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THE ATTRACTION OF MONTAGES:  
CINEMATIC WRITING STYLE IN NABOKOV'S *LOLITA*

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Our understanding of Nabokov's œuvre is influenced by the presence of cinema in at least three ways. Most obviously, its film adaptations serve as a mirror in which certain characteristics of the original literary texts can be seen more clearly and, thus, critics have often compared the novels with the movie versions.<sup>1</sup> Less conspicuous is the extent to which Nabokov references individual movies or film genres and borrows motifs from them.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the influence of cinema goes beyond the referential use, beyond simply borrowing motifs that are reworked into a separate work of art; it also seeps into Nabokov's writing style, shaping the narrative devices he chooses and making his texts intermedial.<sup>3</sup>

Such a profound cinematic influence inevitably threatens to oppress Nabokov's prose by implying that the literary in it has been replaced by the filmic and, therefore, the written word is inferior to the image. Nabokov's works answer this threat by displaying uniquely literary, 'unfilmable' characteristics. Whether endowing his prose with such characteristics was Nabokov's conscious decision is impossible to tell. It should be noted that he claimed to be thinking in images instead of words and to rely on mental images during writing and reading;<sup>4</sup> yet, when asked specifically about the resemblance of films and his writings, he denied that the novels correlated to a visual impression: "I can't make the comparison between a visual impression and my scribble on

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent book-length study of film adaptations, see Ewa Mazierska, *Nabokov's Cinematic Afterlife* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> For an exploration of this aspect, see Alfred Appel, Jr., *Nabokov's Dark Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon is examined in Barbara Wyllie, *Nabokov at the Movies: Film Perspectives in Fiction* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 14, 40, 69, 302, 309-310; Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 289, 363; Nabokov, Interview with George Feifer, *Saturday Review* 4, no. 5 (27 Nov., 1976): 21; Nabokov, Interview with Robert Robinson, *The Listener* 97, no. 2501 (March 24, 1977): 367, 369; Nabokov, Interview with Nurit Beretzky, *Nabokov Online Journal* 8 (2014): 4.

index cards, which I always see first when I think of my novels.”<sup>5</sup> Maybe one could claim that what Nabokov suggests here is that he loses the connection with the original image of the novel once he writes it, and, thus, he is not trying to disassociate his works from visual impressions and movies. However, the statement could also imply, since Nabokov claims to think in images and to see his index cards first when thinking of his novels, that he has a photographic memory of written words which transcends the limitations of single signifiers.<sup>6</sup> If this is the case, Nabokov distinguishes his prose from visual impressions by hinting at his reliance on the profusion of meaning created by wordplay, innuendos and other verbal devices. At any rate, he proceeds to delimit the artistic possibilities of the filmic medium: “The verbal part of the cinema is such a hodgepodge of contributions, beginning with the script, that it really has no style of its own. On the other hand, the viewer of a silent film has the opportunity of adding a good deal of his own verbal treasure to the silence of the picture.”<sup>7</sup> Although the last part of this statement (that viewers of a silent film speak or add their own language while watching the film) might evoke Eikhenbaum’s theory of inner speech<sup>8</sup>, it is, rather, a ‘division of labor’ between film and literature, where literature is solely responsible for the truly artistic verbal expression. In this view, cinema does not need verbal components, and silent films are superior to talkies precisely because they allow the literary-minded viewers to complete them with a verbal “treasure.” This statement shows us that, at some level, Nabokov was concerned about the influence of cinema on his œuvre as possibly making his works seem less literary. His evaluation of the possibilities of the filmic medium is questionable, although not unprecedented. In fact, according to Thomas M. Leitch, the brushing aside of “synchronized sound as a mere appendage to the visual essence of cinema” is “the most enduring and pernicious” fallacy of critical thinking about the medium (and overlooks the fact that television programs or films like *Citizen Kane* rely just as heavily on their soundtrack as on their image track).<sup>9</sup>

Nabokov’s attitude toward the dynamics of film and literature does not seem to go through significant changes from one interview to the next. In his fiction, however, he treated cinema in a more differentiated manner. Nabokov used film-related devices and/or motifs in a significant part of his œuvre, but their exact effects were different on each occasion. The only similarity between these occurrences might be that he is at once approaching the cinematic experience and distancing himself from it. In some of his works, the distancing movement is stronger, while others conform to the cinematic form more closely. The literary end of the spectrum

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<sup>5</sup> Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 164-165.

<sup>6</sup> I owe this observation to Nassim Balestrini.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>8</sup> Eikhenbaum, Borisz, “Problems of Cine-Stylistics,” trans. Richard Sherwood, in *The Poetics of Cinema*, ed. Richard Taylor (Oxford: RPT Publications, 1982).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas M. Leitch, “Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory,” *Criticism* 45, no. 2 (2003): 153.

is found in *Pale Fire*, which features a montage in the Second Canto of the poem, where the Shades are watching television while their daughter commits suicide. The sequence is strongly tied back to the stylistic conventions of literature by the use of conspicuously poetic metaphors. For instance, switching off the TV is described as follows: “Oh, switch it off! And as life snapped we saw / a pinhead light dwindle and die in black / Infinity.”<sup>10</sup> The effect of these lines depends on qualities specific to the literary medium. Both the personification of light through the reference to death and the emphatic impact of a single-word verse paradoxically closing the sentence with a reference to “Infinity” are important in the creation of meaning here. Of course, the montage sequence is also connected to another literary genre, namely, the essay, by Kinbote’s pseudoacademic commentary on the passage. As for the cinematic end of the spectrum of Nabokov’s works, we could cite *Laughter in the Dark*, which, as Alfred Appel argues, “mimic[s] the conventions of a thriller” and, thanks to the large number of its chapters, “convincingly imitate[s] a rapidly paced series of short takes.”<sup>11</sup> Nabokov himself claimed that he “wanted to write the entire book as if it were a film.”<sup>12</sup>

Interestingly, he also considered it his “poorest novel” and felt that he had gone too far in creating characters from clichés.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Nabokov introduced his short story “The Potato Elf,” which he “considered one of his weakest,”<sup>14</sup> by admitting that “[a]lthough I never intended the story to suggest a screenplay or to fire a script writer’s fancy, its structure and recurrent pictorial details do have a cinematic slant.”<sup>15</sup> Brian Boyd points out that this “cinematic slant” may have been more intentional than Nabokov allows; for one thing, he started (but never finished) working on a screenplay (“Love of a Dwarf”) whose title echoes the plot of “The Potato Elf.”<sup>16</sup> At any rate, Nabokov’s disapproval of “The Potato Elf” and *Laughter in the Dark* suggests that, for him, a work of literature is unsuccessful if it does not counterbalance its kinship with cinema (be this kinship the usage of conventional characters or the structure of scripts, which have “no style of their own” in his opinion). While *Lolita* is also influenced by film in many ways, it is not Nabokov’s most cinematic text. As I will try to illustrate, this novel takes the middle course, employing passages that are film-like but, at the same time, demonstrate markedly literary characteristics. For this reason, I think that *Lolita* is the best choice for demonstrating the different effects cinematic devices have in

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<sup>10</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), 43. Lines 473–475.

<sup>11</sup> *Nabokov’s Dark Cinema*, 259, 261.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 262. On another occasion, after answering the question “[w]hich of your books do you remember with the greatest pleasure?”, Nabokov remarks that “[m]y weakest is certainly *Laughter in the Dark*, by the way,” even though the interviewer did not ask him to name his least favorite novel (Interview with Gerald Clarke, “Checking in with Vladimir Nabokov,” *Esquire* 84, no. 1 [1975]: 69).

<sup>14</sup> Nataliia Tolstaia and Mikhail Meilakh, “Russian Short Stories,” in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir Alexandrov (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1995), 649.

