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POPULAR CULTURE AS AN INTERMEDIAL SOURCE:
NABOKOV'S SUBVERSIVE USE
OF THE *UT PICTURA POESIS* TOPOS
IN *LOLITA*, NOVEL AND SCREENPLAY

When one confronts Nabokov's prose with the *Ut Pictura Poesis*¹ doctrine, it clearly appears that he stands more on the side of *poesis* than that of *pictura*, even though painting was his initial vocation,² and even though he claimed that he thought in images rather than in a specific language.³ He indeed does not include actual pictures in his texts, but his writing often stands at the crossroads between the two semiotic systems. As many a critic has noted, Nabokov repeatedly resorts to images in his writing, describing paintings, photographs, sculptures, or movies,⁴ and producing typical *ekphrases*⁵ that have triggered much interest in his work among those engaged in intermedial studies. However, Nabokov, as he did with many other literary traditions, also plays with the venerable ekphrastic mode, and chooses

¹ In 1926, Nabokov composed a poem in Russian which bore this famous title and was dedicated to M. V. Dobuzhinsky, an acclaimed painter and friend of the Nabokovs, who used to teach drawing to the author himself. See Dmitri Nabokov's translation of this poem in Vladimir Nabokov, *Collected Poems*, Ed. T. Karshan (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), 27.

² "I think I was born a painter—really!—and up to my fourteenth year, perhaps, I used to spend most of the day drawing and painting and I was supposed to become a painter in due time. But I don't think I had any real talent there", see Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1973), 17.

³ To a journalist asking in what language he thought, trilingual Nabokov replied, "I don't think in any language, I think in images" (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 14).

⁴ Gavriel Shapiro summarizes this trend in the following terms: "Even though in time Nabokov came to realize that his vocation was literature, his keen sense of vision and color, and his great interest in and vast knowledge of the fine arts, are all manifest in his belles-lettres", in "Nabokov and Early Netherlandish Art," in *Nabokov at Cornell*, G. Shapiro, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 241.

⁵ Ekphrasis is "a literary genre, or at least *topos*, that attempts to imitate in words an object of the plastic arts" (Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis, The Illusion of the Natural Sign* [Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1992], 6).

to describe objects that do not belong to the plastic arts, but rather to popular culture—commercial ads, amateur snapshots, or magazine pictures.

The purpose of this essay is to shed light on how Nabokov subverts the literary tradition of confronting text and image through his intermedial use of non-canonical pictorial references. To that end, the focus will be on *Lolita*, for it is the novel in which popular culture plays a major role at the level of plot, characterization, structure, motifs, and poetics. *Lolita* is also the only work that Nabokov attempted to adapt for the silver screen—an art-form that is itself at the crossroads of art, popular culture and commerce, and that massively produces derivative images circulating in popular culture, especially through magazines in the late 1940s and early 1950s,⁶ when *Lolita* was composed. Therefore Nabokov’s screenplay for *Lolita* will also be analyzed with regard to its attempt to transfer these intermedial features into a filmic system of signs.

By inserting pictorial elements into his scriptural creations, Nabokov produces what Alain Montandon calls “iconotexts,”⁷ which Liliane Louvel defines as “the attempt to merge text and image in a pluriform fusion, as in an oxymoron.”⁸ Louvel uses the oxymoron simile because intermedial texts rely upon an essential paradox, an internal tension stemming from the cohabitation of two semiotic codes, one perceived linearly and unfolding in time, and the other perceived directly in space, as if abstracted from temporality. This essential paradox of textual images produces narratives which seem to acquire the temporal suspension of images without getting rid of their linear nature, as Gérard Genette explains:

la description doit moduler dans le successif la représentation d’objets simultanés et juxtaposés dans l’espace : le langage narratif se distinguerait ainsi par une sorte de coïncidence temporelle avec son objet, dont le langage descriptif serait au contraire irrémédiablement privé.⁹

⁶ Notably general press magazines such as *Life* or *Time* magazines, women’s magazines, teen magazines and movie magazines, which are repeatedly parodied and mocked in *Lolita*.

⁷ Alain Montandon, ed., *Iconotextes* (Paris: Ophrys, 1990). For further discussion of iconotexts see James Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of the Ekphrasis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Werner Wolf, “Narrative and Narrativity: A Narratological Reconceptualization and Its Application to the Visual Arts,” *Word and Image* 19:3 (2003): 180-197.

