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TOPOGRAPHIES OF A CINEMATIC CITY: VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S "A GUIDE TO BERLIN"

SIGI JÖTTKANDT

"As for what 'begins' then – 'beyond' absolute knowledge – unheard-of thoughts are required, sought for across the memory of old signs"

— Jacques Derrida (1973)

If Dickens, in Sergei Eisenstein's assessment (Eisenstein 1949), was born for the movies, Vladimir Nabokov was literally born *in* the cinematic medium. With his opening figure, Nabokov enters a cinematic crypt right in the nucleus of *Speak, Memory*, his autobiographical rhapsody to the power of literary recollection: "The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness" (Nabokov 1996b, 369). Needless to say, as a self-proclaimed rebel, Nabokov will rail against this "commonsensical" understanding of life's finitude. In the following pages, he describes his efforts to combat time whose walls, separating our states of being and nonbeing, Nabokov feels certain must yield a secret passage: "Over and over again, my mind has made colossal efforts to distinguish the faintest of personal glimmers in the impersonal darkness on both sides of my life" (1996b, 369). In its search for "some secret outlet" from the "spherical" "prison of time" (1996b, 370), Nabokov's literary project harbors a strong Proustian resonance, as more than one critic has observed.¹ Nabokov's insistence on voluntary rather than involuntary memory, however, signals an important departure from the French modernist's project, a difference that is indexed in advance by *Speak, Memory*'s famous opening shot. It is cinema that triggers the Nabokovian time machine, insofar as the cinematic offers an alternative perceptual-cognitive *transport* system for conveying the sensations that will form the basis of our understandings of space and time.

¹See, for example, Louria (1974) and Mattison (2013).

In his opening image, then, Nabokov grants us entry into the complex figure through which he conceives of consciousness: it is as a motion picture show that life is lived, a brief intermission of light, sound and movement that for a short while relieves the darkness of the cosmic auditorium. Over the next few pages, Nabokov enlists the cinematic to figure the birth of his self. First, filmic metaphors are invoked in the glimmerings of a *dawning* self-consciousness as it straddles the irreducible zone between two voids. Consciousness then takes shape as an *accelerating sequence* of “spaced flashes” that ultimately resolve into continuous “bright blocks of perception” (1996b, 370). It is upon these luminescent blocks, one learns, that memory is afforded its “slippery hold.”

Turning back to the opening paragraphs, we find the cradle of the opening sentence has meanwhile expanded to the rounded nutshell of a baby carriage, albeit an empty one as if the voids of the earlier passage have become positivized into a more homely dynamic of presence and absence. The baby carriage, it appears, derives from a scene in an early home movie taken by his father a few weeks before Nabokov’s birth in 1899. This haunting image of absence is quickly supplanted by one of enigmatic plenitude. Elena, Nabokov’s expectant mother, is shown waving from an upstairs window “as if it were some mysterious farewell” (1996b, 369). As the early movie camera pans through space, it thus also produces a transfiguring effect on time, giving the young Nabokov access to lifelike moving images of what, for him, is a prehistorial world. Indeed we hear of the uncanny effect that watching this home movie had on Nabokov’s child self. The film produced in him a vertiginous panic, the shock of viewing a world that is the same in every detail as the one in which he now lives, except that he is not in it. As if registering this shock, the baby carriage assumes the sinister appearance of a funerary casket, “standing there on the porch, with the smug, encroaching air of a coffin.” But even this coffin, it turns out, is empty. This is not the final resting place for the vestiges of a life well lived—not a container for the consciousness of a life lived in the open air and fed on fresh bread, country butter and Alpine honey, as Nabokov once described his happy existence to James Mossman (Mossman, n.p)—but a black hole, one that has sucked his life back in advance. It is “as if,” Nabokov writes, “in the reverse course of events, his very bones had disintegrated” (1996b, 369).

It is now commonplace for historians of photography to draw attention to the seeming “objectivity” of the camera lens. By this, they are referring to the photograph’s ability to present images of objects in which the viewer “believes instantly,” as Bernard Stiegler expresses it (2011, 33). For Roland Barthes, too, the photographic image’s “co-naturality” with its referent testifies—albeit always with acute awareness of the object’s loss—to the inevitable “that-has-been” of the object (1981, 77). In *Visions of Modernity*, Scott McQuire extends Barthes’ insight so far as to visualize the camera lens as an “invisible umbilicus” binding image to referent (1998, 15). However, as both McQuire and Stiegler, as well as Gilles Deleuze (1986), have shown in

different ways, the cinema's addition of movement to the static photographic image severs this filament to the real, enabling film to convey impressions of a life that has never been. The most famous example of this is what is known as the Kuleshov effect, named after Lev Kuleshov's famous editing experiment in which various combinations of images were edited to encourage viewers to read different expressions from a single close-up of a face. Another experiment involved combining parts of the bodies of multiple women to create "a woman who did not exist in reality but only in the cinema" (cited in McQuire, 1998, 80).

For Nabokov, by contrast, cinema would be not so much the breeding ground for new life as a mechanism that revokes generation altogether. In the opening scene of the genesis of the self, cinema short-circuits Nabokov's birth such that any "life" lived during the brief interval of existence will be as a shadow play, one whose illusory vitality is traced simply to the speed with which the light flashes of consciousness thread their way through the body's projector apparatus (at some "forty-five hundred heartbeats an hour" to be precise [Nabokov 1996b, 369]). Accordingly, to the extent that a "life" materializes at all on Nabokov's literary plane of autobiography, it will be as a copy of a copy, the false replica of what is already a fake. Deflected prior even to its inception, the literary image yields place to screen memories that stage so thoroughgoing an absence that they could never become the antonyms of presence. In its undermining of all ontological statutes, the cinematic subject would not so much foreclose as blindside all ground of any possible "real."