<sup>15</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *A Russian Beauty and Other Stories*, trans. Simon Karlinsky and Dmitry Nabokov with Vladimir Nabokov (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 220.

<sup>16</sup> *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 230.

a new medium: a Nabokovian text.

In what follows, I examine the role of blending cinematic and literary devices in *Lolita*. I will argue that the cinematic passages help Humbert and Nabokov guide the reader's attention and that they are, therefore, important tools of manipulating the implied audience (for Humbert) or of leading the implied readers to a sophisticated and clear-headed reading of the novel (for Nabokov).

In Part Two, Chapter 16, Nabokov uses a cinematic but 'unfilmable' writing style in order to hide clues the implied readers must find to form such a clear-headed interpretation of the passage. Here, Humbert is waiting for Lolita, who supposedly went to the restroom (while, actually, she consulted Quilty in secret):

Well—my car had been attended to, and I had moved it away from the pumps to let a pickup truck be serviced—when the growing volume of her absence began to weigh upon me in the windy grayness. Not for the first time, and not for the last, had I stared in such dull discomfort of mind at those stationary trivialities that look almost surprised, like staring rustics, to find themselves in the stranded traveller's [sic] field of vision: that green garbage can, those very black, very whitewalled tires for sale, those bright cans of motor oil, that red icebox with assorted drinks, the four, five, seven discarded bottles within the incompleting crossword puzzle of their wooden cells, that bug patiently walking up the inside of the window of the office. Radio music was coming from its open door, and because the rhythm was not synchronized with the heave and flutter and other gestures of wind-animated vegetation, one had the impression of an old scenic film living its own life while piano or fiddle followed a line of music quite outside the shivering flower, the swaying branch. The sound of Charlotte's last sob incongruously vibrated through me as, with her dress fluttering athwart the rhythm, Lolita veered from a totally unexpected direction.<sup>17</sup>

In this passage, everything is described from "the stranded traveler's field of vision," as if in a point-of-view shot of a movie. After identifying this frame, the narration begins to enumerate the elements of the narrator's perception with a step-by-step progression reminiscent of a tracking shot or a zoom-in. This cinematic rhythm is emphasized by the gradual revealing of the number of the drinks – first, it is given as four, then five and ultimately, seven. Moreover, the sense of a heightened awareness, a characteristic of zoom-ins, is enforced by the typographical separation of the events the narrator considers unimportant and those he wishes to highlight. The details of his car

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<sup>17</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. (New York: Vintage, 1991), 211-212. All subsequent parenthetical references are made to this edition.

being attended to and being moved are relegated between dashes, while the oxymoronic expression “the growing volume of her absence” introduces a list of meticulous observations.

These observations, as could be expected from a POV shot, are unique, even idiosyncratic, projecting the feelings of Humbert (objects are personalized and said to “look almost surprised”). At the same time, however, what he sees is compared to a scenic film and is therefore universalized and distanced from Humbert. Then again, this distancing does not suggest that the description is completely objective: the reference to the incompatibility of vegetation and extra-diegetic music undercuts the realistic quality of scenic films. This blurring of the borders of subjectivity and objectivity is a recurring effect of cinematic sections in Nabokov’s oeuvre, where, in Barbara Wyllie’s words, “the calculated manipulation of the camera eye <...> magnifies preoccupying questions of objective and subjective cognition.”<sup>18</sup>

The last part of the passage unifies disparate elements into one vision: the movement of the “wind-animated vegetation,” the movement of Lolita’s fluttering dress and an association Humbert considers to be “incongruous”: the “sound of Charlotte’s last sob.” But unlike Humbert, a reader attuned to the implied author Nabokov’s perspective may find that the sound is quite fitting to the scene because the last time Charlotte cries is when she finds Humbert’s diary and learns that he loves somebody else. Since Lolita is planning to escape with Quilty, an analogous discovery is awaiting Humbert. Also, before Charlotte could make precautions against the situation continuing, she is suddenly killed in a car accident – which Humbert attributes to fate (103). In a similar vein, Humbert is eventually conquered in his attempts to stay with his love by what he perceives to be fate<sup>19</sup>; in fact, he mentions right before describing the above-quoted vision that “toilets—as also telephones—happened to be, for reasons unfathomable, the points where my destiny was liable to catch” (211). And as a final link between Charlotte’s death and the passage above, Lolita “veered from a totally unexpected direction” just like the car that ran over her mother. It could be argued, then, that the passage forms an Eisensteinian “intellectual montage,” inasmuch as it shows in quick succession of phenomena that are in tension with one another (Lolita’s dress is “fluttering athwart of the rhythm” of the vegetation, the memory of Charlotte strikes the narrator as incongruent) but in effect connect to suggest something not evident from the isolated components.<sup>20</sup> Note that this

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<sup>18</sup> Nabokov at the Movies, 9-10.

<sup>19</sup> This is made evident in the screenplay Nabokov wrote for Stanley Kubrick’s film adaptation of the novel. There, Nabokov overtly explains to the readers of the screenplay that Lolita escapes from Humbert “with the unplanned help of Lolita’s hospitalization” (Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita: A Screenplay* [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974], 169). For an explanation of the ways in which Humbert loses control to the will of other characters or fate itself, see Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 239-254.

<sup>20</sup> One of Sergei Eisenstein’s definitions of intellectual montage is: “an idea that DERIVES from the collision between two shots that are independent of one another”. “The Dramaturgy of Film Form (The Dialectical Approach to Film Form)” in *The Eisenstein Reader*, ed. Richard Taylor, trans. Richard Taylor and William Powell (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 95. Yuri Leving argues that Nabokov apparently “held Eisenstein’s aesthetics in high

intellectual montage could hardly be realized in film: if an adaptation only inserted an image or a sound track of Charlotte sobbing, it would miss the point that Humbert finds the association incongruent; if it had Humbert, in a voice-over, utter the line “The sound of Charlotte’s last sob incongruously vibrated through me” as Charlotte can be heard or seen sobbing, the latter element would feel redundant, since it would not be conflicting enough with the voice-over. In this intermedial form, however, the passage unites elements of the montage into a demonstration of Humbert’s unreliability. While the landscape is narcissistically personified in and as a projection of his unease, Lolita is de-personified (she is associated with scenic films and a car). In other words, anything that falls into Humbert’s field of vision gets distorted by his privileging of his own impulses. The observation about the incompatibility of extra-diegetic music with the captured images in scenic films could be applied to the narrator’s presentation of Lolita: Humbert’s musical prose is meant to immortalize her, but is, in the long run, as parasitic as the music is to scenic film. Humbert acts like a director of a scenic film: he attempts to capture the “real essence” not of Lolita but only of her “nymphetic” quality; as he puts it, his “endeavor” is “to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets” (134). The little girl is recorded in artificial circumstances, as it were, through the literary equivalent of an intruding camera of a bad scenic film. Meanwhile, Humbert is not able to grasp every implication of his own montage-recording (he misses the point of the association with Charlotte’s last sob). Thus, Nabokov is able to make claims about Humbert indirectly, through a montage that the reader is expected to decode.

