

# Nabokov on socialist and cinematic realism

by Karin Grelz



ILLUSTRATION: KARIN SUNNIVISSON

Vladimir Nabokov's negative judgment of socialist realism was unequivocal and consistent over the years. His relation to cinematic art, on the other hand, was ambivalent and charged with a highly potent dynamic.<sup>1</sup> The aim of this article is to show to what extent Nabokov's relations to these two phenomena – Soviet art and cinematic art – were interrelated and subtly intertwined. Focusing on a cinematic scene in Nabokov's first novel, *Mary* (1926), the analysis traces how the themes of cinematic deception techniques and mimetic violence are developed further by Nabokov in some of his texts from the 1930s and '40s: *The Eye*, *Kamera Obskura/Laughter in the Dark*, *Nikolai Gogol*, and "The Assistant Producer". Summing up, references will be made also to *Conclusive Evidence*, or *Speak, Memory*, as it was renamed when published in the United States.

In an interview with Alfred Appel Jr., Nabokov boasted of his "uncontested use of cinema themes, cinema lore, and cinematophors".<sup>2</sup> This statement has subsequently been taken at face value by several researchers, and the role of popular culture as well as cinematic narrative technique in his novels has been analyzed from different perspectives.<sup>3</sup> Early on, Appel diagnosed Nabokov's relations to film "as at once those of a clas-

sicist (after Plato – and Arnheim, whom he has never read) and, loosely speaking, a Marxist", and he also drew attention to the special relation between émigré Russian culture and the growing cinema industry in the European 1920s and '30s.<sup>4</sup>

In the USSR, on the other hand, film was celebrated as the most important medium for political agitation and for manipulating the masses.<sup>5</sup> Lev Kuleshov experimented on how to make the audience project emotional content onto neutral images through a montage technique, called the "Kuleshov effect". At the same time young Dziga Vertov, producer of a Soviet newsreel called "Kino-Pravda" in the 1920s, stated that the camera eye was better equipped than the human eye for recording the world without superfluous aesthetic biases. Accordingly, film was declared in the USSR to be the most democratic of all the arts.

## abstract

The aim of this article is to show to what extent Nabokov's relations to the two phenomena Soviet art and cinematic art were interrelated and subtly intertwined. Focusing on a cinematic scene in Nabokov's first novel, *Mary* (1926), the analysis traces how the themes of cinematic deception techniques and mimetic violence are developed by Nabokov. It is shown how cinematic effects in Nabokov addresses the violence inherent in socialist realist aesthetics: political censorship and manipulation on the one hand, and the programmatic extinction of artists labeled as "bourgeois" on the other.

**KEY WORDS:** Nabokov, socialist realism, Soviet art, cinematic realism.

**VERTOV'S PROJECT HAD** explicitly downplayed the artistic element in favor of the technical and industrial aspects of cinematic craft as enlightening entertainment and political propaganda. The message was that, with Soviet film, the bourgeois arts of theater and literature had become obsolete, while journal films presented montages of clips from Soviet life and developed a

narrative that claimed life itself was the author. In his Soviet classic *Man with a Movie Camera*, Vertov also declared on the title cards that this was a film free from artistic lies, made without the help of notes, without script, scenery or actors, and aimed at establishing a truly international, absolute language of film “on the basis of its total dissociation from the language of theater and literature”.

**NABOKOV'S COMPLEX RELATION** to cinema can be explained from this perspective as the result of a double task: to discredit socialist realism (“advertisements of a firm of slave-traders”)<sup>6</sup> and at the same time to take literature’s revenge on film through a kind of symbolic annexation or domestication. Through references to film in his early novels, he established an analogy between cinematic technique and naïve realism, including the socialist variety. At the same time, Nabokov demonstratively called attention to his own literary technique in cinematic terms, but as a more advanced and sophisticated form of deception.

