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"Listening Eyes: Synesthesia in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*"

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Abstract: In this paper, I explain briefly the concept of 'synesthesia' from a cognitive perspective, and its importance in the arts and in literature. I focus particularly on Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Pale Fire*. Three main issues are observed. First, the overuse of color and its importance in contrast to achromatism. Second, synesthesia is explored as a vital influence on characterization of the synesthete protagonist and the non-synesthete antagonist. Finally, the paper studies briefly the impact of synesthesia upon creativity, identity and memory.

Keywords: *Pale Fire*, Synesthesia, Color, Achromatism, Memory, Eye, Identity.

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Listening Eyes: Synesthesia in Valdimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*

O. Introduction: Synesthesia and Arts

Synesthesia is a neurological phenomenon consisting of the union of two or more senses in the brain. From this perspective, the perception of a given stimulus activates a sense, corresponding to a correlative processing in another sense. It is a psychological process that occurs in all newborns up to their 4 months; however, senses separate from one another forming different sensorial modules. This genetically inherited phenomenon has different consequences, as it is observed in the documentary *Sinestesia, Arte, Dolor y Sexo* (Paula Cánovas and Alberto Cano 2013), synesthetes have an excess of neurons, what provides them with human and artistic consequences, as memory and creativity, which will be analyzed further on.

The connection of senses in the brain has been studied since ancient times. However, it was not until the second half of the 19th century that the actual concept received attention. Previous to that, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) studied the concept of synesthesia as we know it. In his *Treatise of the Origin of Language* (1772), Herder aims at answering questions about how senses are connected, and he does so by replying that "we are a thinking sensorium commune" (Takashi 70), which means that all five senses are connected since all of them flow into one process. Herder's theory of common sense claims that "language is generated only through ear by acknowledging the sounding characteristic marks required" (Takashi 72); he is then setting the bases for the concept of *audition colorée* (O'Malley 407).

Many authors have reflected their own synesthesia in their work. Vladimir Nabokov is a good example; he wrote about his synesthesia and its effects on him in his autobiography *Speak, Memory* (1966). Nabokov asserts presenting "a fine case of colored hearing" (*Speak, Memory* 21), which consists in, as he puts it, a sensation when "orally forming a given letter while imagining its outline" (*Speak, Memory* 21). After claiming that, Nabokov explains how he perceives some letters of the alphabet: "in the blue group, there is steely x, thundercloud z, and huckleberry k" (*Speak, Memory* 21). When the author was seven years old, he discovered his particular condition, while looking at some colored alphabet blocks, which were, according to him, "all wrong" (*Speak, Memory* 22). Some other effects caused by synesthesia were having aural and visual "mild hallucinations" (20) that were sometimes "praedormitory visions" (20) and are described as "projections inside the eyelids", (20) "gray figures" (21) or "mauve remoteness melting beyond moving masts" (21). Many other well-known synesthete artists have dedicated their talent to contribute to the development of arts, for example, painters such as Wassily Kandinski (1866-1944) and Carol Steen (1943-). Psychologist Crétien van Campen has noted: "Kandinski's early abstract paintings (that he labeled with musical titles such as *Composition and Improvisation*) contained the sort of blobs,

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lines, spirals and lattice maps that are experienced by synesthetes" (qtd. in Betancourt 60).

Carol Steen explains that "Most often –about 90 percent of the time- I see colors and shapes "internally", with my eyes shut . . . (In her paintings, she has noted that) the absence of sound appears as white. National and regional accents appear in color" (Steen 203-4). In many more artists, not all of them synesthetes, synesthesia has played a major role in the process of painting, drawing, writing or composing. This is the case of musicians such as Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) or Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915); painters such as David Hockney (1937-) and Pablo Picasso (1881-1973); and writers such as Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891), Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) and Patrick Süskind (1949-). Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* (1304-1321) also deals with inter-sensory metaphor and synesthesia, in order to make his poetry clearer for his less prepared readers, and is composed by a tinge of spirituality.

Synesthesia as a literary device that "symbolize(s) ways of perception that belong to a higher plane, in which sensory divisions are transcended" (O'Malley 410) was a major theme for modernists and postmodernists because it implied a rupture with the epistemology previously developed, which was mainly focused on an only existing and objective reality, one of the old Victorian standards.

Modernism breaks away from the 19th-century novel by bringing forth a new epistemology based on the author's subjectivity and his individual perception as reality, synesthesia establishes the interior perception of the experiencer as defying the only and supreme reality. This cultural movement emphasizes the importance of the visual world. French Symbolism also dealt with synesthesia. It was Charles Baudelaire who opposed the view that synesthesia should be avoided because it was a psychological deviation, rather he "insist(ed) that inter-sense analogy was entirely normal" (O'Malley 408). He remains as "the earliest description and illustration of several kinds of clinical synesthesia which later became objects of intensive investigations and long tended to prevent a balanced appreciation of literary synesthesia" (O'Malley 408).