Another vision of Charlotte appears before Humbert’s eyes in Part Two, Chapter 2. Here also, Humbert fails to understand that the vision signals a clandestine cameo of Quilty. As a result, Nabokov’s reader is again invited to pursue the implications of the visual impression better than Humbert:

One day, I remember, I offered to bring them [Lolita and a coeval of hers she played tennis with] cold drinks from the hotel, and went up the gravel path, and came back with two tall glasses of pineapple juice, soda and ice; and then a sudden void within my chest made me stop as I saw that the tennis court was deserted. I stooped to set down the glasses on a bench and for some reason, with a kind of icy vividness, saw Charlotte’s face in death, and I glanced around, and noticed Lo in white shorts receding through the speckled shadow of a garden path in the company of a tall man who carried two tennis rackets. I sprang after them, but as I was crashing through the shrubbery, I saw, in an alternate vision, as if life’s course

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esteem” but despised his political commitment (“Eystein or Eisenstein? Tricking the Eye in Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*,” *Nabokov Online Journal* 6 [2012], 11). The title of my paper borrows and modifies the title of another essay by Eisenstein, “The Montage of Attractions.”

constantly branched, Lo, in slacks, and her companion, in shorts, trudging up and down a small weedy area, and beating bushes with their rackets in listless search for their last lost ball. (163)

The “tall man,” as Appel puts it, is “a mirage of Quilty,” and it is ambiguous whether he is “‘real’ or an autoscopic hallucination.”<sup>21</sup> But since this scene is linked precisely by the vision of Charlotte’s face to the section that I discussed above, the reader can be more certain than Humbert that the tall man was not a hallucination. This scene is reminiscent of the one examined earlier in its appropriation of montage aesthetics, too. It features three visual impressions that follow each other abruptly: first, an image of the face of a dead Charlotte, then a glimpse of Lolita, and finally the two girls looking for the lost ball. These visions are contrastive, at least for Humbert, who does not understand why Charlotte appears before his eyes (he says he saw her “for some reason”) and is so perturbed by the difference between the glimpse of Lolita with a tall man and the subsequent sight of Lolita with the other child that he feels “as if life’s course constantly branched.” By this image, he even seems to suggest that his life is being directed by an abstract yet somehow powerful agent of fate – but a reader who notices the clues to Quilty’s presence can form a less mysterious explanation.

As we have seen, Nabokov encodes, in a ‘cine-literary’ way, important revelations into a single montage. A similar pattern can be discovered in another intermedial passage, from Part Two, Chapter 20, where the narrator evaluates Lolita’s talent in tennis:

She preferred acting to swimming, and swimming to tennis; yet I insist that had not something within her been broken by me—not that I realized it then!—she would have had on the top of her perfect form the will to win, and would have become a real girl champion. Dolores, with two rackets under her arm, in Wimbledon. Dolores endorsing a Dromedary. Dolores turning professional. Dolores acting a girl champion in a movie. Dolores and her gray, humble, hushed husband-coach, old Humbert. (232)

The device employed here, starting with the word “Dolores,” is montage, again – although not necessarily intellectual montage. It depicts Lolita in different stages in an imaginary tennis career of hers. The organizing principle is chronological order instead of contrast, which makes the passage more accessible than the riddle of the connection between “the sound of Charlotte’s last sob” and Lolita’s arrival in Humbert’s “field of vision” had been. The simplicity of this montage is

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<sup>21</sup> *The Annotated Lolita*, 394.

not accidental, since it is a parodistic appropriation of the kind of montage popular films tend to use. The short sentences and the simplicity of the grammatical structures stand in contrast with Humbert's usual, "uncinematic" style.<sup>22</sup> The plain style also collides with the glamorous career depicted by Humbert. The resulting ironic tension emphasizes how unrealistic and ridiculous his desire had been to mold her into a great tennis player against her will. At the same time, it distracts the reader from noticing that he admits having destroyed Lolita's desire to achieve any feats whatsoever.

As with the previous passages, the good reader can decode more from the montage than Humbert is able to. This additional information is again conveyed by a decidedly literary device, this time, alliteration. Alliteration is already literary inasmuch as it guides our attention to the form of the words (their sounds and the shapes of the written letters themselves), but Nabokov emphasizes this effect by connecting the form of one of the alliterating sentences with its "content," the depicted action. In the montage, we see "Dolores endorsing a Dromedary," a fictitious brand of cigarettes. The sentence repeats the letter D, the initial of Lolita's official name and hence imitates the signing (in other word, the endorsing) of a contract, as if Lolita were putting her initial on the paper. This way, the very form of the sentence evokes the depicted action and, thus, contributes to the creation of meaning in a manner unique to the medium of literature.

But what is the information that Humbert misses and the observant reader can decode? That Lolita's endorsing a Dromedary, as Alfred Appel remarks, is a reference to Quilty, whom Humbert had seen "smoking a Drome" on an ad in Lolita's room.<sup>23</sup> Why is this reference important? Because it suggests that emotionally, Lolita belongs to Quilty instead of Humbert. Whereas Lolita's real name (Dolores) alliterates with the name of the cigarette brand associated with Quilty, Humbert's name alliterates only with the adjectives used to describe himself: "Dolores and her gray, humble, hushed husband-coach, old Humbert." It never occurs to the narrator that he could alliterate his own name with the initial of Lolita's last name, Haze; instead, he keeps referring to the girl as Dolores. Humbert's missed opportunity to connect his and Lolita's name undermines his effort to create a sense of rapport between him and the girl by implying a coach-athlete relationship. Humbert is too fixated on his ironic self-deprecation, trying narcissistically to live out his desire (to command Lolita) at least in an ironical vision, to realize that he inadvertently isolates himself from her in this vision. He also misses the clue to Lolita's and Quilty's secret closeness. However, the reader is expected to make these observations.

So far, I concentrated on examples in the novel when a cinematic passage enables us to read

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<sup>22</sup> In a different context, Nabokov himself mocks the style associated with "short, strong, 'realistic' sentences." See his afterword to the novel, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," in *The Annotated Lolita*, 314.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 69, 418 n3.



between Humbert's lines; when the narrator does not recognize the implications of his montage. Throughout the larger part of his confessions, however, Humbert is quite aware of the implications of his words. He even tries to gain his readers' sympathy by a manipulative use of rhetoric devices. At many points in the text, Humbert's employment of a cinematic writing style is not an almost unconscious choice of his, one that unwittingly even exposes his failure to properly interpret the events, as in the above-cited sections. Instead, he evokes film consciously, with the aim of manipulating his readers. The cinematic writing style helps him deceive his readers because it guides their attention in a special way. I will now turn to examples where the narrator exploits the manipulative potential of film. I will start with a section which is of double interest to me because it not only illustrates the narrator's strategy of deception but also shows Humbert (and through him, Nabokov) asserting the autonomy of literature.

The first few chapters of Part Two, which describe Humbert and Lolita's "extensive travels all over the States" (145), have been noted for their cinematic (more precisely, road movie-like) style by several critics. As Barbara Wyllie argues: "The beginning of part two, for example, reads as a series of 'compilation cuts,' giving a rapid, condensed overview of his [Humbert's] travels with Lolita in a dizzying succession of varied locations, a sequence signaled by the repetition of the phrase '*nous connûmes*' and concluded with the obliterating roar of a night train".<sup>24</sup> If the repetition of the expression "*nous connûmes*" gives the passage a cinematic rhythm (since each usage of the expression introduces a "dizzying" list of locations or persons composed in the manner of a cinematic series of compilation cuts), it should be also noted that the first time Humbert uses this phrase, he connects it to Flaubert (and thus, literature), not to film: "We came to know—*nous connûmes*, to use a Flaubertian intonation—the stone cottages under enormous Chateaubriandesque trees, the brick unit, the adobe unit, the stucco court, on what the Tour Book of the Automobile Association describes as 'shaded' or 'spacious' or 'landscaped' grounds" (145). It is not evident exactly to which Flaubertian textual passage the expression "*nous connûmes*" alludes, and commentators have suggested different explanations. Appel notes that "Flaubert uses the verb *connaître* in the literary tense *passé simple* when in *Madame Bovary* (1857) he is describing her unhappy experiments with all kinds of diversions, especially her lovers and their activities together."<sup>25</sup> Maurice Couturier points to a more specific part of *Madame Bovary* and suggests that "the long lists of motels" in *Lolita* "is reminiscent of the list of streets along which the 'cab' drove" in Flaubert's novel.<sup>26</sup> Another commentator associates Humbert's "lists of banalities found along

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<sup>24</sup> *Nabokov at the Movies*, 135.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 385.