To reconstitute "life" from a cinematic imaginary is to tacitly revise the fundamental Kantian transcendental intuitions of space and time. Hence, in the following chapter, we are not surprised to encounter a second cinematic figure, of an aural kind this time. Here Nabokov summons up the memory of an aural hallucination, a voice which he describes as conducting "a kind of one-sided conversation going on in an adjacent section of my mind, quite independently from the actual trend of my thoughts" (1996b, 380). He explains,

As far back as I remember myself...I have been subject to mild hallucinations.... The fatidic accents that restrained Socrates or egged on Joaneta Darc have degenerated with me to the level of something one happens to hear between lifting and clapping down the receiver of a busy party-line telephone. (1996b, 380)

In the irreducible interval between consciousness and sleep's "nightly betrayal of reason, humanity, genius" (1996b, 451) an unidentifiable vocal emission utters "words of no importance to me whatever—an English or a Russian sentence, not even addressed to me, and so trivial that I hardly dare give samples, lest the flatness I wish to convey be marred by a molehill of sense" (1996b, 380). A-pathetic and senseless, this vocal intruder presents as an audio counterpart of the earlier light figure, one that suspends consciousness' shadow-play with an even more deep-seated aphanisis. If, previously,

cinematic light permanently deflected the subject's emergence into an external world of spatial extension, sound now interferes with the coordinates of his inner sense. Inner sense, or in Kant's terms, the transcendental unity of apperception, is the habitual seat of our subjective experience of time, the synthesizing node from which a certain philosophical representational model effortlessly unspools. But here, as if caused by a spectral telephone operator's accidental switch, a "neutral, detached, anonymous" voice speaks where the "I" should be, not so much powerfully usurping as absent-mindedly displacing the Nabokovian subject from any hope of his rightful position as Master in his own house (1996b, 380). Along with cinematic light, teletechnic sound fatally interrupts the official Nabokovian aesthetic program of *Speak, Memory*.

What is this program? In his memoirs, Nabokov tropes his statement of faith in literary memory in the Augustinian terms of perception (especially vision), memory and will. From the outset of his own *Confessions*, Nabokov highlights the power of his prodigious memory, with its seemingly preternatural ability to bring the past back to life in all the ardor of its intensity and detail. The bright mental images conjured by voluntary memory and animated by a "wingstroke of the will" (1996b, 380) are placed in striking contrast with the leaden dullness of his dreams. For it turns out that the most that sleep's "nightly betrayal" of reason can summon up of the deceased are awkward, unhappy guests milling about on the surreal and uncomfortable furniture of the unconscious: "Whenever in my dreams I see the dead, they always appear silent, bothered, strangely depressed, quite unlike their dear, bright selves" (1996b, 395). "It is certainly not then" he goes on,

not in dreams – but when one is wide awake, at moments of robust joy and achievement, on the highest terrace of consciousness, that mortality has a chance to peer beyond its own limits, from the mast, from the past and its castle tower. (1996b, 395-6)

Nabokov never missed an opportunity to ridicule Freud, so much so that Geoffrey Green has called the former's famous aversion to the author of *The Interpretation of Dreams* "the grandest and most extravagant contempt for psychoanalysis known in modern literature" (Green, 1988, 1). However, it is not primarily Nabokov's hostility towards the "Viennese quack," whose "grotesque" talking cure he deems "one of the vilest deceits practiced by people," that I want to initially focus on but rather the theory of the sign that underpins the Nabokovian mnemonic program (Nabokov 1990, 21, 45). At the broadest level, my suggestion is that in the cinematic sign Nabokov finds a concept that will enable him to pursue his literary project to defeat time in a way comparable to (and which indeed compensates for the absence in his system of) the psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious.

To begin with, one can see that, despite their clear differences, both Freud and Nabokov are equally fascinated by the underlying patterns that silently structure a life. And like Freud, Nabokov will claim that such hidden patterns

can become visible to the subject through a certain type of linguistic activity. But where for Freud free association in the presence of the analyst brings these repetitive forms of unconscious memory into view, Nabokov devises his own version of the "talking cure": it is the "speech" elicited by *conscious* memory that uncovers the patterns concealed in life's seemingly haphazard twists and turns. Indeed, the territory upon which he wishes to stake his claim is already intimated in the original title Nabokov wished to give his memoirs (but rejected by his English publishers as, apparently, too difficult for readers in search of the volume to pronounce). Nabokov had proposed to entitle the British edition of his autobiography, *Speak, Mnemosyne*.² With his preferred title, Nabokov is clearly referencing the ancient Greek tradition of magicoreligious speech. Why should Nabokov wish to associate his autobiographical literary program with the oracular pronouncements of the ancient Greek mysteries? It is because at the core of this mnemonic speech, as Marcel Detienne reminds us in his perspicacious study of the ancient Greek concept of truth, is its power to obliterate time. Magicoreligious speech is "efficacious," Detienne explains, because it is "pronounced in the absolute present, with no before or after" (Detienne 1996, 74). Oracular speech takes place in an atemporality that incorporates "that which has been, that which is, and that which will be" (74). To call back the past from the waters of Lethe (Oblivion) is to reanimate the dead, unfastening Cronos' resolute grip on our mortality. Aided by letter and number, it is the goddess of memory who fashions the path along which the poet enters the Beyond. Yet, as Detienne also points out, the figure of Mnemosyne is not without ambiguity. In his close and careful analysis of ancient Greek mythological language, Detienne points to a fundamental duality at the heart of the truth that the Muse of memory conjures: the Aletheia spoken by Mnemosyne is double, perpetually ghosted by its shadow, Lethe, whose echo continues to be heard in the very word for truth. Oracular speech is thus "a double power, both positive and negative," Detienne concludes (1996, 79). He writes, "There can be no Aletheia without a measure of Lethe. When the Muses tell the truth, they simultaneously bring 'a forgetting of ills and a rest from sorrow'" (1996, 81). From the outset, then, the figure Nabokov enlists for his program to outwit time through the visionary power of literary memory always already harbors a counter-tendency towards forgetting. There is a duplicity at work in Mnemosyne's Aletheia which, "edged with Lethe," limns the contours of our Being with its negativity that forms our "inseparable shadow" (1996, 82).