The outcome of Baudelaire's change of conception of synesthesia can still be seen nowadays, since literary synesthesia does not entail negative connotations and it is simply "the stylized expression of a metaphysical-aesthetic attitude towards life" (O'Malley 410); or it even implies positive connotations like beauty, as Odgen and Richards state (in O'Malley 175). Synesthesia as *audition colorée* can also be appreciated in Rimbaud's works; in his poem "Vowels", he lists the colors of vowels according to his own experience "A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu: voyelles" (Baudelaire, Rimbaud & Verlaine 237). 20th century literature will be influenced by the decline of the logocentric culture and the rise of the visual mode as a means to convey meanings. As a consequence, cinema and photography are also responsible of such a change; cinema implies writing on light, as synesthesia also teaches us. Reality will vary according not only to the subject experiencing but also to the locus and its light.

1. Synesthesia in *Pale Fire*

The following sections show the result of applying synesthesia to the writing process. In order to achieve this goal, I explore the use of synesthesia by the American and

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synesthete writer Vladimir Nabokov. In particular, synesthetic issues found in Nabokov's novel *Pale Fire* are studied in detail¹, namely, overuse of color, the protagonist as synesthetic, the importance of memory when dealing with synesthesia, defining identities in terms of being synesthete, and the fallacy of the senses.

The novel *Pale Fire* presents over five hundred words that refer to colors in order to tackle poetic reality: "*Mauve* rings around the moon; // *blood-orange* sun Twinned *Iris*; // and that rare phenomenon □ // The *iridule*- when, beautiful and strange," (*Pale Fire* 10; italics added). Some extracts show how sensitive² Nabokov is to rare color shades in daily life: "A *dull dark white* against the day's *pale white* // And abstract larches in the *neutral light*. // And then the *gradual* and *dual blue*" (*Pale Fire* 20; italics added).

The fact that Vladimir Nabokov employs color in such a great extent leads us to notice that synesthesia might be the main reason of such an overuse. Color in this work is not used symbolically, but mentioned as a means to make the work more visual: "The *black* trunk stands on another *brown* or *brownish* even larger one, and there is I think a stuffed fox or coyote next to them in their *dark* corner" (*Pale Fire* 107; italics added) The overuse of color that this work presents makes the text totally different from the approach to objectivity present classic novels. This is a visual novel that follows postmodern trends and shows a very subjective perspective in the way it deals with colors. The rarity of some colors draws awareness the fact that his synesthesia causes the author to have a special perception of different and strange color tones, such as blue-blooded (*Pale Fire* 216), purple-black (*Pale Fire* 224) or tea-rose (*Pale Fire* 218). As Julian Connolly reminds us, Nabokov "possessed a very rich appreciation of gradations in color variations . . . he declared: 'For me the shades, or rather colors, of, say, a fox, a ruby, a carrot, a pink rose, a dark cherry, a flushed cheek, are as different as blue is from green.'" (*The Annotated Lolita* 364; in Connolly 53).

However, he does not feel the need to circumscribe colors to a particular meaning or symbol, which can represent an example of his studied tendency to avoid limitation, "Dissatisfaction with limited ways of viewing the world is, accordingly, a prominent theme of Nabokov's work" (Tonn 8). As mentioned in one of his interviews he preferred "the specific detail to the generalization, images to ideas, obscure facts to clear symbols" (qtd. in De la Durantaye *Strong Opinions* 115). This tenet denotes his search for providing ideas with an image rather than with a specific meaning, playing with conventions about the determinacy of meaning in a typical postmodernist way; what is a declaration of his love for images and rejection for symbols and also his desire to "caress detail,...the divine details!" (*Lectures on Literature* 23) as he does with that huge appreciation of color. Thus, Nabokov aims at writing pieces of literary art visually appealing so that the final product can be better understood and appreciated, and so readers are able to feel what he feels. In order to do so, Nabokov "hopes to 'create an effect of simultaneity, but of course in practice the artist, who must mark with temporal

¹ For a summary of the novel see Appendix 1.

² For further and more detailed information about the different tones employed in *Pale Fire* see Appendix 2 and 3. The first is a description of these colors, while the second is a visual schema of those color tones.

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sequences, can construct only a suggestive simulation of such an effect" (Tonn 11). Nabokov seems to be attempting to write in a manner that he can show his synesthesia and make the reader see it too. He wants his works to be like a canvas, perceived like a painting, in a visual manner, and all at once: "If life is to be appreciated aesthetically, then it must be viewed, like a painting, as a simultaneous connection of interconnected elements" (Tonn 98). In this way, Nabokov experiences "many things at once... And thus, mentally restore(s) the initial, the meaningful, non-linear 'live image' from the inherently sequential text" (Tonn 98).

There exist novelists and poets, and ecclesiastic writers, who deliberately use color terms, or numbers, in a strictly symbolic sense. The type of writer I am, half-painter, half-naturalist, finds the use of symbols hateful because it substitutes a dead general idea for a live specific impression. I am therefore puzzled and distressed by the significance you lend to the general idea of "red" in my book. When the intellect limits itself to the general notion, or primitive notion, of a certain color it deprives the senses of its shades. (qtd. In Connolly 53)

In *Pale Fire*, the absence of color denotes death; when death comes, color disappears and only achromatism remains. Such could be the case here since according to Connolly, "in certain works [Nabokov] brings the colors black and white together in contexts associated with death or the cessation of consciousness" (54). Then, life would stand for color whereas death and sadness would stand for achromatism. When death or sadness is mentioned in the work, the only colors used are white, black, or grey as these two fragments show:

And finally, at half past eight (when, I imagine, the lady of the house had begun to crack her finger joints as was her impatient wont) a long *black* limousine, officially glossy and rather *funereal*, glided into the aura of the drive, and while the fat *Negro* chauffeur hastened to open the car door, I saw, with pity, my poet emerge from his house, a *white* flower in his buttonhole and a grin of welcome on his liquor-flushed face. (*Pale Fire* 161)

I can't tell you how I knew - but I did know that I had crossed // The border. Everything I loved was lost . . . //And *blood-black* nothingness began to spin // A system of cells interlinked within // Cells interlinked within cells interlinked // Within one stem. And dreadfully distinct // Against the *dark*, a tall *white* fountain played. (*Pale Fire* 59)

The following passage, the murderer of the work will come to darken the pages of the book, what makes sense if we take into account that he will kill the synesthetic main character, ripping color out of the book, darkening it and leaving only achromatism. "gradual decay // Spacetime itself is decay; Gradus is flying west; he has reached gray-blue Copenhagen. After tomorrow (July 7) he will proceed to Paris. He has sped through this verse and is gone - presently to darken our pages again." (*Pale Fire* 163)

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John Shade uses color in order to express his feelings, those colors seem to be connected with his emotions. Nevertheless, he makes a clear opposition between all colors and gray: "All colors made me happy, even gray" (*Pale Fire* 34). The reason why he does this distinction might be that Shade acknowledges to whom this color is matched, the murderer Jack Degrey.

Finally, the overwhelming presence of death and its absence of color can be also seen in the references to the game of chess, a Manichean world. Black and white stand for death, but there seems to be a battle between these two colors. This black and white contrast can also be related to early cinema, as Marina Grishakova points out,

The contrast of black and white is thematized in melodrama and thriller as the conflict of good and evil. The blossoming of the aesthetics of mystery was stimulated by the color range of early cinema. In Nabokov's *The Defense*, these contrasts form a dense network of meanings: black and white (chess, cinema), good and evil (freemasonry, detective and mystery fiction). Nabokov's chess novel may be read as a screenplay. (184)

In this quotation we can see how the color black in chess stands for evilness, and is associated to Kinbote, the antagonist of the book:

SHADE: There are rules in chess problems: interdiction of dual solutions, for instance. // KINBOTE: I had in mind diabolical rules likely to be broken by the other party as soon as we come to understand them. That is why goetic magic does not always work. The demons in their prismatic malice betray the agreement between us and them, and we are again in the chaos of chance. (*Pale Fire* 226)

2. Synesthesia in the characters of *Pale Fire*

The overuse of color can be even applied to the use of proper names in the novel. The protagonist's last name, Shade, refers to obscure tones and darkness. His name is clearly used in a metaphorical way, and he accepts its connotations: "I like my name: Shade, Ombre, almost "man" in Spanish" (*Pale Fire* 174). Shade is an incomplete man because he sees himself as if he were only the shadow of what a real man would be; maybe due to his artistic profession, he describes himself as a simple "*ombre*", which also means shadow in French. Thus, he acknowledges it: "I was the shadow of the waxing slain by feigned remoteness in the windowpane" (*Pale Fire* 37); and likes playing with such an idea: "My secret stamp, // The Shade impress, the mystery inborn" (*Pale Fire* 65). This "incompleteness" of the main character may be a foreshadowing of the end of the story, maybe he is only a shade, a shadow because at the end of the story he is dead, as his poem proves beginning and ending in the same way, as a cycle: "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain" (*Pale Fire* 33).

John Shade's daughter, Hazel Shade, apart from sharing the shadowy connotations, carries color in her first name. It refers to a mixture of color green, gray, and brown. She suffers from hallucinations that she herself describes as:

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Scrappy and scrabbly sounds.10:25./ A roundlet of pale light, the size of a small doily; flitted across the dark walls, the boarded windows, and the floor; changed its place; lingered here and there, dancing up and down; seemed to wait in teasing play for evadable pounce. Gone. /10: 37. Back again. (*Pale Fire* 188)

This description might remind the reader of the one made by Nabokov about himself in his autobiography *Speak, Memory*: "mild hallucinations" (21), which were "strange fears, strange fantasies, (and) strange force" (45). These are related to synesthesia in the sense they are formed by color visions and hearing sounds: "Of character - as when she spent three nights // Investigating certain sounds and lights□In an old barn. // She twisted words: pot, top,// Spider, redips. And "powder" was "red wop."// □She called you a didactic katydid" (*Pale Fire* 45). In addition, like Nabokov, Hazel Shade is also an artist, namely a painter; as the "dear bizarre Aunt Maud, who is also a poet and a painter with a taste// For realistic objects interlaced// With grotesque growths and images of doom" (*Pale Fire* 36).