<sup>26</sup> "Nabokov and Flaubert," in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir Alexandrov (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1995), 411.

American highways” with “similar lists found in *Bovary*: in the rhetoric of the counselor’s speech at the agricultural fair and in the clerk’s ravings at the Rouen cathedral.”<sup>27</sup> These interpretations all seem to suggest that Humbert alludes to *Madame Bovary* in order to compare his situation to a secret love affair (and also, let me add, in order to mislead the reader into believing that Lolita consented to this affair of her own free will, like Emma Bovary did). But if it is tenable that Humbert’s lists refer to the speech at the agricultural fair in *Madame Bovary*, there is an additional implication. The scene featuring the speech employs a cross-cutting between two events (Monsieur Derozerays’s delivering a speech and Emma’s seduction) and is hence an example of montage realized in literature. In fact, many film theorists, including Eisenstein, trace back the origin of montage to this very scene.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, while the above-cited passage of *Lolita* evokes road movies thematically by focusing on the sights seen on the road, the “Flaubertian intonation” reminds us that this type of montage was first used in literature. As a result, the passage is protected from the accusation that it not only evokes cinema experience but succumbs entirely to film form. The authority of literature is also asserted by describing an element of the sight with a literary reference (the trees are “Chateaubriandesque”). Moreover, Humbert ironically quotes words (signs, expressions from the Tour Book, names of different accommodations) so abundantly and quickly that all of them could hardly be shown on film, which further sets the passage apart from film.

Although Barbara Wyllie states that the passage reads cinematically only until the roar of a night train (*Lolita* 146), the narrator continues to use, amply if less densely, devices that evoke the aesthetics of montage up to the end of Part Two, Chapter 2 (and utilizes them occasionally in Chapter 3). These devices include parallel structures, iterative sentences and enumerations of locations and activities. Humbert even uses the expression “We came to know” (159) one more time. Although the “Flaubertian intonation” is missing here as the narrator chooses the English form of the phrase, not the French one (*nous connûmes*), he follows it with a list of the types of persons encountered during traveling, just like the last time he used *nous connûmes* (146). This suggests that the echoing of the beginning of Part Two, Chapter 1 is deliberate. For these reasons, we could consider the first few chapters of Part Two a series of montages.

These chapters offer insights into Lolita’s suffering, but Humbert attempts to divert the reader’s attention from them. He does so by weaving the moments of Lolita’s sorrow into the

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<sup>27</sup> Peter Lehu, “Bad Readers in *Madame Bovary* and *Lolita*,” *Scribd*, 8 December 2003, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/2939578/Bad-Readers-in-Madame-Bovary-and-Lolita#scribd>.

<sup>28</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, “Through Theater to Cinema” in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949), 12-13. Elsewhere, to be fair, Eisenstein identifies precedents of montage in works written before *Madame Bovary* (by Dickens, for instance). This does not change that Flaubert’s agricultural fair scene is the canonical reference point and that Flaubert was the one to give montage the definitive form, a form that shaped the works of later writers. Alan Spiegel makes this claim in *Fiction and the Camera Eye: Visual Consciousness in Film and the Modern Novel* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 5-6, 175.

above-discussed montage. The montage technique gives the narrator an opportunity to quickly shift away from the shocking scenes without breaking the narrative flow. The readers are prompted to move on from the incriminating scenes to the next, less risky ones without stopping (and having an opportunity to weigh in the implications of what Humbert just told them), since stopping would break the fast-paced rhythm established earlier by the repetition of *nous connûmes*. For instance, Humbert ‘cuts’ from a long enumeration of the places he has visited with Lolita to an enumeration of “rows, minor and major” they had (158). He mentions a shocking moment when the little girl expressed her grief: “at a motel called Poplar Shade in Utah, where six pubescent trees were scarcely taller than my Lolita, and where she asked, *à propos de rien*, how long did I think we were going to live in stuffy cabins, doing filthy things together and never behaving like ordinary people?”

Then, the narrator immediately ‘cuts away’ and goes back to an enumeration of places: “On N. Broadway, Burns, Oregon, corner of W. Washington, facing Safeway, a grocery. In some little town in the Sun Valley of Idaho, before a brick hotel, pale and flushed bricks nicely mixed, with, opposite, a poplar playing its liquid shadows all over the local Honor Roll” (158). These places are the locations where their other rows occurred, but they are simply enumerated; the reader is not offered even as brief an insight into the nature of the rows themselves as Lolita’s question did. Humbert’s rhetorical strategy here is to hide the little girl’s poignant question between two montage-like catalogs of places. Of course, this dehumanizes Lolita by suggesting that the American landscape is just as important, or even more important, than her emotions. (This effect is heightened by the fact that Humbert calls the trees “pubescent” and notes that they were almost of the same height as Lolita, as if the pubescent Lolita would be consubstantial with the trees. The method is similar to the association of Lolita with the “wind-animated vegetation” in the first passage I analyzed in this paper.)

However, Humbert’s strategy to divert the reader’s attention by the use of a cinematic device is not failure-proof. His hiding an incriminating moment in a montage would be more effective in film, since the audience does not have the choice to pause the movie in the cinema. Readers of a book, conversely, can interrupt their reading at any point and many will do so even if it requires breaking the natural rhythm of the passage.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, we are given a chance (and are expected) to see through Humbert’s manipulation. This, of course, requires a careful reading – the more quickly Humbert cuts away from Lolita, the harder it is for us to pause and measure the weight of a moment of which we only got a fleeting

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<sup>29</sup> This, of course, only applies to the period in which Nabokov wrote *Lolita*: later, when VCRs became widespread, pausing films was no longer impossible. But even today, stopping seems to be a more integral part of reading than it is of film watching, since we usually watch movies or episodes of TV series in one sitting, but do not read through a longer prose work without interruptions.

glimpse. In another part of this chapter, one that shifts extremely briskly from Lolita to a description of the landscape, the girl's desperate utterances are relegated into a single parenthesis:

The various items of a scenic drive. Hundreds of scenic drives, thousands of Bear Creeks, Soda Springs, Painted Canyons. Texas, a drought-struck plain. Crystal Chamber in the longest cave in the world, children under 12 free, Lo a young captive. <...> Our twentieth Hell's Canyon. Our fiftieth Gateway to something or other *fide* that tour book, the cover of which had been lost by that time. A tick in my groin. Always the same three old men, in hats and suspenders, idling away the summer afternoon under the trees near the public fountain. A hazy blue view beyond railings on a mountain pass, and the backs of a family enjoying it (with Lo, in a hot, happy, wild, intense, hopeful, hopeless whisper—"Look, the McCrystals, please, let's talk to them, please"—let's talk to them, reader!—"please! I'll do anything you want, oh, please. . ."). Indian ceremonial dances, strictly commercial. ART: American Refrigerator Transit Company. Obvious Arizona, pueblo dwellings, aboriginal pictographs, a dinosaur track in a desert canyon, printed there thirty million years ago, when I was a child. (157)

Here, as I mentioned, Humbert tries to decrease the significance of Lolita's begging by shifting away from it very abruptly. Moreover, other narrative choices serve the same goal. Humbert establishes a monotonous pace of narrative progression: after referring to the "various items of a scenic drive," he mentions "hundreds" of other scenic drives and "thousands" of items of making them scenic. Repeating the expression "scenic drive" and gradually increasing the ostensible numbers suggest the monotonousness of the landscape and the stale language of guidebooks. This way, Humbert links repetition to boredom before Lolita's parenthetical sentences and, consequently, when the girl repeats the word "please," her beseeching is also made to seem dull and unimportant. Moreover, Humbert himself repeats Lolita's request to talk to the McCrystals (he echoes the girl's words incredulously: "let's talk to them, reader!"), although this has a somewhat different effect than the other repetitions, since he addresses the reader. But this turning to the reader also attempts to trivialize Lolita's request: Humbert forces the audience in his position by addressing them as his partner in crime, as if they shared the same concerns.<sup>30</sup> And from the position of a pedophile who is afraid of being discovered, the request is indeed absurd.

