The Russian *Kamera obskura*, first published in English as *Camera Obscura* and later as *Laughter in the Dark*, is the fifth novel written by Vladimir Nabokov. *Kamera obskura* returns to a prose model previously constructed by the young author in the late twenties in his *King, Queen, Knave*. The new novel is once again based on experimental devices and constitutes an ironic evaluation of a topos worn out by traditional fiction and subliterature—the love triangle, adultery, and its fatal denouement in crime and death. The rhetoric of melodrama is skilfully used to hold the reader's interest, but the author's ironic and playful attitude toward literary background, intensified by parody and the grotesque, lends a new quality to the novel. This quality is absent from the background clichés regardless where the parodied stereotypes of the love triangle come from: the cultivated, classical adultery novel or popular art.

The novel's constructive principle lies in its integration of a melodramatic plot with a juxtaposition of semantic sequences developed from the inner theme of "sight." Such are sequences relating to the visual arts, specifically cinema and painting. These are subordinate to a third semantic sequence based on semantic variants of "vision." The ornamentalism of the novel evolves from the elaborate pattern of repetition and the interaction of its motifs and micromotifs derived from these sequences. It is important that the concept of "sight" is being used both in the meaning of a physical sense (the function of this physical sense in the perception and creation of art and also its role in the sphere of eroticism), and in the metaphorical meaning of "in-
sight,” that is, sight as a moral category (the sense of “moral blindness” as in the phrase “love is blind”). The value of these semantic shifts is especially relevant on a more abstract level of the novel where the theme of vision, or, more specifically, the relation between artistic and moral vision, can be interpreted as the author’s playful redefinition of an old problem in the history of the arts, especially literature: the relation between aesthetics and ethics in art and life. Now it becomes more clear why the author of Kamera obskura chose Tolstoi’s Anna Karenina as a prime literary backdrop (fon) for his ironic novel.

Our discussion of Nabokov’s novel will focus on two topics: 1) the book’s parodies of the adultery theme and 2) its structure in terms of the juxtaposed semantic sequences sketched above. Before approaching these topics, however, we shall refer briefly to our label of ornamental prose for Kamera obskura and to its role as a part of the contemporary literary process underway in Russia, the avant-garde. In other words, we shall try to explain our understanding of the novel’s literary context. These characteristics could be applied, it seems, to the rest of Nabokov’s novels.

Although Nabokov is a cosmopolitan writer, one must keep in mind that the author of Kamera obskura is first and foremost a Russian formed through the traditions of Russian “classical” literature and the literature of Russian modernism. It is also obvious that he had early opportunity to get to know new artistic tendencies marking the inception of a new stylistic formation, the Russian avant-garde (1910-30). In spite of the numerous differences between the artists of Russian modernism and the Russian avant-garde, they shared a pronounced interest in the aesthetic function of the literary work. In broad semiotic terms, the common denominator of their artistic interest lies in the sphere of the signifier at the expense of the signified. In this sense both stylistic formations are opposed to the previous formation, realism.

It has been noted that ornamentalism in modernistic prose came into being almost simultaneously with the surge of ornamentalism in the modernist visual arts (Sezession, Jugendsstil, Art Nouveau, and so on). Contemporary art historians tend to interpret ornamentalism in the visual arts as the consequence of an artistic urge to stress the value of the structure of an art object, not merely to ornament it. On the other hand, it was through music that ornamentalism came into the rhythmic prose of the Russian modernists who often composed according to the principles of musical counterpoint and a system of euphonically significant leitmotifs. Music was the art that modernism held in the highest esteem while the visual arts were the closest to avant-garde.

2. The concept of literary formation belongs to Aleksandar Flaker. I am also indebted to his research in the literary history of the Russian avant-garde: A. Flaker, Stilske formacija (Zagreb: Liber, 1976); Poetika osporavanja (Zagreb: Shkolska knjiga, 1982).