Another name that needs to be highlighted is Jakob Gradus, also known as Jack Degree or Jacques de Grey. He is obviously related to the color grey; he is a grey murderer. Thus, color must be accounted as a resource in order to make characters unique. His name works as a pun:

By an extraordinary coincidence (inherent perhaps in the contrapuntal nature of Shade's art) our poet seems to name here (gradual, gray) a man, whom he was to see for one fatal moment three weeks later, but of whose existence at the time (July 2) he could not have known. (*Pale Fire* 77)

Two other proper names must be remembered when thinking of colors, namely, Gerald Emerald and Izumrudov (from Russian, "of emeralds"). Both characters wear a green jacket in the work. It is even more interesting the name of Gerald Emerald, whose name also works as a pun because of the musicality and rhythm it implies when pronounced. Finally, some other proper names related to color in the novel are Joe Lavender, Professor Starover Blue and Judge Goldsworth.³

Now, two characters will be set forth: the protagonist John Shade and the antagonist Kinbote. John Shade is a synesthete artist; he claims that he has "a brain, five senses (one unique)" (*Pale Fire* 37), where this intertwining process, considered by Herder as basic in synesthesia, is admitted. Due to his synesthesia, John Shade sees his "own special reality having nothing to do with the average reality perceived by the eye" (*Pale Fire* 130). Thus, inter-sense perception can be considered a high cognitive process, with a tinge of spirituality like in Dante's religious conceptualization:

³ Not all names are used with relation to color, but they have a special meaning, for example: Netochka, which means nameless nobody; Natochdag, which means night and day; Eberthella H. which means salmonella; Schweitzer, which means Swiss and equality; Mr. Pardon; Zembla, the country where Kinbote is from means earth of reflections and Kinbote stands for regicide in Zemblan language.

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I could distinguish the expression of passionate interest, rapture and reverence, with which he followed the images wording themselves in his mind, and I knew that whatever my agnostic friend might say in denial, at *that* moment Our Lord was with him. (*Pale Fire* 89)

Synesthesia in Nabokov is conceived as an "intrinsic . . . force[s] of perception to purify the verse" (*Pale Fire* 26), and as a divine phenomenon related to creativity and arts, which is admired even by the non-synesthete villain of the novel:

I am looking at him, I am witnessing a unique physiological phenomenon: John Shade perceiving and transforming the world, taking it in and taking it apart, re-combining its elements in the very process of storing them up so as to produce at some unspecified date an organic miracle, a fusion of image and music, a line of verse. (*Pale Fire* 27)

This admiration acknowledges John Shade's power as an enchanter, the most positive literary feature according to Nabokov:

There are three points of view from which a writer can be considered: he may be considered as a storyteller, as a teacher, and as an enchanter. A major writer combines these three –storyteller, teacher, enchanter- but it is the enchanter in him that predominates and makes him a major writer. (*Lectures on Literature* 5)

The magic of Shade's art resides in his synesthesia. "Magic, story, lesson – are prone to blend in one impression of unified radiance, since the magic of art may be present in the very bones of the story" (*Lectures on Literature* 6). This way, Nabokov enriches the quality of the multivalent experience, "consequently furnishes his work with imagery related to exceeding the limitations of sight and touch" (Tonn 99). Synesthesia is the magic employed to create a new reality, the artistic world created by both Nabokov and John Shade in their works: "We should always remember that the work of art is invariably the creation of a new world" (*Lectures on Literature* 1). John Shade employs puns when writing; the case of euphony is an interesting one in relation with synesthesia. Euphony refers to the pleasure found in sounds, and in the case of color hearing synesthetic people, an acoustic perception produces a color sensation in front of the eyes that can be more or less pleasant. An example of the use of euphony might be the following one: "Lemniscate "A unicursal bicircular quartic" says my weary old dictionary. I cannot understand what this has to do with bicycling and suspect that Shade's phrase has no real meaning. As other poets before him, he seems to have fallen here under the spell of misleading euphony" (*Pale Fire* 136). When incorporating the visual to the linguistic mode in poetry, sign consequently emphasizes its subjective traits, producing polysemic senses. Thereby, colors must be understood as unique perceptions because they lack their conventional sense. It is clear that John Shades combines senses when writing; his words sometimes can be defined as "an allusion to a structure whose myriad interconnections are visible at once" (*Pale Fire* 103). Pleasure can be obtained

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from his words, which are synesthetic, because if there is no sound, then no light can be found either:

Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream // But a topsy-turvical coincidence,
// Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense. // Yes! It sufficed that I in life could
find // Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind // Of correlated pattern in the
game, // Plexed artistry, and something of the same // Pleasure in it as they who
played it found. // It did not matter who they were. No sound, // No furtive light
came from their involute. (*Pale Fire* 63)

The antagonist, Kinbote, is a mediocre critic who admires John Shade because of his creativity.

There is no bound to the measure of grace which man may be able to receive. . . . I
had never seen such a blaze of bliss before but was to perceive something of that
splendor, of that spiritual energy and divine vision, ... reflected upon the rugged and
homely face of old John Shade. (*Pale Fire* 88)

John Shade's wife describes Kinbote as: "an elephantine tick; a king-sized botfly; a macaco worm; the monstrous parasite of a genius" (*Pale Fire* 172), thus showing the inferiority of the non synesthetic character. It is quite obvious that the antagonist wishes to be a synesthete when he asserts that:

One essential dislike, formidable in its simplicity, pervaded his dull soul: he disliked
injustice and deception. He disliked their union...with a wooden passion that neither
had, nor needed, words to express itself...He called unjust and deceitful everything
that surpassed his understanding. He worshiped general ideas and did so with
pedantic aplomb. The generality was godly, the specific diabolical. (*Pale Fire* 152)