Furthermore, Humbert evokes the "Crystal Chamber" not long before he quotes Lolita's

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<sup>30</sup> This remark is influenced by Lisa Zunshine's discussion of how Humbert constructs his readers (*Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* [Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2006], 106).

begging to talk to the “McCrystals.” By associating the family name with a tourist attraction, he relegates them to the same level of banality that the cave represents. Another thing he portrays here as banal is his sexual desire for Lolita: by shifting casually between descriptions of the landscape and a mentioning of a “tick in [his] groin” – the tick is very possibly the result of having sex outdoors, where “nameless insects” stung him, as he later relates (168) –, Humbert suggests that pedophilia is as routine as the “twentieth Hell’s Canyon” or “fiftieth Gateway to something” that they come across.<sup>31</sup> As we can see, by the use of various devices, Humbert suppresses Lolita’s voice and justifies his lust for her in this montage-like passage.

There are instances in the novel when Humbert refers to cinema more explicitly than in the sections already discussed. These references also contribute to the narrator’s manipulation of the reader, inasmuch as Humbert tends to mention cinema in order to trivialize his deeds. This happens, for example, at the beginning of Part Two, Chapter 19, which features a description of a wanted poster:

Serene Lo studied the rogues’ gallery. Handsome Bryan Bryanski, alias Anthony Brian, alias Tony Brown, eyes hazel, complexion fair, was wanted for kidnaping. A sad-eyed old gentleman’s faux-pas was mail fraud, and, as if that were not enough, he was cursed with deformed arches. Sullen Sullivan came with a caution: Is believed armed, and should be considered extremely dangerous. If you want to make a movie out of my book, have one of these faces gently melt into my own, while I look. And moreover there was a smudgy snapshot of a Missing Girl, age fourteen, wearing brown shoes when last seen, rhymes. Please notify Sheriff Buller. (222)

Here, Humbert refers to a device used in film, dissolve, when ordering the future director of a potential movie adaptation to “have one of these faces gently melt into my own, while I look.” As the word “gently” indicates, dissolves are so common elements in movie editing that audiences do not necessarily notice them consciously. When described in the medium of literature, however, the device sounds strange and Humbert exploits this comical strangeness to his own purposes. The comparison between him and the criminals on the poster seems absurd because of the farcical effect of the change of medium (from film to literature). Consequently, the amused reader might not

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<sup>31</sup> Karen Jacobs’ observations are also relevant to Humbert’s justification of pedophilia. She argues that the images in the novel have a power that “brackets and ultimately supersedes any question of individual and local agency” and that the “road trip across America <...> draw[s] out the forms of sexual tourism implicit in Humbert’s obsession with Lolita to geographical proportions, in which images of Lolita and America are linked into a virtual photo-montage of the scenes of his gratification” (*The Eye’s Mind: Literary Modernism and Visual Culture* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001], 269).

realize that, in fact, there are many parallels between these offenders and Humbert. Bryan Bryanski has a “mirrored” name like Humbert Humbert and both use aliases (“Humbert Humbert” is a pseudonym itself, and the narrator says he has “toyed with many” more, including “‘Otto Otto’ and ‘Mesmer Mesmer’ and ‘Lambert Lambert’” [308]). Bryan “is wanted for kidnaping”, a crime not too far from Humbert’s forcing Lolita on “extensive travels all over the States” (145). The fact that Sullen Sullivan is armed recalls Humbert’s shooting of Quilty. Humbert also trivializes the case of the “Missing Girl, age fourteen, wearing brown shoes when last seen,” this time by pointing out the internal rhyme in the description. Obviously, this item of the poster also echoes his life: Lolita escapes from him and, in this sense, goes missing at the age of fourteen (she was born on January 1, 1935 and leaves the hospital with Quilty on July 4, 1949<sup>32</sup>).

Famously, the murder of Quilty is turned into a farcical scene, which masks the seriousness of Humbert’s vice. One of the tools that heighten the farcical effect is the direct evocation of cinema. At gunpoint, Quilty downplays the danger he is in by imitating the gangster character of underworld movies: “‘Say!’ he [Quilty] drawled (now imitating the underworld numbskull of movies), ‘that’s a swell little gun you’ve got there. What d’you want for her?’” (297).

The fact that Quilty refers to the pistol by the feminine pronoun “her” counterbalances another cinematic motif of the novel. On his way to execute Quilty, Humbert starts to identify as a macho killer by “dress[ing] in gangster black” and obsessing over his gun, which he calls “Chum”<sup>33</sup> (which is a fitting name, since the term “chum” can mean “a mate in *crime*” [my italics] and was historically used “in prison for newcomers and old hands”<sup>34</sup>). This way, he hopes to borrow the appeal of movie anti-heroes. To distance himself from vulgar, unappealing criminals, who kill out of simple sexual jealousy, he engages in a scornful interpretation of his fixation on the pistol: “There, snugly wrapped in a white woolen scarf, lay a pocket automatic <...> loaded and fully cocked with the slide lock in safety position, thus precluding any accidental discharge. We must remember that a pistol is the Freudian symbol of the Ur-father’s central forelimb” (216). However, Humbert’s description of the weapon before the shooting of Quilty is less sarcastic: “Push the magazine into the butt. Press home until you hear or feel the magazine catch engage. Delightfully snug. Capacity: eight cartridges. Full Blued. Aching to be discharged” (292). At this point in the narrative, Humbert is so enveloped in revenge that he unconsciously repeats the double entendre of “discharge” without any ironic counterpointing. His sexual frustration is unveiled also by his

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<sup>32</sup> See Dieter E. Zimmer, “A Chronology of ‘Lolita’,” *d-e-zimmer.de*, last modified March 3, 2008, <http://www.d-e-zimmer.de/LolitaUSA/LoChrono.htm>.

<sup>33</sup> Susan Amper, “Lolita and Her Movies: The Unmaking of Humbert Humbert,” *West Virginia University Philological Papers* 41 (1995): 87.

<sup>34</sup> *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, ed. Eric Partridge, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1970).

delight in pushing the magazine clip “into the butt,” causing a “[d]elightfully snug” sensation. Thus, Humbert’s attempt to create sympathy or at least fascination in the reader by an impersonation of a movie gangster is not completely successful.

This is why Quilty’s imitation of “the underworld numbskull of movies” and his feminizing of the emphatically masculine “Chum” works toward excusing Humbert. Too close an association with criminals would discredit Humbert’s persuasiveness. However, Quilty’s referring to the pistol by the word “her” and his clownish behavior during the scene in general creates the necessary distance from Humbert’s gangster persona.

