

Chapter V: “An Old Scenic Film”

“If you want to make a movie out of my book, have one of these faces gently melt into my own, while I look.”

Vladimir Nabokov, Lolita, p. 222

“Cinematic metaphors run rampant in Humbert Humbert's account of Lolita's seduction and betrayal [...] - Lolita reads movie magazines and loves going to the movies; Quilty makes porn movies; Humbert sees himself as a director, camera, and leading man [...] Humbert scrupulously remarks throughout the confession that he is working with the wrong medium. He is convinced [...] that Lolita could be forever his [...] if only he could film her rather than write about her. In short, Humbert uses film as a metaphor to account for his own failure at rendering Lolita immortal.”

Elizabeth Power, “The Cinematic Art of Nympholepsy: Movie Star Culture as Loser Culture in Nabokov's Lolita”, 1999

Lolita's journeys through the United States took her farther than the boundaries of a large continent; she became the stuff of celluloid dreams. Through the decades, she has been debated by filmmakers, screenwriters and actresses, each one trying to decipher and capture the magic of the nymphet. Mine is just another attempt to enter the debate that from the beginning is a challenge to anyone writing a dissertation on this subject. The analysis of the historical background of films about *Lolita* allows for many questions: can Lolita be moulded to the 60s backdrop without suffering some essential character alteration? Can Humbert, the post-WWII gentleman, be accurately depicted in the 90s junk-food culture? Did it all change so much after all, the urge to love, to tarnish, to atone? Can someone think of Lolita today as an avatar for American teen culture without being tied up in the notion of female promiscuity? Or have our critical eyes changed so much, being bombarded too often with images of hot young girls in provocative poses, that today Humbert would walk away with a slap in his wrist for being a dirty old man with a thing for younger chicks (*Vide Annexe 12*)? Has time and cynicism impaired us from seeing Humbert as a chivalrous lover and Lolita as a hopeless ingénue, or did we grow wiser and wilier and know better by now?

The search for some answers to these questions run across the analysis of two film adaptations of *Lolita*, focusing on one pivotal point: is Kubrick's version tainted by his too-close-to-the-50s point of view? And does Adrian Lyne's film, too-recent and too-close to the MTV Generation, suffer a similar disruption? Succinctly, the main question at play is how time, Humbert's most hated enemy, treated Nabokov's masterpiece; how it moulded its characters, its principal themes, and furthermore how it affected the unforgettable couple, the star-crossed Lolita and Humbert, in their trans-cultural journey through a mysterious land; not just the actual geography of the United States, but the vivid geography of an European's imagination (Humbert's, Nabokov's, mine), and what we, "native illusionists," did with that mythic territory in the first place (317).

1. Barbie-Doll Nymphet - Analysis of Stanley Kubrick's film *Lolita* (1962).

Nabokov's *Lolita* begins with a "Foreword" written by a level-headed man called John Ray Jr., who analyses Humbert's memoirs under a moralist light. Later on, the sensible reader may dismiss this as a farcical artifice on Nabokov's part, but it is still an important voice no movie could truly capture due to the film's own medium – moving pictures. This is a central point to understand, in my opinion, *Lolita*'s failure in being successfully adapted to the big screen in defiance of Nabokov's authority as the scriptwriter. Much of *Lolita* as a film is lost among the preoccupation with representing the book as truthfully as possible through images and flesh-and-blood actors. Many critics have accused Kubrick and Lyne of failing in their noble purposes – one for excessive carefulness due to vigilante censorship; the latter due to excessive faithfulness to the book's minute descriptions.

It is hard to find a middle ground and understand why these filmmakers, both approaching the same material at different times, should have failed to convey a loyal account of it. One valid reason may be that the novel, as 1997 *Lolita*'s screenwriter Stephen Schiff admits, it " [...] is not just a book, it is a puzzle [...]"(xvi), and the labyrinthine paths the narrative takes, with its literary puns and blows traded between Humbert and Quilty, are not easy to translate into images.

Much of *Lolita*'s events and characters are completely filtered by Humbert's poetic language and his emergency in looking, to his jury's eyes, less conspicuous in the pervert's part. Because " [...] Humbert's world is completely internal, a world of language in fantasy [...]", it is indeed extremely difficult for a movie to externalise this inner realm (xvii). In the case of *Lolita*, it is an unfair task for the writers and filmmakers alike, but especially for the actors. They must produce the illusion of matter-of-fact characters while dwelling on a madman's pantomime. One of the hardest emotions to convey is simultaneous sympathy and disgust for Humbert; to see him as a lost European boy in love

with a dead girl, and simultaneously feel his urgency in recreating her memory in the material world of American children that *Lolita* epitomises.

Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita*, released in 1962, was a film aiming at exposing and parodying the perversity hidden in the apparently healthy suburbia of the 50s; however, Kubrick also wished to appeal to as many people as possible, so that commercial success would allow him greater creative freedom. For some critics, this is Kubrick's lasting flaw.

Although controversial, many condemned his *Lolita* for being too tame taking into account the unsettling material from where it was derived. More satire than melodrama, more contemptuous than contentious, it is a movie that radiates sly humour and a director's personal style, far removed from the lyrical universe of Nabokov's literary vision. As Norman Kagan states, "Reviewers complained that Kubrick had censored the film down to nothing, along with substituting a well-built, fetching vulgar teen-ager for the dark 'demonical' nymphet of the novel [...]"(99). Impressively, Kubrick agreed with this accusation, later abiding that "[...] the audience felt cheated that the erotic weight wasn't on the story. I think that it should have had much erotic weight as the novel had" (84). Censorship, naturally, was to blame for his filmic sanitisation.

