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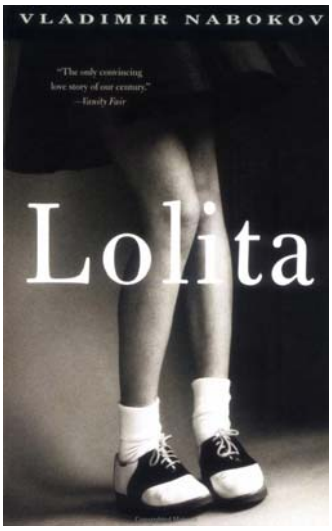
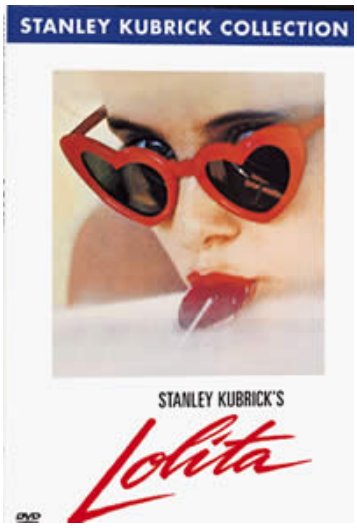
Transmedialities: Performance at the Edge

Lo, Lola, Lolita
Remake, Adaptation and Defining Success





Introduction

Watch a film and nine out of ten times it will be either an adaptation of a book or other text, or it will be a remake of an earlier film or combination of films; in some cases it will even be both. When a source film deviates considerably from its source text, the Director of the subsequent movie may choose either to return to the original text when re-scripting his film, or to refer to the previous film for his inspiration; he might even choose to only loosely adhere to both, and so create something entirely new.

When Adrian Lyne filmed Lolita in 1997 he had to stand his ground against two remarkable influences in the literary and film world: Vladimir Nabokov and Stanley Kubrick, both of whom had in the 35 years since the first filming of Nabokov's novel grown in professional stature. Nabokov's novel, that on its completion almost failed to find a publisher, was now recognised as a work of literary genius, its writer a sophisticated, insightful and humorous analyst of human nature.

The film director Kubrick had, subsequent to his interpretation of *Lolita*, risen in stature as a director for films that included *Full Metal Jacket* and *The Shining*.

Kubrick's *Lolita* was pre *A Clockwork Orange*, pre *2001: A Space Odyssey* and pre the aforementioned movies. It was made by a Kubrick still searching for his "voice" and perhaps still in awe of his source, Nabokov. On the other hand, Lyne's *Lolita* was post *9½ Weeks* and post *Fatal Attraction* and in some circles Adrian Lyne was seen as a mere ad-man turned soft porn Director. So at the time of release both films are at the outset handicapped by the status of their Directors; but in 1997 Lyne was additionally handicapped by the position Kubrick held in Cinema at that moment.

Fabula and Style

Adrian Lyne has chosen to adhere to the "fabula" (Elliot: 230) of Nabokov's novel. To emphasise this approach there is extensive application of "non-diagetic" (Forceville, C) voiceovers that are quotes plucked directly from the novel. These voiceovers serve as reminders that we are viewing a work of art, and remind us that this is a "reflexive" film (Stam: Preface-xi) much in the same way that Nabokov defends *Lolita* by saying "For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere connected with other states of being where art… is the norm." (314-315). Granted Kubrick also uses voiceovers but they are not as ubiquitous as Lyne's.

The search for Lolita after she has run away, which takes Humbert criss-cross over America, is, in Lyne's film, narrated almost entirely with voiceovers: Nabokov's lyrical, highly-stylized, hypnotic prose. It is an important development in characterisation, allowing the viewer to witness Humbert's psychological deterioration, echoing the moral tone of the novel, where Humbert's deviance eventually leads to his downfall. Kubrick eliminates this search entirely, and jumps forward to Lolita's begging letter, which takes Humbert straight to her. Kubrick has chosen not to adhere to the 'fabula' of the novel, and prefers to allude to his own prior works.

In the opening scene of the film (foreshadowing the end) Quilty springs from under the dustcovers of a chair proclaiming he is *Spartacus* referring to Kubrick's previous work. This ridiculous Quilty will

dominate the film, whereas in the novel and in Adrian Lyne's adaptation Quilty is the sinister figure lurking in the shadows.

Spirit and Style

Nabokov's style also contained other important elements; namely satire and irony. Despite dealing with a delicate subject: the obsession of a paedophile with his ward, he brings humour into the prose, as here when describing the playwright Quilty and at the same time foreshadowing what will eventually happen to him: "…The murdered playwright. Quine the swine. Guilty of killing Quilty. Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with!" (32). Or "'She is still shuttling,' said Miss Pratt, '… between the anal and the genital zones of development.'" (194). And then to remind us that this is a mere work of fiction. "If you want to make a movie out of my book, have one of these faces melt gently into my own, while I look." (122).