### From mute to motion pictures and crime scenes

A coeval of moving pictures, Nabokov was a cinemagoer throughout his life and followed its technical development. As a young boy he watched magic-lantern pictures and silent movies, while as a middle-aged man he witnessed the birth of sound pictures, wrote film scenarios together with Ivan Lukash, and even claimed to have worked as a film extra in Berlin in the 1920s.<sup>7</sup> In the 1960s his novels were brought to the screen and he was invited to collaborate with Alfred Hitchcock on a film about a woman married to a defector – a collaboration which never took place, but which would have been the perfect match from the point of view of deception and manipulation techniques. In 1964 he wrote in one of his letters to Hitchcock that he had a great deal of material on the subject:

“While ignorant of the workings of the American intelligence, I have gathered considerable information regarding those of the Soviets. For some time now I have been thinking of writing the story of a defector from behind the Iron Curtain to the United States. The constant danger he is in, the constant necessity to hide and be on the lookout for agents from his native land bent on kidnapping or killing him.”<sup>8</sup>

During his first years of emigration in Berlin, Nabokov already seems to have had the opportunity to gather information about Soviet activities abroad. *The Rudder (Rul’)*, the émigré daily newspaper where he was published extensively, printed reports smuggled out of Russia. As a result, one of its employees was approached by an agent of the Soviet OGPU (successor of the

Cheka), which almost managed to infiltrate the editorial staff.<sup>9</sup> After the Civil War the Bolsheviks had also launched a special campaign to encourage emigrated artists and directors to return and reanimate the declining Soviet cinema. Among the returnees were established directors as Iakov Protazanov, whose decision to go back still remains an enigma to his biographers.<sup>10</sup>

These and similar examples fed into Nabokov’s early work and were explicitly touched upon for the first time in his play *The Man from the USSR*, written in 1925–26.<sup>11</sup> The short play featured a group of destitute refugees in Berlin, among them an informer from the USSR, supposed in the end to be a double agent. Coming back from a visit to Moscow, he sets up an appointment in a film studio with a countryman who is desperate to return and in need of a passport. Nabokov did not choose the setting by chance. Working in a film studio was a way of earning one’s bread and hence a place where émigré Russians met and “sold their shadows” in more than one sense.

### The primary scene in *Mary*

Nabokov’s first longer novel *Mary (Mashenka, 1926)* is especially interesting from the point of view of his cinematic technique. It presents a kind of cinematic-mimetic primary scene that addresses in metafictional terms the question of realism in art, and also the situation of émigré Russians.

The protagonist Ganin is an émigré in Berlin in 1924 who has been working as a film extra to earn his living. When he goes to the movies with his girlfriend, he recognizes himself among a theatrical audience on the screen. He recalls how humiliating the situation at the shooting was and also reflects on the insidious realism of the medium. The transformation of ragged extras and poor scenery into a glamorous theater auditorium, as well as the thought of how cheaply he sold himself and

how his shadow will continue to wander all over the world after his demise, disgusts Ganin. A feeling of lost authenticity and shame for what he has taken part in overwhelms him: “We know not what we do.”<sup>12</sup>

The cinema scene in *Mary* dramatizes the theme of art as a distorting mirror and false representation of reality. This thought, however, is brought into play by what Ganin sees on the screen: a prima donna fainting on the opera stage after being reminded by her role of a murder she once committed in real life. The scene turns in multiple ways on the mirror-relationship between art and life, memory and experience, and complicates Ganin’s role as a spectator. What he once saw as an extra, acting as part of a staged audience on the screen, he now reexperiences from his position in the auditorium at a movie theater, as part of a “real” audience. In his preface to the English translation, Nabokov stated that *Mary* was an “extract of personal reality” and Ganin a “vicar” for himself, but at a closer look the scene rather points in playful terms to the mirror games of his fiction.

**“NABOKOV CRITICIZED THE WAY ART UNDER SOVIET RULE HAD BEEN REDUCED TO A PRIMITIVE INSTRUMENT FOR IMPOSING GOODNESS.”**



PHOTO: GIUSEPPE PINO / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Nabokov, in 1969, shows his own original butterfly illustrations. When he arrived in the US in 1940, his first job was to make drawings of butterfly anatomy at the Museum of Natural History.

