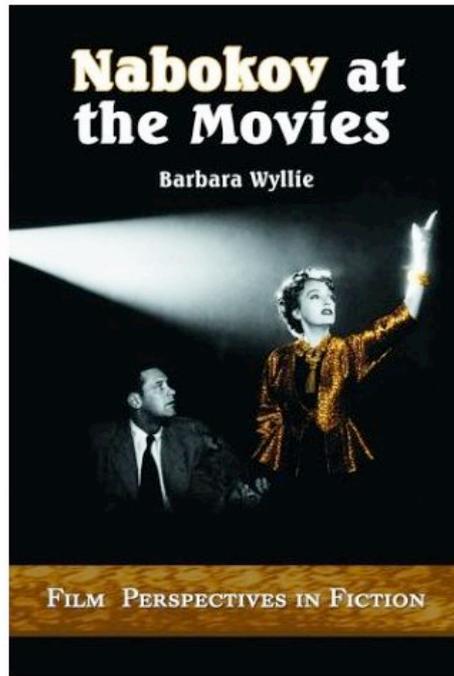


Barbara Wyllie. *Nabokov at the Movies: Film Perspectives in Fiction*. Jefferson, NC, and London: McFarland Publishers, 2003. ISBN 0-7864-1638-6, x+298pp., £27.95. Notes. Filmography. Bibliography. Index.



The connection between Nabokov's fiction and cinematic storytelling is something that has preoccupied critics for decades. Since at least the mid-1970s, scholars have sought to illuminate readers about cinematic sources shining through in the prose of Nabokov. Barbara Wyllie's book comes along these lines of investigation. Thus, *Nabokov at the Movies* should be viewed as a further and deeper exploration into the conundrum of the cinema(s) that influenced Nabokov's creative writing. This book diverts from its predecessors, such as Alfred Appel's *Nabokov's Dark Cinema* (1974), in one way: its focus is not the public persona of Nabokov and his relationship with cinema. Instead, this book concentrates on his writings and how his style has been influenced by cinema; it aims to track the parallelisms and points of correspondence that converge in Nabokov's fiction. In Nabokov, Wyllie points out, it is possible to detect not only thematic exploitation of cinema, but also, and far more important, narrative pace, character's perception (or deception), use of colour or scene description as vital reflection of cross-medium borrowings. It is Wyllie's

contention that Nabokov's rigorous attention to style and structure is informed by cinematic movements, which he would have experienced while going to the movies.

After a short introduction, Wylie starts with Nabokov's Russian writings and situates their forms within German Expressionism and filmmakers like Fritz Lang and F.W. Murnau. In particular, the latter's *Der Letzte Mann* (1924) is compared to *Details of a Sunset*, where Nabokov plays with the contrasting effect of light and dark, with patterns of shadows, with distortions and inanimate objects. The cinema of German Expressionism here serves Wylie's argument of Nabokov literary preoccupation with narrating a human psychology or a character's perspective, which is 'abnormal' from that of the viewer/readers. In these forms of dealing with the surge of modernism, the world is askew as if by its mere crookedness it can reveal a higher state of aesthetics and understanding. This linkage is then followed by a treatment of how Dziga Vertov's filmmaking has influenced *The Eye*, written at the same time as *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) travelled around the world as a manifestation of the invention of a new cinematic aesthetics. The connection between the English title of Nabokov's narrative and Vertov's Kino-Eye is obviously there, but Wylie takes this further by implying an affinity between Vertov's cinematic form of 'zhizn' vrasplokh' (life caught unawares) and Nabokov's main character's self-understanding as a "product entirely of his own design" (27). However, Nabokov's and Vertov's concern with vision and what it can 'record' also diverges. Where Vertov believed in the mechanics of camera to capture life, Nabokov's character, Smurov, has an unreliable perception of reality, which disintegrates while leaving the narrative unfulfilled on the account of visual mastery. According to Wylie, this literary exploitation is "an ironic process of progressive reduction" (28), which not only points to the ambiguous relationship that Nabokov had with cinema, but also to the question of what precisely is transferred from cinema to literary fiction.

In *Leonardo*, Wylie identifies three 'cinematic devices' that Nabokov employs: (1) the narrative perspective of a filmmaker/director, (2) visualisation of scenes as if caught by the camera eye and (3) sudden narrative shifts in pace, which break the flow of narration into "abrupt and disorientating visual jolts" (31). I will return to the term 'cinematic devices' later, but on the evidence that Wylie provides, it seems that the analysis can go into a flight of forcing temporal contexts on the author's unintentional similarities – in particular, in the

instances where the latter cinematic device is an example of the influence of the Soviet montage technique. For example, Nabokov's line, "one could survey her entire palate and uvula, which resembled the tail end of a boiled chicken", functions and has the same impact for Wyllie as cinematic montage (32). However, not negating that Soviet Montage did insert the fantastic and the 'unreal' into a sequence of jolted images, it could also be argued that Nabokov is in fact using the technique of creating a metaphor, which is as old as literature. Thus, it could be said that Soviet Montage was in fact influenced by literature and that the montage of attractions (such as the slaughter of the bull in *Strike* (1924)) is not cinematic but literary. The imaginary visual connection emerges not in the images, but in the heads of the viewers, who combine the two disparate worlds of the toiling masses and the slaughtered bull, or of the female tongue and the boiled tail of a chicken. The implication of this might add little more to the subject than a chicken-or-egg discussion (to continue in the poultry department), but it should have perhaps compelled the researcher to provide a further explanation of the fundamental difference between the two media.

