designed to illuminate specific subjects at various pitches in confined spaces, such as shops, galleries and laboratories. See 'Kliegl Picture Lighting Projectors', Marcel Breuer Digital Archive <https://breuer.syr.edu/xtf/view?docId=mets/24898.mets.xml;query=;brand=default> [accessed 16 January 2023]. These 'dazzling' Jupiters (*slepitel´nye zherla iupiterov*) had already featured in Ganin's description of the film set in *Mashen´ka*. See Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda*, p. 60. In Michael Glenny's 1970 English translation they are replaced with Kliegs. See Vladimir Nabokov, *Mary*, London, 1973, p. 30.

[130] 'Kinematograf', p. 595. See also, Leving, 'Filming Nabokov', p. 7.

[131] Nabokov, *The Defense*, pp. 8–10.

[132] Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 316.

[133] Nabokov, *The Defense*, pp. 8 and 10.

[134] Barton Johnson, *Worlds in Regression*, pp. 87 and 88.

the novel's 'secret points' and 'subliminal co-ordinates', which, it can be argued, are 'plotted'[135] also in terms of an abiding tension between the perspectives of Luzhin and the narrator. At the same time, the 'splendid insincerity' that lies at the heart of Nabokov's fictive and chess strategies[136] echoes the 'melted fiction' of film in 'Kinematograf', establishing a direct link between the artifice of cinema and the artifice inherent in the 'fatal patterns' of Nabokov's chess novel.

Nabokov's film strategy in 'The Defense'

In *The Defense*, Nabokov's hero is given an acute sensory ability to engage with the world, an ability that has a powerful mnemonic function but which, rather than granting artistic transcendence, ensnares him in an endlessly repeating vortex that threatens ultimate oblivion. The primacy of sensory experience in Luzhin's world is established in the novel's opening pages, in which 'Nabokov quickly engages, and pegs for future back-reference, all our senses, one after the other, appealing above all to our ability to recognize an image as both familiar and yet never registered before'.[137] Not only this, but Nabokov also establishes the novel's dual-aspect narrative perspective that constantly shifts between an over-arching authorial point of view — i.e. Nabokov's — and a very defined and narrow field of vision that is Luzhin's. This marks a departure from the more conventional narrative stance in *Mary* and *King, Queen, Knave*, which gave Nabokov universal access to the thoughts and feelings of his protagonists. The emphasis on vision in *The Defense* establishes a kind of sympathetic optical conspiracy between author/narrator and character, in which the narrator assumes Luzhin's point of view at critical moments (for example in the lead up to and during his play against Turati, after which he suffers a complete mental breakdown). Not only does this reinforce Luzhin's silence — his inability to articulate his experience verbally — but also Nabokov's deliberate choice to deploy the visual as a means of dramatizing Luzhin's emotional and psychological state. We see this in operation as early as chapter one, in the episode where Luzhin attempts to escape being taken back to school.

After climbing in through an open window, Luzhin takes refuge in the attic amongst various discarded objects, including 'a cracked chessboard'

[135] Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 316.

[136] See Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, pp. 160–61.

[137] Gennady Barabtarlo, 'Nabokov's Trinity (On the Movement of Nabokov's Themes)', in Julian W. Connolly (ed.), *Nabokov and His Fiction: New Perspectives*, Cambridge and New York, 1999, pp. 109–38 (p. 120).

(p. 23).[138] Luzhin is alerted by the sound of people searching for him, but as he peers down through the aperture of the attic window the visual aspect takes over, the sounds are silenced, and we see the scene exclusively through Luzhin's eyes:

> Taking a cautious look through the little window he saw below his father, who like a young boy ran up the stairs and then, before reaching the landing, descended swiftly again, throwing his knees out on either side. […] Finally, after another minute had passed, they all went up in a posse — his father's bald head glistened, the bird on mother's hat swayed like a duck on a troubled pond, and the butler's gray crew cut bobbed up and down; at the rear, leaning at every moment over the balustrade, came the coachman, the watchman, and for some reason the milkmaid Akulina, and finally a black-bearded peasant from the water mill. (p. 24)

Luzhin's perspective emulates a high-angled shot from his vantage point at the top of the stairs that depicts a comically surreal, disembodied parade of elbows, knees, hats and the tops of people's heads. These are faceless figures, identifiable only by their particular features — his father's baldness, the butler's grey hair and the peasant's black beard — their depersonalization revealing the alienation and dissociation that will characterize almost all his future interactions.