⁸ Liliane Louvel, *Poetics of the Iconotext*, trans. Laurence Petit (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 15.

⁹ Gérard Genette, *Figures II* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), 60.

Genette uses a verb in the conditional here, thus indicating that the effect of temporal suspension is but an illusion, since descriptions are between “the ideal poles of absolute kinesis and absolute stasis,” as Christopher Collins recalls.¹⁰

Keeping in mind the tension at work within descriptions, and especially descriptions of already-constituted images or visual objects, let us turn to Nabokov’s handling of this paradox in his use of popular culture images in his writing. As Humbert visits the Haze house for the first time, we find many pictorial references connoting Charlotte’s bad taste and cultural pretensions, among which is René Prinnet’s “Kreutzer Sonata,” which hangs above Humbert’s bed: “I inspected it through the mist of my utter rejection of it; but I did discern above ‘my’ bed René Prinnet’s ‘Kreutzer Sonata.’”¹¹ As explained by Alfred Appel Jr., this is a reference to a painting used over and over to advertise *Tabu* perfume in American magazines, since 1943.¹² The *Annotated Lolita* archive at the Library of Congress includes a magazine clipping bearing Nabokov’s manual annotation: “this illustrated ed. is limited to one (and is hence very rare),”¹³ similar to the image below:

¹⁰ Christopher Collins, *Reading the Written Image* (University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 127.

¹¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. A. Appel Jr. (New York: Vintage, 1994), 38.

¹² *Tabu* by Dana is a women’s fragrance (still sold in drugstores nowadays) created by Jean Carles (1892–1966). The House of Dana relocated its headquarters in the US in 1940 because of the German occupation in Paris, and used to be a popular producer of luxury perfume until the 1980s. Countless versions of the ad were made every year, always including the 1901 Prinnet painting based on Tolstoy’s novella, usually in the background, in a gilded frame, with an elegantly-dressed woman in the foreground. Its slogan “Tabu, the forbidden fragrance” has often been parodied, and must have appealed to Nabokov’s delight in the details of American *poshlost*, as recalled by Morris Bishop, quoted by Appel when he evokes Nabokov’s renting “the appallingly vulgar and garish home of an absent Professor of Agriculture,” and his “relish in every awful detail” (Alfred Appel Jr., “Backgrounds of *Lolita*,” *Triquarterly* 17 [Winter 1970]: 29).

¹³ New York Public Library, Berg Collection, in Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovich, m. b. (Nabokov) Appel, Alfred, *The Annotated Lolita*: preface, introduction and notes, Typescript draft (x copy), unsigned and undated. 169 p. With Vladimir Nabokov’s ms. Corrections. Photostat of earlier version in separate folder. Juliar: A28.8.



As Appel explained, this type of reference belongs to Nabokov's satire of "American songs, ads, movies, magazines, brand names, tourist attractions, summer camps, dud ranches, hotels, and motels as well as the Good Housekeeping Syndrome"¹⁴ in *Lolita*. According to Appel, this reference to Prinnet's painting in Charlotte's house is a clear indication of *poshlost*.¹⁵ What is interesting here is that Nabokov does not refer to the original 1901 oil on canvas in color, but to its commercial reproduction for a perfume ad found in magazines,¹⁶ a further indication of its *poshlost* nature, since Nabokov also saw *poshlost* (among other items) in "imitations of imitations."¹⁷ He therefore chose to play the intermedial game through an image borrowed from popular culture instead of the fine arts, and he selected an image that itself used a frame-within-the-frame effect. His emphasis on the mechanical reproduction of art in advertising

¹⁴ Alfred Appel Jr., "Backgrounds of *Lolita*," 34.

¹⁵ Nabokov defines *poshlost* as "not only the obviously trashy but also the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive" (Vladimir Nabokov, *Nicolai Gogol* [New York: New Directions, 1961], 70).

¹⁶ As Brian Boyd found out from Nabokov's preparatory notes to *Ada*, Nabokov used a similar pictorial reference: he refers to Toulouse-Lautrec's famous poster entitled *Divan Japonais* via an ad for French wine that features the poster in the background, set as a *mise-en-abyme* of the scene displayed in the poster (an actual lady with a "picture hat" sitting at a counter of a Parisian café). See Brian Boyd, *Nabokov's Ada: the place of consciousness* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985), 111.