Nevertheless, Ganin's situation bears concrete witness to the historical circumstances of the interwar period in Europe: many of the first wave of Russian émigrés made their living by working for the growing European and American film industry. With their property expropriated by the Bolsheviks and without valid passports, they were undesirable and unacknowledged existences from both a European and a Soviet perspective. Their past was at the same time subject to a fictionalization process. In films about the First World War, such as Edward Sloman's *Surrender* (1927), Russian émigrés appeared as extras in roles of the White Guardists they had once been. In Josef von Sternberg's *The Last Command* (1928), Emil Jannings played a tsarist ex-general applying for work as an extra, while actual Russian émigrés were acting as extras in the same film.<sup>13</sup> Ganin's experience in *Mary* is clearly a reference to such a situation and Appel specifically notices Nabokov's sensitivity to this kind of figurative violence and historical irony. He even suggests that Ganin's strong reaction to what he sees on the screen is prompted by his recognition of the scene as a parody of a charity concert at his former family estate.<sup>14</sup>

Next to his double, Ganin also observes a bearded man whom he remembers from the shooting. He is wearing evening dress with a starched white shirt and a sash across his breast:

**“Ganin's doppelganger also stood and clapped, over there, alongside the very striking-looking man with the black beard and the ribbon across his chest. Because of**

**that beard and his starched shirt he had always landed in the front row; in the intervals he munched a sandwich and then, after the take, would put on a wretched old coat over his evening dress and return home to a distant part of Berlin, where he worked as a compositor in a printing plant.”<sup>15</sup>**

In an interview with Andrew Field, Nabokov later hinted at the bearded man in this scene as being a cameo appearance of sorts. He recalled how, in Berlin, he had been the only extra wearing evening dress during a shoot, and also how he had stood clapping before an imaginary stage. When Nabokov explained to Field that there actually was a real murder going on which the audience took to be part of the performance, he most likely had the symbolic kind of violence in mind that disgusts Ganin so much in the novel.<sup>16</sup>

### **The *mise en abyme***

According to Wyllie, the cinema scene in *Mary* expresses the impact of the cinematic medium on Nabokov's imagination and demonstrates the complexity of his response to it.<sup>17</sup> At the same time it may also be read as an allusion to the metafictional experiments of contemporary literature. In the discussions of the 1920s about how to develop and renew the 19<sup>th</sup>-century naturalist novel, the artistic devices of visual mimesis were brought into play, with André Gide's *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (1925) as one of the most renowned examples. By writing a story about the writing of a story – and thus using the literary device of *mise en abyme* – Gide criticized naïve realism and the notion of literary sincerity prevailing in current literary discussions. The term is derived from heraldry, where it denotes the technique of inserting into the shield a miniature copy of its design, repeating the motif *ad infinitum*. With a text mirrored in a text, and an author-protagonist who is deeply concerned with the idea of a new novel, a book would describe the process of its own becoming and create a kind of narrative infinity.

**AS CONVINCINGLY ARGUED** by Leonid Livak, it was Gide's attempt to develop the realist novel that inspired Nabokov to write his first more elaborate metafictional novel, *The Gift* (1937–1938).<sup>18</sup> Like *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, Nabokov's *The Gift* is a novel about the writing of a novel, and to that extent it capitalized on Gide's praxis. At the heart of his book, however, Nabokov placed a critical biography of Nikolay Chernyshevsky – the author of the treatise “On the Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality”, and of Lenin's favorite book *What Is To Be Done*. This he apparently did both as a comment on Chernyshevsky's materialist aesthetics and as an ironic allusion to the socialist Gide's ideological convictions, but also as a literary experiment. The protagonist's text is rejected by his editor, just as Nabokov foresaw that his own novel would be. The socialist revolutionary editors of the literary magazine where it was serialized found Nabokov's disrespect for the legend Chernyshevsky offensive (he had actually focused more on the private person), and the fourth chapter of *The Gift* was consequently left out in the first publication. Later, in his 1962 fore-

word to the full version, Nabokov triumphantly noted that, this time, life had imitated art rather than the other way around.

A similar device of a text or image placed within another was applied already in *Mary*, which was published within a year after Gide's *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*.<sup>19</sup> This time it is the protagonist's memories of his first love, set among pre-revolutionary Russian gentry, that serves as the text within the text, as if Nabokov thus intended to preserve both the 19<sup>th</sup>-century tradition of the Russian novel and the memory of the Russian gentry.

