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EYSTEIN OR EISENSTEIN?
TRICKING THE EYE IN NABOKOV'S *PALE FIRE*

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The collaborative article by Yuri Tsivian and Omry Ronen entitled “*Dubli*” [“Takes”] examines how the conflicts in the Hollywood film *A King in New York*, directed by Charlie Chaplin, are reflected in Vladimir Nabokov’s 1962 novel *Pale Fire* (Ronen and Tsivian). Between the communist sympathies of the “progressive” intelligentsia and the polemic against them, the authors write, the character Botkin/Kinbote has a special set of “shaded” relationships. One theme in particular that is included in the “shade” is that of the king, which accompanies the motif of the theatrical game. Its culmination is in the flight from the castle through an underground passageway into the theater, where a car is waiting for the fugitive at the exit (ibid. 269).

The Nabokov family came very close to participating in the real-life vanishing of an interim “king” from the Winter Palace in 1917. When, on the morning of 25 October, two officers approached the writer’s father and demanded that he allow them to use his car to take Kerensky to loyal troops in the Luga area, Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov (father of Vladimir Vladimirovich) refused on the grounds that his old and feeble Benz

landaulet was of little use in such a situation.¹ As we know, the American embassy then stepped in. But film aficionados remember the visual image of this fugitive – Kerensky crouched down in an open car – in posed frames from Sergei Eisenstein’s 1927 film “October.”

In *Pale Fire*, the commentator on the poem (and also its character) tells of two “Russian experts” who are searching for the crown jewels, which they presume to be hidden in the palace (note to line 130). Literally tearing the Council Chamber and several other rooms to pieces, the vandals transfer “their activities to that part of the gallery where the huge oils of Eystein had fascinated several generations of Zembla princes and princesses” (130).² Eyshtein is the name of the Zembla court artist, a “prodigious master of the trompe l’oeil,” whose painting technique leads Kinbote to contemplate the mutual connection between art and reality:

Under the unshakable but quite erroneous belief that the crown jewels were concealed somewhere in the Palace, the new administration had engaged a couple of foreign experts (see note to line 681) to locate them. The good work had been going on for a month. The two Russians, after practically dismantling the Council Chamber and several other rooms of state, had transferred their activities to that part of the gallery where the huge oils of Eystein had fascinated several generations of Zemblan princes and princesses. While unable to catch a likeness, and therefore wisely limiting himself to a conventional style of complimentary portraiture, Eystein showed himself to be a prodigious master of the trompe l’oeil in the depiction of various objects surrounding his dignified dead models and making them look even deader by contrast to the fallen petal or the polished panel that he rendered with such love and skill. But in some of these portraits Eystein had also resorted to a weird form of trickery: among his decorations of wood or wool, gold or velvet, he would insert one which was really made of the material elsewhere imitated by paint. This device which was apparently meant to enhance the effect of his tactile and tonal values had, however, something ignoble about it and disclosed not only an essential flaw in Eystein’s talent, but the basic fact that “reality” is neither the subject nor the object of true

¹ See Nabokov, V. D. 1922, 110; Boyd 133. Other than the account of in the memoirs, there are no other known sources to corroborate the appeal to Nabokov for a car to transport Kerensky.

² The remark about “[t]hat sorry ruler... known to have escaped disguised as a nun” in *Pale Fire* (209) clearly echoes a similar anecdote about Kerensky’s alleged escape from the Winter Palace.

art which creates its own special reality having nothing to do with the average "reality" perceived by the communal eye. (*Pale Fire* 105-106)

There can be no doubt that in this narrative Nabokov is transparently playing with the surname of Sergei Eisenstein, following a pattern established earlier. Years before this, the distorted name of the director had been used by Nabokov in letters to Edmund Wilson. However, at that point, without a moment's hesitation, Nabokov had called the director "Eisenstadt." The principle on which the metamorphosis is based has now changed: in the first instance the root *stein* ("stone"), common in the surnames of Ashkenazi Jews, is changed to the no less common morpheme *stadt* ("city"), while in the second instance Nabokov substitutes the last name of the director (Eisenstein) with the last name of the famous physicist (Einstein) and simply leaves out one letter (and, if we want to be picky about it, it is the first letter in his own name). *Eystein* and *Eisenstadt* thus become doubles of the real Eisenstein, or, as Ronen and Tsvivan punned: "*dubli*" (the Russian word can mean either a "double" or a "take" of a film scene).

But why does Kinbote find "something ignoble" in how Eystein included bits and pieces of the texture of reality in his painted depictions? The "trompe-l'oeil" technique (referring to an optical illusion), which became fashionable in the 16th century, involves passing off a visual depiction as something real, i.e. "tricking the eye." The effect is achieved by a perspective drawing based on strict adherence to optical principles and on flawless execution.