In spite of *Lolita*'s action being set in the immediate postwar years, the first adaptation of Nabokov's novel surfaces in the beginning of the 60s, and this decade's peculiar flavour may already be noticed throughout the film. Sue Lyon's hair style, make-up and some of her wardrobe is remarkably 60s-inspired, a fact quite noticeable in her last scene as Mrs. Schiller, or in her dance scene with her partner Kenny O'Beron. Although one can identify her blouson dress as a 50s artefact, and the same goes for the hula hoop or the Capri pants in which she plays in her backyard, it is hard not to feel she is very much a product of the oncoming 60s (*Vide Annexes 7 and 8*).

Many other clues hint at a temporal hybridism: the fainting soundtrack, the characters' coy physical posture, and the strenuous way references are dropped here and there about *Lolita* "going steady," "jam sessions," Mona being "junior monitor at summer camp," and "mature young ladies" being demurely described as "enchanted clouds of pink." Shelley Winters's Charlotte also resembles a 60s sitcom housewife, especially when she gives Humbert the grand tour of her salubrious home.

Lyon, moreover, continuously suffers of an overall misplaced characterisation Stephen Schiff described as "[...] a fifteen-year-old who nevertheless looked like a twenty-year-old hooker" (xviii). However, one can always advocate the bobby-soxers' obsession for make-up in order to shed some light in Kubrick's particular choices concerning his *Lolita*'s characterisation. From this angle, it is relevant to report back to the third chapter of this dissertation and recall that, by the late 40s, make-up had become so intimately linked with female coming-of-age, that it was generally accepted one could guess if a girl was decent or frisky from her excessive use of lipstick or rouge. This concern with establishing a relationship between *Lolita* and the distinct use of make-up among teen girls may also

account for Kubrick's first shot: a close-up of an unknown, young-looking foot being adoringly held by a man's hand while the toes are carefully varnished. This scene will be re-enacted an hour and half into the film, now explicitly showing the initially hidden identities of those involved in the scene, Humbert and Lolita. More importantly, this dotting toe-painting sets the mood for the rest of Kubrick's story and reveals its core – an older man's servile obsession for a capricious younger girl. Hardly the set Nabokov pictured for his lively nymphet and her grim stepfather, but nevertheless, an accurate representation of the model of parenthood stereotyped in the postwar years: the pitiable father who is overrun by his bossy daughter (*Vide Annexe 8*).

Kubrick's vision of Lolita as a vamped adolescent may have been an attempt to be faithful to kids' beauty trends back in the postwar years, as well as already hinting at Lolita's provocative nature.¹ Sue Lyon does look rather dolled-up, as well as knowingly seductive towards Humbert, in Kubrick's cinematographic version. She represents, moreover, the public fetishisation of the bobby-soxer, the hyper-glamorised version of what many had seen as the true mixture between naivety and cunningness: the "not a child but not yet a women" prototype. As the actress herself would admit years later, her greatest professional goal was to be "a cross between Bridget Bardot and Marilyn Monroe," an ambition that clearly comes across in her performance as Dolores Haze (Sinclair 106). Unfortunately, this also ruined the character.

Lyon never looks tousled or with a thread out of place, not even when she and Humbert are cooped up in a car crossing the country for months, and she complains of a fever; she is as poised and collected in her scenes as a bratty daughter in Ramsdale, as she is as the conniving nymph in the school play (*Vide Annexe 9*). This lapse results in utterly disbelieving Lyon as a poor, orphaned teen. Even in Beardsley's heated quarrelling scene, one sees not a domineering father squashing his helpless charge, but two grown-ups battling over some domestic trifle. In the most generous case scenario, one may imagine it is a row between a conservative father and a high school senior that is too fresh and bossy, but never could the viewer who has not read the book envisage the net of blackmail and coercion passing between Lolita and Humbert. As Humbert solemnly states in the novel, the age gap between nymphet and lover is very important for it denounces a larger, most meaningful gap – the emotional gap that gives the upper hand to the nymphet lover.³ Lyon's Lolita fails to provide this striking age contrast, which essentially underlines the harmful obsession beneath Humbert's rhetoric.

Regardless of how conscientious Kubrick's movie might be, it is still obviously removed from Nabokov's universe. While *Lolita*, the novel, lingers on a limbo of magic-realism due to Humbert's lavish language, Kubrick's uptight filmmaking technique does not allow room for linguistic and poetic beauty. The characters are imbued with strict realism, the cinematography is stark and somewhat too modern; the sets are not reminiscent of the 40s suburban and wild landscapes Humbert had pondered upon while travelling around with his Lolita.

One can say History is always anachronic, thus these mismatches are bound to happen in a filmic adaptation portraying a past era. The problem in this specific case, however, is that by binding Humbert and Lolita's affair to a 60s background, much of the enchantment of a burgeoning culture is left behind. Humbert does not arrive at an exciting land of plenty and apprehension in the throes of the WWII, but at a country civilised and convulsed by the early 60s, where a good dose of aesthetic cynicism already permeates the air. This is noticeable not only in Seller's sardonically blasé depiction of Quilty, but in Lyon's too stylised Lolita.

Every frame of this movie is formalistic in its sleek black and white. British (this was Kubrick's first movie made in the UK, due to MGM blocked funds) as well as American censorship still had a very tight grip on the way relationships between children and adults were being portrayed on the big screen. This censorship produced an atmosphere so proper and sparse it results in a film far removed from the joyful and boisterous image which epitomised Lolita's postwar.

Simultaneously, Humbert's eerie words concerning his love for nymphets are reduced to a couple of shots where James Mason's Humbert thinks out loud, and where sexual relations between the odd pair are less than implied. Kubrick's stoic Mason is as distant from Nabokov's rhapsodic Humbert as Kubrick's mature nymphet is distant from Nabokov's sturdy Lolita. Kubrick would come to admit this movie was one of his principal failures, concluding that "[...] if I had realized how severe the limitations were going to be, I probably wouldn't have made the film" (Power).