This scene is repeated later in the novel, when Luzhin returns to his fiancée's parents' flat, in a state of collapse. Again the angle of vision is extreme, this time from a low vantage point looking up at a window from the street below, and then up rather than down, from the bottom rather than the top, of a staircase:

> The window emptied, but a moment later the darkness behind the front door disintegrated and through the glass appeared an illuminated staircase, marble as far as the first landing, and this newborn staircase had not had time to congeal completely before swift feminine legs appeared on the stairs. […]
>
> Meanwhile the staircase continued to spawn people… A gentleman appeared wearing bedroom slippers, black trousers and a collarless starched shirt, and behind him came a pale, stocky maid with scuffers on her bare feet. (pp. 148–49)

[138] The crack in the chessboard becomes indicative of Luzhin's damaged relationship with the game.

As before, the figures are oddly disembodied, reduced to legs and feet and slippers. This time, however, the perspective is not Luzhin's, but that of the two drunks — Kurt and Karl — who have brought him home. Nabokov indicates this by the way the staircase comes into view — it appears, 'newborn', like something never seen before as the lights are turned on inside the apartment building, the lighting assisting the men's inebriated vision to pull focus. The deployment of this low-angled perspective enhances the chaos of the scene, and the impaired vision of Kurt and Karl. Luzhin's perspective is meanwhile completely disengaged, as he sits outside on the steps with his back to everyone. It can be argued that this episode functions as the comic interlude in a Shakespearian tragedy, releasing the tension of Luzhin's crisis. Yet the tragedy of the situation is amplified both by the comedy duo's 'unawareness and irrelevance',[139] and by the fact that everyone else assumes, as they do, that Luzhin is just another drunk.

In these episodes, Nabokov consciously and deliberately emulates camera eye perspective to further enhance Luzhin's detachment, deploying this mechanical mode of vision to 'distance and finally alienate the seer from his field of vision by viewing the seen object through eyes that focus like a camera':[140]

> camera-like vision [indicates] that whatever the special circumstances, and however the participating observer, and however intimate this observer may become with whatever the field of vision may contain, the seen object itself will always remain slightly other than and slightly apart from the life of the observer. To see in the matter of the camera is to see without engagement, participation, or any hint of mental, moral, or spiritual assumption of the seen object.[141]

Whilst Luzhin's camera eye communicates the degree of his dissociation, it is also inextricably linked to his relationship with chess. Marina Grishakova comments that 'film as a combination of light and darkness […] is the key metaphor of *The Defense*', and that the theme of retrograde analysis is played out as if Luzhin 'is watching a film of his life until a retake starts'.[142] This link between cinema and chess is established when Luzhin is first introduced to the game. Grishakova has noticed how the

[139] See Susan Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies*, Princeton, NJ, 1979, p. 5.
[140] Spiegel, 'Flaubert to Joyce', p. 241.
[141] Ibid., p. 242.
[142] Grishakova, *The Models of Space, Time and Vision*, p. 123.

scene 'unfolds as a movie in full darkness with the "lit island" of the table with chess pieces as an equivalent of the screen',[143] but there is much more to the way Nabokov constructs its cinematic elements, as closer analysis reveals.

Luzhin sneaks into the darkness of his father's study to get away from a party, 'settling on a divan in the corner' from where he listens to the 'tender wail of a violin', coming from several rooms away:

> He listened sleepily, clasping his knees and looking at a chink of lacy light between the loosely closed curtains, through which a gas-lamp from the street shone lilac-tinged white. From time to time a faint glimmer sped over the ceiling in a mysterious arc and a gleaming dot showed on the desk […]. He had almost dozed off when suddenly he started at the ringing of a telephone on the desk, and it became immediately clear that the gleaming dot was on the telephone support. The butler came in from the dining room, turned on in passing a light which illumined only the desk […]. A minute later he returned accompanying a gentleman [the violinist] who as soon as he entered the circle of light picked up the receiver from the desk and with his other hand groped for the back of the desk chair. (pp. 40–41)