There is a dichotomy between the protagonist John Shade, who is a synesthete artist creating new worlds through his art, and the antagonist Kinbote, who is a non synesthete critic devoting his life to attempt to provide John Shade's work with an objective and absolute meaning. Nabokov likes the first action, but as a postmodernist writer, in his irreverent attitude, he rejects "the specific detail to the generalization, images to ideas, obscure facts to clear symbols", the need to search for unique interpretations to works in the sense it sets boundaries to those new worlds created by art. Nabokov dislikes critics like Kinbote, looking for a specific meaning in works of art: "To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of 'meanings'" (Reading 92). This same idea is conveyed by John Shade; he rejects readers looking for symbols and specific meanings in the works of art:

There are certain trifles I do not forgive." Kinbote: "For instance?" "Not having read
the required book. Having read it like an idiot. Looking in it for symbols; example:
'The author uses the striking image *green leaves* because green is the symbol of

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happiness and frustration.' . . . This is widespread, and when I hear a critic speaking of an author's sincerity I know that either the critic or the author is a fool." Kinbote: "But I am told this manner of thinking is taught in high school?" (*Pale Fire* 156)

3. Synesthesia and memory

A memory factor provoked by synesthesia is also evoked in Nabokov's autobiography, as seen in this quotation, where Nabokov talks about a memory reinforced by some color sensations: "judging by the strong sunlight, that, when I think of that revelation, immediately invades my memory with loved sun flecks through overlapping patterns of greenery, the occasion may have been my mother's birthday" (*Speak, Memory* 10).

In the article "Synesthesia, Art and the Mind", Ione claims that the combination of elements expressing synesthesia is impossible to be forgotten:

what I find most appealing about *Speak, Memory* is her ability to mix abstraction with representation and fluidity with form...are so sensitively seasoned that they just taste right, although I am not a synesthete...the work has the flavor of a properly prepared gourmet dish comprised of ingredients that one might not be able to identify precisely but whose combination one will never forget (268).

Synesthesia, as a psychological issue, has to do with memory in the sense that both terms refer to neural connections in the brain. It is a cognitive process that enhances the memory system because implies the activation of more neural networks: a same and simple input activates more than one sense, strengthening the memory of the person who is experiencing this information. From a connectionist point of view, synesthesia should be regarded as an associative process, in the sense a stimulus is linked to a network in the brain, activating it and providing it with more weight. "Synesthesia demands a memory of each moment just before in order to reference it and charge it with power, pleasure or pain" (Moss 70).

The mind's muscles, striated branches and probability paths, bear the chemical touch of our past experiences, open radically to smells, rearrange present moments in cascades of personal hierarchies. Without memory there can be no transformation, because each thing can only be itself in an ever-changing stream. (Moss 70)

In *Pale Fire* this association between his synesthesia and memory draws the reader's attention throughout the novel. John Shade, the protagonist and synesthetic poet, claims that his eyes help him remember because the images caught by them can be reproduced whenever he wants:

My eyes were such that literally they//Took photographs. Whenever I'd permit,
//Or, with a silent shiver, order it,□//Whatever in my field of vision dwelt - // An
indoor scene, hickory leaves, the svelte // Stiletto of a frozen stillicide - // Was

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printed on my eyelids' nether side // . . . Was close my eyes to reproduce the leaves, // Or indoor scene, or trophies of the eaves. (*Pale Fire* 34)

Kinbote, the antagonist, is aware of this fact: "There is, moreover, a symptomatic family□resemblance in the coloration of both poem and story" (*Pale Fire* 81). Synesthesia is employed as a raw material by Nabokov in order to bring memories back. Synesthesia can thus be described as a cognitive resource in the sense it involves analogy, mimesis, and association with past images, memory, and recognition, as explained by Caivano (175). All these cognitive processes are continuously used having always to do with color. Nabokov, through the use of memories strengthened by his synesthesia, sets forth his past life in Russia as opposed to his current life in America; what is reinforced by the dichotomy between the synesthete American protagonist – representing Nabokov's current home – and the Zemblan, North-European villain – standing for his origins. It is an "artistic struggle between the pragmatic American poet and the overbred European aristocrat" (Reading 16). The fact that Nabokov's autobiography is called *Speak, Memory* is absolutely enlightening; Nabokov begs his own memory speak so that he is able to grasp some input from hearing his inner voice expressed through synesthesia. Memory makes Nabokov mixing places and times; thus, he mixes his Russian past and Europe with his present in America, in English language. He "recreates the past in his fictional universe" (Shapiro 7). Speaking in semiotic terms, the visual and the textual modes are combined to build a stronger memory: "Snow imagery which often recurs in Nabokov's Works, appears to epitomize his Russian Past" (Shapiro 8). Nabokov's colored hearing can be thus better understood; the sound of words evoke his Russian past in his brain, which is based on snowy colors reinforcing the memory, as Shapiro considers (13)

The vibration in my ears is not longer their receding bells, but only my old blood singing. All this still, spellbound, enthralled by the moon, fancy's rear-vision mirror. The snow is real, though, and as I bend to it and scoop up a handful, sixty years crumble to glittering frost-dust between my fingers. (*Speak, Memory* 99)