Although Kubrick would recurrently blame bigoted censorship for corseting his creative views, one has to wonder if this was not only half of the problem. After all, some other movies had successfully dealt with teen sexuality before, despite heavy criticism. Well-crafted examples are Elia Kazan's *Baby Doll* from 1956, or later in 1962, Kazan's *Splendor in the Grass*, both predecessors of the topics found in Kubrick's *Lolita*, and both starring young sensual nymphets: Carroll Baker and Nathalie Wood.

From my point of view, another way of accounting for Kubrick's failure in translating Nabokov's to the big screen lies in his refusal to follow the writer's own screenplay. It suggests Kubrick's conscious "[...] desire to distance his film from the novel and its potentially salacious content" (Boyd 145). This theory does seem more convincing than the one accusing censorship of single-handedly mutilate Nabokov's masterpiece, converting it in a long, humorous film. Kubrick himself would support the former view, when in a 1972 interview, he conceded that maybe "[...] if it had been written by a lesser author, it might have been a better film" (Power). Adapting Nabokov's book was then, from the start, limited by social mores, studio policies, actors' abilities and the filmmaker's circumspection, coupled with the motion pictures stark medium, which makes almost impossible to translate the lyricism and dreaminess of Humbert's rhetoric in a satisfying light.

In Kubrick's filmic attempt, James Mason has a wooden, brooding performance, giving off a whiff of disturbing mania as if he was indeed too bulky to sleep with a child without ravaging her. From my perspective, he also sounds successfully repugnant and scheming during the first half of the movie, while terribly neurotic in his last scene with Lolita as Mrs. Schiller. Yet, it is still an uneven performance, suffering from Mason's incapacity to affect a genuine foreign appeal, a European finesse and decadence, a maudlin, but not mawkish (which sometimes he pathetically is) vulnerability. Most of the times, especially in the reversely placed scenes of murderous Humbert in Quilty's house, Mason affects such a stern pose one may wonder if he did not fancy himself in a Shakespearean revenge tragedy instead of a postwar American drama; his demanding accent is more crowded with stiff Elizabethan outrage than with actual heartbreak.

One may argue Humbert is a character dipped in a profound solipsism and this sets him apart from the real world. He may see himself as a great Othello going to revenge his marred honour, and not as a peevishly offended lover about to become a murderer. Although this explanation could perhaps account for Mason's rigid performance, it does not make him more successful in portraying a convincing Humbert. He utterly lacks the capacity to mix pity with repulsion, and this is obvious when one finds him, in the end of the movie, dourly entering Quilty's house, gun loaded, trench-coat impeccable and not a hair out of place. The narrative finally comes full-circle but it is not enough to stir some pathos within the viewer. Mason comes across so tidy and theatrical one cannot feel sorry for him, especially when his evil double, Peter Sellers' Quilty, is so effectively comic and distracting in his drunken stupor.

James Mason also suffers from the film's own limited structure. As it was referred before, Quilty's death scene is placed in the beginning of the movie in Kubrick's version so to keep the viewers interested after Humbert has possessed Lolita half way into the story. Nonetheless, this artifice fails. Right in the beginning of the movie the audience is presented with a character much more fascinating than Humbert. In his mocking drunkenness, in his exaggerated accent while reading Humbert's foolish poem, like if he was indeed a simpleton parson reading a requiem, Sellers quite automatically dismisses Mason as a secondary prop. In Nabokov's universe, however, these memoirs are Humbert's personal disclaimer and, undoubtedly, he is the absolute protagonist.

When confronted with such early competition, the connection the audience must feel with Humbert's point of view is immediately diluted. After meeting Seller's entertaining character, the viewer goes on wondering why one must hear the story from Mason's bland, humourless voice; one begins to understand why Lolita would leave such a dull European for a swell guy like Quilty, with all his warped disguises and funny accents.

This, in itself, is a reversed result of Nabokov's novel; the audience should feel an uncomfortable sympathy for Humbert due to his seductive poetry, not for Quilty, who in the novel is

nothing more than a vile-looking manipulator and a kinky pornographer. But in Sellers' hands and body – another crass anachronism is how much Sellers looks like an older Buddy Holly in his black rimmed glasses – Quilty does achieve the casual allure an American celebrity would exert on impressionable Lolita. He is not exactly handsome, but there is something remarkably witty and sly about him, a worldliness Mason's Humbert only mimics in a poor imitation of old-world stuffiness (*Vide Annexes 7 and 8*).

Also by placing Quilty's murder on the overture of the film, Kubrick fails to give Humbert a rightful escalate from demure dreamer to fevered maniac. When, by the end of the movie, one grasps Humbert's tempestuous journey with Lolita, it is already too late to be genuinely appalled by his gory crime – the viewer already knew of his violent nature. It is true that in Nabokov's novel the reader is presented with Humbert's murderer status right from the first page, but because one never knows until near the end of the book who is his victim, this ambiguous information has a very gripping effect on the overall plot. I think that introducing Quilty as Humbert's visible victim is a crass flaw in Kubrick's movie. From then on, the movie has no suspense left for one cares very little about Humbert's drab reasons for committing such lurid crime. In Lyne's 1997 version, Quilty's death is gruesome, bloody, almost unbearable, but at least one can feel the exorbitance of Humbert's pain and rage riding high. Mason's killing of Quilty proves as hackneyed as his whole performance; as trite as a player who said his lines so many times they have already lost their power to astound. This is the capital penalty for an actor playing Humbert, for Humbert stands for the acme of literary love; love for words and rhetoric, no matter how spurious these may be.

But, moreover, Mason is not sufficiently alluring for one to care about, not like the Humbert Nabokov had envisioned: fluent, elusory, half-mad, half-dreamy. Unfortunately Mason is not capable of carrying a mystery thriller on his back, not while he goes on looking all majestically solemn next to a stylised teenager, more reminiscent of the 60s cabana girl Sandra Dee than the cute prewar darling Deanna Durbin (*Vide Annexe 4*).