LIKE GIDE'S NOVEL, *Mary* describes a mirror situation and the complex relation between original and copy.<sup>20</sup> This theme is captured in its essence in the cinema scene. Interpreted in the literary context outlined above, Ganin's doppelgänger experience can be read as referring to Gide's favorite trope: the émigré Russian appearing as a representation *en abyme* in a film about his own past. The experience is accompanied, moreover, by a visual manifestation that recalls the escutcheon – the coat of arms, from which the name of the trope is borrowed. The ribbon across the starched white shirt of the actor next to Ganin creates a visual impression reminiscent of a heraldic shield with a characteristic bend (which may be a “bend dexter” or “bend sinister” – cf. Nabokov's novel of the same name).

Nabokov's point seems to be that if, for Gide, the metafictional presented an artistic opportunity or challenge, for the émigré Russian appearing as an extra in films about his own past it was a quite real, existential experience. In the surreal life of the émigré Russian, where images collapsed and imploded into one another, the *abyme* gradually became a metaphor of imprisonment, disappearance, and death.

### The last snapshots of the European intelligentsia

The counterfeiter-writer's heraldic trope in Nabokov appears as a “cinematophor” that symbolizes the programmatic extinction of bourgeois art and the social class to which Nabokov belonged. This extinction was built into the normative postulates of socialist realism and efficiently propagated through the techniques of mass culture. Trotsky, in his *Literature and Revolution* (1924), discussed how to make use of the remnants of bourgeois culture – the fellow-travelers (*poputchiki*), as these writers were called – once they had agreed to accompany the proletariat on its way to socialism. After Lenin's death, and with the development of the first five-year plan in 1927, this joint journey was coming to an end. The cultural sphere was subjugated to programmatic proletarianization, and one of the most central questions was the role of the bourgeois artist in the new society.

Walter Benjamin, who visited Moscow in the winter of 1926–1927, gave a discerning interpretation of these discussions in

“Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia”. In this essay, he pointed to the need to proceed from contemplation to political action, in order to finally overthrow the intellectual predominance of the bourgeoisie. Summing up, he suggested, with a touch of irony, that the new function of the bourgeois artist could consist in having his “artistic career” interrupted:

“If it is the double task of the intelligentsia to overthrow the intellectual predominance of the bourgeoisie and to make contact with the proletarian masses, the intelligentsia has failed almost entirely in the second part of this task because it can no longer be performed contem-

platively. And yet this has hindered hardly anybody from approaching it again and again as if it could, and calling for proletarian poets, thinkers, and artists. To counter this, Trotsky had to point out – as early as *Literature and Revolution* – that such artists would only emerge from a victorious revolution. In reality it is far less a matter of making the artist of bourgeois origin into a master of “proletarian art” than of *deploying him, even at the expense of his artistic activity, at important points*

*in this sphere of imagery. Indeed, might not perhaps the interruption of his “artistic career” be an essential part of his new function?”*<sup>21</sup>

The interruption of the artistic careers of bourgeois artists, however, became more violent in the Soviet Union than Benjamin might have expected. A campaign was launched against the fellow-travelers, texts from abroad were censored and the control of Soviet authors increased, while returning writers ritually denounced their émigré peers. Trotsky was exiled in February 1929, and the same year Stalin started retouching his enemies out of photos. The surrealist implosion of imagery that Nabokov explored in *Mary* now also affected the proponents of socialism. In April 1930, Vladimir Mayakovsky – a revolutionary poet who successfully hid his bourgeois background more or less in plain view<sup>22</sup> – ended his artistic career in a symbolic and cinematic way: by a shot from a weapon used as a prop in the film *Not For Money Born*.

### Totalitarianism, mass culture, and deception techniques

Nabokov seems to have noticed early on how the Bolshevik plea for realism, together with the techniques of the new medium – which was bolstered by the introduction of sound pictures in 1929 – was accompanied by the development of censorship. In the essay “Goodness Triumphant” (“*Torzhestvo dobrodetelei*”, 5 March 1930), he formulated his principal objection to Bolshevik cultural policy. As the title indicates – an allusion to Rossini's popular opera *La Cenerentola* (“Cinderella”) – Nabokov criti-

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Left: The face of Mosjoukine, from a later reconstruction of Kuleshov's experiment.  
Right: From Cocteau's film *The Blood of a Poet* (*Le Sang d'un Poète*, 1930).

cized the way art under Soviet rule had been reduced to a primitive instrument for imposing goodness.

