

# Going Nowhere Fast

The Car, the Highway and American Identity  
in  
Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*  
and  
Robert Frank's *The Americans*

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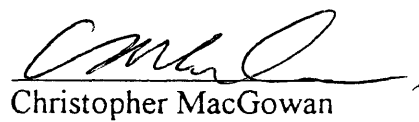
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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate how Robert Frank's collection of photographs *The Americans* and Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*, works created by European émigrés to America that appeared in the United States in the late 1950's, use the car and the highway as central components of their representations of "America." The thesis will argue that both works go much further than pointing out the ubiquity of the car in American daily life; they point out, and in different ways critique, its centrality in the American imagination. The thesis will argue that both *Lolita* and *The Americans* are "road novels" that go against the grain of that term's usual implication of the glorification of the freedom of the open road. Unlike works by native-born contemporaries that fall into the distinctly American literary tradition of romanticizing the individual's flight from society, both *The Americans* and *Lolita* take a more skeptical view of the benefits of such a flight. This thesis will demonstrate how both works show that the dream of escape is one of many interrelated fantasies inscribed into the idea of the car by a number of covalent forces, mass media most powerful among them.

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Two outsiders to America, Robert Frank and Vladimir Nabokov -- émigrés from Europe, with extraordinary powers of observation -- traveled the length and breadth of the country in the early- to mid-nineteen-fifties in the service of artistic projects that involved the construction of representations of America, both an exterior landscape of social fact and an interior landscape of collective fantasy. Central in every way to both Frank's and Nabokov's representations of America and what can be described broadly as the American way of life are the automobile and its partner, the highway. Both works go much further than pointing out the ubiquity of the car in American daily life; they point out, and in different ways critique, its centrality in the American imagination. Both *Lolita* and *The Americans* are "road novels" (or more generally "road books") in the sense that the car and the highway are central to their concerns. But they are road novels that go against the grain of that term's usual meaning, signifying as it does a glorification of the freedom of the open road. Unlike works by native-born contemporaries, like Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, that fall into the distinctly American literary tradition of romanticizing the individual's flight from society, both *The Americans* and *Lolita* take a more skeptical view of the benefits of such a flight. The dream of escape, both works show, is one of many interrelated fantasies inscribed into the idea of the car by a number of covalent forces, mass media most powerful among them.

Both Robert Frank's collection of photographs *The Americans* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, then, works created by European émigrés to America that appeared in the United States in the late 1950's, use the automobile and the highway as essential components of their (in Frank's case self-stated) project of apprehending "America."

Both works identify and decry the importance of the car and the highway in the American popular imagination, point out the fraudulence of the message that mass media injects into the consciousness of the American consumer about cars and so many other things, and identify the sometimes tragic cost of accepting that message too credulously, as Lolita Haze does. *Lolita* and *The Americans* both use the cross-country journey as a means of providing narrative structure; and both use the car and highway as the supreme examples, even totems, of America's culture's values -- among them freedom, speed, choice, newness, and escape. Both put the car and the highway to uses that call these values into question, and both represent the power of the media to disseminate these values into American hearts and minds. Both *Lolita* and *The Americans* identify mass media as having the power to invest objects and spaces, particularly the car and the highway, with a force so seductive that its correlatives are sexual desire and religious faith. In both works, the car functions in the American imagination as both a surface and a space. Their vision is of an America of car owners who believe that their automobiles communicate something essential about themselves. If, in general terms, the role of advertising is to convince consumers that their acquisitions define who they are, both to themselves and to the outside world, *The Americans* and *Lolita* depict a country in which advertising is a powerful force indeed.

And cars are invested with even more power as spaces than as surfaces: Americans, both works communicate, expect something transformative to happen to them when they step into their cars, especially when they take them to that entirely new form of space, the interstate highway. In their cars, they are safely sealed from the outside world, and on their interstate highways they are safe from spontaneous interactions with other human beings -- car crashes excepted.

What Christian icons were to inhabitants of eighth-century Constantinople, consumer goods are in Frank's and Nabokov's representations of mid-twentieth-century America: objects that define and empower their possessors on levels they consider sacred. This analogy is not made lightly: the sort of emblems of religious faith that bind a community together become more significant to the community when it is under threat from without by infidels who oppose its world view. At its height, the Cold War was a holy war pitting the forces of light against those of darkness, and proof that America was on the side of righteousness was to be found in its superior range and quality of consumer goods; as was demonstrated at the famous summit in which Nixon pointed out to Krushchev the superiority of American washing machines to Russian models as proof of the superiority of the American way of life and its consumer culture. In both *Lolita* and *The Americans*, the automobile is the ultimate consumer-culture icon -- an object of devotion that has come to occupy a special, polysemous place in the culture. As *Lolita* and *The Americans* describe them, Americans see the car as the solution to several interrelated yearnings, especially sexual desire and the desire for escape -- the safe and easy transcendence of one's

circumstances. Americans, in these works, are excited about their cars, and they communicate that excitement in sometimes sexual, sometimes religious terms.

The highway, too, a new form of space that only the car allows us to enter, is foregrounded in both *Lolita* and *The Americans*. In this new space, Americans can escape the constraints of their over-defined social groupings to enter a world of surfaces --a depthless realm without consequences. It is a world in which transient people segregated inside their cars interact anonymously at motels, roadside diners and tourist attractions. In *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert escapes social censure by taking Lolita out of society and into this new space on a long journey without a destination, during which they are divorced from any responsibilities. Ultimately, both works show the car to be a false god, its promise of transcendence an illusion. The dark side of liberation is alienation, isolation, and loneliness. Both works show how the illusion of liberation is propagated through mass media, particularly advertising, for its own ends -- the power of the mass media to shape minds is a strong undercurrent running through both. By the end of *Lolita* and *The Americans*, the glamour, the delusively alluring air of compelling charm, romance, and excitement that has cloaked the car and the highway has been dispelled. Buying into this mass-produced fantasy figment is like taking a powerful narcotic: when the fix wears off, everything's worse than it was before, not better.

Perhaps if Nabokov had applied for a grant to fund the writing of *Lolita* he would have stated that the cataloging of American culture was one of its aims, but he did not have that need. Robert Frank, however, did need money, and in his successful

application for a Guggenheim Fellowship he outlined his plan to travel around the United States in a car and compose “the visual study of a civilization...the kind of civilization born here and spreading elsewhere” (Frank, *New York to Nova Scotia*, 89). A hint of omen can be detected: contagions “spread,” too, and the “elsewheres” to which contagions and civilizations alike spread have historically not accepted their invaders altogether willingly. Frank goes on in his application essay to describe his agenda in greater detail:

...it is fair to assume that when an observant American travels abroad his eye will see freshly; and that the reverse may be true when a European eye looks at the United States. I speak of the things that are there, anywhere and everywhere -- easily found, not easily selected and interpreted. A small catalog comes to the mind's eye: a town at night, a parking lot, a supermarket, a highway, the man who owns three cars and the man who owns none, the farmer and his children, a new house and a warped clapboard house, the dictation of taste, the dream of grandeur, advertising, neon lights, the faces of the leaders and the faces of the followers, gas tanks and post offices and back yards... (Frank, *From New York to Nova Scotia*, 89)

Robert Frank did not deviate from this initial vision in his composition of *The Americans*; this statement succinctly addresses many of the work's prime themes, particularly the notion of duality, of opposing forces: wealth and status versus poverty and anonymity; the public versus the private; illusion versus reality. Note that Frank uses the number of cars a man owns (“the man who owns three cars and the man who owns none”) to convey the idea that he will seek to juxtapose images of high and low status and prosperity; note, too, how many objects in Frank's catalog relate to the automobile: “a parking lot, ...a highway, ...gas tanks.”

Also significant in Robert Frank's Guggenheim Fellowship application essay is his appropriation of the mantle of otherness, his insistence on defining himself as a European, an outsider. This is at least something of a conscious choice: at the date of this application, 1954, Frank's primary residence had been New York City for the previous seven years. (Frank came to New York from Switzerland -- where Nabokov would go to live after *Lolita* made him wealthy -- on his own to find work in fashion photography in 1947. With an impressive portfolio and a number of recommendations from influential Swiss photographers in hand, he quickly found work with Alexei Brodovitch at *Harper's Bazaar*, the most visually innovative magazine of its time. Frank soon wearied of commercial photography, however; he came to refer to himself and his friends derisively as "Sammys," after Sammy Gleick, the hustling, desperate titular character in the popular novel *What Makes Sammy Run*.)

Whether a non-native-born American's vision of America should be seen as somehow "fresher" and therefore more accurate could be debated; but what cannot be argued is that comparatively few native-born American artists have chosen to take on the project of apprehending and describing all of the regions of this country and their mores together in one work, labeled either fiction or nonfiction. Notable exceptions include John Dos Passos's trilogy *U.S.A.* A long and reputable tradition exists, though, of the visitor to a foreign country writing about his experiences for his fellow countrymen, in which tradition travelogues about America by Chateaubriand, Dickens, the Earl of Carlisle, and de Tocqueville would fall, as would any number of books by Americans on their experiences abroad. But as a proposition, the enterprise of an

émigré artist interpreting America for an American audience, particularly in a critical vein, is more fraught, as émigré psychologist Erik H. Erikson explains in introducing the “Reflections on the American Identity” chapter of his influential 1950 book

*Childhood and Society*:

The point is that it is almost impossible (except in the form of fiction) to write *in America about America for Americans*. You can, as an American, go to the South Sea Islands and write upon your return; you can, as a foreigner, travel in America and write upon taking leave; you can, as an immigrant, write as you get settled; you can move from one section of this country or from one “class” of this country to another, and write while you still have one foot in each place. But in the end you always write about the way it feels to arrive or leave....The only healthy American way to write about America for Americans is to vent a gripe and to overstate it.

(Erikson, 283-284)

Judging from the above, it is safe to say that if Erik Erikson had only known *The Americans* through the critical attention it received upon its first American publication, he would have assumed that Robert Frank’s work was extraordinarily healthy -- almost without exception early critics attacked it as taking a gripe and overstating it. The book’s publication provoked such an outcry over its perceived anti-Americanism that the magazine *Popular Photography* devoted part of its May 1960 issue to assessments of the book by a number of the magazine’s editors. A short sampling of these assessments makes the point:

...a warped objectivity...gives this book its major limitation. Although he calls it *The Americans*, Frank’s book actually explores a very limited aspect of life in the United States, and it is the least attractive aspect, at that....it is only logical to conclude that his book is an attack on the United States. As such, it must be considered an overwhelming success.