Nabokov engages Luzhin's camera eye perspective, focusing it, initially, on the lilac light of the streetlamp which reaches into the room and lands as a 'gleaming dot' on the desk. The cinematic cast of the scene is established by this 'arc' of light — this 'twirl of mirror darkness' — that emulates the beam of a movie projector. It is an image which recurs the following day, when Luzhin's aunt takes him back to the study to teach him the game — 'they entered the study where a band of sunbeams, in which spun tiny particles of dust, was focused on an overstuffed armchair. She lit a cigarette and folds of smoke started to sway, soft and transparent, in the sunbeams' (p. 45). The quality of the daylight has the same lilac tinge — 'mauve, indigo and pale blue' — with the 'wooden street pavements' cast in a 'violet sheen' (p. 43), affirming a sense of continuation from the night before. It is also no coincidence that Nabokov chooses this particular colour, denoting, as it does across his fiction, not only 'the very colour of time',[144] suggestive of transcendence and immortality, but also his presence in the text.[145]

[143] Ibid., p. 119.

[144] See Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, p. 241.

[145] As James Joyce 'set[s] his face in a dark corner of this canvas' via *Ulysses*'s Man in the Brown Macintosh (Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, p. 320), here Nabokov establishes his presence through colour and light. On Nabokov's self-reference through colour, see

As in the attic episode, the sounds around Luzhin suddenly stop, the silence, until it is broken by the ringing telephone, magnifying the visual aspect of the scene. In the pitch black of his father's study, similar to the darkness of a cinema auditorium, Luzhin's attention is caught initially by the beam of the streetlight that guides his eye to the telephone, which acts as the scene's dramatic catalyst,[146] and then by the lamp which, like a spotlight, illuminates only one side of the violinist's face, and then his floating hands. The reified, disembodied description identifies him only by his 'ivory nose, black hair', and a single, 'bushy eyebrow' (p. 41). Luzhin's vision also exhibits a form of photographic 'depthlessness', whereby his eye 'flatten[s] out the depth of field', 'foreground[ing] and equaliz[ing] everything […] on the same flat, two-dimensional plane', while through 'anatomization', his cinematic perspective 'places a new and concentrated attentiveness upon the infinite number of phases that constitute the shape of any single action' — here the violinist arriving to answer the telephone — able to follow and apprehend his every movement.[147]

As part of the novel's many repetitions and recurrences, this key cinematic episode anticipates a scene in which Luzhin goes to the cinema for the first time. His wife takes him to see an unnamed, generic, sentimental drama, at which he cries. One could say that the film is a success, in that it provokes the designed emotional response from its audience, but what is unusual here is that this is one of the rare occasions when Luzhin shows any form of emotional release. There are only four other times when he actually sheds tears — when he tries to escape being taken back to St Petersburg and to school; when he proposes to his wife; when Valentinov leaves him (he implies); and during his breakdown, as he runs through what he thinks are the woods that surround his family's Russian country estate but which are only the trees in a Berlin park.

Gerard de Vries and D. Barton Johnson, *Nabokov and the Art of Painting*, Amsterdam, 2006, pp. 39–41. In Nabokov's synaesthetic alphabet, the first letter of his pen-name, Sirin, takes on a 'curious mixture of azure and mother-of-pearl', essentially lilac (in Russian, *siren'*). Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p. 21. See also, Gavriel Shapiro, 'Setting His Myriad Faces in His Text: Nabokov's Authorial Presence Revisited', in Connolly (ed.), *Nabokov and His Fiction*, pp. 15–35. Nabokov made the first of such 'visits of inspection' in *King, Queen, Knave*. Vladimir Nabokov, 'Foreword' to *King, Queen, Knave*, London, 1993, p. vi. A similar 'inclined beam of pale light' appears at the end of *Bend Sinister* (1947), along which Nabokov travels to save Krug, his incarcerated protagonist, 'from the senseless agony of his logical fate'. See Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, New York, 1990, p. 233.

[146] Anticipating its function in *Lolita*, for example, as Humbert Humbert remarks: 'With people in movies I seem to share the services of the machina telephonica and its sudden god.' Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 205.

[147] Alan Spiegel, *Fiction and the Camera Eye: Visual Consciousness in Film and the Modern Novel*, Charlottesville, VA, 1976, p. 88.

These are all significant, life-changing events which could legitimately be expected to have an extreme emotional impact, yet this film — this highly manipulative, artificial, two-dimensional construct — also makes him cry.