The narrator himself makes efforts to sugarcoat his association with movie anti-heroes. He relates his comical inexperience in maintaining a gun: “Such a thorough oil bath did I give Chum that now I could not get rid of the stuff. I bandaged him up with a rag, like a maimed limb, and used another rag to wrap up a handful of spare bullets” (293). At the scene of the crime, he again mentions his failure to clean the weapon: “I <...> gingerly unwrapped dirty Chum, taking care not to leave oil stains on the chrome—I think I got the wrong product, it was black and awfully messy. In my usual meticulous way, I transferred naked Chum to a clean recess about me and made for the little boudoir” (295). Undoubtedly, the narrator once more fails to notice and counterbalance ironically the implications of sexual frustration in his expressions (he is not aware of his echoing the “Ur-father’s central forelimb” in the phrases “maimed limb” and “naked Chum”). Nevertheless, he presents himself as incompetent and, thus, mitigates the effects of his embodying a gangster. Ultimately, Humbert is trying to maintain a balance: on the one hand, he suggests determination and ‘honor among thieves’ by portraying himself as a gangster. On the other hand, he neutralizes the unappealing associations of that portrayal by ironic counterpoise. Humbert’s aim is to glamorize but in the meantime also trivialize his criminal deed.<sup>35</sup>

Not long before he finds Quilty, Humbert passes a drive-in and gets a glimpse of the movie which is being screened. This moment “foreshadows Quilty’s death”<sup>36</sup> and has a dual effect similar to that of his gangster persona:

While searching for night lodgings, I passed a drive-in. In a selenian glow, truly mystical in

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<sup>35</sup> Appel also comments on the gangster imagery of the analyzed section. His interpretation comes close to mine when he points out the irony in Quilty’s applying a female pronoun to the gun and when he declares that the shooting “is as deeply serious as it is funny: Humbert’s guilt is not to be exorcised so easily.” However, he endorses the view that Quilty “is clearly expendable” because of embodying *poshlost* in many ways. Although Appel names Quilty a “‘false’” double, he still argues that “all that” Quilty “represents” has to die. Quilty is a “bad writer” and, thus, “Nabokov passes sentence on” him by having Humbert shoot him. “The killing of Quilty thus serves poetical justice, if no other, and murder, along with parody, becomes an act of criticism, more suited to art than life.” I cannot accept this view in that form, because it works toward trivializing Humbert’s vice. See *Nabokov’s Dark Cinema*, 135, 144-151.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

its contrast with the moonless and massive night, on a gigantic screen slanting away among dark drowsy fields, a thin phantom raised a gun, both he and his arm reduced to tremulous dishwater by the oblique angle of that receding world,—and the next moment a row of trees shut off the gesticulation. (293)

As Appel puts it, the screen is “as ludicrous as it is ‘mystical’.”<sup>37</sup> The description creates a menacing atmosphere by the Gothic imagery and the alliterations endow the landscape with a sublime quality: “moonless and massive night, on a gigantic screen slanting away among dark drowsy fields” (my italics). This atmosphere is abruptly undercut by an unexpected stylistic change, a metaphoric use of “dishwater.”<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, the gigantic screen’s air of awe is not discredited fully – the fact alone that the movie predicts a later event grants it mystique. Thus, Humbert endeavors to create a dual effect: to elevate and to trivialize the scene at the same time.

There is no need for me to catalog Humbert’s other overt movie references, since Appel in *Nabokov’s Dark Cinema* already undertook that task. Instead, I wish to focus on one last, covertly cinematic passage. Part One, Chapter 23 begins with a description of what Humbert saw when he stormed out of the house after Charlotte had been run over:

I rushed out. The far side of our steep little street presented a peculiar sight. A big black glossy Packard had climbed Miss Opposite’s sloping lawn at an angle from the sidewalk (where a tartan laprobe had dropped in a heap), and stood there, shining in the sun, its doors open like wings, its front wheels deep in evergreen shrubbery. To the anatomical right of this car, on the trim turf of the lawn-slope, an old gentleman with a white mustache, well-dressed—doublebreasted grey suit, polka-dotted bow-tie—lay supine, his long legs together, like a death-size wax figure. I have to put the impact of an instantaneous vision into a sequence of words; their physical accumulation in the page impairs the actual flash, the sharp unity of impression: Rug-heap, car, old man-doll, Miss O.’s nurse running with a rustle, a half-empty tumbler in her hand, back to the screened porch—where the propped-up, imprisoned, decrepit lady herself may be imagined screeching, but not loud enough to drown the rhythmical yaps of the Junk setter walking from group to group—from a bunch of neighbors already collected on the sidewalk, near the bit of checked stuff, and back to the car which he had finally run to earth, and then to another group on the lawn, consisting of

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> This change in tone is ironic even if Nabokov playfully declares elsewhere that the image of dishwater is artistic: “That lake between those trees will be called Lake Opal or, more artistically, Lake Dishwater” (“Good Readers and Good Writers” in *Lectures on Literature*, 2).



Leslie, two policemen and a sturdy man with tortoise shell glasses. (97–98)

This section is of special interest to me not only on account of its cinematic qualities, but because it echoes Nabokov's account of the process of writing fiction. In an essay entitled "Inspiration," he claims that there is an early stage in writing when:

The narrator forefeels what he is going to tell. The forefeeling can be defined as an instant vision turning into rapid speech. If some instrument were to render this rare and delightful phenomenon, the image would come as a shimmer of exact details, and the verbal part as a tumble of merging words. The experienced writer immediately takes it down and, in the process of doing so, transforms what is little more than a running blur into gradually dawning sense, with epithets and sentence construction growing as clear and trim as they would be on the printed page...<sup>39</sup>

Later, Nabokov explains that inspiration "accompan[ies] the author in his actual work <...> by means of successive flashes."<sup>40</sup> In a very similar manner, Humbert also has a "flash," an "instantaneous vision," whose impact he tries to put "into a sequence of words." Admittedly, Humbert does not relate the process of refining the "verbal part" of inspiration (the gradual transformation of "a tumble of merging words," which is "little more than a running blur," into a composition), but at one point he does seem to advance from unrefined expressions to enhanced descriptions: "the sharp-unity of impression: Rug-heap, car, old man-doll, Miss O.'s nurse running with a rustle, a half-empty tumbler in her hand, back to the screened porch <...>." Here, the "[r]ug-heap," the "car" and the "old man-doll" are noted hurriedly, as if the writer were taking down, in their rawest form, the words that the original image of inspiration is turning into. From the mentioning of "Miss O.'s nurse," the description becomes more detailed, the syntax more complex. This is not coincidental: the rug-heap, the car and the old man-doll were already depicted a few sentences earlier, while the nurse is a new participant in the scene.

This way, the reader has an opportunity to compare the earlier, more elaborate descriptions of the rug-heap, the car and the old man to these more reticent references, which seem closer to Humbert's initial "sharp unity of impression." This is a very indirect way of referring to the process of mending the syntax and the entire composition – Nabokov's essay discusses it more openly. But even if Humbert does not comment here on the transitory stages of writing, his starting point ("an

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<sup>39</sup> *Strong Opinions*, 309.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

instantaneous vision”) and his ending point (“a sequence of words”) directly correlate to those in Nabokov’s essay: we proceed from a vision to an organized verbal construction. Moreover, the initial flash of inspiration (both its “verbal part” and the image itself) seems to be pre-rational. The very reason Humbert attempts to borrow “the impact of instantaneous vision” is that he wishes to evoke the moment when he did not understand the implications of the sight, only saw the “shimmer of exact details.” Since Humbert gives explanations for each element of the sight after describing them,<sup>41</sup> he moves from a pre-rational stage to one that makes perfect sense, which is yet another parallel between his procedure and Nabokov’s essay.

The fact that Humbert gives instructions to the reader on how to imagine the scene (the “decrepit lady may be imagined screeching, but not loud enough to drown the rhythmical yaps of the Junk setter”) is also close to Nabokov’s own conception of literature. In his essay “Good Readers and Good Writers,” Nabokov identifies imagination as one of the “instruments” both the good writer and the good reader must possess, and explains that the reader should reconstruct the world as it was constructed by the writer, paying attention to the details.<sup>42</sup> In the spirit of this essay, Humbert tries to make sure that the audience “get clear the specific world the author places at” their “disposal”<sup>43</sup> by emphasizing the proper way to imagine the details of the scene.