-- Les Barry

There is no pity in his images. They are images of hate and hopelessness, of devastation and preoccupation with death. They are images of an America seen by a joyless man who hates the country of his adoption. Is he a poet...? Maybe...But he is also a liar, perversely basking in the kind of world and the kind of misery he is perpetually seeking and persistently creating....This is Robert Frank's America, God help him....The book seems to me a mean use to put a camera to.

-- Bruce Downes

As a photographer, Frank shows contempt for any standards of quality or discipline in technique: as a poet he is too ready to lapse into the jargon of propaganda.

-- Arthur Goldsmith (*Popular Photography*, 55-61)

The level of this vitriol could not have come entirely as a surprise to Frank. Only a short while after Jason Epstein sought to test whether government censors would intervene in *Lolita's* publication by introducing excerpts from the novel in *The Anchor Review* accompanied by a somewhat defensive essay by Nabokov, "ON A BOOK ENTITLED *LOLITA*" (which then became the published book's afterword), Frank saw the publication of a selection of photographs that would be in *The Americans* in *US Camera Annual 1958*, accompanied by a somewhat defensive essay by Frank's friend and mentor Walker Evans. Evans admits in his essay that the criticism of American life in Frank's work could be seen as unremitting -- "This bracing, almost stinging manner is seldom seen in a sustained collection of photographs" (*US Camera Annual 1958*, 23) -- but defends it by quoting from a George Santayana essay about the United States:

The critic and the artist too have their rights....Moreover, I suspect that my feelings are secretly shared by many people in America, natives and foreigners, who may not have the courage or the occasion to express them frankly. (*US Camera Annual 1958*, 23)

In hindsight, the reasons *Lolita* did not excite any critical indignation -- or even, as I will try to show, much in the way of critical examination -- for its depiction of America seem more or less obvious. As Erik Erikson's reference suggests, fiction - especially fiction narrated by a *soi-disant* madman -- possesses certain immunities that a collection of photographs does not. Nabokov certainly did go to great lengths himself to sample as broad a swath of American culture, particularly road culture, as he could. Like Frank, Nabokov collected his raw material on cross-country drives, in his case using his summertime treks to prime butterfly-collecting sites in the West to explore the sort of motels, diners, and tourist attractions that Humbert Humbert and *Lolita* encounter on their journeys. In the summer of 1953, for example, he chose his summertime destination, Oregon, specifically because he hadn't been there before and he wanted to, in Brian Boyd's words, "make Humbert Humbert defile with his 'sinuous trail of slime' every state in America" (Boyd, 224). But trying to separate American "reality" from Humbert Humbert's warped perception of it in understanding the novel's agenda is not easy, and to attempt to do so too rigorously would be to put Descartes before the horse, as it were. And too, critics were more likely occupied with other issues in the novel, such as the fact that it can be read as an apologia for the abduction, forced captivity, and repeated rape of a young girl by a pedophile, to be offended by *Lolita's* representation of America. Also, Nabokov attempted to nullify any such criticism by addressing it preemptively in "ON A BOOK ENTITLED *LOLITA*," in which he claims that the "charge...that *Lolita* is anti-American....pains me

considerably more than the idiotic accusation of immorality” (Nabokov, 315), and that the “philistine vulgarity” (Nabokov, 315) of the novel’s towns, highways, motels and roadside attractions is no better or worse than philistine vulgarity the world over, only different. Unlike Frank, Nabokov does not expose himself by claiming to see America in the round through foreign eyes; he takes the opposite tack, adopting a pose of humility: “I am trying to be an American writer and claim only the same rights that other American writers enjoy” (Nabokov, 315). In the first season of *Lolita*’s American publication, the fall of 1958 -- a time in which it received an extraordinary amount of media attention -- only one national magazine, *New Republic*, carried any explicit denunciation of its depiction of America. The magazine’s opening editorial of its October 27, 1958 issue claimed that the “morals” to be drawn from *Lolita* constituted an unbalanced critique of American culture:

The first moral (it could be called a justified inference) is that by the age of 12 one American girl (and how many others between 9 and 15?) has already been “hopelessly depraved” by “modern co-education, juvenile mores, the campfire racket and so forth” (Nabokov’s words) and that whatever indignities and brutalities are inflicted upon her thereafter add little or nothing to her degradation.... The second moral is that prolonged assault of a 12-year-old, though horrible, is no more sordid than what Mr. Nabokov calls the “philistine vulgarity of the American scene” [*sic*. This is an incorrect and inflammatory distortion of a line from “ON A BOOK ENTITLED *LOLITA*.”] which he finds exhilarating. What happens to *Lolita* blends into and is not of a different order from the middle-class squalor of endless motels and jukeboxes.” (*New Republic*, 3)

Although the editorial’s second charge -- that *Lolita* holds that the rape of a minor is no worse an assault in its way than American popular culture’s steady barrage -- is overwrought, its first -- that *Lolita* Haze has been vulgarized by a diet of pop culture -

- is hard to refute. If Nabokov had had as purely anthropological an agenda as Frank, he might have called the novel *An American Girl*, or *An American Romance*, and made the point more plainly -- but that would have made him, like Frank, a stationary target.

Surprisingly few scholars or critics have dealt in any substantial way with how Nabokov's works represent American life and culture. Occasional mention is made of an undercurrent of cultural critique in Nabokov's works, but little attention is paid to how the forces of culture shape his characters. This absence of thoughtful commentary has been pointed out by David Rampton in the beginning of his book *Vladimir Nabokov: A Critical Study of the Novels*, a book published twelve years ago whose claim is still valid. Rampton argues that the norms and values of mass or popular culture are lampooned and critiqued in all of Nabokov's novels: those written in Russian, in which the critique is largely directed against the values of *mitteleuropean* Berliners, and those written in English as well. Rampton notes that, interestingly, early Russian-émigré critics writing about Nabokov's Russian language novels when they first appeared *did* notice this tendency.(1) He goes on to make the general point that

Nabokov's émigré critics discussed the form and content of his novels together....It is important to understand this in order to appreciate the shift that has occurred, for modern critics of Nabokov's novels, if one were to sum up their interests in a single sentence, have placed the emphasis squarely on the formal qualities of the work. (Rampton, 12)

A survey of the significant book-length criticism of Nabokov's body of work published in the last thirty years supports this claim. The title of the first book-length

study of Nabokov's novels, Page Stegner's, in 1966, sets the tone: *Escape into Aesthetics*. The book advances the thesis that Nabokov regards art and private passion as an escape from the sordidness of external reality to a world of beauty and imagination. Four years later, Julia Bader's *Crystal Land: Artifice in Nabokov's English Novels* makes a related point: that through their use of artists and artistry, Nabokov's novels illuminate and approximate artistic creation, that they are self-contained worlds which incorporate and reshape the reader's conception of art. "Nabokov's novels," Bader declares, "are mainly concerned with the artistic imagination and consciousness." Later, in apparent backlash against this conception that Nabokov's novels were games created by a brilliant aesthete who lacked a certain natural sympathy for the plight of his inferiors, a cluster of critical works appeared in the early 1980's that set out to defend the morality of Nabokov's fiction. Ellen Pifer's 1980 book *Nabokov and the Novel* declares its intent to be a defense of the morality of Nabokov's fiction against this "steady barrage of criticism [that] has, for half a century, accompanied the frequent praise" (Pifer, 3). As it related to *Lolita* this defense amounts in Laurie Clancy's 1984 *The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov* to a determination to prove that the novel is a journey of moral progress for Humbert, that his is a more empathetic, a better consciousness at novel's end than at its beginning. In the 1983 book *Nabokov's Novels in English*, Lucy Maddox uses Humbert Humbert as the supreme example of her thesis that "the real subject of [Nabokov's] novels" is "that compulsive need to possess the world beyond the self, to possess it sexually and intellectually" (Maddox, 22). Maddox's book frames *Lolita* and the rest of Nabokov's

novels written in English as descriptions of the worldly costs of (usually obsessive) desire. David Packman's 1982 study *Vladimir Nabokov: The Structure of Literary Desire* calls this opposition, between those who would see Nabokov's work as amoral and those who would insist on a moral dimension to it, a false one, arguing that Nabokov is both a creator of intricate literary games *and* a writer with a manifest sense of right and wrong. However false the opposition may be, it still keeps Nabokov critics occupied: the following is a quote taken from the promotional copy on the dust jacket of the most recent significant book-length study of Nabokov's work, Michael Wood's *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction*: "Wood argues that Nabokov is neither the aesthete he liked to pretend to be nor the heavy-handed moralist recent critics make him" (Wood, dustjacket). Left out of almost all Nabokov criticism is an accounting of Nabokov's representation of American life and culture in his work.

There *is* one significant critic to whom David Rampton's charge does not apply, however, and that is Alfred Appel. In his 1971 *Nabokov's Dark Cinema*, and to a much lesser extent in his later *Signs of Life*, Appel devotes a great deal of time to the idea that *Lolita* is a critique, in his mind devastating, of American culture. He writes, "Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), a vision of the 1947-52 period, succeeds better than any other postwar American novel in its rendering of the ways in which songs, ads, magazines, and movies create and control their consumers" (Appel, *Nabokov's Dark Cinema*, 15). And later in the book: "*Lolita* stands alone among postwar American novels in its uncompromising yet controlled dramatization of the manner in which the iconography of popular culture forms or twists its consumers" (Appel, *Nabokov's*

*Dark Cinema*, 107). This paper owes Appel's *Nabokov's Dark Cinema* a great debt for the illuminating comparisons it makes between *Lolita* and Robert Frank's *The Americans*. *Nabokov's Dark Cinema* supports the claim that both *Lolita* and *The Americans* are critiques of American consumer culture, specifically, of the power of mass media to mold its consumers. *Nabokov's Dark Cinema* also makes mention of how both works foreground the power of the automobile in American life, though it does not in any way expand or elaborate on the idea.