It is becoming clear that, to the extent that it is founded on Mnemosyne, Nabokov's literary-autobiographical project would encrypt a shadowy counter-tendency at its heart. This is a counter-logic of oblivion and forgetting that silently erodes the efficacy of memorializing speech at every instance of its utterance. In fact, and as if in recognition of the ambiguity introduced

²For an account of the American and British publications of the memoirs, see Boyd (1991, 192).

by the Greek term, Nabokov turns in his autobiography to another tradition to figure the actual salutary effects of recollection on the past. In chapter fourteen, it is Hegel's dialectical structure rather than Greek mythic speech that is ultimately enlisted as the operative metaphor for the memorializing project. Drawing on Hegel's "triadic series" (Nabokov 1996b, 594), Nabokov figures his own life's trajectory from Russia to Western Europe, from Europe to America and then finally back again in Hegelian terms of the "spiritualized circle." Hegelian recollection, which famously both cancels and preserves, enables Nabokov to detect larger patterns secreted across the contingencies and tragedies of quotidian life. Seen through the denser medium of memory, the past's oblique angles round and soften to a spiral that thematizes a hidden internal unity: "A colored spiral in a small ball of glass," he writes, "this is how I see my own life." "Twirl follows twirl, and every synthesis is the thesis of the next series" (1996b, 594).

Metaphors of circularization persist when Nabokov comes to address the question of representation directly in *Speak, Memory*. In order to figure the relation of memory to writing, for example, life's "spiritualized" spiral flattens into the two dimensions of a circle. In the previous chapter, in a passage describing his student days, Nabokov conjures an image of rowing on the river Cam that becomes the occasion for a remarkable description of the operations of literary representation. We hear how,

The three arches of an Italianate bridge, spanning the narrow stream, combined to form, with the help of their almost perfect, almost unrippled replicas in the water, three lovely ovals. In its turn, the water cast a patch of lacy light on the stone of the *intrados* under which one's gliding craft passed. Now and then, shed by a blossoming tree, a petal would come down, down, down, and with the odd feeling of seeing something neither worshiper nor casual spectator ought to see, one would manage to glimpse its reflection which swiftly—more swiftly than the petal fell—rose to meet it; and, for the fraction of a second, one feared that the trick would not work, that the blessed oil would not catch fire, that the reflection might miss and the petal float away alone, but every time the delicate union did take place, with the magic precision of a poet's word meeting halfway his, or a reader's recollection. (1996b, 591)

Here the naturalized image effortlessly floats the reader to the mystical site where word binds to world. Presided over by the three "lovely ovals" of *ontos*, *theos* and *logos*, this allegory of the origins of signification transports one through the solemn entryways housing the Nabokovian mysteries. We are carried to the mysterious and sacrosanct moment when transcendent meaning makes its magic descent to the reflecting pool of representation, which in turn rises up to greet it with a secret handshake.

One would seem to be back among the ancient Greek rituals again. However, on closer inspection, Nabokov's guiding metaphor of reflection in fact solicits a much later, secular, representational paradigm. In *Of*

Grammatology, Jacques Derrida notes how a signifiatory regime of immense longevity and power buttresses the mimetic circuitry underpinning the reflective metaphor. He describes this regime as the “great metaphysical, scientific, technical, and economic adventure of the West.” From this metaphysical tradition, in which “sign and divinity have the same place and time of birth” (Derrida 1997, 14), derives a certain order of cognition, one which routinely apportions what are by now our classical oppositions of the sensible and the intelligible, the real and the unreal, the living and the nonliving, being and non-being, light and dark, presence and absence, interior and exterior, the signifier and signified, and so forth.

In his discussion of Aristotle’s “On Interpretation,” Derrida points to the dependence of this metaphysical program on Aristotle’s privileging of speech. He concludes that Western reason is founded upon the phoneme to the extent that the latter presents as the immediate expression of the Idea. Along with all its “determinations of truth” (Derrida 1997, 10), the history of the metaphysics of presence is found to descend from this fundamental connection between speech and thought wherein the act of hearing-oneself-speak forges the primordial link in the signifying chain. A “nonexterior, nonmundane, therefore nonempirical or noncontingent signifier,” the phoneme thus inaugurates the theory of the sign as reflection of inner sense (1997, 7-8). Derrida describes the peripatetic philosopher’s key argument thus,

If, for Aristotle, “spoken words...are the symbols of mental experience...and written words are the symbols of spoken words” (*De interpretatione*, 1, 16a 3) it is because the voice, producer of the first symbols, has a relationship of essential and immediate proximity with the mind. (1997, 11)

Seamlessly translating the mind’s thoughts into speech, the voice becomes the “producer of the first signifier,” keeper of the ancient contract between thought and being from which later reflective models (including Hegel’s) will be derived.