Bolshevist cultural policy had brought the complex question of how to artistically handle the shortcomings of man and the base facets of human existence back to the level of ancient mysteries and moralistic fables – this is Nabokov's main point of critique. Ages of artistic development were wiped out as art was reduced to a primitive reproduction of the morally acceptable aspects of mankind. He concluded with an appeal in which he referred to the Soviet censor as a film director, silencing any voice that would appear subversive to the optimistic narrative:

**“If you really believe that this is for the best – why not bring the Soviet censor up from the basement and give him almighty powers? Let him lead us all along the Path of Goodness, like a film director. And to all you talented sinners – Silence!”<sup>23</sup>**

The appeal could also have been a reference to the American Hays Code, which was introduced the same year, although not put into actual practice until in 1934. But the article was written in Russian and printed in *The Rudder*, in a cultural context where literary discussion among émigré writers was affected by the harshening climate in the Soviet Union.<sup>24</sup>

In his novels, however, Nabokov deliberately avoided big, burning questions, and focused instead on deception technique itself. In *The Eye* (*Sogliadatai*, 1930) he looked further into cinematic forms of deception through a protagonist who is determined to master his fictions to perfection. After being tortured and humiliated by the husband (named *Kasimarin* – from *kashmar*, nightmare, from the French *cauchemar*) of one of his mistresses, the protagonist Smurov stages his own suicide and starts playing a narcissist game with his neighbors. The idea that guides him through all his manipulations is that of his private self as a fiction, reflected only in the eyes of his “neighbor”.

In her analysis of the cinematic dimensions of the text, Wyllie notes how Smurov (phonetically evoking associations to “paddy” or “ill humored”) “submits himself utterly to the camera perspective to wield an unchallenged authority over his narrative”, while at the same time his own existence remains as unreal as a film.<sup>25</sup> Still, it is Smurov's eye, in the form of the narrator's point of view, which dominates the whole narrative

– even to the point of self-deception. When Smurov finally runs into the violent husband again and is offered a job by him, he willingly accepts. In the end, the narrator assures the reader that happiness is to observe, to spy, and that he (Smurov) is very satisfied with his new and invulnerable position.

By connecting Smurov's narcissistic game to an experience of physical violence, the novel describes the devastating effect of violence on a fragile ego, just as Dostoevsky did in *The Double*.<sup>26</sup> From this point of view, Nabokov makes a general statement in this text on mimetic forms of violence as well. The Russian title of the novel, *Sogliadatai* (eavesdropper, peeper), evokes both the narrator's godlike peeping eye and the all-seeing, stalking eye of a totalitarian state. The novel also includes several references to the aesthetics of Dziga Vertov's experiments in *Kino-glaz*, which Nabokov evidently watched in Berlin.<sup>27</sup>

## Dark laughter

Nabokov's most cinematic novel, *Laughter in the Dark* (*Kamera Obskura*, 1932), is also a novel on the art of deception, written like a screenplay with filmic cuts and car chases.<sup>28</sup> The protagonist Krechmar (Albinus in the English translation) is an art historian who dreams of turning classical artworks into moving pictures. He falls blindly in love with an adolescent girl who is working as a hostess at the local cinema. Not talented enough to become a film star, she decides to get as much as possible out of her older admirer. Unable to see through her manipulations, Krechmar leaves his wife and even sponsors a film for his vampire protégée to perform in. During a trip to the French Riviera, he is literally blinded in a cinematically narrated car crash, and his mistress is now free to socialize with her new lover and accomplice Gorn (Rex) – a caricaturist and counterfeiter of old paintings – right before Krechmar's eyes.

The English title, *Laughter in the Dark*, can be interpreted as a reference to all kinds of primitive and blinding mimetic practices, and to the spectator's amusement by them in the cinema (“Friends described how he would ‘single out intentionally an inept American film’ and ‘literally shake with laughter, to the point where . . . he would have to leave the hall’”<sup>29</sup>). But it can also be read as a reference to the surrealist dark laughter suggested in the title of Appel's book. Through the protagonist's gradually dimmed cognition and numbed senses, the novel seems to describe a journey backwards in cinematic history, into

the most primitive and brutal forms of deception. The bottom line is reached in a scene where Gorn sits shamelessly naked right in front of the blind Krechmar, tickling his forehead with a straw without revealing his presence. The secret lover's silent movements in the apartment makes him appear like an actor in a silent movie – an association which is even spelled out in the English translation, where Gorn is said to be “munching like a silent film diner”. Finally, the narrator's “stage directions for the last silent scene”, with Krechmar's dead body lying on the floor, appear as a return to the still life of a camera obscura picture.