The initial notoriety of *The Americans* notwithstanding, Robert Frank's work has generated far less sustained critical attention than Vladimir Nabokov's, and it is correspondingly more difficult to position a discussion of *The Americans* against a standing body of critical work. This relative dearth reflects many things. For one, the book-length photographic essay was and is not an art form that elicits the same response in our culture that the much older form of the novel does. Also, there is not an academic photography criticism industry in this country of anything resembling the dimensions of the academic literary criticism industry. For photographers' work, the loci for critical discussion are gallery shows, which (for an artist of Frank's stature) usually generate -- in addition to the reviews in the newspapers and magazines that devote space to exhibit review -- exhibit catalogs, the texts of which usually consist of a biographical essay and an essay of homage to the body of work on view. Also, Frank's output of new work, never prodigious before *The Americans*, would stop altogether after the book's publication. *The Americans* is a landmark in the history of American photography: it is identified as such in almost every book-length survey of

American photography; since a new edition was published in 1978 (which was announced in a *Newsweek* review as the “Return of a Classic”)(*Newsweek*, page 63), it has remained in print; and it was the centerpiece of a retrospective on Robert Frank’s work initiated by the National Gallery of Art that toured the country in 1994, accompanied by a large companion book.(2)

However *The Americans* has been perceived, it does, like *Lolita*, represent an America in which the automobile and the highway function as the dominant symbols of a widely-held value system. *The Americans*, as Sarah Greenough points out, is divided into four sections, each beginning with a photograph of a flag (Greenough, *Moving Out*, 113); the automobile dominates all four of these sections. Twenty of the book’s eighty-three images involve the car or the highway centrally, compared to five for the American flag, for example. From the second image of the book, which features several men leaning against a parked car, with a number of parked cars arranged haphazardly in the near distance behind them, to the book’s parting shot, of a car pulled over on the side of the road, its passengers slumped wearily against the inside of the front passenger-side door, the car is the back-beat of the collection, the reference point that Frank returns to again and again. More than that, though, the car unifies the photos in the book because it appears in a variety of different contexts, takes on a number of different meanings, as will be shown. Rich or poor, urban or rural, black or white, young or old, the Americans of *The Americans* are never very far from their cars.

Frank's photographs explain why that would be. They often glow with a sense of cars' glamour. Through careful juxtapositions, both of images within a composition and of compositions within the collection, Frank connects the car to universal human concerns, particularly of sex and death, and to the promise of transcending these concerns, as through a religion. The connection between the automobile and Christianity is made particularly emphatically. Frequently, the car and the highway are used almost as props in a modern-day passion play. In "Santa Fe, New Mexico" (Fig. 1)(Frank, *The Americans*, 93), a composition that appears toward the middle of the book, a large, unlit neon "Save" sign looms in the left-hand side of the picture over a squadron of beat-up gas pumps in the foreground; the highway is in the background. The religious undertones of the "Save" sign are brought out by Frank's use, toward the end of the book, in "Chicago" (Fig. 2) (Frank, *Americans*, 167), of a shot taken from behind of a gleaming Pontiac with a round "Christ Came to Save Sinners" sticker attached above the license plate and a rectangular "Christ Died For Our Sins" sticker in the rear-view window. The light reflecting down on the car cuts the picture into two discrete sections, each of which is dominated by one of these evangelizing Christian propaganda stickers. Americans look to their cars for salvation, Frank's images say. Frank's Americans themselves see their cars as signs to be read by the outside world, surfaces on which it is appropriate to affix messages expressing their deepest spiritual convictions.

The "Save" sign over the gas pumps is part of a sequence of images that illustrates how Frank creates a melody of themes out of a sequence of images, playing

images off of each other in such a way that a complex of formal and contextual issues emerges out of shots that are in themselves more ambiguous and polysemous. The image immediately preceding the “Save” sign, “Luncheonette -- Butte, Montana” (Fig. 3)(Frank, *Americans*, 91), quietly suggests Christianity by drawing the eye to the arrangement of bumpers in the center of a bumperpool table: they clearly form a cross. Here, religion and politics are conflated: the eye rises from the cross of bumpers to a series of political campaign posters arranged in a row against the wall behind the far end of the table. This is followed by the above-mentioned “Save” sign, to whose religious *double-entendre* the reader is sensitized by the image that precedes it. The “save” composition is shot in such a way that the images point the eye toward the right side of the page; followed by a composition called “Bar -- New York City” (Fig. 4) (Frank, *Americans*, 95) which more emphatically flings the eye off the right side of the page: it has captured the left arm of a man who is crossing the camera’s line of sight, seemingly in a hurry, into the area of a bar outside of the camera’s line of sight to the right. The shot has captured the man’s movement in such a way that he almost seems to flee the object at the dead center of the composition, a large, eerily glowing jukebox. Then, on the next page, “Elevator -- Miami Beach” (Fig. 5)(Frank, *Americans*, 97), the eye is thrown back to the left, drawn to the face of a sullen woman gazing leftward into the distance as she operates an elevator in what appears to be a luxury high-rise of some sort; then again to the right, on the next page, “Restaurant -- US 1 leaving Columbia, South Carolina” (Fig. 6)(Frank, *Americans*, 99), in which all lines converge on a television screen, on which a man in a suit, a

newscaster or game show host by the looks of him, is captured staring off-screen to the right.

Then, three images follow that insist on wresting the eye to the left, beginning with “Drive-in movie -- Detroit” (Fig. 7)(Frank, *Americans*, 101), an image that mixes the automobile, the movie, and religion, for the shot is of row upon row of clean, streamlined cars reverentially aligned to face a drive-in movie screen that is imbued -- because the quality with which the dying light of the evening sun suffuses the clouds in the background -- with the aura of an open-air cathedral. This is followed by “Mississippi River, Baton Rouge, Louisiana” (Fig. 8)(Frank, *Americans*, 103), which captures a black priest in a white robe and soft cotton cap kneeling on a cardboard box and facing left, toward the Mississippi River, Bible in one hand and cross in another. The composition is divided in two by the sharp edge of the riverbank, which cuts across the photograph horizontally: land and water are connected only by the kneeling man’s intensely white cross. This image is followed immediately by another image that draws the eye toward a man holding a cross, facing left. This image, “St. Francis, gas station, and City Hall -- Los Angeles,”(Fig. 9) (Frank, *Americans*, 105) is quite different, however, for the man is a statue -- St. Francis -- and it is an urban shot, in which the saint appears to be addressing the blessing of his cross over a landscape of parked cars shimmering in the heat and haze of the mid-day sun in the background. And this sequence (artificially designated as such) concludes on a full stop, with a still, arresting image of a beam of sunlight lancing down from clouds that hang low over a deserted highway. The sun touches the edge of the leftmost of three wooden crosses

painted on the near side of the road, clearly in commemoration of the victims of an accident of some kind. Here, in these eight images arranged in sequence, can be seen the manner in which Frank cross-pollinates his images, mixing together the car, Christianity, radio, television, the movies, and death into a sequence that taken as a whole moves the eye around the page in a way that further conveys the energy, the power of its thematic concerns. The car and the road gain an ideological charge from these affiliations, becoming linked to a sense of longing for the unattainable, the transcendent. The link between religion, mass media, and the car, though not overt, is extremely powerful; as a result, the car assumes an aura of glamour -- literally, of a spell.

The five images that fall on pages 73, 75, 77, 79 and 81 of *The Americans* communicate what Frank uses the car to signify and how he uses it. The first composition, "US 91, leaving Blackout, Idaho" (Fig. 10)(Frank, *Americans*, 73), captures the profiles of two grim-faced young men in the front of a car or truck. Frank is so close to the passenger of the car that he almost seems to be in the cab with him, yet the man stares sullenly into space as if oblivious to his presence. The driver, slightly older, wearing a jean jacket and baseball hat, leans forward intently over the steering wheel. He also seems oblivious to the camera. Both men face forward, eyes fixed on the approaching road, yet there is a tension to the composition that comes out of the way they are separated; Frank has shot them so that one is in an entirely different plane than the other. They are connected only in that they share in the

claustrophobia of the setting: Frank has shot this so that the roof seems to be pressing down on them, and the dashboard pressing up.

Frank uses this pose frequently -- the flat, side view of people in a car, captured in such a way that they seem reduced by the machines that surround them, pinched, often embittered. In "Motorama -- Los Angeles" (Fig. 11)(Frank, *Americans*, 31), for example, three bored and sulky young boys slouch in the seat of a shiny parked car. None of the boys is paying any attention to another in this image, and they have been photographed so that the variance in the degree of light each receives -- one fully lit, one half in shadow, one entirely in shadow -- increases the overall feeling of isolation in communion, of the sterility of their social exchange. In "Butte, Montana" (Fig. 12)(Frank, *Americans*, 39), a hard-faced woman glowers suspiciously out of the front passenger-side car window, as a young, bedraggled girl, perhaps her daughter, leans forward from the back seat to peer out of the rear corner of the same window. The effect of these two dour faces squeezed so tightly into the small rectangle of this front window is one of compression, discomfort. The space created within Frank's cars is anything but pleasant or liberating -- the car is represented predominantly as an imprisoning, dehumanizing space.

Frank follows "US 91, leaving Blackfoot, Idaho" with "St. Petersburg, Florida"(Fig. 13) (Frank, *Americans*, 75), a marvelous found irony of speed and stasis, newness and decrepitude: in the foreground are two benches, back to back, filled with wizened, sour retirees, several of them hunched over with osteoporosis. A man and a woman on the left bench and two men talking together on the near side of the right

bench form two straight lines, between which is emphasized the solitary figure of the feeblest-looking and most sour looking member of the tableau, a sagging woman with a cigarette in her right hand. In the street above the bench in the composition, flashing horizontally atop this scene of people at the end of their lives, is a shiny two-tone convertible, moving at speed from left to right. It is sleek; it radiates youth and prosperity. No one on the bench pays it the slightest attention: it is as if it is of a different world. Frank follows this image with “Covered car -- Long Beach, California” (Fig. 14)(Frank, *Americans*, 77), a photo of a low-slung sports car shrouded by a tarpaulin, flanked by two lush palm trees and parked in front of a low building. This car could be the convertible from the previous image: the scene conveys a sense of wealth, of Mediterranean glamour, and yet the effect is also quite somber, even funereal. This Frank follows with “Car accident -- US 66, between Winslow and Flagstaff, Arizona” (Fig. 15)(Frank, *Americans*, 79). It is a grim, gray shot of the shrouded body of an accident victim lying on the side of the highway, with four people looking on behind it, and several ramshackle dwellings in the far background. The link between the shrouded sports car of the previous shot and this shrouded corpse is unmistakable, and both shots are connected to the shot before of the convertible and the retirees on the bench: new car horizontal across the page; shrouded car horizontal across the page; shrouded bodies horizontal across the page. As he is wont to do, Frank breaks this horizontal motion, begun in that first image of the two young men staring ahead into the right-hand margin of the page, with his next image, a severe vertical full-stop, “US 285, New Mexico” (Fig. 16)(Frank, *Americans*,

81). It is a lonely shot of a ribbon of stark, empty highway, stretching far into the distance at the top of the page until it becomes a small speck. A car is approaching, but is still so far away that it too is only a dot, and it underscores the loneliness of the composition rather than ameliorating it. These five images work together to suggest that the car is an agent of death, of class divisiveness, and of isolation.