Now, representational models are formed where the body encounters the world, that is, in the stippled openings and edges that comprise the loci of our sense perception. And it is at these liminal sites that Nabokov revises our habitual epistemological and perceptual paradigms, proposing an alternate model of signification that threatens to dethrone the official mimetic regime of *Speak, Memory*. Nabokov’s fondness for trans-lingual puns and his fascination with anagrams and other word puzzles, his propensities toward repetitive aural and scriptive patterns that Elizabeth D. Ermath terms his “thematic tracteries” (1992, 196), might be thought to proceed according to a certain letteral logic found in his inherited condition of “coloured hearing.” For like his mother Elena, Nabokov was a synaesthete. Both mother and son heard words in color, together with their individuated letters. This would be, then, a sensory-phonematic system of maternal provenance, with all the challenges to our ordinary, patrilineal representational paradigms

this might implicitly entail, as synesthesia is usually thought to be inherited through the maternal gene.³ Closely following upon the description of his aural hallucinations in chapter two, Nabokov itemizes the chromatic cast of his audio-visual alphabet. It is worth quoting at length:

The long *a* of the English alphabet (and it is this alphabet I have in mind farther on unless otherwise stated) has for me the tint of weathered wood, but a French *a* evokes polished ebony. This black group also includes hard *g* (vulcanized rubber) and *r* (a sooty rag being ripped). Oatmeal *n*, noodle-limp *l*, and the ivory-backed hand mirror of *o* take care of the whites. I am puzzled by my French *on* which I see as the brimming tension-surface of alcohol in a small glass. Passing on to the blue group, there is steely *x*, thundercloud *z*, and huckleberry *k*. Since a subtle interaction exists between sound and shape, I see *q* as browner than *k*, while *s* is not the light blue of *c*, but a curious mixture of azure and mother-of-pearl.... In the green group, there are alder-leaf *f*, the unripe apple of *p*, and pistachio *t*. Dull green, combined somehow with violet, is the best I can do for *w*. The yellows comprise various *e*'s and *i*'s, creamy *d*, bright-golden *y*, and *u*, whose alphabetical value I can express only by "brassy with an olive sheen." In the brown group, there are the rich, rubbery tone of soft *g*, paler *j*, and the drab shoelace of *h*. Finally, among the reds, *b* has the tone called burnt sienna by painters, *m* is a fold of pink flannel, and today I have at last perfectly matched *v* with "Rose Quartz" in Maerz and Paul's *Dictionary of Color*. (1996b, 381)

Here Nabokov divulges the code to his cross-sensory conversion process. Each word is available to the eye in this shift as, with every utterance, the phonemes act as light-rays dispersing through a prism. Splitting into different hues, words form polychromatic clusters that burst like unearthly rainbows on the visual cortex. Effortlessly spanning the gap dividing our sense of sight from our sense of hearing, these radiant bridges forge illicit thoroughfares for thought, by-passing the voice's philosophically-sanctioned direct route from mind to speech in the service of alternative lexical paths. It is a radical "othering" of the perceptual apparatus that Nabokov's synesthesia effects, a cognitive re-wiring whose first consequence is to rewrite the history of the sign. For when run back through his synesthetic "translation" process, common words find themselves reassembling into alphabetical compounds

³Two hypotheses regarding the neurological basis of synesthesia have been put forward: Cross-Modal Transfer (CMT) and Neonatal Synaesthesia (NS). Briefly, the first proposes synesthesia as a genetic mutation (thought to be carried by the X chromosome) whereby synapses linking contiguous brain areas fail to be removed during ordinary neural development. The second (NS) builds on the CMT theory but suggests a functional explanation for synesthesia. For (NS), all human brains begin with cross-sensory modalities, but these become inhibited in "normal" development. Synaesthesia is accordingly thought to be caused by an "inhibition failure" of the synapses between adjacent brain regions. See Marks (1975). See also Maurer and Mondloch (2005).

that are irremediably alien to phonocentric models and their metaphysical heritage. Written in prismatic alphabet, "The word for rainbow, a primary, but decidedly muddy, rainbow, is...the hardly pronounceable *kzspygv*" (1996b, 381). Unreadable and inarticulable linguistic composites, these would be the "unheard-of thoughts" referred to by Derrida in my epigraph above—memories of "old signs" that arise from a different history and lineage of the logos. Spawned from a different reproductive process than the phoneme, such photogrammatic signs betoken words that no unified subject has ever spoken nor heard itself speak; such words are the signifiers for "mental feelings" of no representational consciousness or mind.

What Nabokov's synesthetic rewriting of the sensorium proposes, then, is an alternative, "cinematic" model of representation, one that proceeds from a fantastically different theory and history of the sign. Its first consequence is that, through installing the photism at the heart of the phoneme, "cin-aesthetic" representation suspends the ancient Aristotelian philosophical contract between mind and voice. As it ghosts the signifier with its uncanny, synthetic light, this "pale fire" permanently deflects and refracts the philosophical dream that would reunite mind and world through recollection, where each pole mirrors the other in perfect, self-moving circles, word and world reflecting one another with "magic precision."

A Techni-City Berlin

The idea that Nabokov should turn in the early nineteen twenties to the newly emerging art of cinema as the metaphor through which to trope his alternative perceptual and representational logic does not demand any great leap of thought. For early twentieth century filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein, whose later writings explored the phenomenon of synesthesia directly, cinema offered fascinating possibilities for "synchronizing" the senses. Eisenstein and his contemporaries discovered in the cinematic body in motion a "circuit of sensory vibrations that links viewer and screen."⁴ Laura Marks goes so far as to call cinema an inherently synesthetic medium. Cinema's "intersensory" effects, as she calls them, traverse sensory boundaries, "appealing to one sense in order to represent the experience of another" (Marks 2000, 213).