Wyllie continues with drawing attention to American literature and writers like William Faulkner and F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose relationship with cinema was much more overt as they tried their craftsmanship as screenwriters directly on the cinematic industry of Hollywood. This intertwining of the cinematic industry and the world of letters comes across as insightful, although Nabokov seems to have harboured few ambitions in that regard. Furthermore, Wyllie compares works such as *King, Queen, Knave* and *Laughter in the Dark* to, in particular, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, which apparently points at a shared response to the function of cinema and the style of writing. In Nabokov's Russian fiction, as with Fitzgerald, visual disruption, distortion and manipulation were to become the dominant themes (59). This section is followed up by a chapter on film noir and on the linkage to American crime fiction. Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett and the spillover from German Expressionism are the chief focal points, reflected for instance in the use of the femme fatale in Nabokov's writing, such as Martha in *King, Queen, Knave*. Wyllie finds evidence for 'movie values' in the construction of dialogue, the facial close up (the choker) and the use of 'jump cut', where abrupt shifts in the narrative guide the attention of the reader (105). The reader's familiarity with these 'movie values' creates an intimacy with the author, an intimacy that American crime novelists sought in their fiction. While Wyllie draws a line

to Nabokov's work, most of the analysis in this part concentrates on the crime novel's use of cinematic motives, or indeed vice versa. While it is plausible to imagine Nabokov being familiar with this American cinema genre *par excellence* through attending cinemas in Berlin or Cambridge, it is not clear whether the American West coast texture and quality were actively sought by him when working on, for example, *The Eye* or *Despair*.

This becomes more or less self-evident once Wyllie crosses over to *Lolita* and Nabokov's American fiction. Once Nabokov is placed geographically in the United States, the intended purpose of Wyllie's book – to find out why Nabokov was able “to communicate with the American psyche on a subliminal but extremely potent level”(1) – seems to reveal itself. Nabokov's deep involvement in cinematic narratives is, thus, far more convincing in the latter half of Wyllie's study, when she deals with not only *Lolita*, but also ‘The Assistant Producer’, *Ada* and *Transparent Things*. In these works, Wyllie is aptly able to draw references to film noir, screwball comedy and New Hollywood cinema. One of the reasons why the first half seems forced and strained is its narrow selection of cinematic influences. There is, bizarrely, no mention of surrealist filmmaking, impressionist films or Neo-realism, which were also influential cinematic modes and, unquestionably, also were cinematic movements that Nabokov would have been familiar with. However, it is this narrow selection that works well in accounting for Nabokov's American fiction. One example is Wyllie's reading of *Transparent Things*, where she is forcefully able to connect themes, style and narrative perception to the films of Robert Altman, Francis Ford Coppola and Roman Polanski (239). In particular, I found the account of Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974), with its fixation on barriers and screens, acute and informative. Yet this also brings me back to the issue of ‘cinematic devices’, which I mentioned earlier.

One of the canonising factors of Coppola's film is that the main character is played by Gene Hackman, the rising star of New Hollywood cinema cemented by his emphatic performance as Jimmy Doyle in *The French Connection* (1971). While referring to Hollywood as a cultural industry producing screen idols and icons and hence creating appetite for further cinematic products might be seen as a tedious point, it is nonetheless an intrinsic part of cinema narration. Cinema features actors and actors are revealed in cinema, contrary to literature, as ‘whole’ and ‘real’. The author of literature, including Nabokov,

selects what the reader needs to know about a character and the reader then fills out the gaps by imagination – the same gaps that cinema fills out by default, leaving much less to the viewer’s imagination. The heavy-handedness of Soviet Montage illustrates how difficult it is for cinema to create a simple metaphor because cinematic images are as a rule readymade and fixed. Cinema forces a suspense of disbelief (with fatal consequences if broken), while literature forces a belief in the author since the reader acts as a co-creator (this belief, however, can also be turned into disbelief at times). The literary character is never a cinematic/photographic ‘whole’ but is reduced to authorial suggestions, as in a script. This is where the writing style matters, and Wyllie’s query is constructive, because through style the writer is able to guide the attention of the readers. Cinema, of course, has other means of drawing the attention of the viewers, the star being one such tool. This does not mean that cinema reveals absolutely everything, as quite often what is not revealed or what is off-screen is part of the viewer’s own imaginary space. This is explicitly exploited, for example, in horror movies. My point is that there are fundamental differences between cinema and fiction which should be taken into consideration when discussing cross-medium borrowings. What works in narrative cinema, might not work in literary fiction, and vice versa. Such a discussion is absent in Wyllie’s book, which is a pity, because she is on to something very fascinating with regard to how the creation of literature has been shaped and formed by narrative cinema. There is a tendency to view works of literature exclusively as a predecessor to cinema, indeed as originals to actual films. However, Wyllie’s study turns this perception around and moves the two creative forms into a reverse comparison. Film novelisation, which is a relatively recent trend in publishing, suggests an even further interconnection of these two cultural industries. On the ‘art’ of film novelisation, Joe Queenan observed recently in *The Guardian* that “a noveliser can effortlessly write a readable book based on a motion picture filled with computer-generated monsters and get away with it, but has trouble when asked to bring a bubbly teen multiple-personality [Hannah Montana] to life on the printed page”.¹

¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2009/jul/10/joe-queenan-movie-novelisation>

This again highlights differences. The movie star – not cinematic techniques – is quintessentially cinematic, despite being thematically present throughout Nabokov’s American fiction. Even the best of writers select unevenly among ‘cinematic devices’ and may sometimes unwillingly create ‘scenes’ (when caught unawares) that share craftsmanship with the silver screen. *Nabokov at the Movies* aims at getting under the skin of artistic creation and writing, and hence is recommended to students of literature and creative writing beyond the Nabokov scholars. But to the budding writers who are searching for a style of their own I would suggest reading Nabokov and going to lots of movies.

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