Both these novels can be read as allegories of Soviet blinding manipulations: the rewriting of history and the retouching that is wiping out bourgeois culture. To ensure that this would be intelligible to an English-speaking audience, Nabokov casually reminded his readers in his foreword to the English translation (1965) of *The Eye* of how a “social group casually swept into artistic focus acquires a falsely permanent air”. He also noted how “bunches of pages have been torn out of the past by destroyers of freedom ever since Soviet propaganda, almost a half century ago, misled foreign opinion into ignoring or denigrating the importance of Russian emigration (which still awaits its chronicler)”.<sup>30</sup>

### Gogolizing the eyes of the reader

Nabokov repudiated Soviet literature and refused to lecture on it. His relation to it is indirectly explained, however, in his *Nikolai Gogol* (1941–1943). Without mentioning socialist realism, which he apparently found too primitive even to serve as his polemical target, he exclaims: “Gogol – a ‘realist’! There are textbooks that say so”.<sup>31</sup> Gogol used his imagination for the purpose of complex and unnecessary deception, says Nabokov, and notes the amusing potential of his deception techniques to make the world secondary to it: “The vulgar imitation of artistic fiction on the part of life is somehow more pleasing than the opposite thing”.<sup>32</sup>

When Nabokov sets out to reveal how Gogol invented facts and created his reader, all the devices of cinematic technique are present. Gogol's symbolism “took on a physiological aspect, in this case optical”<sup>33</sup>, and, by his use of odd hybrid names, Gogol conveys “a sense of remoteness and optical distortion due to the haze.”<sup>34</sup> As a young letter writer, Gogol deceives his mother with appeals to Providence, honesty and truth, and even reveals a literary Kuleshov effect of sorts: that a combination of two emotionally engaging images could make the recipient jump to hasty conclusions.<sup>35</sup> Nabokov's statements that in Gogol “allusions become delusions”,<sup>36</sup> that logical links are “mimicked”, and that Gogol applies a “life-generating syntax”<sup>37</sup> also seem to allude to constructivist cinematic montage techniques. The apotheosis of Gogol's manipulative technique, moreover, is found in his short story “The Overcoat” – a favorite among Soviet literary scholars, read as a forerunner of socialist realism.

Gogol in Nabokov's version behaves like Vertov's man with

the movie camera. When he travels around Europe his stories are generated by “rolling wheels [...] physical gyration [...] the intoxicating quality of smooth steady motion.”<sup>38</sup> Even a reference to *Roget's Thesaurus*<sup>39</sup> can be read as a cinematic allusion. Peter Marc Roget was also the author of a scientific work on film as optical illusion: *Explanation of an Optical Deception in the Appearance of the Spokes of a Wheel When Seen Through Vertical Apertures* (1825). In this connection, Nabokov's statement that Gogol's “torrent of irrelevant details”<sup>40</sup> produces a hypnotic effect also sounds like a reference to cinematic technique, as does the final warning to the reader that “after reading Gogol one's eyes may become gogolized”<sup>41</sup> – a warning that could be extended to interpreters of all kinds of manipulative fictions, including Nabokov's own.

### “The Assistant Producer”

In the short story “The Assistant Producer” (1943), Nabokov returned to the historical situation in which he set *Mary*. The cinematic experience of the émigré Russians in Europe is now referred to explicitly in terms of a prison of mirrors:

“German film companies, which kept sprouting like poisonous mushrooms in those days (just before the child of light learned to talk), found cheap labor in hiring those among the Russian émigrés whose only hope and profession was their past – that is, a set of totally unreal people – to represent “real” audiences in pictures. The dovetailing of one phantasm into another produced upon a sensitive person the impression of living in a Hall of Mirrors, or rather a prison of mirrors, and not even knowing which was the glass and which was yourself.”<sup>42</sup>