With striking precision, Nabokov guesses the principle on which Eisenstein's artistic thinking is based, and which was later published in his notes on stylization in painting.³ But it is the cinematographer that provokes the writer into an unflattering and barely

³ In 1945-47, Eisenstein wrote: "The 'naturalistic' depiction of facts in that which we often interpret as a most distinguished *stylization*... first struck me in Holland.... Roaming along the highways of the Netherlands, blessed under the protection of the Wilhelmine rulers, you time after time run into a chain of unaltered quotations from Van Gogh: here is the exact same little yellow bridge, there is a field, there are the walls of houses painted in such pure tones – blue, orange, yellow, green, cherry red – that they seem to cubes of watercolor arranged between the walls of enameled boxes such as the ones we were given in childhood, and you involuntarily search along the thresholds of these little houses for... a set of paintbrushes. These houses, painted in the purest tones, burn like topaz, emeralds, or rubies. They burn like the palette of Van Gogh, like the rays of the sun separated by the glass facets of a prism" (italics in the original). An abridged version of the text of *Neravnodushaia priroda* [*Non-indifferent Nature*] was published two years after Nabokov's novel (Eisenstein 1964, 3:251-432). This passage is quoted from the most complete version: Eisenstein 2006, 2:414.

camouflaged attack on the director. It would be unthinkable today to present the history of 20th century film without the montage technique, for which the film *October* became the most fully developed manifesto. The key ideological moment in the film is the destruction of the tsar's residence in Petrograd, the palace and museum that the people so hated. It is noteworthy that the shots themselves in their own way became an experiment in the destruction of the visual space of the museum (Kujundzic 2005). Nabokov may have taken something interesting about Eisenstein's filming process from a work by another writer of whom he was not terribly fond, but whose work he nevertheless followed with great interest. Viktor Shklovskii, in his 1939 book *Dnevnik (Diary)*, writes:

The servants at the Winter Palace said that the Palace suffered less during its original taking than it did during the shooting. This is because the Bolsheviks were struggling against the provisional government, not against the furniture (Shklovskii 1939, 15).

The first of two times that Eisenstein is mentioned in the correspondence with Wilson was in 1948. In an argument about the historical role of the Russian avant-garde, which, in Nabokov's opinion, had discredited itself by allying with the Bolsheviks, the writer declares: "I do not want to be personal, but here is how I explain your attitude: in the ardent period of life you and other American intellectuals of the twenties regarded with enthusiasm and sympathy Lenin's regime which seemed to you from afar an exciting fulfillment of your progressive dreams. Quite possibly, had the position been reversed, Russian avant-garde young writers (living, say, in an Americoid Russia) would have regarded the burning of the White House with similar enthusiasm and sympathy" (*Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya* 222). The metaphorical parallel is clear – substituting the Winter Palace for the burning residence of the President of the United States in Washington, we end up with the tsarist equivalent in Petersburg. (In this connection, we cannot help but recall the canonical experiment by Lev Kuleshov, who demonstrated one of the main functions of montage in film by using the architectural symbol of American executive power⁴.)

⁴ Kuleshov's technique consisted of the following sequence of shots: the actress Khokhlova walks past the Mostorg department store on Petrovka Street in the opening shot, and in the next shot the performer Obolenskii walks along the bank of the Moscow River. They smile and start walking to meet each other,