We have seen that the passage resonates with Nabokov’s own views on writing. If the passage whose aesthetics overlap with the writer’s authorial aesthetics is, as I claimed earlier, cinematic, it might lend itself to demonstrating the difference between film and literature and the effects of the crossing of their borders. But is it cinematic? After all, the “peculiar sight” Humbert describes is a sudden, single flash, and for this reason might be closer to photography than moving images. Besides, when writing the screenplay version of the novel, Nabokov himself connected the scene to photography instead of film in the following action paragraph:

The picture now is a still. Humbert surveys the scene: The body on the sidewalk, the old gentleman resting on the grass near the car, various people attracted by the accident, the unfortunate driver, two policemen, and the cheerful collie walking from group to group.

A photographer from the Traffic Division is taking a picture.

In a projection room it is shown to a bunch of policemen by an instructor with a

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<sup>41</sup> He writes: “At this point, I should explain that the prompt appearance of the patrolmen <...> was due to their having been ticketing the illegally parked cars <...> that the fellow with the glasses was Frederick Beale, Jr., driver of the Packard; that his 79-year-old father, whom the nurse had just watered on the green bank where he lay <...> was not in a dead faint, but was comfortably and methodically recovering from a mild heart attack or its possibility; and, finally, that the laprobe on the sidewalk <...> concealed the mingled remains of Charlotte Humbert who had been knocked down and dragged several feet by the Beale car <...>” (98)

<sup>42</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, “Good Readers and Good Writers” in *Lectures on Literature*, 3-4.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

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Nabokov demands a freeze-frame and then has a photographer take a photo of the street Humbert is watching, both of which suggest that the “peculiar sight” in the novel was closer in nature to photography than film.

However, a closer look reveals that Nabokov was hesitating whether to render the scene by photographic or cinematic means. Although the picture should be “a still” at this point, Humbert “surveys” the scene, taking in its sundry details step by step, from the “body on the sidewalk” to “the cheerful collie walking from group to group.” Humbert’s gradual examination of the scene (not to mention the dog’s back-and-forth movement between groups) breaks the formal limits of a photo-like still picture – its portrayal requires moving images. In addition, it is unclear how a photographer can be shown taking a photo if the picture is supposed to be a still. And immediately after the action paragraph, when the instructor starts to demonstrate the choreography of the accident to the policemen on the photo, Nabokov again relies on narrative devices, not merely the use of photography, in order to recreate in his screenplay the ironic comments Humbert makes on the “peculiar sight.”<sup>45</sup> Therefore, the screenplay utilizes cinematic devices even when it tries to capture a photo-like, unmoving sight.

Turning back to the novel, the passage there also employs a cinematic style despite its reference to the photographic impact of the spectacle. As Barbara Wyllie argues, Humbert might claim to imitate the immediacy of an “instantaneous vision,” but his way of telling in fact denies immediacy for the sake of creating tension. Wyllie suggests that the gradual revelation of the elements of the scene forms “a series of close-up cuts.”<sup>46</sup> This procedure of the novel is cinematic, according to Wyllie, because it is analogous to a characteristic of the film camera that Alan Spiegel

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<sup>44</sup> *Lolita: A Screenplay*, 87.

<sup>45</sup> The instructor explains that “the elderly person here on the grass is not dead but comfortably recovering from a mild heart attack” (and so on) like Humbert does in the novel, with the difference that the instructor is less scornful than the narrator of the novel. It is also interesting to note that the instructor becomes ridiculous because he claims that “[t]o the ordinary spectator who has just arrived on the scene the situation may seem very, very unusual: it is not so, really,” since he lacks the extra information Humbert has (that Charlotte rushed out of the house right after discovering evidence for the object of Humbert’s real desire). Also, the instructor uses a diagram with arrows and dotted lines to represent the movement of the car and Charlotte. In the novel, it is the driver of the car who uses a similar diagram to demonstrate his own “absolute innocence” as opposed to Charlotte’s “recklessness.” I have the impression that the driver is more culpable in the accident than he suggests – his “[b]reathing violently through jet-black tense nostrils” implies nervousness; also consider his absurd claim that Charlotte “should have flung herself not forward but backward” when she slipped on the asphalt. If it is so, the screenplay exchanges an opportunity to laugh at Humbert’s inability to notice that the driver deceived him for an opportunity to laugh at an incompetent policeman misrepresenting an accident. *The Annotated Lolita*, 102 and *Lolita: A Screenplay*, 87.

<sup>46</sup> *Nabokov at the Movies*, 137. Similarly, Susan Amper points out the influence of “the cinematic device of quick-cutting” on the expression “[r]ug-heap, car, old man-doll, Miss O.’s nurse running with a rustle, a half-empty tumbler in her hand” (“*Lolita and Her Movies*,” 86).

terms “anatomization”: the “concentrated attentiveness” on “detailed information.”<sup>47</sup> Wyllie describes the effect of Humbert’s narration:

Humbert Humbert’s “sequence of words” functions <...> as a sequence of cinematic frames, converting the still image into a piece of anatomized film. As [Raymond] Chandler does [elsewhere], Humbert Humbert starts from the edge of the scene, working around its perimeters and then moving gradually inward, postponing the vision of Charlotte’s body until the very end, painstakingly registering every other detail but the one the reader/audience is anticipating.<sup>48</sup>

It is clear from this argument that the cinematic style of the section helps Humbert Humbert to control the rhythm of the distribution of information and to create tension. There is another procedure which the narrator uses to control the reader’s attention – metaphorization. This device is on the border of the medium of film and that of literature (it is one of the most fundamental narratological principles that both films and literature use metaphors) and for that reason, it can help to shed light on the different effects these two forms of art have. I will argue that even in a cinematic passage, Nabokov’s writing works differently than films do.

By the use of metaphors, Humbert anthropomorphizes the car, a lifeless object, and portrays humans as inanimate objects.<sup>49</sup> In Humbert’s wording, the car “had climbed” the lawn and “stood there, shining in the sun.”<sup>50</sup> The machine also has an “anatomical” right side. By the reverse procedure, the driver’s father is dehumanized – he is described as an “old man-doll” and is compared to “a death-size wax figure.” The neighbor, Miss Opposite (a person identified by her spatial coordinates rather than human characteristics) is said to be “screeching” – this is a pun that merges the crying of the old lady with the screeching sound of the tires the braking car must have made during the accident (the sound is referred to as a “hideous screech of desperate brakes” in Nabokov’s screenplay version of the novel<sup>51</sup>). Miss Opposite is also “propped-up” like an object, and called “decrepit,” which is another pun, unifying two meanings of the word: ‘having old age

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<sup>47</sup> Spiegel, *Fiction and the Camera Eye*, 88.

<sup>48</sup> Nabokov *at the Movies*, 137.

<sup>49</sup> Zsuzsa Hetényi argues in her recent book (the first monograph on Nabokov written in Hungarian) that the depiction of humans as mechanical, puppet-like creatures and the animation of objects are fundamental components of Nabokov’s writing style, utilized not only in *Lolita* but throughout the entire oeuvre (*Nabokov Regényösvényein* [On the Paths of Nabokov’s Novels] [Budapest: Kalligram, 2015], 104-105). As Barbara Wyllie observes, animated objects also appear in German Expressionistic films, but with a different effect (they are an “external manifestation of an intensely driven subjective consciousness” [*Nabokov at the Movies*, 15]).

<sup>50</sup> Alfred Appel notes in passing that cars are personified here and in other parts of the book, but his focus is on the *film noir* connotations of “what Professor Nabokov might have termed the ‘car theme’ in *Lolita*.” *Nabokov’s Dark Cinema*, 221.

<sup>51</sup> *Lolita: A Screenplay*, 86.