*The Americans* ends with a torrent of images of cars, arranged in such a way, not to undercut the effect of sequences such as these two above, but to inject a sense of sympathy toward the car and its owners, an ambiguity about its role, that adds another layer to our understanding of its position in American culture as Frank sees it. National Gallery of Art photography curator Sarah Greenough has stated that the final section of the book is all about alienation and man's lack of physical and spiritual connection to his community or his environment (Greenough, *Moving Out*, 113), but in fact this final section contains the most sympathetic portrayals of people interacting in healthy social relationships of the collection -- lovers, friends, family members. The final eight images of the book suggest a more nuanced attitude toward the automobile, beginning with "Belle Isle, Detroit" (Fig. 17)(Frank, *Americans*, 163), a photograph of two well-dressed black men in the front seat of a convertible, with four young black boys in the back seat, gazing out, obviously delighted at the passing scene. Everything about this photograph suggests openness, speed: the top is down on the convertible, and it is moving fast enough that the boys' faces are slightly blurred. Far from engulfing its passengers, the car is dominated by them -- we can actually see only a thin ribbon of its body at the bottom of the image. Given the more mordant uses to

which the convertible has been put by Frank earlier in the book, this image suggests a concession: perhaps the idea of the car as a liberating force in people's lives is not entirely an illusion.

But then, in a typical Frank juxtaposition, comes the next image, "Detroit"(Fig. 18)( Frank, *Americans*, 165). It is another side view into the rectangle of a car window, in which an elderly man, driving, and his passenger, a woman, probably his wife, squint flatly ahead. Again the rectangle constricts the car's occupants, reduces them. The preceding photo communicates motion, excitement; here, the effect is torpor -- this, Frank seems to be saying, is the other Detroit. The convertible moves from left to right, and this car moves from right to left, so a feeling is given that the two cars are going to collide on the blank page that separates them. Frank follows "Detroit" with "Chicago" (Fig. 2)(Frank, *Americans*, 167), the previously mentioned photograph of a glistening Pontiac, shot from the rear in a way that focuses the eye on two Christian *pronunciamentos* calling out from stickers affixed to the car. If the two Detroit images form a couplet, this photograph forms a couplet with the one that follows it, "Public Park -- Ann Arbor, Michigan" (Fig. 19)(Frank, *Americans*, 169). Here, we have moved from slogans about sin and death on a blank and empty car to an image of two happy, frolicking, scantily clad couples lolling, entwined, on blankets in front of their cars, clearly in a sort of lover's lane popular for the purpose. From using the car to demand prudery to using it to permit prurience, these two photos capture the range of possibilities the car can embrace in *The Americans*.

Then come two tender photographs of young lovers on public display: “City Hall, Reno, Nevada” (Fig. 20)(Frank, *Americans*, 171), in which happy newlyweds embrace in the center of what is clearly a makeshift chapel -- flowers tied to a bench to the left, public water fountain to the right; and “Indianapolis” (Fig. 21)(Frank, *Americans*, 173), a photograph of a proud couple astride their gilded Harley Davidson motorcycle, both clothed in suitable biker apparel -- denim and leather. A line of people behind them seems to stare enviously. Here, too, we have an image of people buying into the fantasy, the myth that has accrued to this particular piece of machinery, the motorcycle, specifically the Harley Davidson -- the myth of toughness, of open sexuality. And these people are black, which is never a casual observation in this book: it is a topic for another paper, but the blacks in this collection who are depicted in segregated, outside-the mainstream social groups seem self-possessed, content, whereas the ones who are depicted in social arrangement, usually clearly submissive, with whites, seem more beaten down. This couple may have received its cues about what riding a motorcycle signifies to the world from mass media, or they may not have, but the emotion Frank engenders here is far more complicated than scorn. One critic has observed that “Frank used the automobile and the road as metonymic metaphors of the American cultural condition, which he envisioned every bit as pessimistically as postmodernists do today” (Grundberg, 15), and certainly to a large extent that’s true, but the blanket statement does not allow for Frank’s appreciation of the humanity of his subjects.

The book's final image, "US 90, en route to Del Rio, Texas" (Fig. 22)(Frank, *Americans*, 175) is appropriate to a collection of images haunted by the car and to one whose conclusions about it are fraught with ambiguity. It is an image of Robert Frank's family, huddled, exhausted, in the front seat of their car. Frank's wife Mary is awake; his son and daughter appear to be asleep in her arms. The car is pulled to the side of the road. The lights are on. Frank has taken the photo from the front in such a way that the car is cut in half -- we only see the passenger side: not only is the car stopped, then, but its ability to move has been neutered. There is no steering wheel in the shot, nor are there wheels. The promise of the car as vehicle of liberation, of sex, even of death, seems absurd. What is important in this image is not the car; it is Frank's family, tired and unremarkable as they seem. This image, which brings the collection to a screeching halt, brings a halt, too, to the power of the nexus of overblown fantasy images woven throughout the preceding pages. But it is not an entirely negative image. Like the images that immediately precede it, it suggests that however ground down Americans are, they can yet achieve transcendence, not through mass-produced fantasy, not through escaping somewhere else in a car, but through social relationships, through sincere engagement with other human beings. By inscribing his family inside his representation of America, Frank the artist puts himself on an equal level with his subjects; he is not superior to them, he is among them. And by placing a domestic tableau of his family inside their *car*, and by placing the image last, he suggests that at the end of his project of attempting to apprehend America, he has become more of an American himself.

In *Lolita*, too, the car is the literal and figurative vehicle Americans use to transcend their environment, if only temporarily; and in *Lolita*, too, the transformative power that Americans ascribe to entering this space -- the car, the road -- is seen as a fiction, an ideological construct central to their conception of "the good life." In *Lolita*, even more strongly than *The Americans*, the car is used as an escape vehicle -- a means of avoiding the consequences of one's actions. At every turn in the novel, the automobile offers liberation of one form or another. Immediately after Charlotte Haze discovers Humbert's diary, and with it, to her horror, the true nature of his feelings for her and her daughter, she is run over by a car and killed, instants before she can stuff a handful of incriminatory letters into the corner mailbox -- only the first instance of a car liberating Humbert to follow the dictates of his obsession for Lolita. The novel sets up two parallel escapes from stultifying society through the car: first Humbert escapes the smug, insular New England town of Ramsdale, and his sham marriage to Charlotte, by abducting Lolita and going on an intoxicating, routeless, out-of-control months-long cross-country road trip with her.

In the latter half of the book, it is Lolita who uses the road trip to escape. After the first spree has spent itself, Humbert and Lolita land in Beardsley, a city as bourgeois and insular in its way as Ramsdale, and there Lolita is enrolled in the "progressive" Beardsley School. Now it is Lolita who engineers her flight, from this town, from the constraints of formal schooling, and from another sham family relationship, the father-daughter one. Lolita also uses the car, hatching a plot with Clare Quilty whereby she convinces Humbert to take her out of school, out of

Beardsley and out on the road in their car in another aimless cross-country marathon road trip. Quilty tails them, and when the opportunity presents itself, snatches her from Humbert's clutches. It is significant that these car trips never have a final destination: the automobile is the literal and figurative vehicle for the fulfillment of the characters' pangs of longing, as it is in Frank's photographs. After Quilty abducts Lolita, Humbert sets off on his most fevered car ride of the book, consumed by his need to find Lolita and exact his revenge on her still-unknown abductor.

There are two geographic zones in *Lolita*, then: the community -- or "society" -- and the road, where one goes when one wishes to flee from society, usually because one finds its limitations and proscriptions intolerable. (A third zone in the novel is the imagination -- the only zone in which Humbert does achieve some form of transcendence.) Ramsdale and Beardsley represent generic "Everytowns" -- the Hazes live on generic "Lawn Street" -- and their bourgeois mores are to be understood as typical. The automobile makes this sort of escape possible, in the same way that Huckleberry Finn and Jim's raft on the Mississippi enables them to flee Cairo. (Such is their intent, anyway, though of course they don't realize until it's too late that their raft is in fact taking them further into slave territory.)

Nabokov and Frank obviously aren't the only artists of their time in whose work the automobile functions as a means of escaping society. The historical moment they capture, America in the late 1940's and early 1950's, saw, because of unprecedented post-war prosperity, cheap gasoline, and the fact that the television both glamorized and made safe the idea of driving to far-off destinations, an explosion

in the number of cars on the highway, in the number of people with the time and means to take sightseeing vacations in their cars, and in the number of motels, roadside diners, curio stands and other tourist-servicing businesses. But whereas in *The Americans* and *Lolita*, the open road offers no cheap solace or enlightenment for those seeking escape from their suffocating social bonds, one work in particular written about the same time speaks with a different, more romantic voice, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. *On the Road* is the sort of novel that has for years inspired young people to set out across country in cars in bacchanalian voyages of self-discovery, burning with that same gemlike flame to try to outrace the sunset that pushed wild Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise.<sup>(3)</sup> In *On the Road*, there is no agenda to represent "conventional" American mores and habits, in the way there is in *The Americans* and *Lolita*; *Lolita* offers a road map of "typical" tourist behaviors, for example, while *On the Road* takes place off the map, in an underground America of the romanticized disenfranchised.

Pace Leslie Fiedler's well-known thesis in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, *On the Road* is part of that vaguely homoerotic American tradition of men leaving the world of women and going off into the wilderness to be alone with each other (e.g. *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Moby Dick*.), whereas *Lolita* fits more easily into the Continental tradition of plots driven by improper sexual relationships that rupture the social fabric (e.g. *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*, and Nabokov's own *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Invitation to a Wedding*, *Invitation to a Feast*, and *Invitation to a Journey*). But *Lolita* in fact blends these two strains into a hybrid, appropriate to the work of a European émigré

embracing his adoptive country. Lionel Trilling makes a distinction between American and English fiction in an essay entitled “An American View of English Literature” that is illuminating. He writes:

The difference [between English and American literature] lies in the way the two literatures regard society and the ordinary life of daily routine. As compared to American literature, British literature is defined by its tendency to take society for granted and then to go on to demonstrate its burdensome but interesting and valuable complexity. And American literature, in comparison with British, is defined by its tendency to transcend or circumvent the social fact and to concentrate upon the individual in relation to himself, to God, or to the cosmos, and, even when the individual stands in an inescapable relation to the social fact, to represent society and the ordinary life of daily routine not as things assumed and taken for granted but as problems posed, as alien and hostile to the true spiritual and moral life. (Epstein, 9-10)

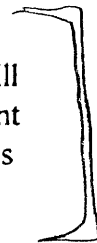
Without quibbling over how well or universally this comparison proves to hold up, Trilling’s description of American literature sums up precisely the spirit of *On the Road*. *Lolita*, on the other hand, engages in the “social fact” head-on, in Ramsdale and Beardsley, and at the same time features several ultimately futile attempts -- not counting the book itself -- to transcend that social fact. In the same way, *The Americans* juxtaposes images of ritualized communal behavior with those of isolated drivers and lonely highways. Both zones are negatively charged in different ways, and if one is privileged over the other it is the community; it is certainly not the highway.