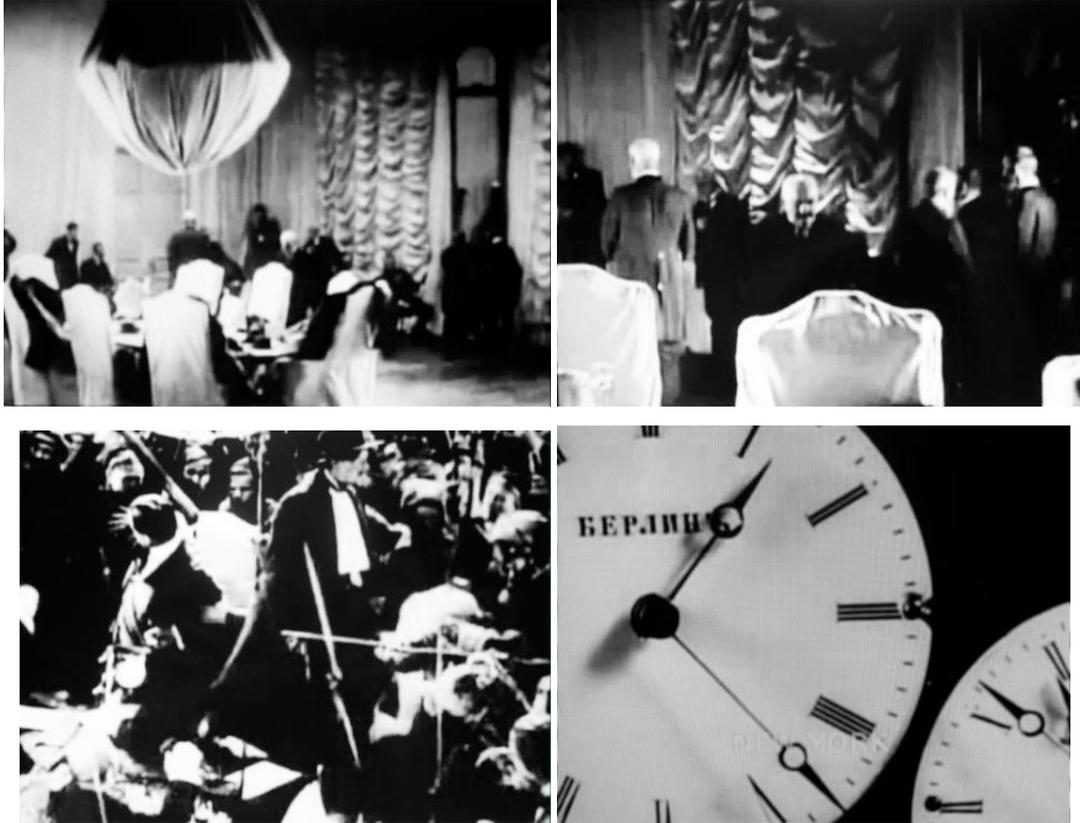
The “flaw in talent” of Eystein/Eistenstein, according to Nabokov, was that he was unapologetically willing to manipulate facts, and he undertook to transform a documentary structure for the sake of his own artistic vision. Even worse, the Soviet power structure had, thanks to the artist, figured out not only how to manipulate viewers at the time, but also how to construct a non-existent historical discourse. This shady dramatization played a cruel joke here too: later shots from the mass open-air show put on after the Revolution by the artists Iurii Annenkov and Natan Al'tman were often passed off as photographs of the historical storming of the palace.⁵ In a similar way, stills from the fictional film *October* were frequently copied as posters and illustrations in Soviet textbooks. The famous photographer Aleksandr Rodchenko, after seeing one of these still shots at the Museum of the Revolution in 1927, was shocked at the absence of any inscription explaining that this was a dramatization (Musvik 2003). The Winter Palace, as a political symbol and an artistic object, had been subjected to essentially the same sort of trick as those in the experiments that Nabokov associates with the court artist of Zembla.

However, we might hazard a guess that Nabokov had in mind not so much the sadly famous scene of the storming of the Winter Palace (which, taken out of its original context, the audience subsequently came to accept practically as documentary evidence⁶), as much as another, more “personal” episode in the film: the arrest of the Provisional Government.

then meet, shake hands, turn, and look to the side. Here a shot of the White House in Washington is inserted. After this follows a scene shot on Prechistenskii Boulevard in which the actors walk off into the distance. After watching this, the audience is convinced that the characters went to the White House. Thus constructed, the scene created the impression in the viewer of a single space – yet another variation on the *trompe-l'oeil*.

⁵ Years later, one of the creators of the mass show *The Taking of the Winter Palace*, Iu. P. Annenkov, would serve as the producer of Nabokov's play *The Event* at the Russian Drama Theater in Paris in the spring of 1938.

⁶ A decade later, an excerpt from the storming of the Winter Palace would appear in Mikhail Romm's film *Lenin in October* (1937), which was approved by Stalin at a closed screening. The picture's international premiere was held in 1938 in France and the United States (Nugent 1938).



Assembly and arrest of the Duma delegates in the Winter Palace.

Screenshots from S. Eisenstein's "October"

It was very likely this small example of an “optical illusion,” presenting the viewer with a pitiful collection of comical long-beards in pince-nez, for which the son of a Cadet delegate to the Constituent Assembly could not forgive Eisenstein. Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov, due to a combination of circumstances, was not arrested on that fateful night depicted by the communist director. Nabokov the elder managed to escape the Winter Palace on 25 October twenty minutes before the Bolsheviks blocked the exits from the Palace in preparation for the storming (Boyd 133). However, after avoiding captivity in the Peter and Paul Fortress along with the members of Kerensky’s cabinet, Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov was arrested on the orders of Lenin one month later. On 23 November (6 December new style) 1917, the Cadet committee was detained during a

morning session, and within five days Nabokov and his colleagues were held under guard in a small room in the Smolny.⁷

2

“October” was not the first film directed by Sergei Eisenstein to attract Nabokov’s attention. His novel *The Gift* (1934 – 1938) contains a tantalizingly brief description of a fragment from an unnamed contemporary film: accompanied by his mother, the hero, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, goes to a Berlin movie theater “where a Russian film was being shown which conveyed with particular *brio* the globules of sweat rolling down the glistening faces of the factory workers — while the factory owner smoked a cigar all the time” (G90). Alexander Dolinin has suggested that this is “a textbook example of parallel montage” and close-up, taken from Sergei Eisenstein’s *Strike* [*Stachka*].⁸ Although *Strike* contains a montage sequence similar to the one described, some minor elements in this particular episode still depart from Nabokov’s vivid rendition.⁹