For Nabokov, cinema's new form of figuration lends something invaluable specifically to his literary enterprise. If Nabokov's well-known lifelong fascination with the cinema has more than the anecdotal significance it has largely been treated with to date, it lies in the challenge posed by the 'tenth Muse' to the representational regime of Western reason and particularly to its corresponding, "common sensical" understanding of time. More than

⁴Sobchack (2000, n.p.).

its ability to evoke cross-sensory impressions, what cinema offers Nabokov is a conceptual program that permits a thorough-going revision of space and time, one comparable to the Einsteinian quake that was shattering the Newtonian certainties of the scientific world in this period.⁵ Detectable as a kind of interference pattern flickering throughout Nabokov's oeuvre, the cinematic pulls together many of the themes that have been identified by the critical tradition as keys to his works. These include the earlier discussed problem of time; the theme of dual or multiple other worlds with extra dimensions, and the Möbius-strip-like relationship between the fictional and "real" worlds (a favorite conceit explored in many early films as, for example, in Buster Keaton's *The Cameraman*). The short-lived genre of the 1920s Rebus-Film, Paul Leni's animated cross-word puzzles that opened and closed some of the early matinee sessions in Berlin, invites comparisons with Nabokov's lifelong fascination with ciphers, secret codes, esoteric inscriptive combinations involving hidden patterns.⁶ Finally, as several critics have noted, photographic imagery of light and shade unmistakably dominates in Nabokov's work, along with the phenomenon of the "photographer's shadow," which several critics have read as a figure for an auctorial presence that animates Nabokov's fictional worlds.⁷ Above all, by means of cinema, Nabokov connects both his scientific and aesthetic interests in the figure of light, which combines into one the fundamental *duality* that contemporary physics has discovered at the foundation of reality.

Read across his oeuvre, the complexity and persistence of the cinematic trope suggests the remarkable longevity and integrity of Nabokov's aesthetico-temporal concerns, which a careful reading reveals to be present right from the earliest publications. And indeed, in one of his earliest short stories we find what amounts to a guided tour of the subterranean transportation infrastructure underpinning Nabokov's lifelong literary-cinematic program. Despite the youth of its author, "A Guide to Berlin" is considered one of Nabokov's seminal short stories. Nabokov himself described it in the 1976 Preface to his short story collection as "one of his trickiest pieces" (Nabokov 2008, 670), a comment which I suspect refers not simply to the difficulty its translation into English presented. The tale first appeared in the Russian émigré review, *Rul'*, edited by Nabokov's father, V.D. Nabokov, in 1925. Like thousands of other White Russian families, the Nabokov family had settled in the German capital after fleeing the Bolsheviks in 1918. In *The Russian Years*, Brian Boyd describes how Russians flocked in vast numbers

⁵Steven Blackwell argues that Nabokov drew on developments in contemporary physics for his own aesthetic purposes. As Blackwell notes, contemporary theories of subatomic structure and quantum mechanics were "alluring" to Nabokov precisely insofar as they offered "possible ammunition against a purely mechanistic philosophy." See Blackwell (2009, 144).

⁶Paul Leni's short animated Rebus-Films were shown in German theaters from 1925 and 1927.

⁷Gabriel Lanyi, "On Narrative Transitions in Nabokov's Prose," *A Journal for Descriptive Poetics and Theory of Literature* 2 (1977): 73-78. Cited in Grishakova whose remarkable book represents one of the few in-depth critical treatments of Nabokov's cinematic aesthetic to date (2006, 197).

to Berlin in this period, settling primarily in the cheaper Wilmersdorf area. Here is where the Nabokov family held court as the center of the expat Russian colony, making valiant efforts to recreate the cultural milieu from which they had been so dramatically uprooted. "The full flavor of a wealthy, enlightened St Petersburg home" is how one observer described the Nabokovs' Sächsische Strasse flat (Boyd 1990, 184). Berlin, however, also played host to a further trauma for the family: in 1922, Nabokov's father, V.D. Nabokov, was tragically assassinated while trying to protect a fellow Russian Constitutional Democratic party member. Of course, these events not only had a profound psychological impact on the twenty-one-year-old Nabokov, but one might also see them as instrumenting what was to become this writer's lifelong concerns with what is real and what is semblance as these came to organize themselves in his work around the divergent representational modes of literature and the cinema.

Berlin in the 1920s could hardly have offered a better locus for Nabokov's exploration of the literary possibilities of the filmic medium, presenting in this period as the archetypal cinematic city. Berlin was not only the center for German film production and the creative focus both for Western European and Russian filmmakers. It was also the subject of several important early documentary films, including Walther Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a City* (1927), whose action and setting seems strangely "postscient" of Nabokov's short tale. An avowed and avid cinemaphile, Nabokov had no shortage of opportunities for movie going in this period. First from his family's Wilmersdorf apartment, and then from subsequent rooms in the nearby Charlottenberg and Schöneberg neighbourhoods, Nabokov was bordered on several sides by corner theaters built during the post WW1 boom in theater construction.⁸ These included the Wittelsbach cinema (Berliner Str. 166) and the Union-Palast Theater (renamed the Ufa-Theater Kurfürstendamm in 1924), and the majestic 1911 Cines-Kino on the Nollendorfplatz, which was just a short stroll from the Luitpoldstrasse rooms where Nabokov and Vera began their married life in April 1925. In these and other Berlin theaters, Nabokov would have been able to see the latest offerings by directors such as Fritz Lang and F.W. Murnau, as well as feed himself on an extensive diet of Hollywood films that were rapidly gaining in ascendancy following the end of the American film import ban in 1920 (Saunders 1994, 10).⁹

⁸Frances Guerin notes how by the end of the 1920s, Germany had 4000 cinemas with up to 2 million visitors a day. Guerin (2005, 7).