In Frank’s long, lonely stretches of interstate and in Humbert and *Lolita*’s flights from Ramsdale and Beardsley, the car and the open road hold out the same fickle promise. In 1950, in the “Reflections on the American Identity” essay in *Childhood and Society*, Erik Erikson generalizes about what he sees as a quintessentially American urge to run away from society:

Historically the overdefined past was apt to be discarded for the undefined future; geographically, migration was an ever-present fact; socially, chances and opportunities lay in daring and luck, in taking full advantage of the channels of social mobility.... Today when there is so much demand for homes in defensively overdefined, overly standardized, and over-restricted neighborhoods, many people enjoy their most relaxed moments at crossroads counters, in bars, in and around automotive vehicles.... No country's population travels farther and faster. (Erikson, 304-305)

When Humbert goes on the road with Lolita, he's practically fulfilling an American cultural imperative. As perhaps was John Steinbeck, when he set out to explore America by road in a jerry-rigged trailer accompanied only by his loyal but mercurial poodle Charlie, an experience he would write about in the 1962 book *Travels With Charlie*, another well-known contemporaneous work in which a writer self-consciously sets out to experience the entire country. *Travels with Charlie* is nonfiction, and it can perhaps better be compared with *The Americans* than *Lolita* for that reason, but though Steinbeck writes in it of his desire to rekindle an understanding in himself of the essence of the American way of life, he makes clear that, unlike Robert Frank, he sees his vision of America as an individual and purely subjective one:

In this report I do not fool myself into thinking I am dealing with constants.... I cannot commend this account as an America that you will find. So much there is to see, but our morning eyes describe a different world than do our afternoon eyes, and surely our wearied evening eyes can report only a weary evening world. (Steinbeck, 77)



Still, like *The Americans*, *Travels with Charlie* is a self-conscious attempt to learn something about America by driving its length and breadth, meeting the people whose paths he crosses and learning their stories.

Such a purpose is antithetical to Humbert Humbert's. He is not interested in learning anything about America, and he certainly isn't interested in interacting with anyone. In fact, he does everything in his power to ensure that he and Lolita don't interact with anyone else on their journeys; the scenes in which they do -- when they are pulled over by the police for speeding, when two children and their mother stumble upon Humbert and Lolita picnicking on a blanket in a post-coital embrace, when a fellow hotel guest who has overheard the couple's strenuous nocturnal exertions through the bedroom wall sits next to Humbert at breakfast and teases him good-naturedly, when two spinsters behind them in a movie theater whisper evilly as Humbert snakes his arm around Lolita's shoulders -- are moments of pure, high terror for Humbert.

Humbert has two problems, how to keep himself and Lolita isolated and how to keep Lolita entertained, or at least distracted. Driving around the country on interstate highways in a sedan is the best solution to both problems available to him. Out on the road, Humbert and Lolita experience the passing scenery as a flash of surfaces. Humbert frequently catalogs their experiences in torrents, reeling off long, unconnected lists of roadside attractions, museums, natural wonders, eateries, and motels, and drives,

“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 as a young captive. A collection of a local lady's homemade sculptures, closed on a miserable Monday morning, dust, wind, witherland. Conception Park, in a town on the Mexican border which I dared not cross.  
(Nabokov, 157)

The insular, homogenized quality of car travel in America perfectly suits Humbert's needs. As he remarks, in summing up his and Lolita's first cross-country trip, "We had been everywhere. We had seen nothing" (Nabokov, 175).

In the family sedan, Lolita is Humbert's young captive. As long as they're in the car together, he is free from worries about her escape. It is when they have to stop that he must worry about her running off, or telling someone about their relationship. For that reason, he is careful to make sure that Lolita gets in the car and closes the door before he will tell her of her mother's death (Nabokov, 141). There's a correlation between the physical state of the car and the state of their relationship: at one point, Humbert has to take the car to a mechanic to be fixed, and Lolita uses the fact that she is hidden from Humbert by the car's raised hood to slip out of the gas station and rendezvous with Quilty.

The sites that Humbert and Lolita take in have no depth; they are two-dimensional, pure distraction, indistinguishable from the movies they see, or the magazines Lolita reads. The above "hundreds of scenic drives" are functionally equivalent to the "oh, I don't know, one hundred and fifty or two hundred programs (movies) [that Humbert and Lolita took in] during that one year." (Nabokov, 170). Lolita's favorite movies are musicals; Humbert describes the world of the Hollywood musical as "an essentially grief-proof sphere of existence wherefrom death and truth were banned" (Nabokov, 170). With that phrase, Humbert Humbert has also succinctly defined the sort of world he has hoped to engineer for Lolita and himself on the road in their car. The world Humbert creates for the two of them, a world in

which every person, place and event outside of themselves is seen as just that much more stimuli of the sort necessary to keep a *petite jeune fille moyen sensual* occupied, is a world without any moral consequences. Thus, Humbert is capable of listing the following as a sample of “our very best moments”:

When we sat reading on a rainy day..., or had a quiet hearty meal in a crowded diner, or played a childish game of cards, or went shopping, or silently stared, with other motorists and their children, at some smashed, blood-bespattered car with a young woman’s shoe in the ditch (Lo, as we drove on: “That was the exact type of moccasin I was trying to describe to that jerk in the store)... (Nabokov, 174)

There is no difference between reading, eating, game-playing, shopping, or staring at the aftermath of a gruesome and probably fatal car wreck. Humbert and Lolita are so far removed from the social realm that the evidence of another young woman’s sad fate makes an impression on her only in that it reminds her of an item of clothing she had wanted to buy. Instead of repulsing her, or saddening her, the sight of the woman’s moccasin fills her with longing for a moccasin of the same sort, previously denied her. This grisly scene has a visual equivalent in one of Robert Frank’s photographs that was taken during the same period in which the *The Americans* photographs were taken, but which Frank did not opt to include in the book. It is another of Frank’s found ironies, a photograph of a swiveling postcard rack with three levels of postcards to it. Frank has photographed the rack so as to capture the fronts of three postcards that are evenly lined up, one on top of the other: on the top, a postcard of the Grand Canyon; in the middle, a postcard of the Hoover Dam; and on the bottom, a postcard of the mushroom cloud from an atomic bomb blast. All three

phenomena have been reduced to two-dimensional kitsch in the form of these tourist momentos suspended in space at what appears to be a roadside stand (Frank, *Moving Out*, 211).

Humbert takes pains (needlessly -- Lolita sees right through him at every turn) to keep up an appearance of purpose about their drive, though the only purpose is to keep the two of them separated from society and its imperatives for as long as possible:

By putting the geography of the United States into motion, I did my best for hours on end to give her the impression of “going places,” of rolling on to some definite destination, to some unusual delight. I have never seen such smooth amiable roads as those that now radiated before us, across the crazy quilt of forty-eight states. Voraciously we consumed those long highways, in rapt silence we glided over their glossy black dance floors. (Nabokov, 152)

Humbert’s triumphant exuberance comes out of every line of the above: Lolita is in Humbert’s sole possession, and she is reasonably docile. The entire trip, in fact, is relayed in an air of cheery smugness. Humbert frequently describes tourist attractions and natural wonders in terms loaded with sexual *double-entendres*. He is a pure solipsist: wolfishly slaking his desire for Lolita on this trip, he sees the world around him as conspiring with him. Now, the roads are “amiable;” they are “glossy black dance floors.”

The second cross-country trip, on the other hand, the one from Beardsley that Lolita and Quilty, not Humbert, have masterminded, is in every way this trip’s dark double. Now, Humbert is being pursued, and we sense that the moment of Lolita’s being ripped from his clutches is drawing nigh. As Humbert’s hysterical anxiety

mounts, his descriptions of the highway become more fey and fantastical, as in the scene in which the fact of Quilty's pursuit becomes undeniable:

But next day, like pain in a fatal disease that comes back as the drug and hope wear off, there it was again behind us, that glossy red beast. The traffic on the highway was light that day; nobody passed anybody; and nobody attempted to get in between our humble blue car and its imperious red shadow -- as if there were some spell cast on that interspace, a zone of evil mirth and magic, a zone whose very precision and stability had a glass-like virtue that was almost artistic. The driver behind me, with his stuffed shoulders and trappish moustache, looked like a display dummy, and his convertible seemed to move only because an invisible rope of silent silk connected it with our shabby vehicle. We were so many times weaker than his splendid, lacquered machine, so that I did not even attempt to outspeed him. *O lente currite noctis equi!* *O softly run, nightmares!* We climbed long grades and rolled downhill again, and heeded speed limits, and spared slow children, and reproduced in sweeping terms the black wiggles of curves on their yellow shields, and no matter how and where we drove, the enchanted interspace slid on intact, mathematical, mirage-like, the viatic counterpart of a magic carpet. And all the time I was aware of a private blaze on my right.... (Nabokov, 219)

Now, Humbert is hoist on his own petard. The interstate highway has been a godsend to him, a zone of apartness in which he and Lolita are hermetically sealed from the outside world in their speeding car. On the American interstate highway system, they can and do manage to live for weeks and weeks at a stretch without any significant interaction with other human beings. In the above scene, however, Humbert experiences a fun-house mirror distortion of that isolation, the "interspace, a zone of evil mirth and magic." The need to be on alert for his pursuer also forces Humbert to leave his dream world and pay attention to the other cars around him, in a way he never did on the first trip:

The necessity of being constantly on the lookout for his little moustache and open shirt -- or for his baldish pate and broad shoulders

-- led me to a profound study of all cars on the road -- behind, before, alongside, coming, going, every vehicle under the dancing sun: the quiet vacationist's automobile with the box of Tender-Touch tissues in the back window; the recklessly speeding jalopy full of pale children with a shaggy dog's head protruding, and a crumpled mudguard; the bachelor's tudor sedan crowded with suits on hangers; the huge fat house trailer weaving in front, immune to the Indian file of fury boiling behind it; the car with the young female passenger politely perched in the middle of the front seat to be closer to the young male driver; the car carrying on its roof a red boat bottom up.... (Nabokov, 228)

This cross-section of members of the genus "American highway traveler," ending with an example of the sort of "normal" relationship a young woman in a car might be expected to be in, puts Humbert's growing hysteria in sharp relief

Quilty's taking Lolita from Humbert hoists him on his own petard in a larger sense, too. Humbert has kept Lolita distracted on their first extended road trip by relying on and shamelessly exploiting his understanding of her prototypical adolescent fantasy world, constructed from pulp movie fan magazines, romance magazines, penny dreadful novels, love songs on the radio and on juke boxes, and movies. If he's not taking her to a movie after sex, or letting her play the juke box ("The Lord knows how many nickels I fed to the gorgeous music boxes that came with every meal we had!" (Nabokov, 148)), he's buying her a magazine:

When she was ready at last, I...told her to buy herself a magazine in the lobby.... There, in the lobby, she sat, deep in an overstuffed blood-red armchair, deep in a lurid movie magazine.... I settled the bill and roused Lo from her chair. She read to the car. Still reading, she was driven to a so-called coffee shop a few blocks south. (Nabokov, 138-39)

Such pathos: An orphaned teen-aged girl tries to use movie-magazine fantasy as a shield to ward off the much uglier reality of the situation, that she has been raped (at

least statutorily) the night before by her mother's widower. One can imagine her willing her relationship with Humbert into the form of a movie-magazine love story: she'll play Deborah Kerr to Humbert Humbert's Cary Grant, and rough trade in The Enchanted Hunters hotel will magically become *An Affair to Remember*.