However, I believe that this excerpt from Nabokov may represent a hybrid of *two* films directed by Eisenstein, combined here in a cross-cut montage: *Strike* (1924) and *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925). The effects of light and shadow projected onto the faces of the agitated rebelling sailors are emphatically presented in *Potemkin*. The latter film was shown on screens in Berlin in the spring of 1926, which is when the action of Nabokov’s novel begins. In addition, the author could very well have been aware of the scandal that developed around the German release of the film.¹⁰

The presence of *Potemkin* becomes obvious if one expands the passage under scrutiny to include the preceding sentence, which contains a fleeting portrayal of a Communist demonstration in the town: “Once, [Fyodor and his mother] saw a modest

⁷ Boyd 139. In his film, Eisenstein depicted not only the meeting of the delegates at Smolny, but also the rooms in which the representatives of various factions convened, including the Mensheviks (in Room № 16) and the Socialist Revolutionaries (Room № 20).

⁸ See Vladimir Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda*, 5 vols. (St. Petersburg: Simpozium, 2000), Vol. 4, p. 662.

⁹ A. Dolinin refers to scene № 7 (“The Workers’ Demands”), featuring four fat factory owners smoking cigars; however, this *mise en scene* is inter-cut with long shots of the crowd of strikers and then the mounted police squadron. The close-up of the workers next to their lathes is found only at the beginning of Eisenstein’s film.

¹⁰ See also in my *Keys to The Gift. A Guide to V. Nabokov’s Novel* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011), pp. 302-304.

Communist procession walking through the slush – with wet flags – most of the marches battered by life, some crookbacked, others lame or sickly, a lot of plain-looking women and several sedate petty-bourgeois” [*podbitye zhizniu, gorbatye, da khromye, da kvelye, mnogo nekrasivyykh zhenshchin i neskol’ko solidnykh meshchan*] (*The Gift* 90 / *Dar* 273). It is this collision, parodying the flow of humanity consisting mainly of cripples, women, a sick child, and confused bourgeois from the now canonical Odessa steps sequence, that might have been reflected in *The Gift*.

It is impossible to say precisely what version of the film Nabokov watched in the German movie theater. Peter Jelavich calls the editing of *Battleship Potemkin* for German distribution “a process that turned into one of the most spectacular cases of film censorship” (Jelavich 131). Sergei Eisenstein’s account of the naval mutiny during the Russian revolution of 1905 had attracted limited attention when it was released in the USSR in 1925. Only after a leftist film distributor arranged for showings in Germany did it receive an enthusiastic response (at least by left-of-center members of the press and the public).

The right to screen the work, however, was hard won. *Battleship Potemkin* was initially banned by the Berlin film board on 24 March 1926, but approved by the appellate board on 10 April. The latter ruled that the work could not be banned for its political slant, nor was it likely to pose a threat to public order and security, as the lower film board had argued. Yet the appellate board further ruled that certain scenes had a “brutalizing effect” and thus had to be cut – namely many of the shots of the mutiny aboard the ship as well as the massacre of civilians on the Odessa steps. This is the likely explanation for why Nabokov focused his attention on the crowd rather than on the violent imagery of the oppression which he, in any case, must have considered a side effect of the ridiculously exaggerated Bolshevik propaganda.

The Weimar argument for censoring *Battleship Potemkin* was that audiences would equate the conditions shown in the film with present-day Germany and thus be incited to violence. But after severe cuts (hundreds of meters!) were made, the Berlin film board declared that the “German people, even the workers... know exactly how to distinguish between the type of state and the governmental policies in czarist Russia and those of the

German Republic, between the tortured and oppressed soldiers of czarist Russia and the free, self-governing people of the German Republic.”¹¹

3

As stated above, Nabokov mentioned Eisenstein twice in his correspondence with Edmund Wilson, and both times he distorted the name of the Soviet director as “Eisenstadt.” The first instance dates to 1948, at which point Nabokov instructed his American friend as follows: “In fact a typical Russian intelligent would look askance at an avant-garde poet... But of course people who read Trotsky for information anent Russian culture cannot be expected to know all this. I have also a hunch that the general idea that avant-garde literature and art were having a wonderful time under Lenin and Trotsky is mainly due to Eisenstadt films — ‘montage’ — things like that — and great big drops of sweat rolling down rough cheeks. The fact that pre-Revolution Futurists joined the party has also contributed to the kind of (quite false) avant-garde atmosphere which the American intellectual associates with the Bolshevik Revolution” (NWL 2001, 222).