Kubrick, under severe pressure from influential institutions, including the Catholic Church, and aware of the fine line he was walking in filming *Lolita,* (Bane: 150) minimised the darker side of the novel and defended his adaptation in an article entitled Words and Movies that appeared in *Sight and Sound* magazine in 1961:

> People have asked me how it is possible to make a film out of *Lolita* when so much of the quality of the book depends on Nabokov's prose style. But to take the prose style as any more than just a part of a great book is simply misunderstanding just what a great book is. Of course, the quality of the writing is one of the elements that make a novel great. But this quality is a result of the quality of the writer's obsession with his subject….
> Style is what an artist uses to fascinate the beholder in order to convey to him his feelings and emotions and thoughts. These are what have to be dramatised, not the style. The dramatising has to find a style of its own, as it will do if it really grasps the content. (14)

While Kubrick adds the satirical element by expanding the role of Quilty throughout the book, and by assigning the role to the "hypertextual" (Stam: 25) Peter Sellers, who to the informed viewer can never be taken seriously given his reputation as a Goon, Lyne's *Lolita* lacks this humour, "swerving" (Geddes on Bloom) away from the "spirit" (Elliot: 222) of the novel to create a darker work. Against the almost slapstick performance of Peter Sellers, Frank Langella as Quilty is a sinister figure, lurking in the shadows; his only redeeming feature is his collaboration with Vivian Darkbloom (anag. Vladimir Nabokov), which may encourage a lopsided smile from the informed viewer. This same 'reflexive' technique, ubiquitous in Kubrick's film, misses the subtlety of Lyne's allusion, and given that Kubrick, having persuaded Nabokov to write the screenplay, subsequently re-wrote it, until no more than 20% survived (Bane: 152 footnote), the allusion becomes no more than a consolation prize for Nabokov.

Characterisation and Focalization

Characterisation plays an important role in defining the 'spirit' of a source text or in illustrating author intent. Whether the onus of responsibility for the events that unfold in the novel lie with Lolita or with Humbert Humbert, depends largely on how the author chooses to portray them. Nabokov leaves no room for doubt about the "reality" or his

"illusion" of reality (Stam: 1). One of the most important elements in this 'reality' is that it is a first person narrative. The foreword which precedes the novel proper in *Lolita* by the fictitious John Ray says:

> "Lolita, or the Confessions of a White Widowed Male," such were the two titles under which the writer of the present note received the strange pages it perambulates. "Humbert Humbert," their author, had died in legal captivity, of a coronary thrombosis….this remarkable memoir is presented intact…. For the benefit of old-fashioned readers who wish to follow the destinies of the "real" people beyond the "true" story…

Everything after that is related by Humbert himself.

But, despite this dominant point of view, Nabokov actually shifts "focalization" from an internal "character focalizor" to an "external focalizor" (Bal: 148): the first being Humbert, the second also Humbert as he becomes further unravelled, and split emotionally. At these moments he talks about himself in the third person, and develops various nicknames for himself, that illustrate his current state of mind. "Humbert the Hummer…. Humbert Humbert …. Humbert the Hound …. I crushed out against her left buttock the last throb of the longest ecstasy man or monster had ever known." (57-61).

Nabokov portrays a complex Humbert, fully aware of his deviance, who sees himself as powerless to resist his base urges. Humbert is a man who marries a widow to maintain proximity to her daughter, and despite being fully aware that she is a pubescent girl given to wild fantasy: "I am said to resemble some crooner or actor chap on whom Lo has a crush." (43) and "Pubescent Lo swooned to Humbert's charm as she did to hiccupy music;"(104) engages in a sexual relationship with her even when she resists: "never did she vibrate under my touch; and a strident "what are you doing?" was all I got for my pains …. between a Hamburger and a Humburger, she would … plump for the former… I dubbed her my frigid princess." (166) and "it was always my habit and method to ignore Lolita's states of mind, while comforting my own base needs."(287).

Neither Kubrick nor Lyne have achieved this multilayered characterisation. Kubrick has opted for the impartial observer, maintaining 'external focalization' throughout. His Humbert is serious and calculated, displaying by his actions that he at all times knew what he was doing. Kubrick's Lolita is less clearly defined. Again the climate and the era in which Kubrick's film was made forced Kubrick to leave Lolita open to personal interpretation. She is neither completely innocent nor completely calculating.

Thirty five years later, Lyne does not shy away from creating sympathy for Humbert and assigning Lolita a less palatable character. Lyne shifts from the 'external focalizor' to the 'character focalizor' and it is Humbert who provides the 'voiceovers' that are direct quotes from the novel. In this way Humbert relates directly to the viewer, winning sympathy. Added to this, Lyne's Lolita is the temptress, albeit a guileless one; Lyne later modifies this when he introduces the possibility that Lolita has been sending out signals that are appropriate for pubescent boys who share her stage of development but inappropriate when aimed at the paedophile Humbert.

There comes a point at which Lolita realises that her situation is unnatural. But she has nowhere else to go. She realises that Humbert cannot resist her sexually and now demands

money for sexual favours; money she saves to finance her eventual escape. She plans her escape with Quilty's help. Here Lyne begins to shift more frequently between the 'external focalizor' to the 'character focalizor' offering the viewer the opportunity to see Humbert through Lolita's eyes, and vice versa. As Humbert deteriorates psychologically, so too the sympathetic character traits diminish.