¹⁷ Interview in *The Paris Review* 41 (Summer-Fall 1967): 103, also available at <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4310/the-art-of-fiction-no-40-vladimir-nabokov>. Consulted 2014-06-28.

is part and parcel of the advertisement motif in the novel, which is woven through the fabric of the text via pictorial, and above all textual, references (Nabokov parodying the language of ads¹⁸). In his *Lolita: A Screenplay*, Nabokov provided an ekphrastic description of Prinnet's work, which clearly states his contempt for it:

He winces as he glances at a picture: a reproduction of René Prinnet's "Kreutzer Sonata"—the unappetizing one in which a disheveled violinist passionately embraces his fair accompanist as she rises from her piano stool with clammy young hands still touching the keys.¹⁹

It is worth noting that in the course of writing his screenplay, which involved a lot of editing of his textual material, Nabokov chose to retain this image, and to expand it through the ekphrastic mode; yet this *ekphrasis* teems with derogatory terms ("unappetizing", "disheveled", "clammy") and is highly ironical: "passionately embraces", "his fair accompanist." One can also note the tension between stasis and kinesis identified earlier in the syntax of the *ekphrasis*, which renders the swiftness of the embrace in one sentence resorting to a conjunction ("as") and a preposition ("with") linking the verbs that create the impression of simultaneous, though paused, action.

In addition, one may see in Nabokov's intention to keep this image-within-the-image in the film an attempt at visually rendering Charlotte's romantic aspirations in a playful manner. Indeed, many of the Tabu ads portray a lonely woman with the Prinnet painting in the background, externalizing the woman's dreams of seduction, as suggested by the text accompanying the pictures:

¹⁸ See for instance Nabokov, *Lolita*, 148, 254.

¹⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita: A Screenplay* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 37. In *The Annotated Lolita*, Appel's note also indicates Nabokov's contempt for this image: "it shows, in Nabokov's words, an "ill-groomed girl pianist rising like a wave from her stool after completing the duo, and being kissed by a hirsute violinist. Very unappetizing and clammy, but has 'camp' charm"" (Nabokov, *Lolita*, notes, 355-356).



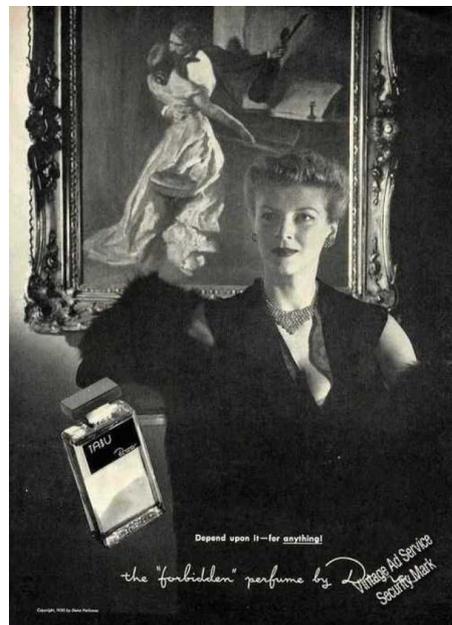
1951 – “haunts forever whoever comes near it”



1947 – “the one perfume that dares you to be entirely yourself”



1950 – “Audacious? Naturally!”



1950 – “Depend upon it – for anything!”

Even though it is impossible to say whether Nabokov had these specific ads in mind when he composed his novel, one can postulate that these ads (which all display similarly-posed, fancy-dressed ladies with analogous slogans) must have appealed to Nabokov’s keen observation of middle-class ridiculousness. Moreover, the above examples significantly echo Charlotte’s personality. They announce both her blatant intentions to seduce her lodger and the perfume-

purchase episode narrated by Humbert in his diary.²⁰ In this instance of the intermedial use of a commercial ad, the main purpose is not to use Art as the ultimate referent for Beauty, but instead to indicate the poor taste of a fictional character.

In that example the intermedial device is mostly used to fulfill characterization purposes, to complete the parody of American suburbia, and also to create a proleptic hint at the “passionate embrace” Charlotte longs for. The Prinnet reference thus serves as a parodic *mise en abyme*, a false foreshadowing of the relationship between Charlotte and Humbert. As Lucien Dallenbach pointed out concerning the *mise en abyme*, those devices only achieve their function if the reader perceives their double nature: not only do they have a meaning within the diegetic world, but they have a deeper significance once the reader perceives the parodic twist. Among the many allusive techniques displayed in the book, parody — a form of repetition with variation in which Nabokov excels — holds a special place within the metafictional tricks of the novel. Using intermedial parody, Nabokov invites the reader who can see the echo to explore the mechanism of creation, as Linda Hutcheon explains: “Parody is, therefore, an exploration of difference and similarity: in metafiction it invites a more literary reading, a recognition of literary codes.”²¹ Through intermedial parody, Nabokov asserts his ascendance, and creates a type of complicity with his reader, over his character’s shoulder.