(used for a person)’ and ‘worn out by hard use (used for an object).’ Moreover, the car and Charlotte change attributes. Charlotte is covered by a laprobe for much of the scene (a laprobe, in the definition of the *Random House Dictionary*, is “a fur robe, blanket, or the like, to cover the lap and legs of a person, *esp. when riding an automobile, carriage, etc.*”<sup>52</sup> [my italics]). When her body is revealed, she is associated with an inanimate object: “the top of her head a *porridge* of bone, brains, bronze hair and blood” (98, my italics). While Charlotte is connected to inanimate objects, one of them an item used in automobiles, the car is “shining in the sun” with “its doors open like wings, its front wheels deep in evergreen shrubbery.” The imagery suggests that the car’s soul – not Charlotte’s, the car’s – is moving up, by its wings, from the evergreen shrubbery (a conventional symbol of eternal life) towards the shining sun. This image is kitsch turned into Nabokovian grotesque (the writer rendered and trivialized the death of Humbert’s mother by a similar picture in the screenplay of *Lolita*: “Her graceful specter floats up above the black cliffs holding a parasol and blowing kisses to her husband and child who stand below, looking up, hand in hand”<sup>53</sup>). Humbert’s dehumanizing of characters and personifying of the car serves the same purpose as the screenplay’s “graceful specter” or the novel’s montages that I discussed earlier: they undermine the audience’s sympathy for the suffering characters and introduce the idea of diminished personal agency (people are like objects or the American landscape). Ultimately, the metaphors contribute to Humbert’s self-justification and the manipulation of the reader.

Although films also employ metaphors, Humbert’s manipulative imagery could hardly be reproduced in a movie. Humbert’s metaphors saturate his narration: they are present in the smallest details (even throwaway words like “decrepit” or “screeching” are significant and contribute to the imagery) and are simply so abundant that only the most careful readings can identify the exact nature of Humbert’s manipulation. Even if it is clear from the outset to the audience that Humbert is a so-called “unreliable narrator,” it is not easy to locate the precise points where he represents characters and events manipulatively. After all, who would think that a simple reference to a laprobe or a porridge would not be innocent but would rather serve to dehumanize characters and work toward excusing the narrator? Thus, Humbert’s narration creates a high level of uncertainty, which cannot be reproduced in the same form on the screen. As John Lennard argues: “One failure of the camera is uncertainty. <...> [W]ith relatively few exceptions—dreams, visions, drunken hallucinations and so on, which tend to be clearly conventionally marked—cinema cannot easily deal with the implicatures of uncertainty.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language: College Edition*, ed. in chief Laurence Urdang (New York: Random House, 1968).

<sup>53</sup> *Lolita: A Screenplay*, 4.

<sup>54</sup> John Lennard, *Literature Insights: Vladimir Nabokov: Lolita* (Penrith, GB: Humanities-Ebooks, LLP, 2008), 77. Of

For a theoretical explanation of the different ways in which film and literature guide the audience's attention, we can turn to Seymour Chatman's influential essay, "What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (And Vice Versa)." Chatman argues that the difference between the medium of literature and that of film can be grasped in their respective treatment of descriptions. When a writer describes visual phenomena, something is necessarily "asserted." As Chatman explains, in connection with a passage by Maupassant that describes a cart:

When I say: "The cart was tiny; it came onto the bridge," I am asserting that certain property of the cart of being small in size and that certain relation of arriving at the bridge. However, when I say "The green cart came onto the bridge," I am asserting nothing more than its arrival at the bridge; the greenness of the cart is not asserted but slipped in without synthetic fuss. It is only named. Textually, it emerges by the way. Now, most film narratives seem to be of the latter textual order: it requires special effort for films to assert a property or relation. The dominant mode is presentational, not assertive. A film doesn't say, "This is the state of affairs," it merely shows you that state of affairs.<sup>55</sup>

This part of Chatman's essay shows us the affinities of Humbert's rhetorics with film. In the passage describing the scene of Charlotte's death, Humbert's narration relies not on Maupassantian assertion but on an approximation of the way cinema "merely shows you that state of affairs." Humbert's dehumanizing and personifying claims are placed outside of the focus of his assertions: while Humbert builds tension (and the reader is lured into guessing: Where is Charlotte? What else is present in the scene, waiting to be revealed?), he, as Chatman puts it, "slips in" a significant part of his manipulative imagery. Humbert writes that the car "had climbed" the lawn and stood there "shining in the sun, its doors open like wings, its front wheels deep in evergreen shrubbery." Here, only two personifications, "climbing" and "standing," are assertions, but the associations of ascendance to Heaven are presentational, not assertive (i.e., the narrator just mentions the car with "its doors open like wings" instead of emphasizing that the doors *were* open like wings). Humbert continues thusly: "To the anatomical right of this car <...> an old gentleman <...> lay supine, his long legs together, like a death-size wax figure." The "anatomical right" is not an assertion and thus flows seamlessly with the sentence, with the reader's subconscious approval of the notion that the car is a living entity. On the other hand, the claim that the old man "lay supine <...> like a death-

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course, this is not to say that films cannot create the same level of uncertainty, but its means of guiding the audience's attention are different. A popular example is the following: Christopher Nolan, in his film *Memento*, does create uncertainty and does sustain it for the entire length of the movie, but the tools by which he achieves this effect are much more conspicuous (nonlinear narration, overt references to uncertainty from the characters).

<sup>55</sup> "What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (and Vice Versa)," *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 128.

size wax figure” is an assertion. However, even this comes off as a side remark, because Humbert at that point is still holding off the information concerning Charlotte’s fate. The simile delays the revealing of that information and therefore frustrates the curiosity of the reader, who is invited to move on in order to learn about Charlotte. By utilizing these pseudo–side remarks, Humbert makes the reader unconsciously assume that it is the old man who is dead instead of Charlotte, right until Charlotte’s “mingled remains” are finally mentioned (98). Thus, Humbert appropriates cinema’s natural mode of the presentation of things (a detailed showing of the state of affairs without assertions), but in the literary medium, the effect of this form of narration is not natural but the opposite: manipulative. But what makes it manipulative?

Chatman argues that while the presence of incidental visual information is inherent to film mechanics, literature has a different focus on details. Comparing Maupassant’s description of a cart with the presentation of the cart in Jean Renoir’s film adaptation of Maupassant’s short story, Chatman concludes that

there are some vital differences. For one thing, the number of details in Maupassant’s sentence is limited to three. In other words, the selection among the possible number of details evoked was absolutely determined: the author, through his narrator, “selected” and named precisely three. Thus the reader learns only those three and can only expand the picture imaginatively. But in the film representation, the number of details is indeterminate, since what this version gives us is a simulacrum of a French carriage of a certain era, provenance, etc. (125)

Humbert’s meticulous description of the scene of Charlotte’s death promises a photographic or cinematic presentation of details, although the medium of literature cannot fulfill this promise. His cataloging the details gives the impression that he is “merely showing the state of affairs,” while in fact he is diverting the audience’s attention from his manipulative narrative procedure (the dehumanizing imagery). Therefore, readers should be familiar both with literary narration and cinematic narration in order to discern the manipulative claims of the narrator and understand his rhetorics.

In conclusion, the cinematic passages in *Lolita* reveal a concern about the extent to which the novel is influenced by film. Nabokov, somewhat defensively, asserts the autonomy of literature and emphasizes the unfilmable quality of his fiction by various means (the use of alliteration, Humbert’s clueless comment on his own montage scene and a reference to Flaubert’s employment of the montage technique). But even if he makes sure that the difference between literature and film

not be totally blurred, Nabokov blends cinematic and literary techniques to create an intermedial writing style. The reason he includes passages that rely on both cinematic and literary forms of narration is that they help in directing the attention of the audience in a unique manner. Certain montage scenes offer insights into an aspect of Lolita's character that the narrator tries to downplay. Other cinematic passages, on the other hand, serve as Humbert's tools to trivialize his deeds. Thus, intersections of film and literature in the text also mark intersections of Humbert's and Nabokov's proposed ways of reading. If interpreted carefully, these sections expose Humbert's manipulative strategies and separate them from Nabokov's authorial clues.<sup>56</sup>

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