Cinematography

A shift in focalization as mentioned in the previous section, is achieved in film by switching cameras. The main camera, which impersonally records all characters in the scene, is replaced with a camera that actually 'takes the place' of one of the characters. In Lyne's *Lolita* the external focalizor camera shows Humbert slapping Lolita on the face, character focalizor camera as Humbert 'sees' Lolita lift her hand to her face then character focalizor camera as Lolita 'sees' Humbert's reaction. So the viewer is given the opportunity to 'feel' Humbert's horror at his own action and 'feel' Lolita's shock and helplessness.

Kubrick chooses not to employ this cinematographic tool. However the mis en scene, including the 'vanitas' elements such as the triptych shrine to Charlotte Haze's dead husband and the photographs on the wall remind us of the brevity of life and the transience of human pleasures. Another trick Kubrick uses to sow a seed of doubt about Humbert's trustworthiness is at the beginning of the film in the garden, when Humbert has just decided to stay at the Haze's so that he can enjoy "Cherry pie" an obvious play on words. At this point the camera cuts away to a scene from a Frankenstein movie, and the unmasking of the monster, the metaphor underlined by the switch to Humbert, Charlotte and Lolita watching the movie at a drive-in, with Humbert preferring to clasp Lolita's hand. A seed has been planted. The summer camp Lolita attends is called 'Camp Climax'. As Humbert pauses at the sign, the viewer sees him indulging in the scantily clad campers. Another seed.

Adrian Lyne, borrowing from his experience in *9½ weeks* and *Fatal Attraction*, makes use of many cinematographic tools. The most striking effect is his use of lighting. In the mid section of the film, when the relationship between Humbert and Lolita is most subversive, the lighting is dull in scenes containing both of them. Rooms are drab, items cannot be seen clearly. In the latter section of the film, as Lolita starts to prise herself free from Humbert, the hotel rooms become brighter, (the last one is white and brightly lit). The hospital is also brightly lit: Humbert cannot lurk in the shadows any longer, nor can he keep Lolita prisoner. During Humbert's search for Lolita across America, the camera films from long shots, and aerial shots. A lone car crossing the American desert symbolises Humbert's isolation.

A striking cinematographic difference between the two films is that Kubrick's is black and white and Lyne's is colour. A conscious choice by Kubrick who had previously produced a film in colour (*The Seafarers*). Black and white is used 'reflexively' reminding the viewer that this is a film. In contrast Lyne's application of colour, of light and shade, is reminiscent of *9½ weeks*, also a story of sexual obsession and ultimately self-destruction.

Both films begin with the mist, which inevitably foreshadows a murky narrative.

Remake, Adaptation and Defining Success

A spokesman for the MPAA found Kubrick's script to be unacceptable, saying: "script, in my opinion, has turned an important literary achievement into the worst sort of botched-up pastiche that could be imagined". (Hughes 103). When the film was finally released critics condemned it as "the saddest and most important victim of the current reckless adaptation fad" or "an occasionally amusing but shapeless film…like a bee from which the stinger has

been removed." *The Observer* called it "*Lolita* Fiasco" said the film turned Nabokov's novel into a story about "this poor English guy who is being given the runaround by this sly young broad" (Hughes 99).

The credits of Lyne's film state: "Based on the Novel by Vladimir Nabokov", Kubrick's "Based on a Screenplay by Vladimir Nabokov". The question remains, is *Lolita* 1997 a remake of *Lolita* 1962? Lyne is silent on the issue. However, it is amusing to note in the closing scene of the film that he allows the 'sacred cow' to cross Humbert's path as he derives his car into a field. Whether the intention is there or not, the film is by its existence a remake, though by his silence on the issue, Lyne frees himself of any responsibility when it comes to improving on the original, bringing it up to date, or paying homage to it. (Segal: 63). Paradoxically, it took until 1997, and Lyne's *Lolita* for Kubrick's film to be re-evaluated. Lyne's version fell short by comparison for most critics. Kubrick, defined by Jack Nicolson as 'the man' of film, was a hard act to follow for ex ad-man Lyne.

It was a decisive Lyne that distanced himself from the remake rumours; the same Lyne 'swerved' just as decisively from the Nabokov narrative too. As Phillip Martin sums up in his article for the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*

> Lyne and Schiff have opted not to play up to the vulgar and common misconception of Lolita that all the hubbub has only propagated. Nor…. are they ultimately faithful to the book, eliding the layers of irony and judgment in which lurk Nabokov's real authorial voice and design.

By extensive application of Nabokov's prose, and by adherence to the fabula, Lyne chooses not to empty the ancestor entirely (Geddes on Bloom). However, by re-inventing the characters of Lolita and Humbert – Dominique Swain as Lolita is an irresistible temptress for Jeremy Irons as Humbert – and asserting influence over the viewer through subtle use of techniques such as focalization, he in fact creates a new narrative and an original work with its own spirit. As a remake considered inferior, as an adaptation too careful, this film, without abridgement or embellishment, demands its own merit as a valid work of creation.

"…in near relatives, the faintest gastric gurgle has the same 'voice'." (Nabokov: 95)

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