This is the only text that Nabokov claimed to have based directly on a true story. The narrator he chose for this exclusive mission of telling the truth is consequently a priest. But what he recalls is an occurrence or case that is just as cinematic as a *film noir* of the

1930's: the story of the disappearance of General Miller (named “General Fedchenko” in Nabokov's text), the head of the exile Russian All-Military Union in Paris. In September 1939, Miller was deluded by the intelligence chief Nikolai Skoblin (“General Golubkov”) into going to a secret meeting with an informer from the other side, after which he disappeared without a trace. With two former presidents kidnapped and killed by the Soviet secret service, Miller had had reason to sus-

pect that a trap was set for him and had left a message behind. Skoblin was subsequently disclosed as a triple agent and his wife as his accomplice, but what actually happened to Miller was not revealed in Nabokov's lifetime.<sup>43</sup>

“The Assistant Producer” describes a surrealist implosion of images taking place in real life, with Parisian NKVD collaborators

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dressed up as German Abwehr in a fiction staged by the Soviet secret service. When the narrator visualizes how the trap was set, he imagines a little green door in a dead-end street, and at the same time the name Nabokov chose for the street invokes his prison-trope – the Gidean hall of mirrors *abyme*:

“In that particular quarter of Paris the streets are called after various philosophers, and the lane they were following had been named by some well-read city father rue Pierre Labime. [...] and in the wall there was at one spot a little green door. [...] The old man was never seen again. [...] There is no green door, but only a gray one, which no human strength can burst open. I have vainly searched through admirable encyclopedias: there is no philosopher called Pierre Labime.”<sup>44</sup>

Ganin’s cinematic experience in *Mary* can also be interpreted in the Russian *film noir* context described in “The Assistant Producer”. In the 1930s, émigré Russians of bourgeois origin were silenced and disappeared in the abyss of time and politics, sometimes with apt help from both émigré and Soviet agents in different guises, while their life stories were exploited and fictionalized with themselves appearing as extras on the screen.

### **Speak, Memory!**

The culmination of Nabokov’s responsive strategies to this kind of “filmic” performance – historical ironies as well as deliberate mimetic violence, censorship, and repression – is to be found in *Conclusive Evidence* (1951), the semi-autobiographical novel that was supposed to bear witness of Nabokov’s existence to posterity.

The narrator now openly takes on the position of a film director in relation to his past, looking into memory as through the lens or prism of a camera. This is a very visual novel, moving beyond the parody of family albums and silent movies into the new techniques of color and sound.<sup>45</sup> In the twelfth chapter, Nabokov returns to the love story recalled in *Mary*, although this time the girl’s name is Tamara. In the middle of this chapter there is again a revealing cinematic appearance. Ivan Mosjoukine, a Russian silent film actor whom the narrator says he and Tamara liked to watch on the screen, suddenly comes riding out of the thickets of the Crimean forest in spring 1918. It is suggested that Mosjoukine was there to star in a film based on Tolstoy’s *Hadji Murad*.<sup>46</sup> This film, *The White Devil* by Alexandre Volkoff, was not made until 1930, however. He would have been more likely to run into the set of one Protazanov’s films that Mosjoukine starred in during his Crimean exile, some of which were later erased from the director’s Soviet list of works.

But Nabokov instead inserted a filmic reference that adds a symbolical dimension to the encounter. Mosjoukine was the actor that Kuleshov had used in his famous psychological montage experiment (the face of the “Kuleshov effect”), and that Sloman had cast in his film *Surrender*. Moreover, Volkoff’s *The White Devil* had become famous as the film that ended both the silent film era and Mosjoukine’s career as a silent film actor. In one take Nabokov thus achieved a reference to Soviet manipulative techniques, to the

mimetic violence exerted on émigré actors, and to the interruption of artistic careers. Nabokov, for his part, seems to have been eager to put an end to silence by giving the actor a line to speak in the text: “Stop that brute [*Derzhite proklyatoe zhivotnoe*]”.