When he manipulates Lolita by playing on her mass-media-induced longings, Humbert undercuts his declarations of love for her, his professions of connecting with her on any plane higher than the sheerly physical. At such times, he is brutally frank about her intellectual limitations, her gullibility:

Mentally, I found her to be a disgustingly conventional little girl.... She believed with a kind of celestial trust any advertisement or advice that appeared in *Movie Love* or *Screen Land* -- Starasil Starves Pimples or "You better watch out if you're wearing your shirrtails outside your jeans, gals, because Jill says you shouldn't.".... She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster. (Nabokov, 148)

Clare Quilty is the perfect revenge on Humbert, because he outdoes him in every way in preying on Lolita's awe of images and ideas she receives from mass media. When Humbert inspects her room, he finds that she has taped to her wall two advertisements that she has ripped out of magazines. The first is an ad for a brand of men's robe: in it, a disheveled man, clearly a "haggard lover" (Nabokov, 69), wearing his natty robe, brings his mate breakfast in bed. "Lolita had drawn a jocose arrow to the haggard lover's face and had put, in block letters, H.H." (Nabokov, 69) Underneath this ad on her wall is another ad, though, a cigarette ad in which "distinguished playwright" Clare Quilty is photographed smoking Dromes cigarettes. "He always smoked Dromes," the ad communicates. Lolita finds Humbert so appealing in part because he *reminds* her

of a man in an ad. What chance, then can he have of competing against Quilty, who is himself in an ad, who is well enough known that he is paid by a cigarette company to be photographed smoking its product in a magazine? None, as Humbert will learn.

Appropriately, the ultimate symbol of Quilty's superiority to Humbert in Lolita's eyes is his car, the luxurious Aztec red convertible. In the same way that the red convertible conveys youth, vitality, and speed as contrasted with old age and failing health in Robert Frank's composition "St. Petersburg," Quilty's convertible is everything Humbert's car -- by his own admission, a "shabby vehicle" -- isn't; it is an "imperious red shadow" to Humbert's "humble blue car" (Nabokov, 219). Clare Quilty's car even appears to have magical powers, as in the scene in which Lolita and Humbert first espy it:

A row of parked cars, like pigs at a trough, seemed at first sight to forbid access; but then, by magic, a formidable convertible, resplendent, rubious in the lighted rain, came into motion -- was energetically backed out by a broad-shouldered driver -- and we gratefully slipped into the gap it had left. I immediately regretted my haste for I noticed that my predecessor had now taken advantage of a garage-like shelter nearby where there was ample space for another car; but I was too impatient to follow his example.... "Wow! Looks swank," remarked my vulgar darling squinting at the stucco as she crept into the audible drizzle and with a childish hand tweaked loose the frock-fold that had stuck in the peach cleft...." (Nabokov, 117)

Though Humbert has no idea at this point who the driver in the car is, this is his first encounter with Quilty outside of Ramsdale (if he hasn't met Quilty before in Ramsdale -- in Kubrick's film, screenplay by Nabokov, he does see him -- he at least knows who he is), and already he is being upstaged: while Quilty steers his "posh" convertible to the safety of the garage, Humbert settles for a parking space that is in the rain. Lolita

coos at the broad-shouldered ad-man in his red convertible and moves her hand to her crotch, aroused by this mass-produced fantasy, as Humbert, next to her, is aroused almost to madness by her. Quilty and his car are both the stuff of magazine-ad fantasy: Lolita has accepted at face value the sexually charged language and imagery used by cigarette companies to sell their products.

In the value system bred into Lolita by the consumer culture at whose teat she sucks, even a car as “swank” as the shiny Aztec red convertible becomes obsolete and needs to be traded in. And so, of course, Quilty trades in the car for one different make and model after another:

A veritable Proteus of the highway, with bewildering ease he switched from one vehicle to another....He seemed to patronize at first the Chevrolet genus, beginning with a Campus Cream convertible, then going on to a small Horizon Blue sedan, and thenceforth fading into Surf Gray and Driftwood Gray. Then he turned to other makes and passed through a dull rainbow of paint shades.... (Nabokov, 227)

His automobiles, like everything else about his surface appearance, represent the *reductio ad absurdum* of what Lolita’s banal media influences have conditioned her to find desirable. That the car as the supreme symbol of Quilty’s omnipotence is taken to its extreme here is also a reflection of the way Humbert’s observations come to seem more and more distorted and fantastical as he speeds toward his doom, but it is also a stinging comment on planned obsolescence, and a reflection on the proliferation in a prosperous nation of meaningless distinctions between products that have to be imbued with meaning through marketing.

In *The Mechanical Bride*, published in 1951 and largely an angry diatribe about the spiritually crippling effect media, particularly advertising, has on Americans, Marshall McLuhan writes:

Ours is the first age in which many thousands of the best-trained individual minds have made it a full-time business to get inside the collective public mind. To get inside in order to manipulate, exploit, control is the object now. And to generate heat not light is the intention. To keep everybody in the helpless state engendered by prolonged mental rutting is the effect of many ads and much entertainment alike. (McLuhan, v)

Humbert Humbert preys on Lolita's "helpless state," but he is outclassed in that respect by a man with a bigger, newer, flashier car; a man who's *in* an ad, instead of just resembling someone in an ad; a playwright, not a writer manqué. Humbert wrote perfume ads for his uncle's company at one point, but in the American status hierarchy, ca. 1950's, writing plays might make one celebrated enough to be considered "selling" in an ad, but writing ads doesn't.

If Humbert's second road trip with Lolita, from Beardsley, is his increasingly pathetic attempt to recreate that first cross-country sojourn by car in all its madcap exhilaration and carnal release, then from the moment Lolita is abducted from him, the devolution into nightmare of his extended car ride outside of the bounds of any social order intensifies rapidly. The lists of made-up *double-entendre* names Quilty leaves behind in hotel registers to torment Humbert mirror, and parody, the catalogs of often erotically charged natural and manmade attractions Humbert and Lolita take in during the first trip. Humbert's relationship with Rita is also a cruel and grotesque mirror-image of what he shared with Lolita: his cross-country cruises with Rita over the

course of two years are in *her* car -- it is he who feels imprisoned by her, and who ultimately runs away from the relationship; and when they stop in a "hideous" (Nabokov, 259) hotel on the east coast, reminiscent of *The Enchanted Hunters*, they wake up to find a grotesque man ("One of his front teeth was gone, amber pustules grew on his forehead.") (Nabokov, 260) sleeping in their bed with them -- a far cry from the night at *The Enchanted Hunters* when he first consummates his relationship with Lolita.

Back in Ramsdale, now almost wholly deranged, Humbert walks through a graveyard and recalls the automobile accident that killed Charlotte Haze and liberated him to take flight with Lolita. Again, though, his recollection takes the form of a dark mirror image of the original event:

I turned into the cemetery and walked among the long and short stone monuments. *Bonzhur*, Charlotte. On some of the graves there were pale, transparent little national flags slumped in the windless air under the evergreens. Gee, Ed, that was bad luck -- referring to G. Edward Grammer, a thirty-five-year-old New York office manager who had just been arrayed on a charge of murdering his thirty-three-year-old wife, Dorothy. Bidding for the perfect crime, Ed had bludgeoned his wife and put her into a car. The case came to light when two country policemen on patrol saw Mrs. Grammer's new big blue Chrysler, an anniversary present from her husband, speeding crazily down a hill just inside their jurisdiction (God bless our good cops!) The car sideswiped a pole, ran up an embankment covered with beard grass, wild strawberry and cinquefoil, and overturned. The wheels were still gently spinning in the mellow sunlight when the officers removed Mrs. G.'s body. It appeared to be a routine highway accident at first. Alas, the woman's battered body did not match up with only minor damage suffered by the car. I did better. (Nabokov, 287-88)

In that the story of Edward G. Grammer's plot, by the sound of it culled from a tabloid newspaper or radio story that Humbert has come across, culminates with an

automobile running off the road and up a grassy embankment, Humbert's recollection of it echoes both the beginning and the end of his own epic car ride. The automobile that runs off the road and strikes Charlotte ends up "deep in evergreen shrubbery" (Nabokov, 97); similarly, in his final car ride, the final visual scene of the novel, Humbert, having just shot and killed Quilty, careens wildly away from Pavor Manor, violating every rule of the road -- driving on the wrong side into traffic, running a red light, speeding wildly, driving much too slowly -- until at last, "With a graceful movement I turned off the road, and after two or three big bounces, rode up a grassy slope, among surprised cows, and there I came to a gentle rocking stop." (Nabokov, 306-307)

It is only fitting that *Lolita*, like *The Americans*, ends with the image of a car driven off a road. By the end of the novel the liberating power of the car and the freedom of the open road have been shown to have a sinister side. Out on the interstate a middle-aged man can, with sufficient money, spend over a year in an intense physical relationship with a barely-pubescent girl without being detected. The end result of such a narcissistic fantasy, though, is self-destruction, in the form of a car crash. And Lolita? If the stolen years of her adolescence, spent in the company of two debased, amoral, cultured but depraved pedophiles, resulted in any small good, they stripped her of her starry-eyed illusions, her infatuation with mass culture and its products. This disillusionment was pretty thoroughly accomplished while she was still with Humbert in Beardsley, as he concedes, noting at one point that her "veritable passion" for the cinema "was to decline into tepid condescension during her second

high school year,” her last year with Humbert. What shows the change in Lolita most clearly is her choice of the kind, gentle, stolid Richard Schiller to be her husband -- a man as different from Clare Quilty as it is possible to be. Dick Schiller is deaf, and thus, like a hayseed Odysseus, immune to the juke box’s siren song. Lolita has come a long way from her days of lusting after the Aztec Red convertible: Dick and Dolly Schiller don’t even have a car. And in moving to Alaska, the Schillers go as far away from the forty-eight states as they can get and still be in the U.S.