Due to Lyon's much older and wiler appearance, Mason comes across as a conservative middle-aged man with a thing for attractive twenty-year-olds who compensate youth with cunning. This flaw is particularly obvious in their first scene together in The Enchanted Hunters' room – Humbert sits down trying to look fatherly coy, while Lolita lies on the bed playing with her high heels and coiffed hair. This scene resembles more a re-enactment of young seductress Lauren Bacall eyeing suggestively the much older Humphrey Bogart in *To Have and Have Not* (1944), than a prelude to quasi-incest. Even the famous heart-shaped glasses and playful lollipops sported on *Lolita's* ads do not lend Lyon a truthful babyishness, but a mockery of what infancy should be, as expendable props in a play (*Vide Annexe 11*). Meaningfully, Laura Mulvey refers to "*To Have and Have Not* [as] the film [that] opens with the woman as object of the combined gaze of spectator and all the male protagonists in the film. She is isolated, glamorous, on display" (22). From her opening scene, Lyon epitomises the

object of male desire, on display in her revealing bathing suit and suggestive sun-glasses, posed as a mannequin, while Humbert Humbert, Clare Quilty, Kenny Oberon, Dick Schiller and Bill Crest, all shamelessly gawk at her young body at some point in the movie.

Even in that magnificent scene where Humbert goes to find Lolita transformed into Mrs. Schiller, pregnant and worn out, no pathos is ever released for Lyon looks as mature as always, but now oddly dressed in some unbecoming matron's clothes. She does not look beaten down by life, as Lyne's Lolita does, with her messy hair and sweaty brow. Lyon just looks as if she were disguised as an old boring librarian, as previously she looked like a twenty-something woman impersonating a teenage girl. Sue Lyon never seems to really fit the part and incarnate the two opposing stages in Lolita's growth – the sunny child and the prematurely spent housewife.

Again, one goes through the movie feeling everybody is overdoing the roles assigned – Shelley Winters is too loud and caricatured; Sellers' Quilty is too satirical and histrionic; Mason's Humbert too dramatic and artificial, and Lyon is too worldly and starlet-like. It feels like a humorous play filmed as a parody of itself, riddled with subtleties and plot holes, definitely not the fearful adaptation of the “[...] filthiest book I have ever read [...],” as Roth pointed out that the British columnist John Gordon outrageously exclaimed in 1956 (12).

On the other hand, it can be argued that Nabokov's main intent in writing this book was really to satirise Europe's fake prudishness, as well as to undo the romantic belief every American child was as innocent and asexual as a baby. From this perspective, Kubrick's work can be appreciated for its wittiness and for its radical departure from the expected drama, going instead for a strict comedy of costumes, a joyously serious look at American postwar (and hereafter) society.

The squirming emotions the book releases in its reader, however – the horror, the sorrow, the spite, the tenderness – are all lost in a Spartan adaptation that is so politically correct its 152 minutes drag on, not evoking continuous undercurrents of sentiment in its viewers. It is a competent film, at best, which does not live up to its ambitious tagline: “*How did they ever make a movie of Lolita?*”

In my opinion, a straight answer to this question would be carefully, sardonically, glossing over the book's polemic questions; avoiding the greater themes lurking beneath the smooth black and white surface; avoiding the davenport scene where Humbert is sexually aroused by Lolita sitting on his lap; avoiding the unexpected and clumsy kiss between the two of them before Lolita leaves for camp, or the greedy kiss inside the car on the way to The Enchanted Hunters; avoiding Humbert's plan to drug Lolita in order to abuse her while in The Enchanted Hunters; avoiding, moreover, Humbert's desperate search for his vanished Lolita, the consequent sadistic violence in Quilty's murder, and the broken sadness in the fallen Mrs. Schiller. Lyon's tone in this pivotal scene is shallow and snotty, not mirroring the kind of solid assurance, but simultaneously quiet tiredness, Lolita exhibits when she

analyses their “poor romance” and “ [...] dismissed it like a dull party [...] like a bit of dry mud caking her childhood” (272).

What is amiss in Mason’s and Lyon’s performances is the absence of the childishness and innocence that Humbert stole from Lolita with his demands. Lyon does not come across as the steadfast survivor Dolores impersonates, for Lyon never conveyed vulnerability and helplessness in the first place. Her femme fatale looks, even in the early suburban days, does not allow her to grow up into the strong young woman dwelling in a miserable shack. She is always merely a good-looking girl masquerading successively as a child, a temptress, and then a pregnant youngster. She is never convincing and neither is Mason; therefore, they are never able to aptly play out one another for there is never unspoken sexual tension burning between them, nor desire, nor despair, but only preformatted emotions lifted out of a piece of paper.

Conversely, it also sounds dubious that Peter Sellers ever got involved in kinky activities with a multitude of naked adolescents in a shady ranch. He is too surreal, too cynical, to ever be sexually ludicrous; one never truly envisages him capable of getting his hands dirty. Quilty is effective as the materialisation of Humbert’s crescent paranoia though, as an evil shadow that, in his eccentricity, mirrors the wildest emotions Humbert manages to keep hidden under his composed façade. One believes that, in his satirical fashion, Sellers’s Quilty is indeed capable of engaging in some extenuating literary plays and complicated tricks just to annoy Humbert and seduce Lolita. On the whole, however, none of the actors ever takes off from the movie’s medium – the fateful moving pictures. They are never elevated to the dreamy realm of wordy fantasy where the whole narrative lingers on, for it is Humbert’s own personal universe which weaves the story together.