⁹Given their artistic inclinations and connections in the emigre community and Berlin art-world, it is tempting to speculate that Vera and Vladimir might also have been in attendance at the historic matinee, "Der absolute Film" at the Ufa-Theater Kurfürstendamm for one of its two showings, on the 3rd or 10th of May 1925. Organized by the Novembergruppe, an arts organization named after the 1918 German revolution, the program presented experimental art films and abstract animations by Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack, Hans Richter, Walter Ruttmann, Fernand Leger and Dudley Murphy, Francis Picabia and Rene Claire, as well as by the Swedish filmmaker and artist Viking Eggeling. See Elder (2008, 163).

In *The Russian Years*, Brian Boyd describes Nabokov's attempts to move professionally into theater and film during this period. In collaboration with Ivan Lukash, the young Nabokov wrote numerous pieces for the stage and cabaret in the 1920s and '30s, including for Berlin's famous Bluebird cabaret. He also attempted to supplement his income as a film extra in a number of locally produced films (whose titles, unfortunately, have been lost now to history). Nabokov's former student, Alfred Appel, recalls how, throughout his life, Nabokov was eager to see his novels and short stories transferred to film, approaching the Hollywood director, Lewis Milestone, about a possible adaptation of *Despair* (which was rejected as being too erotic for 1930s tastes). Nevertheless, Nabokov did ultimately see several of his works transferred to film in his lifetime, including *Lolita*, of course, first filmed by Kubrick in 1962, as well as by Adrian Lyne in 1997.¹⁰

My interest in the cinematic here, however, is in the way it enables Nabokov to elaborate a formal system that mimics yet fundamentally overturns "normal" reality to expose it as a flickering, semi-translucent light field whose semblance of opacity ("matter") is simply a function of the speed at which it is traveling.¹¹ A shimmering, semi-permeable "Kingdom by the sea [C]," cinema simultaneously precipitates awareness of, and renders privileged access to, this other physical "regime" that otherwise lies hidden, recessively enfolded within the interstices of the representational divide separating the real from its literary "imitation."

In the opening vignette of "A Guide to Berlin," Nabokov lays out the blueprints of his literary-cinematic intervention. Here, in this opening section, we learn that beneath the architectural facades of literary form lies another transportation system, whose elementary signifying structures it shares with its exterior casings. The story opens with a description of several large concrete cylinders lying on the street outside the narrator's house in one of the suburbs of Berlin:

¹⁰Other film adaptations include the film by Tony Richardson of the 1932 novel, *Kamera Obskura/Laughter in the Dark* (1938) which appeared in 1969. In 1972, a version of *King, Queen, Knave* came out, directed by Jerzy Skolimowski. And following Nabokov's death in 1977, many more film adaptations of his works have been made, such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Despair* (1978), Jerome Foulon's *Mademoiselle O* (1994), Francois Rossier's *A Fairy Tale* (1997), Valentin Kuik's *An Affair of Honor* (1999), Marleen Gorris' *The Luzhin Defence* (2000), and Eric Rohmer's *The Triple Agent* (2004).

¹¹This is not the place to engage in an extended discussion of Nabokov's complex relation to Albert Einstein who, with Freud and Marx, is one of the three "prophets" of modernity that the author of *Speak, Memory* publicly repudiates while still reserving certain of their insights for his cinematic program. For a characteristic statement on Einstein's theories of spacetime, see Nabokov (1990, 114): "While not having much physics, I reject Einstein's slick formulae; but then one need not know theology to be an atheist."

In front of the house where I live a gigantic black pipe lies along the outer edge of the sidewalk. A couple of feet away, in the same file, lies another, then a third and a fourth — the street's iron entrails, still idle, not yet lowered into the ground, deep under the asphalt. (Nabokov 2008, 155)

Sections of Berlin's underground sewage system, here the pipes lie unexpectedly exposed to view as evidence of another circulatory system that normally lies hidden beneath the city's surface. These orotund pipes bear the figurative burden of a subterranean signifying system operating beneath the exteriors of literary language. For while they conduct away the waste flows of Berlin's official business, these solid black line lengths suggest themselves as the hidden backbone of all tropological systems: in their formal outlines, the letters of an archaic alphabet come starkly into view as the physical "pipes" through which the literary image flows.

We obtain our first inkling of this other transport system in a flash, in a burst of "bright-orange heat lightning" that radiates from one of the pipes' circular interiors:

...up the interior slope at the very mouth of the pipe which is nearest to the turn of the tracks, the reflection of a still illumined tram sweeps up like bright-orange heat lightning. (2008, 155)

Reminiscent of a photographer's flash, this orange sun enkindles an artificial light-source for the cinematic city, one whose X-rays penetrate matter's boundaries and impart a different form of "life" to Berlin's inhabitants. Charging the story's tropological flow with a fearsome current, this fake sun electrocutes in advance any potential metaphors of the literary polis as a home fit for human habitation. From the outset of the story, a switch has been turned and the order of inside and outside, above and below, real and semblance is reversed. Or it is perhaps not so strictly reversed as *unpeeled*, stripping the metropolitan representational edifice away from the inside: the German capital is double-exposed as a cinema screen in whose "flat grey light" the spectral life forms of "Berlin" will begin to flicker and pulse (2008, 155).