It becomes clear when we compare this excerpt with the text of the novel that Nabokov is quoting the fragment from the same scene that he depicted earlier in *The Gift* (“great big drops of sweat rolling down rough cheeks” / “the globules of sweat rolling down the glistening faces of the factory workers”),¹² though this time he separates the two parallel scenes and does not mention the factory owner smoking a cigar. But how could Nabokov misspell the name of someone whose films he watched and even commemorated in a *mise en scene* in his last Russian novel? And why does the Soviet director’s name appear in a historical discussion that is seemingly quite remote from the aesthetic problems tackled in Eisenstein’s mature art?

We will put the first question aside for the time being and attempt to approach the second one. The solution turns out to be right on the surface if we direct our attention to the date on which Nabokov’s letter was written: 23 February 1948. It is likely no accident

¹¹ Berlin film board report of 12 July 1926, quoted in Jelavich 132.

¹² First noticed by S. Karlinsky (*Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya* 224, 5n), though he made no attempt to identify which Eisenstein film this referred to.

that Eisenstein's name appeared in Nabokov's letter less than two weeks after the death of the famous director (11 February). Eisenstein's death resonated widely in the West: the leading American and European newspapers all printed stories about it. An obituary in *The New York Times* praised Eisenstein's legacy, stressing his unsurpassed influence in advancing of the theory and practice of the montage technique: "One of his most striking contributions was the development of the montage and a new method of cutting and mounting film after 'shooting' was over to produce a rapid panoramic progression of images that forcefully projected some idea. 'A work of art understood dynamically is just the process of arranging images and feelings in the mind of the spectator,' he wrote."¹³ Let us tentatively assume that not long before writing his letter to Wilson, Nabokov had read or heard the news that Eisenstein had died, and was now tacking on his name, which was literally at hand, to the swarm of Bolsheviks and Bolshevik sympathizers.

The attitude of the émigré writer to the artist who had, directly or indirectly, become the servant of tyranny, had in this case hardly changed at any point. On the contrary, the more talented the creator, the stronger was Nabokov's irritation stemming from this "aesthetic betrayal."¹⁴ The abnormal shift in the director's surname was made in the contemptuous manner that was characteristic of Nabokov,¹⁵ and to which he resorted not for comedic effect, but for a certain defamiliarization – in this case, from a figure who was identified with the hateful communist regime. Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov had done something similar to this when he referred contemptuously to Bolsheviks of Jewish

¹³ [By REUTERS]. "Sergei Eisenstein Is Dead In Moscow," *The New York Times*, 12 February 1948.

¹⁴ Cf. in Mstislav Dobuzhinsky's (who was Nabokov's former art teacher) unpublished response to the release of the first part of *Ivan the Terrible*: "Удивляет при этом необъяснимое обилие фальши и исторических неточностей, которыми полон фильм. Ведь там, в Москве, под рукой в Оружейной Палате и в Историческом Музее непочатое богатство всяческих реликвий этой эпохи. И следует признать отсутствие у постановщиков такта и простой добросовестности, не говоря о вкусе, если они могли наряду с вещами убедительными уснастить фильм тем, что называется 'клюквой'. Ни в театре, ни в фильме мелочей не существует, и скверно, если говорят: 'публика этого не заметит'. Имеющие очи видеть всегда увидят погрешности и недочеты" (See Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, "Susal'nyi fil'm," n.p., 1947, Dobuzhinsky Papers, box 5, p. 1, Bakhmeteff Archive, Columbia University Library, New York. Quoted in: Shapiro 230, n. 44)

¹⁵ Cf.: "I gradually got used to his manner (not acquired in the U.S.A., but always there) of not recognizing people, of addressing Ivan Ivanovich, after knowing him many years, as 'Ivan Petrovich,' of calling Nina Nikolaevna 'Nina Aleksandrovna,' the book of verse *In the West* 'On One's Ass' [*Na Zapade—Na Zadnitse*], of washing from the face of the earth someone who had been kind to him, of mocking in print a man kindly disposed to him (as in his review of Aldanov's "The Cave"), of taking something from a great author and then saying he had never read him" (Berberova 226).

origin¹⁶ who hastily changed their traditional Yiddish surnames to more sonorous and more prestigious sounding Russian pseudonyms.¹⁷ The fact that Nabokov defaced the name in no way conflicts with the possibility that he might have directly held Eisenstein's aesthetics in high esteem (and this he apparently did). Priscilla Meyer incisively pointed out that Nabokov in his text, like Eystein, inlays the fictional with the authentic so skillfully that the broad historical subtext of *Pale Fire* creates the impression of a fantastic invention (Meyer 60). The behavioral strategy described here is in complete agreement with the approach that held sway with Nabokov and those around him who were of like mind, in which another author would have a dual aesthetic position. This recalls, for example, the complex of attitudes that Vladislav Khodasevich held towards the Soviet Formalist school (he could not tolerate Viktor Shklovskii and the rest when it came to ideological motivations, but he was nevertheless prepared to accept their innovative approaches to narrative theory).