Luzhin turns out to be a gullible subject, and conforms readily to the very particular environment of the cinematic space:

> In the cinema, the specific set-up of projection, screen, and audience, together with the centring effect of optical perspective and the focalising strategies of narration, all ensure or conspire to transfix but also to transpose the spectator into a trancelike state in which it becomes difficult to distinguish between the 'out-there' and the 'in-here'.[148]

Luzhin initially shows no interest in engaging with what is happening on the screen in front of him, although there is a sense that he has entered a trancelike state — 'the picture ran on in a white glow' (p. 191) — until his attention is finally caught by the vision of the father and doctor playing chess: 'In the darkness came the sound of Luzhin laughing abruptly. "An absolutely impossible position for the pieces," he said.' Luzhin adopts a position of objective irony in an attempt to detach himself from the drama being played out before him, a move which is reinforced by a sudden shift in perspective from Luzhin to his wife. The image of the father's face moving into an extreme, 'choker' close-up[149] is described from her point of view:

> but at this point, to his wife's relief, everything changed and the father, growing in size, walked toward the spectators and acted his part for all he was worth; his eyes widened, then came a slight trembling, his lashes flapped, there was another bit of trembling, and slowly his wrinkles softened, grew kinder, and a slow smile of infinite tenderness appeared on his face, which continued to tremble… (p. 191)

A change from past to present tense signals a return to Luzhin's point of view, which communicates both the intensity of this vision, and the intensity of his response to it: 'And the father, continuing the trembling, slowly opens his arms, and suddenly she kneels before him. Luzhin began to blow his nose.'

[148] Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses*, 2nd edn, New York and London, 2015, p. 77.

[149] 'A tight close-up that fills the frame with the subject's head, generally from the neck up.' Ira Konigsberg, *The Complete Film Dictionary*, 2nd edn, London, 1997, p. 54.

In a 1949 essay, the film theorist Hugo Mauerhofer describes a particular phenomenon which he calls the 'Cinema Situation', something which Luzhin, in this scene, submits to totally, and which also explains his response to the film. Luzhin exhibits the three main traits of Mauerhofer's cinema spectator — 'voluntary passivity', 'imminent boredom' and an amplified imaginative power — generated by the enclosed atmosphere of the cinema auditorium. These traits, combined with film's ability to alter our sense of time, 'cause[s] the unconscious to begin to communicate with the consciousness to a higher degree than in the normal state'.[150] As he sits in the still, hushed darkness of the cinema auditorium Luzhin relinquishes himself to the 'diffused mass' of the anonymous cinema audience. This sense of anonymity heightens his subjective response to the action and characters on the screen, such that he ultimately finds himself identifying with them 'uncritically',[151] thus allowing the drama playing out before his eyes to affect him, profoundly.

There are a number of ways to interpret Luzhin's response to this scene. Nabokov has already shown how Luzhin is susceptible to sentimentality when he is easily beguiled by the phoney nostalgia of the 'gaudy Russia boldly on display' (p. 120) at his parents-in-law's flat. It could be that it recalls the pivotal evening in his father's study, or more potently, Luzhin burying his father's 'precious box of chessmen' (p. 66) in an attempt to stop him trying to teach him how to play. Instead his father invites their doctor to play against him — he turns out to be 'first-rate' (p. 67) — their nightly matches marking the beginning of Luzhin's path towards open competition. Or it could simply be that this fleeting vision of a chess game serves as a potent and painful reminder of an existence that is now closed to him. Equally, though, this could also be an instance where Luzhin is simply overcome by the combined visual power of the images playing out before him — the close-up depicted, for example, as actual movement, as if the father is 'walking' out of the screen 'toward the spectators' (p. 191) — and the new environment that he finds himself in, which together intensify his emotional connection to the on-screen drama.

The close-up is perhaps '*the* most recognizable unit of cinematic discourse',[152] commented on, initially, by Béla Balázs in 1924, in a way that

[150] Hugo Mauerhofer, 'Psychology of Film Experience', *The Penguin Film Review*, 8, 1, January 1949, pp. 103–09 (p. 106).

[151] Ibid., p. 108.

