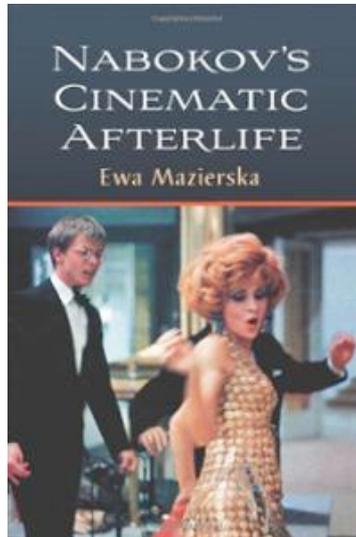


*Nabokov's Cinematic Afterlife*, by Ewa Mazierska. Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2011; ISBN 978-0-7864-4543-1, viii + 235 pp. Illustrations. Filmography. Notes. Bibliography. Index.



This is the first monograph to offer a near comprehensive survey of the film and television adaptations of Nabokov's fiction, from Stanley Kubrick's and Adrian Lyne's versions of *Lolita* (1962 and 1997), Tony Richardson's *Laughter in the Dark* (1969), Jerzy Skolimowski's *King, Queen, Knave* (1972), Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Despair* (1978) and Marleen Gorris's *The Luzhin Defence* (2000), to Jérôme Foulon's *Mademoiselle O* (1994) and Valentin Kuik's *Lurjus (An Affair of Honor)*, 1999). The particular advantage of Mazierska's study is that it considers many films that have been languishing in obscurity since their release. Apart from the two *Lolitas* and *The Luzhin Defence*, which were distributed internationally in mainstream cinemas, of the remainder only *Despair* has recently been made available, released in the United States on DVD in June 2011. (Shortly after, a bootleg copy of *King, Queen, Knave* appeared on YouTube: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsatfUkqGw>>.) Mazierska, therefore, went to great lengths to seek out these films and should be congratulated for her efforts. Her study presents readings of both the original texts and their screen versions in the light of contemporary press reviews and a selection of Nabokov criticism. Its main drawback, however, is that the general unavailability of these films makes it very difficult to judge the reliability of her analyses. The reader is left to form a position based mainly upon the quality of her reading of Nabokov's texts,

and this, unfortunately, is marred by tendentious value judgements, a concept-driven analytical perspective and a cursory treatment of, if not complete disregard for, prevalent critical thought in Nabokov scholarship.

The ‘filmability’ of Nabokov’s fiction has long been an issue for critics, even though he deliberately wrote with the cinema in mind and sought to sell the film rights to his fiction from very early on in his career. Mazierska persuasively addresses this question, as well as the related issue of fidelity in translations and adaptations, in her introduction which, along with the book’s final chapter comparing Nabokov and Jean-Luc Godard, are the strongest in terms of originality and insight. Mazierska is not interested in detailing, explaining or developing the cinematic aspect of Nabokov’s work, however, even though she refers to it continually, but rather presents a more straightforward comparison which focuses on points of intersection and difference between the films and their source texts. Nevertheless, her commentary on these sources is characterized by an unsophisticated and disappointingly limited understanding of Nabokov’s life and art. She persists in portraying him as ‘an experienced political commentator’ (p. 171), tracing a line of polemical invective against the Soviet regime and, especially, the rise of Nazism, in extraneous details located across his fiction. Echoing a recent trend in Nabokov studies initiated by Eric Naiman and Michael Maar — *Nabokov, Perversely* (Ithaca, NY, 2010) and *Speak, Nabokov* (London, 2009) — the figure Mazierska depicts is that of a snob, a right-wing bigot, a homophobe and a misogynist. (This last criticism is also levelled at Stanley Kubrick but not, abstrusely, at his successor, Adrian Lyne.) Nabokov’s chauvinism is, Mazierska contends, only partially redeemed by Marleen Gorris’s *The Luzhin Defence*, in which Luzhin’s wife is given a name — Natalia — and placed at the centre of the narrative. Gorris concertinas the timeframe of the novel, setting her film entirely at the Italian hotel where Luzhin and Natalia first meet. Luzhin’s breakdown and suicide are contained within this space and brought about directly by Valentinov’s deliberate and sadistic sabotage of the man, his game and even his wedding day. Although Mazierska evidently favours Gorris’s rehabilitation of Nabokov’s heroine, she does not consider the feminist implications of Luzhin and Natalia never marrying, or the significance of their relationship being reduced to nothing more than a temporary, albeit tragic, romantic episode. Gorris’s Natalia is left free to simply walk away, and is even granted closure by being allowed to finish her dead fiancé’s championship game.