Another illustration of intermedial irony is to be found in an important episode of the novel that includes two *ekphrases* in a row. Humbert is in Lolita’s bedroom, reading Charlotte’s letter after she left for Camp Q, and he describes two images taken from some of the many magazines littering the house and pinned to the nymphet’s bedroom walls:

A full-page ad ripped out of a slick magazine was affixed to the wall above the bed, between a crooner’s mug and the lashes of a movie actress. It represented a dark-haired young husband with a kind of drained look in his Irish eyes. He was modeling a robe by So-and-So and holding a bridgelike tray by So-and-So, with breakfast for two. The legend, by the Rev. Thomas Morell, called him a “conquering hero.” The thoroughly conquered lady (not shown) was presumably propping herself up to receive her half of the tray. How her bed-fellow was to get under the bridge without some messy mishap was not clear. Lo had drawn a jocose arrow to the haggard lover’s face and had put, in

²⁰ Nabokov, *Lolita*, 50-51.

²¹ Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: the Metafictional Paradox* (New York: Methuen Inc., 1984), 25.

block letters: H.H. And indeed, despite a difference of a few years, the resemblance was striking.²²

As Alfred Appel brilliantly shows in his notes to the novel, this passage is an exact *ekphrasis* of a real ad for Viyella robes (reproduced in the annotations on page 369). What is striking is the way Nabokov intertwines high- and low-brow references here. As Appel's erudite note indicates, Nabokov decodes the literary reference in the ad—its slogan, “See the Conquering Hero Comes—in a Viyella Robe!,” is indeed a reference to a song by Thomas Morell, which was used in two of Handel's oratorios, and played with in Joyce's *Ulysses* to refer to Molly Bloom's seducer.²³ This allusion underscores the ridiculously heroic slogan used for a domestic “ideal” husband, comfortably robed and serving breakfast to his bride. Moreover, the Joycean intertext further undermines the potential sexual innuendoes of a breakfast-in-bed scene, which are rendered comically unlikely by Humbert's imagined scenario of the impossible fulfillment of the dream: “The thoroughly conquered lady (not shown) was presumably propping herself up to receive her half of the tray. How her bed-fellow was to get under the bridge without some messy mishap was not clear.”²⁴

One here observes what Liliane Louvel sees as “one of the fundamental roles of the images,” that is, “to generate narratives”²⁵: the capacity of images for narrative drift is illustrated by Humbert's musings on what the lady may be doing and what may come next when the “conquering hero” tries to set down his tray; it is as if Nabokov's language was prompted by the image, and somehow (and again) stated its superiority, subjecting the image to the order of verbal discourse. It is all the more interesting as the ad itself contains a lot of text, placed beneath the image and the slogan. Thanks to Appel's note, one can see that the beginning of the text quotes the opening lines of Morell's song:

Sound the trumpets, beat the drums, see the conquering hero comes—dressed to the nines in a Viyella robe, and armed with Sunday breakfast for his deserving bride. The superb thing about a Viyella bathrobe is that you can *wash* it.²⁶

²² Nabokov, *Lolita*, 69.

²³ Nabokov, *Lolita*, notes, 367-368.

²⁴ Nabokov, *Lolita*, 69.

²⁵ Louvel, *Poetics of the Iconotext*, 106.

²⁶ Nabokov, *Lolita*, notes, 369.

So we are led to understand that the commercial picture *and* the accompanying text triggered Nabokov's comic imaginings of the "messy mishap" to come, suggestively underscored by an alliteration in /m/. One should also note that Nabokov did not keep this ad for *Lolita: A Screenplay*: indeed this little ekphrastic episode is not essential in terms of plot or characterization. It could be interpreted as a way for Nabokov to mock the pretentious narrator of his novel: by likening Humbert to some anonymous model in a ridiculous pose in a magazine ad, Nabokov proleptically places him in an inferior position when compared to the other image described in the passage, that of Quilty (unnamed here), who clearly has the status of a celebrity: "Under this was another picture, also a colored ad. A distinguished playwright was solemnly smoking a Drome. He always smoked Dromes. The resemblance was slight."²⁷ This short *ekphrasis* of another ad is one of the clues scattered in the novel indicating the identity of Humbert's rival, and it therefore has an important structural role. The status of Quilty as a celebrity in a cigarette advertisement and his identification with the picture in Lolita's room are confirmed in the next occurrence of the fictitious cigarette brand—"Dromes"—in the narrative, when Lolita sees the playwright at the Enchanted Hunters hotel:

"Does not he look exactly, but exactly, like Quilty?" said Lo in a soft voice, her sharp brown eyebrow not pointing, but visibly burning to point, at the lone diner in the loud checks, in the far corner of the room.

"Like our fat Ramsdale dentist?"

Lo arrested the mouthful of water she had just taken, and put down her dancing glass.

"Course not," she said with a splutter of mirth. "I meant the writer fellow in the Dromes ad."

Oh, Fame! Oh, Femina!²⁸

To complete the set of clues for the careful re-reader, Quilty's last appearance on the stage of the novel has him "munching" his last Drome cigarette.²⁹ What is to be noted here is the insistence upon the connection between magazine ads, fame, and the female readers of magazines ("Oh, Fame! Oh, Femina!," with a possible bilingual pun on "fame" and its

²⁷ Nabokov, *Lolita*, 69.

²⁸ Nabokov, *Lolita*, 121.

²⁹ "'Quilty,' I said. 'I want you to concentrate. You are going to die in a moment. The hereafter for all we know may be an eternal state of excruciating insanity. You smoked your last cigarette yesterday. Concentrate. Try to understand what is happening to you.'

He kept taking the Drome cigarette apart and munching bits of it" (Nabokov, *Lolita*, 297).

homophone when pronounced in French, “*femme*,” i.e., woman). Magazines, and especially low-brow women’s magazines, teen magazines and movie fan magazines, play an essential role in *Lolita* and have not been given the critical attention they deserve.³⁰ Magazines are crucial in shaping Charlotte’s and Lolita’s daily life, culture, tastes, behavior and future aspirations, illustrating further the key-role of popular culture in the novel. Therefore the two ads Lolita clipped to literally connect her daily life to the life depicted in magazines are very significant intermedial elements from the point of view of characterization, plot development, and structure.

In *Lolita: A Screenplay*, Nabokov not only kept the Drome ad featuring famous Quilty, but he placed that scene before Humbert received Charlotte’s letter, and added a reference to Annabel Lee/Leigh:

Silence – except for the birds outside and young Negro maid in the kitchen. The telephone *rings*.

MAID: No, there’s no Miss Lee here. You must have got the wrong number. You’re welcome.

Humbert has remained standing on the landing, between his open door and the open door of Lolita’s room opposite.

He surveys her deserted room. Abandoned clothes lie on the rumpled bed. A pair of white shoes with roller skates on the floor. He rolls one on his palm.

There is a full-page advertisement (back cover of a magazine) tacked onto the wall: a distinguished playwright solemnly smoking (“I can write without a pen but not without a Drome”). After a moment’s brooding, Humbert goes to his room and incontinently starts to pack.³¹

Once again Nabokov produces a hybrid intermedial passage, mixing not only text and image, but also literary references and a commercial ad. The importance of the ad is indicated by the careful preparation for the insertion of this pictorial element in the first version of the screenplay. Nabokov indeed wrote a short sequence placed prior to Humbert’s arrival at 342

³⁰ This theme would require a full essay to be properly developed. One may just mention a few key-occurrences: they are all over the place at 342 Lawn Street (“But there was no question of my settling there. I could not be happy in that type of household with bedraggled magazines on every chair” Nabokov, *Lolita*, 37); Humbert uses one as a pretext to touch and play with Lolita during the Sunday morning scene on the living room davenport; it is because she goes down to get a magazine that Lolita meets Quilty in the lobby of the Enchanted Hunters; some of the last items Humbert gets rid of to cure his lovesickness are “an accumulation of teen magazines” (Nabokov, *Lolita*, 254); he finds his detective in an ad from one of Lolita’s movie magazines; Humbert ceaselessly parodies magazine articles, ads, photographs, advice columns, etc.