[152] Mary Ann Doane, 'The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema', *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 14, 3, 2003, pp. 89–111 (p. 90). Emphasis in the original.

echoes the 'precise and silent beauty' which Nabokov saw in the magic lantern slides. The 'magnifying glass of the cinematograph brings us closer to the individual cells of life', Balázs argues, 'allow[ing] us to feel the texture and substance of life in its concrete detail':

> [The close-up lifts] the single image out of the whole. This enables us not only to see the minute atoms of life more clearly than anything on stage, but in addition the director uses them to guide our gaze […] The close-up is the deeper gaze, the director's sensibility. The close-up is the poetry of cinema.[153]

Whereas many early cinema audiences found the close-up deeply unsettling, inspiring a mixture of 'fascination, love, horror, empathy, pain' and 'unease',[154] Balázs's response is unequivocally positive. Nabokov, via Luzhin's fiancée, also shows no sign of flinching at the growing image of the actor's trembling face. The emphasis here is on its melodramatic effect, as it is in an earlier story, in which 'the huge face of a girl with gray, shimmering eyes and black lips traversed vertically by glistening cracks, approaches from the screen'. The face 'keeps growing as it gazes into the dark hall, and a wonderful, long, shining tear runs down one cheek'.[155] Here, in the English translation, Nabokov has replaced 'glycerin' with 'shining'.[156] Glycerin, the term he originally used, reveals, as Jupiter does in 'Kinematograf', his inside knowledge of the industry, it being the substance used by film-makers to simulate tears. The image is also reminiscent of the 'female stars with low foreheads, magnificent eyebrows' and 'lavishly shaded eyes' that feature in the films he recalls from his St Petersburg movie-going.

Tom Gunning has described cinema as both 'an art of light [and] of darkness, not simply in the darkened room necessary for the light image to become visible, but in its actual process: the rhythm and pulse of the flickering light on the screen'.[157] The play of light and dark is a constant element of *The Defense*, and is part of the novel's patterning of motifs —

[153] Béla Balázs, 'Visible Man', in *Early Film Theory: Visible Man and The Spirit of Film*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, New York and Oxford, 2010, pp. 38 and 41.

[154] Doane, 'The Close-Up', p. 90.

[155] Vladimir Nabokov, 'A Letter that Never Reached Russia' (1925), in *Collected Stories*, p. 138.

[156] See Parker, *Nabokov Noir*, p. 39.

[157] Tom Gunning, 'Flicker and Shutter: Exploring Cinema's Shuddering Shadow', in Martine Beugnet, Allan Cameron and Arild Fetveit (eds), *Indefinite Visions: Cinema and the Attractions of Uncertainty*, Edinburgh, 2022, pp. 53–69 (p. 62).

windows, boxes, bridges, telephones — that operates alongside its chess imagery.[158] In film, this patterning would be described as an 'image system', which functions as 'an intrinsic part of the visual language of movies [that] can add layers of meaning, nuance and depth'.[159] Its success relies on a process of 'visual recalling and comparison' that is 'inherent in the way audiences extract meaning from images to understand a story, constantly making connections not only within, but also between shots'.[160] In *The Defense*, Luzhin is conscious of this system, which he responds to as both a participant and an objective viewer, believing, mistakenly, that he can accurately interpret and ultimately control it. Pekka Tammi has argued that because the novel's 'system of hidden correlations' is formulated by both Nabokov and Luzhin, it is 'important to distinguish between those instances in the text that are accessible to Luzhin's point of view and those that are not'. There is a sustained tension throughout the novel, therefore, between these parallel points of view, but despite the complexity of Luzhin's image system, it cannot compete with the sophistication of Nabokov's 'imaginative structure':[161]

> Glass surfaces, rectangular openings, doors and windows function everywhere in the novel as covert prefigurations of the concluding scene […]. At the same time, the recurrences serve to confirm that Luzhin's final attempt to break out of the [narrator]-generated design has also been anticipated on the plane of his own reality.[162]

Dramatic irony is generated by the system of repeated images that Nabokov constructs to which Luzhin remains blind, yet this system is 'specifically manipulated to point beyond [Luzhin's] comprehension'.[163] Indeed, the novel's image system operates in such a way that it can can only be apprehended by the ideal Nabokovian 'rereader',[164] a reader who, like the film viewer, is capable of 'visual recalling and comparison'. As Aleksandr

[158] See Dolinin, 'Istinnaia zhizn′ pisatelia Sirina: pervye romany', pp. 31–32.

[159] Gustavo Mercado, *The Filmmaker's Eye: The Language of the Lens. The Power of Lenses and the Expressive Cinematic Image*, Abingdon and New York, 2019, p. 13. See also, Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*, York, 2014, pp. 400–08.

