Title: *Despair*: Nabokov, Fassbinder, and the Postwar Avant-Garde
Author: Roman Utkin, Davidson College

Abstract:
Focusing on translation as a multifaceted artistic device, my paper examines
Nabokov's *Despair* (1934; 1966) and Fassbinder's 1978 film adaptation of the novel. I explore
the ways in which Fassbinder repurposes Nabokov's interwar aesthetic for his own artistic
project of re-imagining Europe after World War Two. The admission of Hermann, the main
character of the novel and film, that "all the information I have about myself is from forged
documents" evolves into the film's main theme as Fassbinder grapples with representing
authenticity. In adapting *Despair* for the screen, Fassbinder and the playwright Tom Stoppard
(who co-wrote the screenplay) employ some of the same techniques Nabokov uses in translating
his Russian work into English, such as gesturing towards the haunting presence of the Nazis and
Europe's imminent plunge into madness. Despite their pervasive sarcasm and cynicism, both the
novel and the film articulate a "refusal to be dead in life," in Fassbinder's words. I see
Fassbinder's *Despair* as a much broader engagement with Nabokov's oeuvre and an homage to
Nabokov, in which the writer is situated alongside Van Gogh, Dostoevsky, Grosz, and Magritte.
Ultimately Fassbinder offers a new way of reading Nabokov, which in turn helps us
conceptualize paradigms of the postwar (Russian) avant-garde.