Meanwhile, one would expect more of Mazierska, as a specialist on cinema, in

terms of her analysis of the films themselves, but here too she is unconvincing in her assessments and in her depiction of the cultural dynamics that influenced their making, her interpretations marred by simplistic, overemphatic generalizations. Her reading of both the film and text of *Mademoiselle O*, for example, sidesteps Nabokov's tale of regretful nostalgia and understated pathos to present a radically revised and, frankly, improbable scenario in which the children's Swiss governess embodies, in the late-imperial Russo-European Nabokov household, a kind of alien Orientalism, and serves as an object of sexual initiation for the young Vladimir. Although her commentary on Skolimowski's *King, Queen, Knave* is compelling, particularly her discussion of the dramatic role of the film's soundtrack, it is severely undermined by her conclusions. Mazierska argues that 'what was omitted from the book was compensated for by the changes the director introduced', such as the generation of a sense of the absurd through his 'unique handling of material objects'— the 'plane that leaves before Frank reaches the airport, gates that always open at the wrong time, injuring Frank, and numerous things set in motion when Frank and Martha are making love' (p. 78) — which gives the film richness and 'substance' (p. 86). Her attempt, however, to salvage what the director himself described as the 'worst' film of his career, 'an artistic disaster from which he could not recover for a long time', is weakened by contradiction. For example, her response to critics who 'accused him of making a trivial or unfunny film' is to insist that they were, nonetheless, 'positive' and 'enthusiastic', that although the film was criticized for 'indulging in bad style', it at least was not accused of having 'no style' at all (p. 86).

Mazierska is strongest where she is able to pursue intertextualities, and this she does in the chapters on Jean-Luc Godard and Eric Rohmer's *Triple Agent* (2004). Whereas Godard occasionally paid homage to Nabokov in his work, there is no evidence that Eric Rohmer knew of Nabokov's story, 'The Assistant Producer', which is based on the same real-life scenario that inspired his film. Mazierska presents us, therefore, with two adaptations, fictional and cinematic, of the same source, allowing her to comment on their differences, but also the respective artistic priorities of the writer and filmmaker. This, in turn, is highly revealing of Mazierska's own agenda. 'Such comparison,' she argues, 'points to Nabokov's misogyny, prejudice against popular art, willingness to engage in self-reflexive games and a preoccupation with situations in real life when life is thwarted by its representation — simulacra triumphs over original. Rohmer's *Triple Agent* [...] is a testimony to the director's deep

sympathy for and identification with women, his conviction that realistic art is not inferior to any form of anti-realism, and his unwillingness to see the world as a “hall of mirrors” in which reflections appear more real or beautiful than the original’ (p. 180).

Nabokov once commented that ‘a tinge of *poshlust* [the false, phoney, philistine and trashy] is often given by the cinema to the novel it distorts and coarsens in its crooked glass’ (*Strong Opinions*, New York, 1973, p. 105). This statement is often taken simply as a criticism of cinema, but Nabokov’s issue was with the *process* of adaptation, with the potential loss, in the transference from one medium to another, of the complexity and subtlety of the original work. At the same time, *poshlost*’ is a central feature of Nabokov’s response to and representation of his world, as well as being key in generating the comic aspect of his fiction. Even though it is a dynamic which Stanley Kubrick recognized and rendered to great effect in his *Lolita*, it fails to attract serious consideration here.

Mazierska offers us a sense of these film adaptations, but only when they become more widely available will it be possible to develop a more nuanced, dispassionate and multifaceted perspective on Nabokov’s cinematic afterlife.

BARBARA WYLLIE,  
*UCL SSEES*