[160] Gustavo Mercado, *The Filmmaker's Eye: Learning (and Breaking) the Rules of Cinematic Composition*, Abingdon and New York, 2017, p. 21.

[161] Pekka Tammi, *Problems of Nabokov's Poetics: A Narratological Analysis*, Helsinki, 1985, p. 143.

[162] Ibid., p. 142.

[163] Ibid.

[164] Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, p. 3.

Dolinin details, Luzhin's impulse "to free himself, climb somewhere, even into oblivion"' after his game with Turati is adjourned, directly prefigures his death, while the vision of the yard 'into which he "is about to break loose" [has] already [been] seen through the eyes of his wife on her failed wedding night'.[165]

Whilst Nabokov and Luzhin overtly manipulate camera eye perspective, Nabokov deploys a range of devices that amplify the cinematic quality of Luzhin's experience. The most explicit of these is the jump cut[166] that occurs at the end of chapter four, which Nabokov announces, in the form of an 'unexpected' chess move, in his Foreword (p. 9). He also describes the tactic, however, as a distinctive process of pulling focus:[167]

> We switch back to the Kurhaus in Chapter Six and find Luzhin still fiddling with the handbag and still addressing his blurry companion whereupon she unblurs […] and becomes a distinct part of the design. (pp. 9–10)

In other places, the manipulation is more subtle, combining several key cinematic devices in a seemingly incidental way. In his description of the arrival of the taxi that picks up Kurt, Karl and Luzhin, for example, angle of vision, lighting and visual motif combine not only to magnify the cinematic quality of the narrative, but also reinforce the novel's image system. The arrival of the taxi is signalled by the image of its headlamps 'glid[ing] over the asphalt', the angle of vision pitched downwards, so that only their light is registered. The scene is also silent, the taxi '*softly* pull[ing] in alongside the sidewalk' (p. 146 — my emphasis). The perspective then shifts to the body of the taxi, this time lit by a different source — a streetlamp — which focuses like a spotlight on the 'large chess squares' on the door — 'the blazon of Berlin taxis' (p. 147) — in yet another recurrence of the novel's dominant chess motif.

Luzhin, meanwhile, demonstrates how he uses his camera eye to alter the composition of a scene, taking advantage of the angle and aspect of light and shade to engage its mechanism, here deliberately pulling focus to produce a specific vision:

[165] Dolinin, 'Istinnaia zhizn′ pisatelia Sirina: pervye romany', p. 39 (translation mine). In the English version of the novel, 'oblivion' is translated as 'nonexistence' (see p. 140).

[166] 'A cut between two shots that seems abrupt and calls attention to itself because of some obvious jump in time or space'. Konigsberg, *The Complete Film Dictionary*, pp. 200–01.

[167] 'Changing the focus plane during a take. The focus plane goes soft while another part of the scene becomes the primary focus', essentially a process of blurring and unblurring the focal subject. Ibid., p. 152.

> The avenue was paved with sunflecks, and these spots, if you slitted your eyes, took on the aspect of regular light and dark squares. An intense latticelike shadow lay flat beneath a garden bench. The urns that stood on stone pedestals at the four corners of the terrace threatened one another across their diagonals. (p. 59)

In the novel's final scene, Luzhin's camera eye perspective engages in such a way that he registers the details of the bathroom in a series of defamiliarized, reified images — the 'gleaming' white bathtub, the pencil drawing on the wall, the small chest and the window next to it with its two different panes of glass, black and frosted 'sparkly blue' (p. 253). The bathroom light functions as a source of 'high key' lighting that brings all these details onto the same focal plane,[168] presenting, in depthless equalization, a culmination of the principal elements of the novel's image system. Luzhin's drawing, of a cube casting a shadow, for example, recalls the shadow in a square of moonlight that he casts as he steps from his hotel balcony in chapter seven, while the 'sparkly blue' of the frosted glass recalls the 'shining blue window' at the hospital (p. 159) which he had interpreted nostalgically, but mistakenly, as the 'blue gleam of a Russian autumn' (p. 160). Meanwhile, the effect of the 'key' light serves to magnify the whiteness of the box-like bathroom, setting it against the pitch black of the night sky which is also presented as a contained space, confined, for the moment, to the upper pane of the window.