Ironically, by the novel’s end Humbert, the European snob, the high-culture mandarin who has seeded his apologia with literary references in defense of pedophilia from Tristan and Iseult to E.A. Poe, displays more than Lolita Schiller does a consciousness infiltrated by American popular culture. As he considers the happy Schiller couple at home, exuding *gemütlich* hospitality, the thought “A beer ad.” flashes into his mind, seemingly uncontrollably (Nabokov, 273). Later, when he enters Quilty’s house, he thinks, “I could not help seeing the inside of [Quilty’s] festive and ramshackle castle in terms of ‘Troubled Teens,’ a story in one of her magazines” (Nabokov, 292-93). Humbert “could not help” using a magazine for teenage girls as a filter through which to see the home of his nemesis at the novel’s climactic moment: part of the price he has paid for shoveling pop-culture narcotics into Lolita to keep her docile is that he has not been able to escape getting hooked himself.

If *On the Road* is a quintessential American road novel, than *Lolita* is a quintessential anti-road novel. The main characters of both works use the car as a means of escaping the bounds of society and circumstance, but whereas in *On the*

*Road* there is much that is redeeming about the attempt, in *Lolita* it results in pure debacle for everyone involved. The illusion of almost sexual power and almost religious transcendence of place and time is just that, an illusion, and by novel's end the car has run off the road, its driver incarcerated. The driver of the Aztec Red has died a slow and painful death, and is unmourned. The woman Humbert calls the ideal consumer, Lolita, the character who bought into the false glitter of mass culture's prefabricated conceptions of romance, pays the heaviest price, and dies young, in childbirth, in a small and remote northern town. As an icon of freedom, power, and modernity, the shiny new car is not to be trusted, *Lolita* declares, as does *The Americans*. It can lead a person down the wrong road, into a zone of anomie and isolation. *Lolita* and *The Americans* reveal the highway and the car -- the new form of space and the machine that bears us there -- as icons of newly great and terrible stature in American culture, terrible because the promises that have been made for them are fraudulent, are spread throughout the country in such a way as to be extremely seductive, and are dangerous to those, like Lolita Haze, who believe in them too ardently. *Lolita* shows that they are even more dangerous to those, like Humbert Humbert, who feel they are immune to their power. Though he himself is blind to the fact, *Humbert* is the perfect consumer in the novel, not Lolita, who ends up poor and dead. Humbert essentially buys Lolita, or at least tries to, and is the driver until the bitter end, until he drives his battered Melmoth off the road -- appropriately, in the novel's last scene.

Like the final image in *The Americans*, this last scene is Nabokov's ultimate acknowledgment of the automobile's position in the American imagination. Again, though, the crucial difference is Frank's placement of his family -- and thus, by extension himself -- into his representation of this country, as the final component, the parting image of a work entitled *The Americans*. But by doing so, he humanizes the car, domesticates it, and leavens his critique with a note of hope. Nabokov, on the other hand, remains outside and far above his representation of America. This is fitting: the only areas of American life into which Nabokov ever inscribed himself, in his work (the end of *Pnin*) or in his life (Wellesley, Ithaca) were sheltered, rarefied academic communities, and even there he remained an outsider, preferring to sublet a succession of homes from other professors rather than buying one; once he was financially independent, he returned to Europe, and thenceforth came back to America infrequently. Robert Frank, on the other hand, has lived in the same American city -- New York, in Manhattan's East Village -- for the past forty years. The writer who claimed in "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*" "the same rights that other American writers enjoy" (Nabokov, 315), skimmed over the surface of America, while the photographer who highlighted his émigré status on his Guggenheim Fellowship application identified with his subject on a deeper level.



Fig. 1. Santa Fe, New Mexico

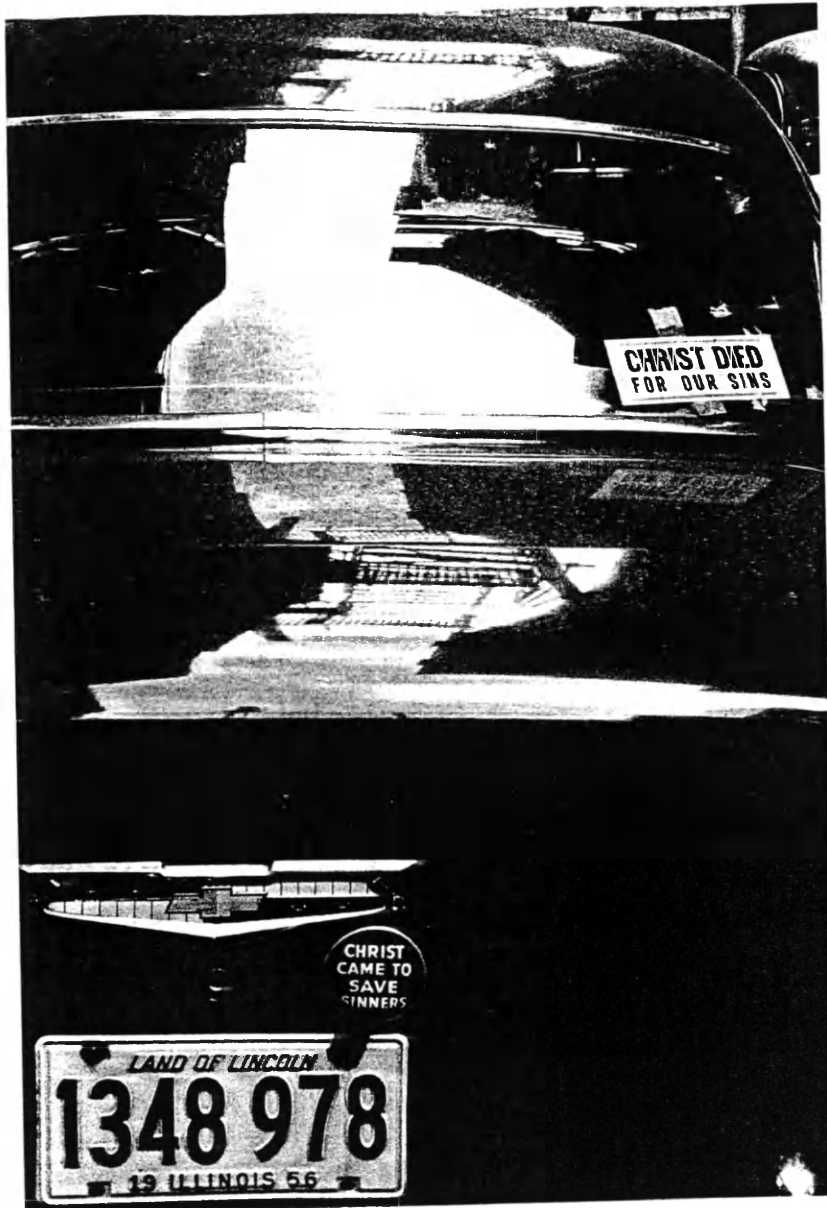


Fig. 2. Chicago.