It has likewise been suggested that Nabokov's main devices for processing documentary sources (for Godunov-Cherdyntsev's Asian journey and the Chernyshevski biography) in *The Gift* – montage, colorization, the addition of sound – are plausibly linked with the techniques used by the early Soviet film-makers. The device of adding color has a direct analogue in Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin*. One scene of this otherwise black-and-white film features a red flag flying from the *Potemkin*'s mast.

¹⁶ In his reminiscences about the meetings of the Provisional Government's Contact Commission, Nabokov wrote of Commission's main figure, Iu. M. Steklov (1873-1941): "I then met him for the first time and I suspected neither that he was a Jew, nor that his sonorous pseudonym concealed an actual surname that was hardly sonorous. Nonetheless, the story may of course have been known – it was later told by L. L'vov – of the abject, extremely loyalist solicitations to which Nakhamkis resorted in order to "legalize" his pseudonym to be used in place of his original name. But be that as it may, from the very first meeting he made a most repellent impression on me by his manner, which in every way suited the surname which organically combined the words "naxhal" [smartass] and "kham" [boor]. His tone was the tone of a man who was certain that the Provisional Government existed by his own grace and only for as long as it suited him" (Nabokov, V. D. *Arkhiv russkoi revoliutsii*. Vol. I. Berlin, 1921). Henceforth throughout the book Nabokov exclusively refers to Steklov as "Steklov-Nakhamkis." Beneath this annoyance directed personally at Nakhamkis (who of course was not to blame for having a typical Jewish surname, meaning "comforter," that did not sound "sonorous" to the ear of a Russian aristocrat), there lies a growing dissatisfaction with the role that Jews played in the Russian Revolution. It must be noted that V. D. Nabokov was a fierce advocate for the rights of Jews in Russia, and after the trial of Menahem Beilis his name was respected in the Jewish community.

¹⁷ Cf. the attempts to expose the chess master by his future mother-in-law in *The Defense* (1930): «Наверное, псевдоним, – сказала мать, копясь в несессере, – какой-нибудь Рубинштейн или Абрамсон». <...> И у него, наверное советский паспорт. Большевик, просто большевик» (*Dar* Vol. 2: 368-369).

Victor Shklovsky wrote on this device in his “Piat’ fel’etonov ob Eizenshteine” (in the fifth feuilleton, – which was first published in the magazine *Sovetskii ekran*, № 3, 1926).¹⁸ Taking into account Nabokov’s study of Joyce’s *Ulysses* during his work on *The Gift*, it is worth recalling that James Joyce was especially interested in *Potemkin* (1925). The two famous innovators met on November 30, 1929 in Paris, ten years before a similar encounter between Joyce and Nabokov took place in 1939 (Noel 1970).¹⁹ The kinship between the technical elements used or implied in *Ulysses* and in Eisenstein’s work, striving for a true synthesis of all major art forms – literature, painting, music, and motion pictures – underscores the paradigmatic interest that writers had in film in the 1920s and 1930s.

Eisenstein’s films from the 1920s – *Strike*, *The Battleship Potemkin*, and *October* – certainly contributed their two cents worth to creating the myth of the Revolution; however, at the same time, the Western critics did not fail to notice certain shifts in the style of Eisenstein as a mature director. *The New York Times* noted that Eisenstein’s revolutionary fever became more ambivalent towards the mid-thirties: “That many of his pictures were patently propaganda works was true, but to students of the movie art this appeared not so much to matter as the fact that he developed new techniques, devised camera approaches and sought always to bring out the potential of a still developing form. That he forgot – or overlooked – to bring the Marxist message to one of his films two years ago brought him that fatal kiss of all – the accusation from the authoritative Soviet magazine, *Culture and Life*, that his productions had been short on the prescribed Soviet requirement of art and interpretation of history.” <this refers to the Central Committee order on the film *Big Life*, which was published in that periodical on 10 September 1946, and in which the main target of the Party’s criticism was the second part of *Ivan the Terrible* – *Y.L.*> The author went on, linking Eisenstein’s failure to please the leader with his untimely demise:

¹⁸ Paperno 319, n. 30 (Paperno credits N. Perlin for pointing out this source). See also the chapter devoted to Nabokov and Russian Formalism in: Glynn 2007.

¹⁹ According to Eisenstein’s account; as far as is known, Joyce never mentioned this meeting in writing (Werner 491-507).

“It was the second part of a trilogy on ‘Ivan the Terrible’ that halted the director in mid-work in 1946. Having failed to portray what an official paper called ‘contemporary realism’ the film expert coincidentally developed a heart attack.²⁰ A few months later he was reported to have regretted that he had ‘permitted a distortion of historical facts, which made our film bad and ideologically defective.’ Apart from what forces were brought upon him at home he remained to professional and lay filmgoers here *a man of great intellectual vigor and unremitting faith in films as an art form* [Emphasis added – Y.L.]”