There is a sense, however, that Luzhin is aware that he is existing in a cinematic simulacrum. The scene in the yard below him that 'divides' before his eyes 'into dark and pale squares' (p. 256), dramatizes the 'special, ocular access' of the cinematic experience, whereby the mere 'act of looking' has the power to open up 'an (imaginary) three-dimensional space', here beyond the deep chasm of the night that confronts him.[169] Luzhin experiences similar moments of 'special ocular access' throughout the novel — the 'limpid sounds [that] strangely transformed in his reverie and assumed the shape of bright intricate patterns on a dark background' (p. 60) — but until this final scene they remain tantalizingly incomplete, only at the last moment coming fully into focus.

The dream-like quality of these visions correlates with the 'illusionary' nature of Nabokov's text and Luzhin's emblematic role within it — the

[168] Key light is 'the major source of illumination for a subject or scene'. Placed high it 'minimize[s] shadows' and 'create[s] the widest and most intense area of illumination', Ibid., p. 203.

[169] Elsaesser and Hagener, *Film Theory*, p. 15.

'man of a different dimension, with a particular form and coloring that was compatible with nothing and no one' (p. 103) — the 'invented creature' whose 'name rhymes with "illusion"' (p. 7). Nabokov's deliberate focus, in the opening lines of his Foreword, on the sound of Luzhin's name — 'pronounced thickly enough', it is possible 'to deepen the "u" into "oo"' (p. 7) — seems initially to be a matter of emphasizing its Russianness for the benefit of his new English readers. Yet the specific attention he pays to it also points to the close affinity of its rhyme with its Russian equivalent, иллюзион (*illiuzion*).[170] Nabokov had already established the centrality of illusion to the cinematic experience in 'Kinematograf', but here the term recalls its popular use by movie-goers in pre-revolutionary Russia. While Western audiences referred to cinema as 'the pictures', early Russian film audiences called it 'the illusions'.[171] Indeed, many of Russia's first movie theatres were named 'Illiuzion', including the cinema at 74 Zagorodnyi prospekt in St Petersburg which ran from 1908 to 1917.[172] Thus, by alluding to the Russian reverberations of Luzhin's name, Nabokov directs his readers to the fundamental importance of cinema to his protagonist's very identity.

Alan Spiegel has argued that the 'literary cultivation of a passive and affectless oval of vision [distinguishes] the cinematographic form of the twentieth century from the concretized form of the late nineteenth. […] This manner of vision tells us that the modern novelist', from Conrad and Joyce to Nabokov and Robbe-Grillet, 'has brought us further away from the seen object' and 'closer to the eye of the subject'.[173] For Luzhin, therefore, it is not a matter of the way he sees the world but the manner in which he sees it. Under stress, it is his vision that is first to become impaired, signalling the disintegration of his primary means of spiritual defence. He experiences unnerving, 'intricate, optical metamorphoses' when under threat of bullying at school (p. 29), the blurring of his vision anticipating the same darkening that occurs after his last match with Turati, where he finds himself surrounded by shadows and fog, taunted by ghosts (pp. 140–43). His growing panic at the German resort as he tries

[170] Thomas Karshan argues that Luzhin's defence is one of illusion, denoted by the very word – '*illiuziia*' – embedded in his name. Karshan, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play*, p. 101.

[171] Prototype cinemas were also known as 'illusion-halls'. See Kovalova, 'The Film Palaces of Nevsky Prospect', pp. 32, 42.

[172] Kovalova, *Kinematograf v Peterburge 1907–1917*, p. 353. Moscow has a famous repertory cinema of the same name. With thanks to Julian Graffy for these further Russian film history details.

[173] Spiegel, 'Flaubert to Joyce', p. 242.

to find the room where he had competed as a boy is also communicated as a set of reified images that register the scene in increasingly surreal and disjointed, abstract visions:

> a tower of plates ran past on human legs. 'No, farther,' said Luzhin and walked along the corridor. He opened another door and almost fell: steps going down, and some shrubs at the bottom, and a pile of rubbish, and an apprehensive hen, jerkily walking away. […] Corridor. Window giving on garden. Gadget on wall, with numbered pigeonholes. (pp. 100–01)

Finally, as he watches his pocket chessboard 'dissolve in a pink and cream haze', Luzhin's eyes are forced to pull focus on the position of the 'tiny, insertable' celluloid chess pieces that transform into something 'complex, pungent, charged with extraordinary possibilities' (p. 218), the visual metamorphosis only serving to confirm the futility of his defence.