In chapter eight, which apparently was written directly after chapter twelve, the sound film references are even more explicit. The narrator begins by recalling the different tutors he had as a child, as well as their technically primitive educational magic-lantern projections. When he finally zooms in, at a family gathering, on the place of his “current tutor”, he approaches the scene from a camera perspective, with fade-ins and fade-outs and triple projections. In the culmination of this take, all the techniques of the new medium are present:

“Through a tremulous prism, I distinguish the features of relatives and familiars, mute lips serenely moving in forgotten speech. [...] And then, suddenly, just when the colors and outlines settle at last to their various duties – smiling, frivolous duties – some knob is touched and a torrent of sounds comes to life: voices speaking all together, a walnut cracked, the click of a nutcracker carelessly passed, thirty human hearts drowning mine with their regular beats; the sough and sigh of a thousand trees, the local concord of loud summer birds, and, beyond the river, behind the rhythmic trees, the confused and enthusiastic hullabaloo of bathing young villagers, like a background of wild applause.”<sup>47</sup>

To interpret this simply as Nabokov’s concession to sound film as his latest inspiration would be a mistake, however. Through the title of the American version of Nabokov’s *Conclusive Evidence*, the scene also reads as Nabokov’s declared determination to make the silent and silenced movie of his bourgeois art of memory “talk”, against all kinds of restrictions and censors: *Speak, Memory!*

ACCORDING TO WILL NORMAN, it was only after his transatlantic migration, i.e. in the 1940s, that Nabokov found the common ground between totalitarianism and mass culture.<sup>48</sup> But, as indicated above, it is likely that he already discovered parallels in the 1920s, maybe even during his time in Berlin. The silencing of a medium that just had learned to talk seems to have been one of the reasons for Nabokov to elaborate on primitive deception technique long before *Lolita*. In dialogue with Gide’s idea of a narrative infinity, Nabokov in the 1920–1930’s developed the metafictional device into a “prison trope”, equally apt for symbolizing the situation of Russian émigrés in Europe and the fictions developed by totalitarian regimes.

Without appeals to engaging themes or burning issues, the cinematic in Nabokov addresses the violence inherent in socialist realist aesthetics: political censorship and manipulation on the one hand, and the programmatic extinction of artists labeled as “bourgeois” on the other. ✖

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- 9 Field, *Nabokov: His Life*, 165.
- 10 Like many other so-called "bourgeois specialists" who returned, due to homesickness, political convictions, or threats of harm to remaining relatives, Protazanov was exposed upon his arrival to a severe campaign intended to discredit him. Denise J. Youngblood, "The Return of the Native: Yakov Protazanov and Soviet Cinema", *Soviet Cinema: Inside the Film Factory* (London and New York, 2005), 103–123.
- 11 Staged by Die Gruppe in Berlin 1926, printed in *The Rudder* in 1927 (Vladimir Nabokov, *The Man from the USSR and Other Plays* (London, 1985), 31–122).
- 12 Vladimir Nabokov, *Mary*, First Vintage International Edition (1989), 22.
- 13 Appel, *Dark Cinema*, 275.
- 14 Appel, *Dark Cinema*, 271.
- 15 Nabokov, *Mary*, 21.
- 16 "I remember I was standing in a simulated theater in a box and clapping, and something was going on on an imaginary stage (a real murder which the audience took to be part of the performance)... I don't think that film will ever be found." (Field, *Nabokov: His Life*, 159)
- 17 Wyllie, *Nabokov at the Movies*, 7.
- 18 Leonid Livak, *How It Was Done in Paris* (London, 2003), 164–203.
- 19 Gide's novel was serialized in *NRF* from March through August 1925. Dieter E. Zimmer suggests that *Mary* was planned in spring of 1925 but composed in fall (*The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, 347).
- 20 By accident Ganin reveals that his first love is married to his neighbor at the Berlin guesthouse and that she is soon expected in Berlin. He recalls the female image of his boyish premonitions to which Mary appeared as the perfect answer, and for four days he resurrects in detail their first summer together in pre-revolutionary Russia. After creating an ideal image of Mary, Ganin decides that no other image of her could exist and he leaves Berlin without seeing her again.
- 21 Emphasis added. "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia", *Literarische Welt* 5 (1929); Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, London, 1979, 238.
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- 46 Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, First Vintage International Edition (New York, 1989), 247.
- 47 Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 171.
- 48 Will Norman, *Nabokov, History and the Texture of Time* (New York, 2012), 91.