As if in concert with this move, the pipes undergo their own peculiar topological transformation. The narrator observes how, in the thin strip of snow, somebody has traced the letters "Otto" onto the pipe's surface. He then reflects how germanely "that name, with its two soft o's flanking the pair of gentle consonants, suited the silent layer of snow upon that pipe with its two orifices and its tacit tunnel" (2008, 155-6). Close to fifty years later, this same combination of letters resurfaces in Nabokov's self-parodic, "fake" autobiography, *Look at the Harlequins*, as one of only three words that Ivor Black's parrot can say.¹² "Otto" thus bookends Nabokov's oeuvre with

¹²The other two words are *állo* and *pa-pa*. See Nabokov (1996b, 574).

a strange sort of squawking, ersatz human language. But one should also note how, in Otto's multi-dimensional palindrome, word intersects with world through a profoundly different relation than that of reflection. Not so much mirror images as "obverse" sides of a non-orientable surface, word and world are connected by a homeomorphic equivalence, where previous divisions of interior and exterior are re-marked as a fold. Otto is not just a three-dimensional pun, it turns out, but a glitch in representational spacetime itself around whose single edge the dual realities of Nabokov's worlds, one "literary" and the other "cinematic," start to align.¹³

In the following section, these mutually imbricated two- and three-dimensional realities converge on the image of a streetcar, itself a favorite subject for documentary films of this period because of its rich metonymic possibilities for conveying the idea of cinematic "transport." Already practically a museum piece by Nabokov's time of writing, the streetcar occasions a reflection on the process of time:

The horse-drawn tram has vanished, and so will the trolley, and some eccentric Berlin writer in the twenties of the twenty-first century, wishing to portray our time, will go to a museum of technological history and locate a hundred-year-old streetcar, yellow, uncouth, with old-fashioned curved seats, and in a museum of old costumes dig up a black, shiny-buttoned conductor's uniform. (2008, 157)

The tram's "air of antiquity" and "old-fashioned charm" provide a certain streetwise cover as it propels the narrator across space. But it quickly becomes apparent that, in the narrator's hands, the Berlin tram is in the process of being conceptually reconstituted. The narrator links the trolley with the miraculous temporal transportation that is literary production, for it seems that writing similarly has the ability to transport the past into "the kindly mirrors of future times" (2008, 157). Literature views the present from a future perspective, looking backwards at the contemporary scene that accrues an inexhaustible source of hidden value and meaning.

But then the image registers with the "salutary shock" of a Benjaminian illumination. Rather than a melancholy figure of loss and absence, the streetcar abruptly reveals its true identity as a time machine that fast-forwards the narrator into future. Here is where its commonalities with "literary creation" really lie, not in a misplaced nostalgia for the past but in the dis-tempering beat of the never-yet-to-be present. We hear how,

¹³Fronting as simple reversibility, Otto's multi-dimensional palindrome inscribes a wormhole, a rupture or tear in the representational fabric of the literary plane. In this respect, "Otto" stages what may be the earliest of the world-transgressing shifts that have been hailed as the hallmarks of Nabokov's writing. See also Johnson (1985) and Naiman (1999).

Everything, every trifle, will be valuable and meaningful: the conductor's purse, the advertisement over the window, that peculiar jolting motion which our great-grandchildren will perhaps imagine—everything will be ennobled and justified by its age. (2008, 157)

The narrator's proleptic nostalgia for the present, it turns out, is merely a front for a revised, "cinematic" understanding of literary transport. In the very same gesture with which it bestows the contemporary world with the otherworldly qualities of artefacts from a former time, literature unseats us from our location in the present. It is not the future but the now, it transpires, that is othered by literary perspective. Literature turns each of us into time travelers, temporal orphans whose tenure in the present expires before it can be lived. Silently betrayed by the rolling wheels of the trolley car, which hint at the reels of a projector, literature's secret identity as a double agent of cinema is unmasked. The literary-cinematic tram's "reels" wind and unwind the past and the future like reversible film spools, while the literary journey of a day in "Berlin" assumes the unmistakable air of a film screening directed by the "chitinous" hands of the ticketman.¹⁴ From these "thick" "rough" fingers, tickets are dispensed to the queuing crowds through a "special little window in the forward door" (2008, 156).

The third vignette, called "Work," describes the action of what we see from our spectator seats at the window of the "crammed" literary-cinematic tram (2008, 157). First, like any good urban documentary film from this period, comes a gritty vision of four men hammering an iron stake into the ground. Again, this is no ordinary scene of employment but the labor of the filmwork on the circular strip of time. Like sculpted mechanical figures of a Rathaus Glockenspiel, the workmen raise and lower their mallets in syncopated beats: "the first one strikes, and the second is already lowering his mallet with a sweeping, accurate swing; the second mallet crashes down and is rising skywards as the third and then the fourth bang down in rhythmical succession" (2008, 157). The sound of their "unhurried clanging, like four repeated notes of an iron carillon" (2008, 157) the narrator notes with pleasure. Providing a kind of aural transformation of the ocular pipes from the first segment, this melodious metallic soundtrack accompanies a display of fleeting figures: a flour-dusted baker on a tricycle, a van transporting green bottles, a long, black uprooted tree traveling on a cart and whose roots are encased in burlap like an "enormous bomblike sphere at its base" (2008, 158), a postman emptying letters from a blue mailbox and, "perhaps fairest of all," a truck piled with animal carcasses—"chrome yellow, with pink blotches, and arabesques"—which are being carried by a man in apron and leather hood from the street into the butcher's red shop (2008, 158).

¹⁴"Chitinous" simply means hardened exoskeleton but as a polysaccharide it also connotes the raw material of cinema's precursor: magic lantern's cellophane.