Lyne’s movie, in my opinion, suffers from the opposite flaw. Every breath of Lyne’s movie is undeniably Humbert’s; the camera always following his fevered gaze, recording each one of his frenetic thoughts, of his elated feelings, in the same dream-like fashion the novel has celebrated. I also believe Jeremy Iron’s pained expression and gaunt figure adjust wonderfully to the portrayal of Humbert’s interior drama. The actor effortlessly slides into the character’s old-world flavour, obliterating the other players. He is the central character scene after scene, which also helps creating the claustrophobic sense of being trapped in a madman’s mind. But more than finding a fine match for Humbert’s character, the main point in adapting *Lolita* is remembering that, ultimately, it is a novel about “[...] a grown man’s obsession with a child, not a grown man’s obsession with a hot young chick [...]”, a mistake which Kubrick’s film definitely blundered into when casting the Barbie look-alike Sue Lyon as Humbert’s love interest (Schiff xix).

In my opinion, another shortcoming in Kubrick’s movie is failing to show “ [...] Humbert’s problem [...] as a certain kind of *incompletion* [...]” caused by the unconsummated passion between him and his beloved Annabel (Wood 185, Italics mine). Kubrick, as it has been stated before, may

have chosen to portray Lolita as the typical postwar American teenager – healthy, vigorous, almost pushy and annoying – but far removed from the realm of ethereal landscapes where she was firstly conceived by Humbert’s imagination. Kubrick’s ultimate flaw, however, is never informing his viewers of Lolita’s death in Alaska. By omitting her tragic demise, this movie allows her a future, a freedom, a world of possibilities Nabokov had never designed or approved of. Lolita dying while delivering a still-born baby, after Humbert, Quilty and Charlotte had perished too, is Nabokov’s device for tidily closing the narrative. As James O’Rourke argues, “Humbert’s death wraps up the package of Quilty’s murder and the transformation of Dolores Haze into Lolita and completes his compensation to Dolores for his hours of sexual bliss” (184). Eliminating all the main participants of this tragedy conveys a sense of consequent and omnipresent disaster, which ultimately supports Humbert’s pressing race against a lethal fate.

2. *Pastel Wistfulness* – Analysis of Adrian Lyne’s film *Lolita* (1997).

Both screenplays changed Lolita’s original age from the overly immature twelve-year-old to a more comely fourteen-year-old; in Kubrick’s case due to the self-righteous Production Code and the Catholic Legion of Decency, while in Lyne’s, due to a greater viability in finding a talented, forthcoming actress. Adrian Lyne has also been described by many of his co-workers as a risky director, in love vivid colours and visual action, and that is strongly influenced by the *Nouvelle Vague* directors Robert Bresson and Jean-Luc Godard, who had a real flair for the tangible and the marginal (*Vide The Directors*).

All these factors are noticeable in Lyne’s various movies. His *Lolita* contrasts with Kubrick’s in many aspects, but the luscious settings and Technicolor brightness are definitely the first ones to catch the viewer’s eye. The casting is, in my view, the second detail to deserve attention. Dominique Swain, Lyne’s Lolita, is much more suitable to play the nymphet part than Sue Lyon, for she sports the kind of gawky cheerfulness suburban kids reputedly had in the early postwar years. Swain depicts Lolita as a seductress and a young girl quite effectively. She rarely appears wearing make-up when she is in Ramsdale; instead she looks as fresh and scrubbed as a peasant child. After her flirt/affair with Humbert has begun, so does her blotched use of red lipstick as if for her; like for her fellow teenagers, “[...] wearing make up [...] was not only one of many signifiers of adulthood; it was one of *the first and most pre-eminent*” (Devlin 104, Italics mine).

Lyne’s movie also paves the way to Lolita’s entrance in Humbert’s life beforehand. Lyne explains Humbert’s loss of Annabel in a grainy, haunting set of images, thus grounding Humbert’s love for nymphets in this originally doomed affair. It also establishes a certain sympathy between

Irons's character and his audience, as Annabel's death offers a good reason for Humbert's obsession with young girls, while Kubrick's version did not.

The vital, yet ghostly, character of Annabel is sublimely introduced by Lyne in a series of summer-bleached flashbacks placed at the beginning of the film. One sees, quickly and effectively, the unveiling of Humbert's rapt love for Annabel and its abrupt ending, as well as the scarring pain that came with it. In a couple of simple but poignant lines Lyne aptly lays bare the core of Humbert's nymphetic obsession, which will lead to his love affair with Lolita, and Annabel's paramount part in it: "The shock of her death froze something in me. The child I loved was gone, but I kept looking for her – long after I had left my own childhood behind" (Schiff 5).

These lines almost immediately exculpate Humbert of any blunt accusation of paedophilia. He is no disgusting adult hunting for little girls; he is a man with a boy's soul, his development arrested in the futile search for the dead girl of his European past. Thus, his rendezvous with Lolita in New England, twenty-something years later, appears in the film as an excusable and understandable landmark in the life of such a unique man.

The setting for this meeting – Charlotte's piazza in a quaint suburban neighbourhood – also irradiates an enchanted aura: smoothly lit and plush-green as a fanciful grove, it makes the viewer feel as if he is indeed seeing Lolita through the eyes of a dreamer, all misty and glittery. Lyne even tries to match Lolita's features with the formerly introduced Annabel (Emma Griffiths Malin), thus respecting Nabokov's writing and once again favouring Humbert's demure excuse that his first impulse towards Lolita was not crude lust, but the amorous resemblance she shared with his childhood darling. With "[...] Jeremy Irons looking suitably haunted from the start [...]" (Wood 182), Lyne's film rapidly gains the oppressive, yet poetical lyricism, one would expect of a deranged man trapped in a tangle of old obsessions, unfinished trysts and childish fairytales.