Evidence of Nabokov’s complex attitude toward Eisenstein is provided in Chapter Thirteen of *Speak, Memory*, in which the author used part of his own letter to Edmund Wilson. Interestingly enough, although other Soviet figures mentioned in that letter (such as Ezhov and Yagoda, Uritsky and Dzerzhinsky) were copiously incorporated into the memoir, the passage on *Eisenstein-Eisenstadt* is omitted. It seems that the attack on Eisenstein should be viewed in the broader context of what triggered the Nabokov-Wilson debate in the first place. Wilson was an enthusiastic and typical product of the American Progressive Era and developed a myopically forgiving view of the Bolshevik experiment in Russia (Kopper 1995, 57; Ross 2003). For Nabokov, as it turns out, Eisenstein proved to be just another convenient provocation.

4

Thus the distortion of Sergei Eisenstein’s name in the 1948 letter *was not* a slip of the pen, nor was it a lapse of memory (the answer to the first question posed above). On the contrary, Nabokov approached these details very systematically. A decade later, on 30 March 1958, Nabokov thanked “Bunny” (the friendly nickname he had given to Wilson) for the new collection of articles sent to him by the man who was still his friend, *The American Earthquake*: “[Vera and I] enjoyed many of the plums in it. What happened to the poor man whom the artist saw, but the political moralist

²⁰ The first part of *Ivan the Terrible* was exhibited in New York in 1947. Bosley Crowther, writing in *The New York Times*, called it the product of one of the really great artists in the (film) medium and praised it as a story of “awesome and monumental impressiveness in which the senses are saturated with medieval majesty.” The second part of *Ivan the Terrible* was released only in 1956.

misunderstood?²¹ He keeps haunting us. The Upton Sinclair-Eisenstadt adventures are hilarious.”²² The last reference is to the article “Eisenstein in Hollywood” detailing various (mostly unrealized) projects of the Soviet artist who was invited to California by Paramount Pictures in 1930 with a \$100,000 contract offer (Wilson 397-413). Paramount wanted Eisenstein to make a movie version of Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* but they parted ways after disagreements about casting (Montagu 1969). Boris Pilnyak, the Soviet novelist, who was brought there by MGM, encountered problems of ideological incompatibility and was also forced to leave Hollywood (Ibid, 405). Wilson’s essay contains an account of the difficulties Upton Sinclair encountered after agreeing to finance Eisenstein’s film *Que Viva Mexico!* Sinclair had to raise \$53,000 and even mortgage his house for the Russian director who had agreed to complete the film within three or four months, but continued in Mexico for more than a year. A brother of Mrs. Sinclair, who had gone along on the expedition and come back before Eisenstein, gave the Sinclairs “most unpleasant reports on Eisenstein’s frivolity, his sexual life and his failure to make progress on his film” (Wilson 405). Finally, Sinclair cut off the funds, insisted that Eisenstein return, and promised to send the whole of the film for editing to the USSR. But Sinclair, whom the author of *American Earthquake* knew personally and who was, in Wilson’s own words, “a Puritan, a moralist and something of a prig,” had become so embittered by Eisenstein’s duplicity, his failure to keep his promises, and a practical joke he had played on him by sending him a trunk containing pornographic photographs to get through customs, that he could not be induced to relinquish the film (Ibid, 408). The footage was eventually screened in New York in 1933, after being edited by producer Sol Lesser without Eisenstein’s input, under the title *Thunder over Mexico*.

Despite the fact that Wilson did not respond in any way to Nabokov’s comments, and the Eisenstein note was thus literally left hanging in the air, the writer himself would soon return to his thought, this time in an artistic incarnation in the novel *Pale Fire*.

²¹ Apparently a reference to the article “The Stieglitz Exhibition” and its afterword written in 1957, where Wilson recalled that Alfred Stieglitz played down the painter Charles Demuth after having earlier championed his reputation because he felt that Demuth “was either not at all the real thing or had been ruined by a craving for worldly success.” (*The American Earthquake* 102). See *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya* 357, 1n.

²² Regarding Nabokov’s attitude towards A. Lewis, see: Schiff 175.

A final question: why *Eisenstadt*, and not, say, Eisenberg or Eisenbaum? It would seem that Nabokov is fusing the Soviet direction with another actual person about whom Nabokov had very strong feelings. The poet and satirist Mikhail Aisenshtadt (as his name would look transliterated directly from the Russian), who was quite popular among the Russian émigré community, had worked successfully with American publishers, both Russian language émigrés with whom he published under the name “Zheleznov,”²³ and English language publishers, under the surnames Eisenstadt and Argus.²⁴ In 1941 Nabokov would need to clash publicly with the journalist in connection with a New York production of the play *The Event (Sobytie)*. In a review published in *Novoe russkoe slovo*, Eisenstadt-Zheleznov stated his assumption that in the second act of the play “Sirin is settling the score with a writer who clearly belongs to our émigré community and whom we are all aware of. The caricature, it must be said in fairness, succeeded brilliantly...” (Zheleznov 1941). Uncharacteristically, Nabokov hastily sent a ranting response to the editors in which he maintained that Zheleznov’s words were “not only rude, but also groundless.” Perhaps the most interesting thing about this is that at the end of his letter Nabokov cites the artificiality of the claim itself and, very likely, by hinting at the pseudonym of the offending reviewer, connects him with a certain *city*: “In voicing my bewilderment, I am only attempting to intercept the flight path of speculations that are as puzzling as they are ridiculous. In doing so, I am struggling with the enticing notion that M. Zheleznov is simply one of my haphazard characters and dwells in the same city in