4. Identity in the 'Is'

In social semiotics, all modes are equally important to express meaning. Nabokov's work goes in this line since he highlights the importance of not only the referential denotative meaning but also the connotative, visual and imaginary one. These modes employ different semiotic resources or materials to express their meanings; the visual mode makes use of color as a primary material in order to convey ideas. It can be even argued, in the case of Nabokov, that color plays a major role when defining identity. Nabokov employs quite wittingly the homophone: I –eye; what cannot be claimed as originated by him since it follows a previous tradition. Defining identities on the grounds of the visual mode can be found in American Transcendentalism. In Emerson's words: "I become a transparent eyeball-I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me- I am part or particle of God" (Emerson 6). Through this famous statement, Emerson portrays himself as being one with nature. His identity, a prophet of

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nature, comes out of his visual capacity. The double identity defined by the I and the eye can also be seen in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart". In this short story, some common features with *Pale Fire* can be found with relation to defining identities: in both stories there are multiple selves of the I and attempts for self and outer introspection.⁴ The acuteness of the visual sense of the narrator in Poe's story refers to both the eye that observes him and his own eye that can perceive how it is being spotted. "The Tell-Tale Heart" (*The Pioneer* 1843) deals, as Nabokov's text, with the murder of a person that the reader can never be sure if it is a different one from the narrator and critic of the work. All these similarities can lead to the conclusion that both the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" and Kinbote, the narrator of *Pale Fire*, have a problem of double personality, or two different personalities intertwined, as it is seen by the importance they give to the "eyes", as the perfect homophone for the 'Is', joining the visual mode with the interior one.

Therefore, the outcome of this ambivalence is the definition of identity through the human visual sense, that is to say, the importance to the visual sense to create the self's identity. Both terms are intertwined not only by their equal sound but also by their contiguous meaning. The "I" represents the interior self, while the "eye" has to do with the exterior self and its connections, his visual ability and the need for color. Also, the eyes, as being two, can be a pun for double identity in the work, the character's ability of having a doubled and different vision through his two eyes; away from the traditionally stable and coherent self, postmodernist approach to identity considers it as fragmented and decentered. So, for instance, in *Pale Fire* it can be seen how the eye represents the identity in the following instances: "Between the mountain and *the eye*" (*Pale Fire* 115); "the weak light of his torch rolled its hopeless eye and went out" (*Pale Fire* 133). As Marina Grishakova highlights, "Nabokov's narrator overtly splits into two agents (narrator vs. observer) ... Thus the privileged position of the first-person narrator, who observes others in the fictional world while remaining "invisible" himself, is turned inside out" (Grishakova 169). In *Pale Fire*, this is expressed as follows: "In *my mind's eye* I see again the poet literally collapsing on his lawn, beating the grass with his fist, and shaking and howling with laughter, and myself, Dr. Kinbote, a torrent of tears streaming down my beard" (*Pale Fire* 271). The eye-I can also be interpreted as a continuum of the individual and the community where he belongs. "But the basic fact that "reality" is neither the subject nor the object of true art which creates its own special reality having nothing to do with the average "reality" perceived by the communal eye" (*Pale Fire* 130). This same tenet is the basis for social semiotics: it is society altogether and not individual who interprets signs and provide them with meaning.

5. Fallacy of the Senses

The concept of fallacy of the senses has much to do with our topic in the sense that both refer to an unusual manner of perceiving reality. In the context of postmodernist self-conscious distrust of Truth, the fallacy of the senses is a key issue. It makes us wonder

⁴ This idea can be linked to the figure of the vulture-like pale blue eye seen in Poe's story (in *Pale Fire* the killer, Gradus, also has pale blue eyes)

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to what extent reality is as we perceive it. This epistemological problem is treated by Nabokov through the use of synesthesia.

In its limpid tintarron he saw his scarlet reflection but; oddly enough, owing to what seemed to be at first blush an optical illusion, this reflection was not at his feet but much further; moreover, it was accompanied by the ripple-warped reflection of a ledge that jutted high above his present position. And finally, the strain on the magic of the image caused it to snap as his red-sweatered, red-capped doubleganger turned and vanished, whereas he, the observer, remained immobile. (*Pale Fire* 143)

This passage refers to the moment in which Zemblan King Charles seems to have found his *doppelgänger* and describes him as a reflection of himself. However, it is only a magical illusion, because it vanishes after being perceived. When reading *Pale Fire*, it is never clear who is real and who is not, and even the matter of the number of characters appearing in the novel is a difficult issue to solve since the postmodernist nature of this work comically plays with the changing literary conventions and styles. Kinbote, the editor of the poem "Pale Fire" is not only its editor, but he also makes a commentary of not less than almost three hundred pages, in which he claims to be explaining it, as if it were totally necessary to have that information, in a common self-reflexive feature of postmodernist fiction. However, he is not actually providing any explanation but telling a completely different story about a mysterious Nordic country called Zembla, his marvelous King Charles and a murderer, Gradus. In this extract it is seen how Kinbote claims that the poem "Pale Fire" by John Shade cannot be understood without his notes:

Let me state that without my notes Shade's text simply has no human reality at all since the human reality of such a poem as his . . . with the omission of many pithy lines carelessly rejected by him, has to depend entirely on the reality of its author and his surroundings, attachments and so forth,—a reality that only my notes can provide. (*Pale Fire* 28)