Lyne fails occasionally, however, in trying to match Swain's tall and sturdy physic with Humbert's previous beloved, clothing Lolita in a very inappropriate fashion throughout the movie,

"Lyne chose to costume Swain as a very young child" complains critic Michael Woods "in checks and flounces and ribbons, as if she were scarcely out of the nursery, and to show her most often in plaits and other old-fashioned hairdos. The effect, curiously, is to make her look like an older girl [...] disguised as a much younger one, something like Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz*, only sexier and sunnier and faster. This does something very strange to the idea of her age" (187).

If Sue Lyon's Lolita is a mature Gidget, then Dominique Swain's seems sometimes an infantilised Shirley Temple.³ I believe, therefore, that Lolita's accurate characterisation is a handicap none of the filmmakers could truly achieve. Kubrick's failure was excessive modernity and too many filmic liberties which somehow created an opacity around Sue Lyon's performance, hindering the audience's capacity to feel compassion for her squandered childhood. Lyne was too focused on

depicting Swain's unreal childishness (she was fifteen at the time) with ill-fitting, almost pantomimic clothes, which led the public to momentarily forget she was not an innocent baby, but a real mundane teen, loving gooey food and "kissing games" (*Vide Annexe 9*).

Still, there is something deeply disturbing about Swain successfully blending infancy and sexuality, an ability that has somehow haltered her career after this movie was made. She seems to be frozen in those candid scenes, like the one where Humbert first sees her as Schiff conceived in his script, immersed "[...] in a pool of light, half-naked, turning to look at him through dark glasses [...]" Her skin is wet and where her dress is wet it sticks to her [...]" (Schiff 12). There are many other endearing and wrenching moments where Dominique seems to exist trapped between the palpable world of suburban lewdness and that otherworldly realm where she moves confidently and dangerously as a *belle dame sans merci*.⁴ This grey area was purposefully created in the novel and Lyne's movie has various scenes portraying Lolita's dubiousness adroitly: the way Swain rubs her unshod foot on Humbert's when she brings his breakfast tray; her suggestive duck and conspiring glare; their feisty, clumsy kisses on the mouth; Lolita unhooking her bra on the road to the hotel, and then taking her retainer off in *The Enchanted Hunters*.

The actress herself resists today only as a memory, as a butterfly trapped in the substance of cinematographic magic, forgotten and forgiven all the B-movies she did afterwards, and that never reprised the brilliancy and discomfort of her first and only heartfelt performance. Perhaps this illusion was mastered due to Dominique's own amateurish quality (this role was her acting debut). In my view, the same cunning ingenuity that makes Lolita such a hard character to pin down permeates Dominique's performance, proving once again that true artlessness can never be falsified.

Curiously Dominique Swain, wandering around the movie in those luminous settings and melancholic score, does seem to have stepped out of a fantastic universe of elves and sleeping beauties. When dressed up as a nymph for her school play, Swain is at once sassy and innocent, a contradiction that gives the viewer a difficult sensation, for her youth is never hidden by layers of sophisticated makeup and hairdos as in Sue Lyon's rendition of that same segment. Lyon is thoroughly dolled-up in a vamped see-through dress that makes her look like an emancipated twenty-something of the early 60s. Even her aggressive eye make-up is reminiscent of a devilish creature, not a pristine nymph, which once again substantiates the theory Kubrick uses Lyon's overdone characterisation as a compass for Lolita's growing mischief.

Dominique Swain's simplicity and brawny prettiness starkly contrast with Sue Lyon's sophistication and manicured beauty. Lyne looks at his Lolita softly and endearingly, with a nostalgia for the past, that in Kubrick's case was substituted by satirical contempt. Kubrick's Lolita is pushy and sexual, while Lyne's tends to be more whimsical and bewildered. Swain succeeds much better in subtly conveying the exact amount of charm and her clumsiness Nabokov attributed to her, while

concurrently never letting forget how young she really is and how awkward Humbert is as a result of her obvious youth.

On the other hand, Jeremy Irons' Humbert excels in taking control over the screen; he is at home in this role, for he plays the passionately tortured, exiled soul rather well, as he had before in Louis Malle's *Damage* (1992) or David Cronenberg's *M Butterfly* (1993). From the movie's opening scene, one can already guess doom lurks nigh – Irons's anguished looks blend adroitly with the washed out countryside, the dramatically serene score, and the battered old car swerving on the road. He has the polite handsomeness of a gentleman, while underneath an effervescent lunacy and a tormented stare denouncing at once the gallant spectre of a "haggard lover" and the blood-spattered serenity of a maniac (Nabokov 34).

This is one of Irons' greatest achievements in playing Humbert; he almost immediately captures the audience into this nostalgic universe of forlorn love, where he embodies the anti-hero on a fruitless errand. His intonation, his face, his words, the setting, all comes together to inspire a sense of sadness and wrongness one cannot simply dismiss as "another perverse story" (Schiff xvi). While Mason's Humbert came across as a peeved, melodramatic neurotic from the moment he confronts Quilty, Irons's shines as a maladroit lover, a Romantic out of time and place, a sentiment well represented by the erratic zigzagging on the road and Irons's first disconnected glare.

Irons is also perfect in his haughty disdain for the American way, and throughout the movie one finds subtle remarks that support his European contempt for all that is American – how he hits his head on the ceiling while touring Charlotte's house; the way he looks disapprovingly at the underwear drying on the bathroom; his excuse at having to leave the house at once due to a much more interesting conference on Baudelaire; his visit to the doctor asking for sleeping pills capable of knocking out a cow, "fat cow" being the secret name he uses in his journal when referring to Charlotte, the domineering wife he wants to keep sound asleep every night. One can easily believe Irons is capable of acts as opposite as fawning on a kid in the porch scene where he dopyly plays with Lolita and her doll, and then crazily throw punches at the hospital orderlies; or stalk Quilty with his gun, shooting him over and over through the corridors of Pavor Manor, in a violent, sadistic ritual which Lyne decided to shoot as an apotheosis for the grisly crescendo of insanity ridding Humbert's mind.