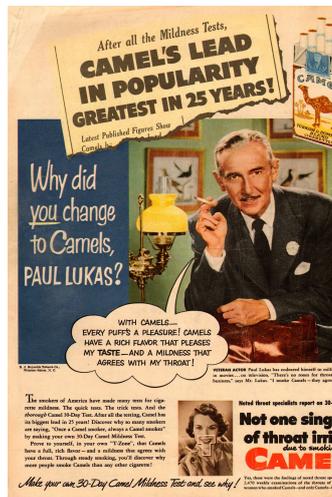
³¹ Nabokov, *Lolita: A Screenplay*, 72.

Lawn Street, in which Lolita cuts out the ad from a magazine called *File* (an obvious parodistic anagram of *Life*): “The last issue of “File” lies on the turf near the deck chair. She contemplates the back cover, then rips it off and takes it upstairs to her room, leaving the rest of the magazine on the chair.”³²

An unusual feature of this image in words is its brevity and its lack of elements descriptive of specific visual features (“a distinguished playwright solemnly smoking”): Nabokov inserts a *text* into the image borrowed from a magazine by creating a ridiculous slogan (“I can write without a pen but not without a Drome”), but does not really provide us with a clear description of the famous playwright. How could this absence of description be accounted for? One hypothesis would be that Quilty’s face ought to remain blurry for his shadow to loom darker over the whole narrative; another would be that Nabokov relied on his readers’ visual memory of a very popular type of ad at the time he wrote *Lolita* to conjure up the ad in their imagination. Indeed at the end of the 1940s and through the 1950s dozens of actors, singers, opera singers, baseball stars, etc. modeled for Camel ads, following a similar visual pattern, as shown in the three examples below:



Camel ad, 1950



Camel ad, 1951



Camel ad, 1952

By appealing to his readers’ visual memory related to the world of advertising and celebrity culture, Nabokov managed to introduce both a visual and linguistic pun: the word “Drome” recalls dromedaries, which are “simplified doubles” of camels (i.e. camels with only one bump), and it also signals an oddity that naturalist Nabokov must have been very amused by, i.e. the fact that on Camel packs it is a dromedary that is pictured, and not an actual camel, as

³² Library of Congress, Washington D.C., Manuscript Division. Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov Papers, *Lolita. A Screenplay*. Draft in English, on index cards, n. d., container #16, folder #2, index card #28.

Appel notes. This double pun on animals that look alike but are slightly different is naturally an integral part of the doppelganger motif that establishes Quilty and Humbert as doubles, and underscores the role of the Drome pattern in the clues revealing who stole Lolita from Humbert.

This ekphrasis of an ad that does not exist in “reality” corresponds to what John Hollander calls “notional ekphrases,” as distinct from “actual ekphrases”³³ (the “Conquering Hero” ad would be a good illustration of an “actual ekphrasis”). Nabokov seemed to have delighted in “inventing” images that powerfully evoke one particular artist or image,³⁴ or in presenting “real” works as being fake³⁵; in doing so he used the ekphrastic technique to create a fruitful tension between fiction and “reality,” in order to produce a metatextual or meta-artistic³⁶ effect and underline the relativity of truth in the creative process. This tension is all the stronger when he uses images or objects from popular culture, for these objects are not designated as representations as clearly as paintings or sculptures are through artistic tradition, and they therefore have a lesser impact from a meta-artistic point of view. Indeed, advertising images are aimed at creating the perfect illusion of belonging to the consumer’s “real” world; they try to obliterate the representational process at play to favor the consumer’s identification with the world of promises heralded in magazine ads.³⁷

However, despite Nabokov’s successful conjunction of text and image in his use of popular images, one should never forget that what is called “intermedial writing” or “intersemiotic writing” is steeped in a paradox; even though it conjures up other systems of signs, such as the iconic system, it can never cross the boundaries of language, nor get rid of the scriptural code it is made of. What is sometimes sensed as an inherent dependence upon language is transferred in Nabokov’s delight in the infinite possibilities of the signifier, and can be seen in the numerous puns, sound effects, and word games with which he enriches his intermedial texts.

Therefore, when he strove to transfer his novel with multilayered motifs and multilingual

³³ John Hollander, *The Gazer’s Spirit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 4: “I shall call “notional ekphrasis,” the verbal representation of a purely fictional work of art.” Let us recall that one of the first ekphrases of literary history, Homer’s depiction of Achilles’ shield in *The Iliad*, is a “notional ekphrasis.”

³⁴ For instance, the Caravaggio painting of the scene near the waterfall in *Ada*, the Parmigianino sketch of Marina in *Ada*, the portrait by Serov in *Look at the Harlequins!*.