²³ M. K. Aisenshtadt (another pen name: Argus; 1900-1970, New York). In 1919 he emigrated to Latvia and in 1923 to Chicago. He was later based in New York. Aisenshtadt published three books: the narrative poem *Vostochnyi geroi* [*Eastern hero*] and two collections of satire, humor, and lyric poetry – *Poluser'ezno, Polushutia* [*Half serious, half joking*] (1959), and *Drugaia zhizn' i bereg dal'nii* [*Another life and a distant shore*] (1969).

²⁴ A collection of humorous sketches in English, *Moscow on the Hudson* (Argus [Eisenstadt-Zheleznov], M. K. New York: Harper, 1951) with illustrations by the author was intended to open a window for the American reader onto the life of the Russian community in that country – in simple language and not without self-criticism, Aisenshtadt told stories of the structure of émigré newspapers (chiefly *Novoe russkoe slovo* [*New Russian Word*], for which he himself worked), about the weekly balls, unsuccessful entrepreneurs, former Russian aristocrats, and those who passed themselves off as the friends or relatives of famous compatriots – from the friend of the theatre director Stanislavsky to the former lover of Stalin’s wife. The characteristic titles of some of the chapters speak for themselves: “When a Russian plans to go to a restaurant, he must first stop in at a cafeteria.” “The spoon plays a primary role in a Russian tea drinking event,” “We argued about many things, from Russian cabbage to Russian kings,” “A Russian carries a briefcase with him to work and to the theater, to a funeral and to a wedding,” and so on.

which my farce takes place.”²⁵ Self-reference, for the author of a play whose characters visit a movie theater to see *Camera Obscura* – “the best film of the season” (Nabokov 2008, 367) – will become a leitmotif in the series of explorations of the interaction between artistic creation and black-and-white truth. Here it is important to note that the possible metonymy of *Eisenstadt* – *zhelezo* – city (*zhelezo* being the Russian word for iron) was more or less obvious for Nabokov, thanks to the pseudonym of the feuilletonist – *Zheleznov* – who was well known among the émigré community at the time for his sharp quill. It also comes as little surprise in this context that one of the aliases of Gradus, “a Jack of small trades” and the killer of John Shade in *Pale Fire*, is pretentious “d’Argus” (the American readers of Eisenstadt-Zheleznov knew the writer mainly as *Argus*).

The name **Eisenstadt/Aisenshtadt** owes its origin to the name of a place in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, literally, “Iron City” – intricately evoking John Shade’s wife, “née Irondell (which comes *not from a little valley yielding iron ore...*)”²⁶ A Jewish community was formed there under the protection of the Esterházy family in the 17th century (upon authorization by Paul I in 1670, which had been petitioned for by approximately 3000 Jews who had been exiled from Vienna). However, the turning point that interests us here will take place almost a century later in 1761, when one Franz Joseph Haydn is named Kapellmeister for the city of Eisenstadt. Over the next three decades, Haydn’s responsibilities would include composing and performing music for his patron. At the time that Nabokov addressed Wilson, the city of Eisenstadt had been occupied by the Red Army for three years (this would continue until 1955); the parallel between the court composer²⁷ and the director might at that time have seemed tantalizingly poignant. The final driving force behind this parodic game with synonyms was not the sinister shadow of the Kremlin protector of the fine arts with the “iron” pseudonym. After Eisenstadt and Aisenshtadt, Eystein became “take three” in the

²⁵ *Sirin, V.* “Po povodu retsenzii M. Zheleznova” [“Regarding M. Zheleznov’s Review”], *Novoe russkoe slovo*, 11 April 1941. Reprinted in full in *Tragediia gospodina Morna* 591.

²⁶ Mentions of Eisenstadt, or “Castrum Ferrum” (*Iron City*), in connection with the ore deposits in the area, date back to the year 1118. The first records of it can be traced in the annals through 1264, at which point the place is written as “minor Morton,” which corresponds to its Hungarian equivalent: *Kismarton*, after the patron saint of the church of St. Martin.

²⁷ Here it is worth citing the entry on this composer in the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*: “Due to the whims of his patron, Haydn was frequently forced to cede his artistic freedom.”

complex history of the writer's attitudes towards the artistic legacy of the Soviet genius – a history whose fate to this day remains that of an undeveloped negative.

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