Although many have deemed Lyne's version inferior and sensationalist mostly due to his depicting of Quilty's death, I argue that Lyne is a filmmaker of the late 90's. While he suffers the influences of a horror recrudescence, which gained popular visibility around the mid-late 90s with Wes Craven's *Scream* trilogy (1996, 1997, 2000), Kubrick was gravely subdued due to the tight vigilance of the early 60s. Paedophilia was a very delicate subject, as well as gratuitous violence, and

the creative freedom he would explore in his very graphic *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) was still mainly latched up due to studio contracts and the public opinion's oppressive morality.⁵

Kubrick's movie, therefore, lives of subtle innuendos, suggestive fade-outs and shootings through Gainsborough's cheap reproductions. In itself that scene already tackles the subject of moviemakers being forced by studio policies to "hide" the bleakest details of the plot under sugar-coated decoys. It is widely known now that Kubrick's first strategy to tackle Nabokov's novel was to "[...] appease the watchdogs and moral shepherds of American cinema" and, disastrously comic, "[...] end the film with Lolita and Humbert married and with an adult relative's blessing" (Boyd 387).

Lyne had already filmed explicitly erotic movies, such as *9 ½ Weeks* (1986) and *Fatal Attraction* (1987), and was comfortable with being graphic. He had also directed the very controversial and acclaimed *Jacob's Ladder* (1990), a nightmarish journey into a veteran's derailing mind. Borderlining between gratuitous sexuality and otherworldly thrills, Lyne's compendium placed him as an understandable, if suspicious, choice to direct another *Lolita*.

He suffered two common, but quite odd, influences for one seeking to reproduce Nabokov's masterpiece – the 70's recurrent blending of erotica with horror motifs, which Hammer B-movies had widely popularised since the 50's; and the 80's slasher films' franchises, such as *Friday the 13th* (1980 - 2004), *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984 - 2003), *Hellraiser* (1987 - 2008), or *Child's Play* (1988 - 2004), which had paved the way for a generalised acceptance of gory movies in big Hollywood productions.

It may be argued that, Lyne's version of *Lolita* suffers from the director's preference for the overt at the expenses of the subtle. This is noticeable in Quilty's death scene with the grotesque mechanical piano playing although he had already left the keyboard; the mad chase through the corridors; the repulsive nudity of Frank Langella's sweaty body (a vivid portrayal of a disgusting pervert); the blood spurting beneath the white sheets; the unbearable bright light streaming into the sparse room. These are graphic elements designed to draw in a larger audience, not just the traditional Nabokovian critics and highbrow viewers, but also the MTV Generation, used to the horror-blockbusters the 90s had been ripe in.⁶

There is something undeniably tacky about Quilty's death scene, though, running naked pathetically, being shot with big splashes of blood and agonising sounds. Two arguments can be forwarded to account for Lyne's choices, nonetheless. Firstly, that without the crudeness of this scene, as well as the starkness present in *Lolita* and Humbert's relationship, this version would be yet another stale shadow of an ambitious novel. What is mostly entrancing in Nabokov's work is the effortless way he mingles horror with laughter and tenderness. Through Swain's natural sensuality and Quilty's grisly death, one can jump from all those extremely graphic experiences – innocence reversed,

madness turned murder – into the softness of Humbert’s days in Ramsdale musing over Lolita, or Humbert gazing at the children’s voices in the distant valley.

The second reason delves once more on the heavy influence Nabokov’s narrative exerts on the director and on the screenwriter. One can feel the words mouthed by actors being underlined by the vivid echo of the novel’s characters. So although Quilty’s death is somewhat exaggerated and B-movie-like, it is actually surprisingly loyal to Nabokov’s account. Humbert’s description of such moment runs in these rather grotesque terms:

“I fired three or four times [...] wounding him at every blaze [...] his face would twitch in an absurd clownish manner, as if he was exaggerating his pain [...] every time I got them with those slow, clumsy [...] bullets of mine, he would say [...]with a phoney British accent - all the while dreadfully twitching, shivering, smirking [...]’Ah that hurts sir, enough!...’ [...] he steadily walked on despite of all the lead I had lodged on his bloated body [...] I reloaded the thing with hands that were black and gory – I had touched something he had anointed with his thick gore [...] He was trudging from room to room, bleeding majestically [...] I saw this blood-spattered but still buoyant person get into bed and wrap himself up in the chaotic bedclothes. I hit him at very close range through the blankets, and then he lay back, and a big pink bubble [...] grew on his lips [...]” (303 – 304).

Lyne set off to reproduce the characters’ rawness, and this proved to be as unsettling and controversial in the big screen as it had been in Nabokov’s book – the love-making episode where Lolita reads a comic book while wiggling on Humbert’s lap; their sordid fight on the bed amid a dozens of coins; the fight which ends with Humbert striking Lolita and with her screaming she wants him to murder her like he murdered her mother. The tension and discomfort produced in the reader are aptly recreated for the viewer through these scenes, and then briefly dispelled by the humorous sight of Humbert ironing and playing the housewife.

Unmercifully, Lyne’s movie tackles one of the novel’s most debatable topics: Lolita’s moral slippage. Was her childhood marred by Humbert’s manipulations or her sensuous power-play is just a surviving tactic, far from corrupting her morals? Plainly Lyne opted for the second hypothesis, depicting Lolita using her foot to extract money from Humbert, or pleading “feeling romantic” and stripteasing in order to confuse and appease Humbert after a fight. There is something vaguely lurid about it, which coupled with the ominous score and the pastel-lit ambiance, gives this film the forbearing of an upcoming tragedy, which is, of course, the core of any good melodrama. Without its explicit carnality, such as Lolita’s provocative moves and looks, Quilty’s nudity, and his ghoulish death, Lyne’s movie could have been more palatable, more beautiful even, but also closer to a trivial made-for-TV movie.