The activity of representation, it is becoming plain, is in the process of being cinematically reconstituted in this vignette. If, in the previous section, the literary-cinematic streetcar was still reliant on a linear process of sentences coupling and uncoupling like trolleys attaching and detaching, here the process of writing itself is transformed. The tongue-in-groove motion of the streetcar that traced looping characters around the metropolitan center like a pencil following the well-worn rails of the alphabet becomes derailed by an arrangement of colorful, fast-moving images. Suggestive of filmic montage, what flits by in this vignette are primarily colors: white, emerald, black, beige, cobalt, chrome yellow, pink, and finally, the crimson of the “butcher’s red shop” (2008, 158). Flitting by like scarcely noticed scratches on the surface of our “reality,” these flying colors send coded cin-aesthetic letters through the black and white page. Recalling the prismatic Comma butterflies that diverted the young Nabokov from his French governess’ “reading voice” in *Speak, Memory* (1996b, 448-9), these letteral cuttings, too, glide through the fourth wall of our reading machine to punctuate *this* side of the representational divide, before a jiggle of the cord returns the story’s trolley pole that has “jumped the wire” (1996b, 156) back to its accustomed place and our cinematic tour moves on to its next attraction.

Entitled “Eden,” the fourth vignette describes a visit to the Berlin zoo, an “artificial” paradise that mimics the “solemn, and tender, beginning of the Old Testament” (1996b, 158) but with a different narrative of origins. We are treated to a vision of the aquarium, illuminated displays behind glass “that resemble the portholes through which Captain Nemo gazed out of his submarine” (1996b, 158). A prelapsarian world glides past us from our “dimly lit” vantage point (1996b, 158) beside the narrator. With him, we peer through another transparent screen, a window this time into a premammalian world, filled with heterologous life forms that undulate, breathe and flash in accordance with a different set of physiological laws than our own. Gazing at this subterranean procession of prismatic geometries, the narrator’s eye pauses for a moment to land on a “live, crimson, five-pointed star” (1996b, 158).

The infamous symbol of Russia’s revolution, it transpires that it is from this ruby star that the whole subterranean transportational network we have been excavating ultimately issues: for here, then, the narrator conjectures, “is where the notorious emblem originated – at the very bottom of the ocean, in the murk of sunken Atlantica, which long ago lived through various upheavals while pottering about tropical utopias and other inanities that cripple us today” (1996b, 158). The icon of the Communist revolution, the starfish registers as the circumvolving principle behind the entire cinematic system of representational transformations and substitutions, of spectral doublings, of double- and triple-crossings that engulf Nabokov’s novels, living on throughout all history – registering indeed as operator of “history” itself insofar as “history” names simply the appalling “upheaval,” the principle of rotation that converts world into representation, metamorphoses matter

into memory, and unleashes the entire nebula of shadows and shadow plays that, under the pseudonym "cinema," befores the Nabokovian oeuvre. An ancient, immortal star system lurking beneath Earth's surface, it is from its preternatural rays that the molten points, lines and planes of Nabokov's cinematic evidently descends.

The final section returns us to the pub from which we began, with its neon "sky-blue sign" and portrait of a winking lion, "LÖWENBRÄU." Here, through a doorway, the narrator picks out the image of a child sitting alone below a mirror in which the entire scene before him is reflected. The boy is the child of the pub owners, a little blond *Bube* who surveys the scene before him. The narrator asserts: "Whatever happens to him in life, he will always remember the picture he saw everyday of his childhood from the little room where he was fed soup" (1996b, 159-60). Regarding himself reflected in the mirror, our guide then sees precisely what the child sees: "the inside of the tavern—the green island of the billiard table, the ivory ball he is forbidden to touch, the metallic gloss of the bar, a pair of fat truckers at one end and the two of us at another." As he views himself as the child sees him, the narrator loses whatever real substance he still held. He becomes an image in someone else's memory, a chance background figure in a photograph. "I can't understand what you see down there," complains the narrator's imbecilic friend. "What indeed!" the narrator exclaims to himself. "How can I demonstrate to him that I have glimpsed somebody's future recollection?" (1996b, 160).

Our guide has led us to the revolving doors of "Berlin" as a cinematic city, a filmic "parallel universe" of pre-revolutionary Russia, fake copy of an original St Petersburg, which itself no longer exists except in the fabricated form of literary memory, as the "careful reconstruction of [an] artificial but beautifully exact Russian world" (1996b, 590). This is a city synthesized by a tensile geometry whose lines and points will be pulled, stretched and deformed to comprise the letteral foundation both of the cinematic image and its literary Other, writing—both equally spectral planes in Nabokov's later works as it will turn out. Thus "Berlin" reveals itself to us as a city of refraction and cinematic chimera, where "Time" is indexed as the spooling and unspooling process in which primordial letters fold and unfold to form signs that are the mnemonic traces of no conscious being, where "Life" resolves to the winking, hallucinatory movement of these shapes as they accelerate and gather speed beneath our eyes, where "History" discloses its source in the mechanical rotations of a subterranean star system, and where "Memory" marks the site of a decentering de-identification that projects the narrating subject into the future as a photographic trace of a spectral spectator who has in effect has never "lived" anywhere.

Nabokov's writing repeatedly inquires into the ontological basis of representation. If early cinema offered Nabokov a metaphor for rethinking ordinary models of space, time and movement, it also accords him many of the rhetorical and conceptual moves associated with the Freudian unconscious. It is to cinema he will turn throughout his works in his lifelong project

to deflect the unidirectional flow of time's arrow. Like the unconscious, for which, famously, no concept of time exists, cinematic signification makes the past appear to "live" again, beyond the limits imposed by ordinary models of perception and cognition. For both cinema and the unconscious, the past, as Henry Sussman has put it in a different context, "is not a conveyance toward a future conceived of as unbounded space. Instead, it draws the circle of the horizon to a close" (1979, 20)

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