The disintegration of Luzhin's visual capacity as his illness takes hold magnifies its mechanical cast, laying bare his 'unconscious optics'.[174] This is introduced during the match with Turati by an image of film running through a projector. The 'boundary between chess and his fiancée's home' melts away, 'as if movement had been speeded up, and what at first had seemed an alternation of strips was now a flicker' (p. 125). Luzhin becomes increasingly aware of his vision as a form of apparatus such that, at the Russian ball, he 'half closes his eyes' so that his old schoolmate 'would not notice him' (p. 200), believing that by reducing his vision in this way and denying Petrishchev visual contact he can render himself invisible. It is as if he is finally fully manifesting the cinematic resonances that his name — Luzhin/*Illiuzion* — indeed his very identity, generates. Alan Spiegel's discussion of the Joycean observer's 'characteristic coldness of vision' can also apply to Luzhin here. Spiegel identifies a 'spiritual separateness that begins with a passive, affectless eye' which 'will never permit the observer total rapport with his visual field', resulting in 'a kind of ocular loneliness'.[175] The episode at the ball reveals the degree not only of Luzhin's visual estrangement, his 'ocular loneliness', but also his dependency on the empirical nature of vision — he exists in the realm of sight in the same way as the world only exists as far as he can see it, and as far as the tools of vision allow.

Yet Luzhin's camera eye perspective fails to provide him with the advantage he so desperately needs in his battle against the forces of chess,

[174] Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', p. 230.
[175] Spiegel, *Fiction and the Camera Eye*, p. 67.

even though it allows him to believe that he can command, like a movie director, the constantly shifting light and darkness, the 'symmetries and combinations' that manoeuvre silently around him. Compounding this is his failure to realize what they actually signify, for, rather than having any real control over his own destiny, he is in fact nothing more than another piece on the board, to be played by intractable forces that lie beyond his reach or understanding. Ultimately the shaft of light that enabled his entry into the game becomes a light that confines him within it, irrevocably:

> the moon emerged from behind the angular black twigs, a round, full-bodied moon […] and when finally Luzhin left the balcony and stepped back into his room, there on the floor lay an enormous square of moonlight, and in that light — his own shadow. (p. 117)

Conclusion

The cinematic cast of Luzhin's name, combined with the deployment of cinematic motifs and techniques in *The Defense*, demonstrates a clear development in Nabokov's experimentation with the medium, while the operation of camera eye perspective anticipates its distillation and concentration in the portrayal of his next protagonist, Smurov, in *The Eye*. Smurov's manipulation of the camera eye echoes both Dziga Vertov's privileging of mechanical cinematic vision[176] and Walter Benjamin's detailing of fluid camera movement, which 'intervenes with the resources of its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions':[177]

> Whenever I wish, I can accelerate or retard to ridiculous slowness the motions of all these people, or distribute them in different groups, or arrange them in various patterns, lighting them now from below, now from the side… For me their entire existence has been merely a shimmer on a screen.[178]

Whereas in *The Defense* the camera eye is deployed by Nabokov to express the extent of Luzhin's estrangement, and by Luzhin himself as a means of, albeit futile, control, Smurov assumes and is subsumed, utterly, by the mechanics of the movie camera.

[176] See Michelson (ed.), *Kino-Eye*, pp. 11–21. For commentary, see Wyllie, *Nabokov at the Movies*, pp. 18–29.

[177] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', p. 230.

[178] Vladimir Nabokov, *The Eye*, London, 1981, p. 91.

Rather than serving as mere commentaries on film, however, these works demonstrate Nabokov's keen interest in the industry, and the extent to which he embraced cinema as an art form, as a medium which offered new ways of both seeing and interacting with the modern world. Unlike many contemporary writers and critics who condemned cinema, in its mass appeal and reach, as 'the most clearly expressed form of anti-art',[179] even seeing it as a threat to their very existence,[180] Nabokov's response to film was not to dismiss it, but to take away the elements that could be incorporated into his fiction, essentially to produce the 'new form of writing' that Tolstoi predicted in 1908.

[179] Parker, *Nabokov Noir*, p. 72, quoting Pavel Muratov in his 1925 article, 'Kinematograf'.

[180] For commentary, see Colin McCabe, 'On Impurity: The Dialectics of Cinema and Literature', in Julian Murphet and Lydia Rainford (eds), *Literature and Visual Technologies: Writing After Cinema*, Basingstoke, 2003, pp. 15–28.