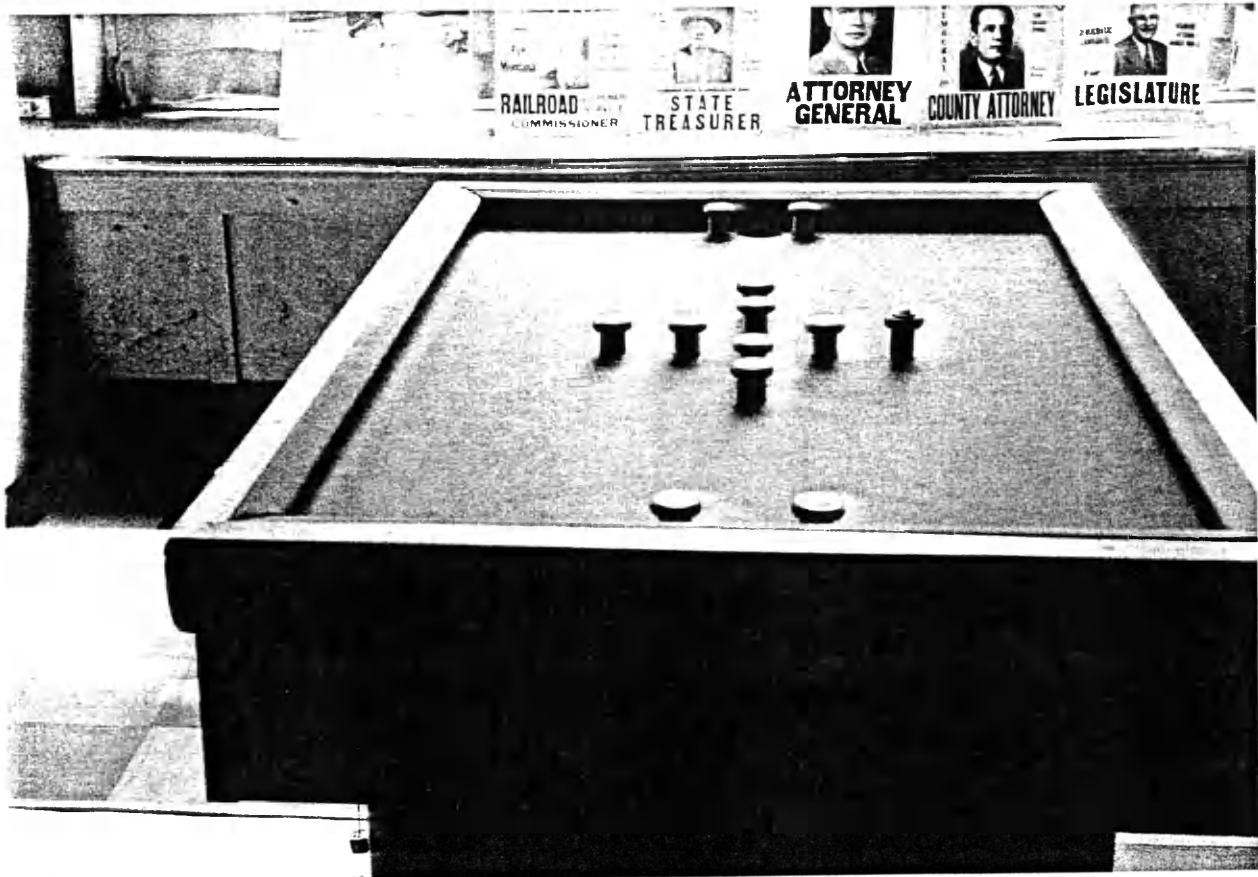


Fig. 3. Luncheonette -- Butte, Montana



Fig. 4. Bar -- New York City



Fig. 5. Elevator -- Miami Beach



Fig. 6. Restaurant -- US 1 leaving Columbia, South Carolina

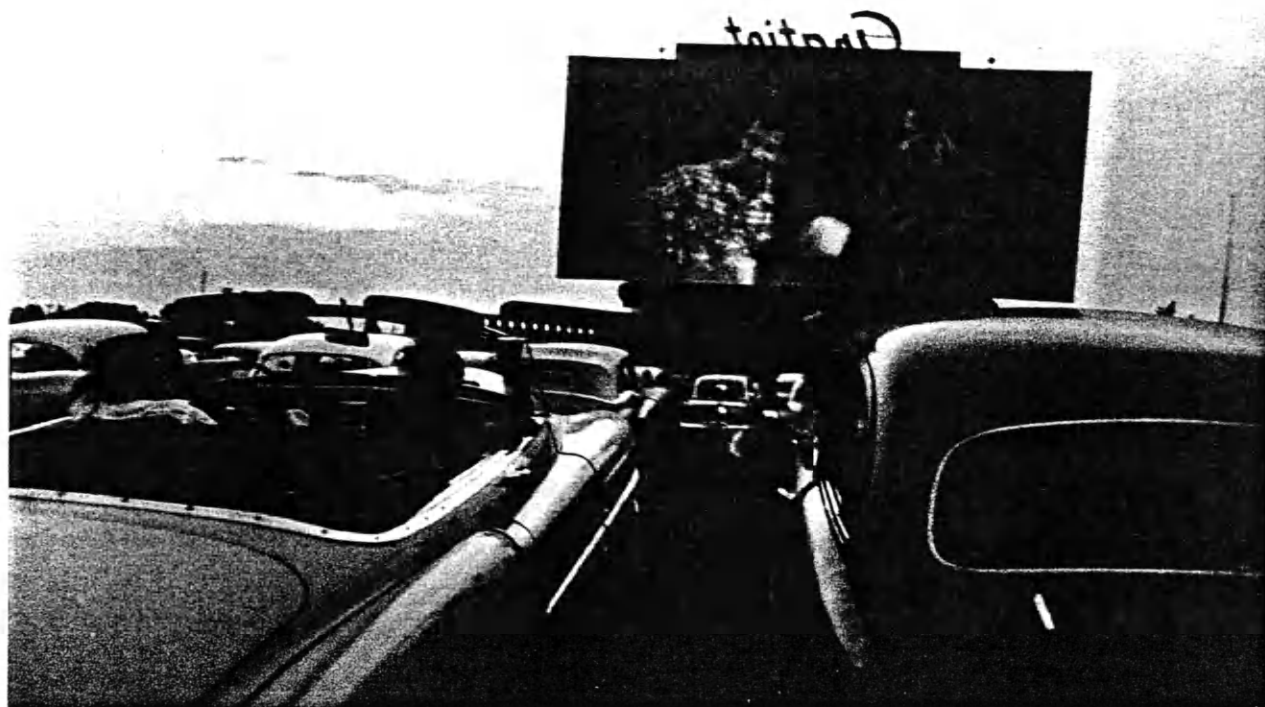


Fig. 7. Drive-in movie -- Detroit



Fig. 8. Mississippi River, Baton Rouge, Louisiana



Fig. 9. St. Francis, gas station, and City Hall -- Los Angeles



Fig. 10. US 91, leaving Blackout, Idaho

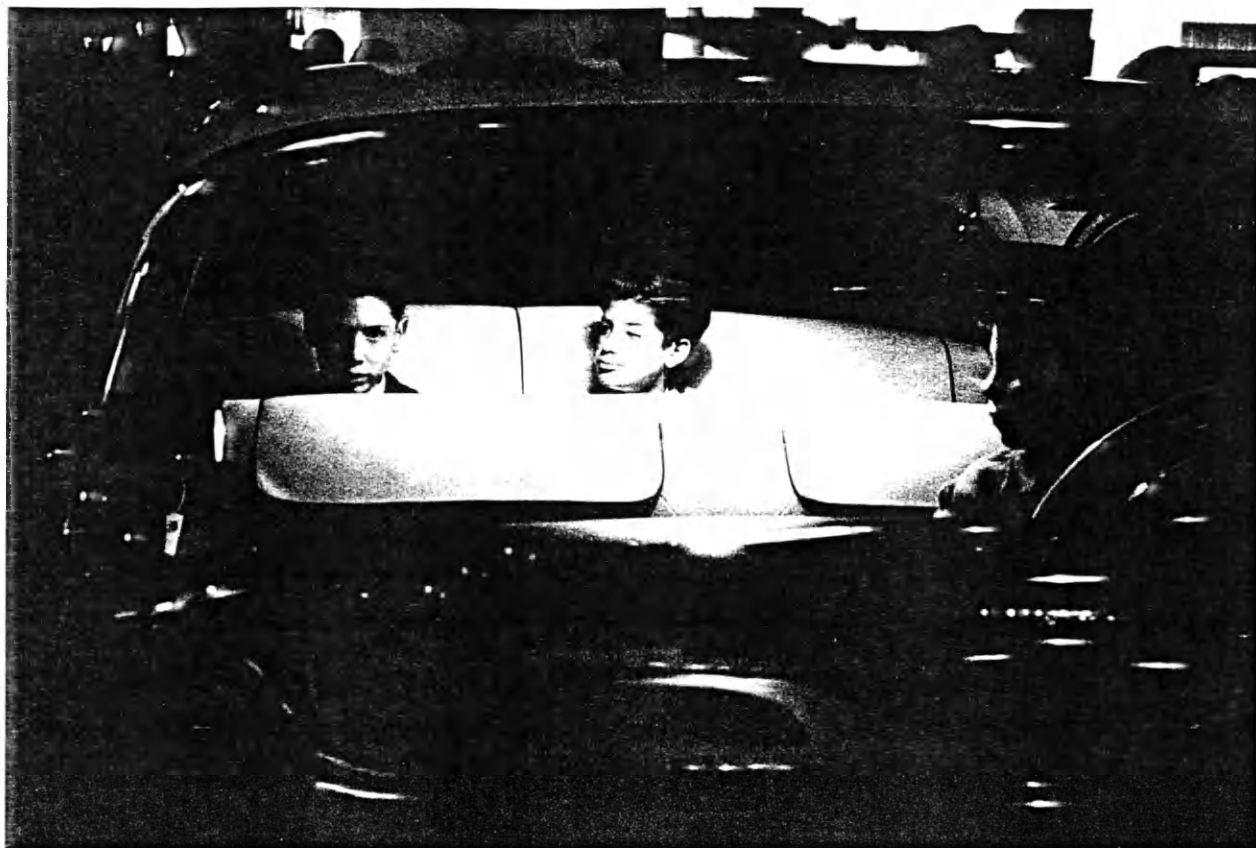


Fig. 11. Motorama -- Los Angeles



Fig. 12. Butte, Montana



Fig. 13. St. Petersburg, Florida



Fig. 14. Covered car -- Long Beach, California



Fig. 15. Car accident -- US 66, between Winslow and Flagstaff, Arizona



Fig. 16. US 285, New Mexico



Fig. 17. Belle Isle, Detroit



Fig. 18. Detroit



Fig. 19. Public Park -- Ann Arbor, Michigan



Fig. 20. City Hall, Reno, Nevada



Fig. 21. Indianapolis



Fig. 22. US 90, en route to Del Rio, Texas

## Notes

1. Rampton cites a review of *Korol', Dama, Valet* (*King, Queen, Knave*) by Mikhail Osorgin in the October 4, 1928 issue of *Poslodnie Novosti* in which Osorgin "reads *Korol', Dama, Valet* as an indictment of the dehumanization of the European bourgeoisie, and commends its author for his representation of the 'real horror of the epoch.'" (Rampton, 11) Rampton also cites a review by Vladislav Khodasevich of *Kamera Obskura* (*Laughter in the Dark*), in which Khodasevich "says that Nabokov employs cinematographic effects in *Kamera Obskura* to illustrate 'the terrible danger hanging over our whole culture, distorted and dazzled by various forces among which the cinematographic, though of course far from being the strongest, is perhaps the most characteristic and significant.'" (Rampton, 12)

2. *The Americans* has retained its value in the marketplace of cultural artifacts for many reasons. Among them are Frank's association with the Beat movement -- an association that began when Jack Kerouac agreed to write a rhapsodic introduction to the American edition of *The Americans* and led to Frank's doing a number of films with Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Orlovsky (the first was *Pull My Daisy*) -- and the romance of *The Americans's* genesis, especially the harassment that Frank suffered. Frank did not experience the same level of comfort as the Nabokov family during his travels. He was frequently pulled over by police officers, especially in the South. Twice he was arrested. One of those times, in November 1955, he was pulled over by an Arkansas state trooper because his car had New York license plates. The officer arrested him for being a potential communist agent because he was disheveled, spoke with a foreign accent, and carried a camera and a great deal of film. The officers placed him in the nearest local jail, in which he spent one grim night. The day after his release, he wrote Walker Evans the following:

Again the same questions, where I came from, where I am going, why etc. I said I was going to photograph at Baton Rouge-Refinerys for that Guggenheim project. They took me to the car....Now they had all my papers in front of them. Why the Guggenheim F. gives me money....?....if I am jewish why I went back to Europe? If it would not have been better to stay in America and not to loaf in Europe....Then the special Inspector arrived. He immediately started to ask me a question in jewish, I said that I did not speak jewish. He asked about the Oil Refinery's Pictures that I where going to take....I was questioned at length about some rolls which I took in Scottsboro Ala. I denied knowing about that case....I had to go in my cell again. When I got in again, the lieutenant leaned back and said: "Now we are going to ask you a question: Are you a commie? I said no. He said, "Do you know what a commie is? I said yes. Then I was asked to give them all my exposed film, so they could develop them. I said I would make a

big stink if they would do that... (Robert Frank: New York to Nova Scotia)

Another time, Frank was beaten up badly enough by Ford security guards while trying to photograph Ford's River Rouge plant to require medical attention. Too, there was his obsessiveness, his dramatic announcement after the book's publication that he would abandon still photography for film-making, because he had taken the art as far as it could go. Frank did return to still photography in the late 1960's, but his later work bears little resemblance to the work of *The Americans*. It features multiple views, scratched and mutilated negatives, self-portraits, and bleak Nova Scotia landscapes. Thematically, this later work indicates a withdrawal from social issues inward, to more personal concerns. He was perhaps spurred by the tragedies in his life, including a divorce, the onset of schizophrenia in his only son, and the death of his only daughter in a plane crash. All of this aided the mythologizing that Frank has always claimed to disdain.

3. In my position as an acquisitions editor at a large trade publishing house, I've received four proposals in the past year alone from agents for travelogues by young writers who want to write about cross-country trips they've taken or intend to take in the spirit of *On the Road*. Each proposal made explicit reference to *On the Road* in this way. Not only are there at least four writers who feel this way, there are four professional literary agents who believe that a market exists for such fare.

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## VITA

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