Nabokov's ideas of reality seem to emerge from an individualized and self interested interpretation of Descartes: the senses sometimes deceive us; they are no more than shadows of meanings. Kinbote equals the search for meaning, but after reading his interpretation of the poem "Pale Fire", the reader realizes Kinbote has deviated totally from the original text. His bizarre commentary seems not to align with the logics of John Shade's poem. In this sense, the conclusion to the previous premise when dealing with Kinbote's interpretation might be the same reached by Descartes: as far as we are concerned, senses always deceive us. In other words, if Kinbote keeps digressing from the original text in more than one occasion, the whole commentary cannot be truly sustained. This idea accounts for the metafictional tinge of Nabokov's postmodernist work:

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From the point of view of contemporary narratology, (post)modernist metafictional strategies (i.e. problematization of the "author-text-reader" relations, destabilization of narrative hierarchy, questioning of spatial and chronological conventions, graphical experiments, etc.) are explorations into the nature of fiction and its relation to reality rather than merely formal exercises. (Grishakova 16)

Truth cannot be expressed in terms of sensorial experience; synesthesia proves that there are multiple faces of reality, as defended by postmodernist "canon". Nabokov's work "opens new ways of perceiving the reality and broadens the possibilities of being-in-the world . . . [since it] shape[s] not only literary history, but our versions of everyday reality". (Grishakova 14). As a result, what a vision or commentary tells you about any issue cannot be claimed as the absolute truth; senses are subjective to the person who experiences it: "My vision reeked with truth. It had the tone, // The quiddity and quaintness of its own // Reality. It was. As time went on" (*Pale Fire* 60). From Nabokov's work, a definition for reality cannot be provided and the idea of any permanent reality disappears, but it can be understood what reality is not; the basic fact that "reality" is neither the subject nor the object of true art, which creates its own special reality, has nothing to do with "the average *"reality" perceived by the communal eye*" (*Pale Fire* 130; italics added).

Then, generally accepted literary laws and matters cannot be resolved; the work is a shade of different meanings. Nabokov thus hints the non-existence of absolute truths; making use of the distortion caused by psychological phenomena such as synesthesia, he is able to create new worlds through his visual manner of writing.

6. Concluding remarks

Nabokov's synesthesia affects his style of writing, and by extension the nature of his works. Synesthesia seems to be one of the main tools for the creation of a new world in the work of art, the book. As an exemplary case, this paper studies around Nabokov's synesthesia in *Pale Fire*. The numerous references to color raises awareness of the importance of Nabokov's *audition colorée* in this novel. Characters in *Pale Fire* are defined by synesthesia. The synesthetic protagonist represents the genius, a perfect artist and creator, opposed to the antagonist, who remains as a mere critic of the genius' poem. Synesthesia is accounted as well as a determining factor when dealing with memory as a strengthened skill by synesthesia. It stands for a dichotomy between Nabokov's actual life in America (symbolized by the protagonist) and his past life in Russia (represented by the antagonist). Thus, it can be argued that synesthesia is used by Nabokov in order to provide characters with special identities. This fact can be exemplified by Nabokov's use of a continuum between the "eye" and the "I". Nabokov's synesthesia affects his vision of reality; introspection is achieved in *Pale Fire* through a dualism of the interior side who is seen, the I, and the exterior one who sees, the eye. In this sense, synesthesia is also understood as a distortion of reality, due to the fact that people affected have some special perceptions, they see their "own special reality having nothing to do with the average reality perceived by the communal eye" (*Pale Fire* 130).

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Reality does not find a solely interpretation; Nabokov's postmodernist idea thus opposes to critics and their search for unique and absolute interpretations of reality.

Synesthesia is also present in some other Nabokov's works, such as: *The Gift*, *Ada*, *Lolita* and *The Eye*. In *The Gift*, whose title might refer to synesthesia as a divine present, Nabokov overuses color again, and its protagonist claims to be a synesthete: "When my eyes open to the alphabet. . . since childhood I have been afflicted with the most intense and elaborate audition colorée" (*TG* 74). As Julian W. Connolly emphasizes, Nabokov describes his synesthesia as a "freakish gift of seeing letters in color" (*The Annotated Lolita* qtd. in Connolly 53). Furthermore, the matter of memory is also treated in the novel. The synesthete protagonist of the novel has a very good memory:

He again made use of all the materials already once gathered by his memory for the extraction of the present poems, and reconstructed everything, absolutely everything, as a returning traveller sees . . . an avenue ending in a burst of yellow light . . . and everything, everything. (*The Gift*, 17)

The novel *Ada*, described as the proclamation of "the crushing victory of the past reality over the dubious current reality, and the final victory of imagination over any kind of limitation"⁵ (Prologue translated 2), presents a meaningful case of synesthesia as well:

Because of its situation among dead things, that dim continuum cannot be a sensually groped for, tasted, harkened to, as Veen's Hollow between rhythmic beats; but it shares with it one remarkable indicium: the immobility of perceptual Time. Synesthesia, to which I am inordinately prone, proves to be of great help in this type of task – a task now approaching its crucial stage, the flowering of the Present. (*Ada*, 431)