Another of Lyne’s key moments is much craftier and much more poetic than the ones cited above. It is the scene that comes after the bloody mess in Quilty’s house – the epiphany on the cliff over the bucolic valley, when it dawns on Humbert that he is sorry for depriving Lolita of her

childhood. Finally the viewers are completely won over by Humbert's linguistic charm and by the longing in Irons's bloodied face, exonerating him from all the wrongs he did to Lolita in the past.⁷

The other pivotal moment in Lyne's movie, and such an improvement on Kubrick's rendition of the same segment, comes when Humbert visits the pregnant Mrs Schiller. One yields to Irons immediately, yields to the profound sense of loss of his Lolita, the girl that did not die yet, but that will die soon, no matter how avidly he tries to entice her back into his old car. It is tempting to yield to Irons almost from the moment he steps inside her ramshackle house and, heartbroken, sees his childish mistress destroyed by time and hardship.

The adoration mirrored in Irons' eyes works on the viewer by effacing all his former dirty deeds; what does the trick, in my opinion, is how vainly he wants to retrieve something which is irretrievably lost, although apparently it stands at his hands' reach. With this mood set, the viewer swerves edgily from pitying Humbert, to empathising with his loss; to pitying Lolita with her swollen belly and shabby surroundings, to begrudge her ruthless scheming; to be glad she has at last escaped his harmful grip and seems grounded and confident. Still, even after this bittersweet reunion, the aura of gloom never leaves the screen – it has been there since the first glimpse of the,

“ [...] New England countryside, a beat-up fifties car, a Melmoth driving outside a small town. It creeps over into the left lane [...] Humbert, a man of forty [...] his face [...] freckled with blood. [His first lines] Lolita [...] But there might have been no Lolita at all had I not first met [...] Annabel” (Schiff 2).

Now the viewer understands these were misplaced images of the movie's dramatic ending, a circular artifice already employed by Kubrick for a totally different effect. There is much beauty and loss comprised in these scenes which hinted at what anyone who read the book already knew – this is not a story with a possible happy ending. By the time the curtain falls to announce Lolita and Humbert's deaths, like in a Greek tragedy every major character will have been haplessly killed by random cars, intent shots, bursting arteries or massive childbirth bleedings.

It is a movie highly evocative of Nabokov's writing, using many of his novel's passages, trying to be so faithful to its essence that one may complain this is but the palimpsest of a book; the literary counterparts breathe in life to the animated actors, these mimicking lines that are not their own. Even “ [...] Dimitri Nabakov, the novelist's son, finds the film 'superb', its only fault a slight excess of fidelity to his father's text” (Wood 184).

It may lack authenticity, for at times it is just like playing a book in one's head, unaccounted-for players voicing words that are not coming from their hearts and throats, but from the book's realm. It is easy to blame Lyne and Schiff of a too-adoring awe for Nabokov's novel and possibly that is a fair charge. It is also hard to picture, however, who would be a better suitor to the gargantuan task of translating *Lolita's* impressions into film, if not lovers of words and of the meaning they carry.

Probably if Nabokov was alive he would still be critical of Lyne's movie as he was of Kubrick's. As a loving parent, no one would ever be good enough to match his mesmerising offspring, not even the most devoted of filmmakers. Though it is understandable he disliked Kubrick's version for all that he changed and left out, and especially after amply ignoring the script Nabokov himself had carefully written for him, Lyne's movie would probably strike Nabokov as too much in debt to his book, too desperate to cause a good impression, so that sometimes it is more of a pastiche, no matter how quaint, but still a pastiche of Nabokov's prolific imagination.

Although Kubrick's era nurtured a noteworthy squirminess about Nabokov's book, surprisingly Lyne's movie would still be fighting off this kind of accusations by the late 90s. As Schiff states in the foreword to his script of *Lolita*, this was a very difficult and complex filming, with heavy detractors such as "Steve Dunleavy, chief mad dog of the *New York Post*" acrimoniously bickering,

"We have kiddie porn sweeping computer networks – and too many Jon Bennets lying in tiny coffins. What on earth would prompt anyone to do a remake of a movie on the most forbidden of subjects? [...] We don't need another "Lolita" to light more tinderboxes of madness" (xxv).

Taking all these facts into consideration it is easier to understand why Kubrick chose tameness over boldness in the early 60s. From the very beginning, however, *Lolita's* "Foreword" has been trying to warn readers against the novel's salacious content, but by doing it so, it seems to have only exposed these readers' eagerness in feasting on "sorry and sordid" businesses. For decades, people kept on reading it and adapting it to the big screen in spite of John Ray's concerned warnings.⁸

Maybe that is the reason why both movies failed to capture the spirit of the novel, or of its era. Maybe Kubrick's film came too soon, too close to the actual silent cynicism and tabooed culture reminiscent of the Finny Fifties, and Lyne's came too late, when sexual liberalisation and mass information had already taken the edge off of social satire and sexual depravity, trivialising themes as paedophilia and suburban contamination. While in the early 60s those were forbidden themes, unseen on the movie screens, by the late 90s people were senselessly spoon-fed graphic slaughters and gratuitous nudity.

Independently from the circumstances and filmmakers, both movies are still a significantly slow anatomy, quite like the novel itself. Its subject-matter is the intricate paths of human obsession – desiring and despising a person or a country that will ultimately be admired, although initially such country appeared to denigrate one's principles. So, from my perspective, what had begun as repulsive as "the commonest pubescent slang," slimy food and banal teenage accessories, is in the end changed into a precious token of appreciation and longing for the past (Nabokov 194). In Lyne's movie, what brings back wistful memories is a hairpin found years later inside a glove compartment, which mirrors Annabel's faded blue ribbon; in Kubrick's film, it is a bespectacled old lover, messy and stale as a used-up map.