³⁵ The most interesting case is the painting in the short story entitled “La Veneziana,” which is presented as a fake in the plot, but precisely describes a real painting by Sebastiano Del Piombo called “Giovanna Romana—La Dorotea.”

³⁶ Nabokov was especially fond of Van Eyck’s works in which the artist’s presence in the painting produces a meta-artistic effect (see Gavriel Shapiro, “Two Notes on *Pnin*,” *The Nabokovian* 29 (Fall 1992): 35–38) akin to the anagrammatic shadow of Nabokov one can glimpse in his works.

³⁷ Nabokov is acutely aware of the nature of commercial ads, and repeatedly highlights it in *Lolita*: “She believed, with a kind of celestial trust, any advertisement or advice that that appeared in *Movie Love* or *Screen Land* — Starasil Starves Pimples, or “You better watch out if you’re wearing your shirttails outside your jeans, gals, because Jill says you shouldn’t.” <...> She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster” (Nabokov, *Lolita*, 148).

puns onto the screen, Nabokov tried to come up with visual equivalents of his textual patterns and proleptic effects, but sometimes they were rather cumbersome. For instance, while in the novel the Drome ad is lost among all the other elements adorning the walls of Lolita's room (and is meant to be noticed only at second reading), in the screenplay the Drome ad is the only image-within-the-image mentioned in the scene.³⁸ The Quilty/Drome motif is actually a lot more obvious in the screenplay than in the novel, which makes Quilty's lurking presence in the story almost too perceptible. This is very different from the novel, in which all the clues of his presence are encoded in the text, and especially in *language*: anagrams, puns, fake *Who's Who* excerpts, doubt regarding his gender, and so on. It seems that Nabokov somehow lacked the cinematographic tools to encode this presence more subtly.

Similarly, Nabokov also resorted to pictorial doubles (another set of images-within-the-image) quite insistently through the two versions of the screenplay, so as to transfer the self-reflexive aspect of his novel. For example, when Humbert visits the room Charlotte offers to rent out to him, the upcoming discovery of the nymphet Lolita is proleptically announced by a triple frame-within-the frame which is very precisely described:

Humbert opens a closet. A painted screen of the folding type topples into his arms. Pictured on it is a nymphet in three repeated designs: (1) gazing over a black gauze fan, (2) in a black half-mask, (3) in bikini in harlequin glasses. <...>

CHARLOTTE: Oops! I *am* sorry. We bought it at the store here <...>. I'll have Lolita remove it to her room. She loves it.³⁹

Note that this passage was already present in the first version of the screenplay and was kept by Nabokov in the final screenplay; this may indicate that he thought it was an important or successful episode. When Humbert hears Lolita's name for the first time, he takes her for the maid, in the novel just like in the screenplay; however, here, the vulgar object foreshadowing the appearance of the nymphet in her bathing suit in the sunlit garden somehow lacks subtlety: the upcoming "bikini" and Lolita's gaze "over dark glasses" are quite heavily introduced here. In the book, the glistening core of a plum, and a simple white sock left on the floor are the announcing details. Linda Hutcheon underscored that adapting involves "a recoding into a new set of

³⁸ Nabokov, *Lolita: A Screenplay*, 72.

³⁹ Nabokov, *Lolita: A Screenplay*, 38.

conventions,”⁴⁰ and in this case, Nabokov did not really manage to combine intermediality and popular culture in the sign system of film as convincingly as in his novel.

The inclusion of an image within the text produces contradictory effects. On the one hand it presents a “ready-made image,” one that “superimposes itself on the signifiers of the text thus preventing the reader from rearranging them freely”⁴¹; in that sense intermedial writing is hampering the reader’s (re)creative and imaginative activity. On the other hand, one could also see intermedial writing as a way to reinforce meaning by performing functions in terms of plot, structure, characterization, and also parody and metafiction. In texts as demanding of their readers as Nabokov’s texts, intermedial passages open new spaces for the participatory reading to take place, and enrich the interpretative process with new realms for experiencing the novel. Nabokov further develops the range of intermedial reading by subverting the traditional field of ekphrasis through resorting to images borrowed from popular culture, that is, to images that have been less commented upon than the traditional references to fine arts and literature, but should not be ignored, for they offer many more paths to be explored.

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⁴⁰ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 16.

⁴¹ Louvel, *Poetics of the Iconotext*, 100.

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