In *Ada*, some of the features treated in this paper are also seen, namely: a synesthete character, a great importance to time and memory, and a dubious current reality, that is to say, a mention to the fallacy of the senses. As Julian W. Connolly mentions, "Jay Edelnant has devoted an entire dissertation to the use of color in one novel, *Ada*" (54). In Nabokov's *Lolita*, Humbert, the main character, seems to find pleasure in sound, and he regrets the loss of Lolita's voice and

realizes his culpability in the tragic loss of Lolita's childhood "the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord" The "concord" in question is a product of several simultaneous sounds, a "vapory vibration of accumulated sounds," a "vapor of blended voices, majestic and minute, remote and magically near" and "flashes of separate cries" originating in a "transparent" town that Humbert looks over while on a cliff suspended in "limpid" air (*The Annotated Lolita* 308 qtd. in Tonn 102).

⁵ Own translation: "la aplastante victoria de la realidad del pasado sobre la dudosa realidad del presente, y la victoria final de la imaginación sobre cualquier clase de limitaciones."

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The analysis done in this paper can be also applied to works by other authors, such as: Stephen Crane's *Maggie a Girl of the Streets*, novella in which color plays a major role as well; Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*; Virginia Wolf's *To the Light-House*; and Patrick Süskind's *The Perfume*, which deals with the problems of a synesthete that, in order to catch people's essence, needs to kill them. The new use of color which also appears in other postmodernist works is leading to revolutionary kind of novels. The appreciation for visual images in the written form may be due to the onset of photography and the new art, cinema, and the change from black and white to the apparition of color in them. Literature is influenced by that inception: the new visual information that these two arts offer transforms the traditional logo-centric culture in a new visual one; such a change leads us to a more subjective manner of perceiving reality, a world in which what the individual feels matters; a world where different perceptions count. Then, there is not a unique reality, but a lot of different realities depending on who sees them. Thus, synesthetes are not afraid of sharing their ability. This is what visual arts such as cinema teach the world: reality is varied and multiplied depending on its focus; reality changes depending on its light. As José Luis Caivano clarifies, synesthesia definitely opens a new world of artistic possibilities (175). Through his synesthesia, Nabokov achieves the magic of the enchanter and transforms what "was a pale fire, oh pale indeed" (*Pale Fire* 176) in "a colored flame" (*Pale Fire* 290), and what was only a simple book metamorphoses in a wonderful painting made of colorful words.

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Appendix:

*Fig. 1: Summary *Pale Fire*

Pale Fire is a novel that revolves around a poem also titled "Pale Fire" written by John Shade, an American literature professor already dead. Shade's poem is unsatisfactorily analyzed by his neighbor and colleague, Charles Kinbote. He provides Shade's poem with a huge commentary attempting to attribute it a meaning. Whereas Shade's poem is an autobiographical poem, Kinbote aims at convincing the reader that the poem deals with his own story, not with the author's life. A subjacent story is framed on Kinbote's interpretation, dealing with the mysterious land of Zembla, whose king, Charles II, has fled to America in order to escape from his stalker, Jakob Gradus. However, at the end of the novel, Gradus murders John Shade apparently by mistake.

*Fig. 2: Color tones and subtones in *Pale Fire*

Colors that appear in *Pale Fire* have been divided in thirteen principal tones divided in some sub-tones. The color blue appears fifty nine times and is divided in some tones, such as: light blue, gradual and dual blue, ink-blue, final blue, gray-blue, deep-blue, pale blue, real blue-blooded, blue-shaded, Speak, Memoryoke-blue, mineral blue, blue-green, bluish, lavender, indigo and turquoise. The color purple appears a number of seventeen times and is subdivided in tones as lilac, mauve, violet, and amethyst. The color green appears an approximate number of forty times and is subdivided in some sub tones such as pale green, so green, greenish, contaminated greens, jade, emerald and bottle-green. The color pink appears twenty one times and has some varieties such as pinky, pinkish, bright pink, salmon and tea-rose. Color black appears a number of fifty nine times in the book with different sub tones as wind-borne black, blackness, blood-black, ballerina black and purple-black. Dark appears a number of fifty seven times, with some varieties such as darkness, yawning darkness, upper darkness and solid darkness. Color gray appears a number of twenty nine times with some varieties as gray brown, light gray, pearl-gray and silver. Color red appears a number of forty eight times with varieties as bright red, reddish, dull-red, wax-red, crimson, maroon, magenta and carnelian. Color white can be counted fifty five times, with varieties as dull dark white, whitewashed, pure white, not white at all and pale white. Brown appears a number of thirty three times with varieties as kelp-brown, dark silky brown and tawny. Color yellow appears a total of fifteen times with sub tones as yellowish, gold and golden. Color orange appears only two times in the work, and one of them is the special tone "blood-orange". Transparent as a color appears seven times with the only tonal variety of "semitransparent". The word "color" and other words of its semantic field appear an approximate number of thirty times being some of those words: colorful, colored and discolored. The word pale as a color appears about twenty times, some examples of this are: pale blue, pale light and pale green. Other references to color that appear in the book are: color peach syrup, nectarine hue, opalescence and iridescence. The word pale, as a modifier of fire, that is to say, the title of the book, appears a number of eighteen times in the work.

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* Fig. 3

