

MEDIA VOYEURS IN VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S LOLITA

by

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ABSTRACT

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Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*, most often noted for its critique on consumerism in post-war America and the conflict between Old World European values with New World American ones, contains an equally strong critique on consumerism of media. *Lolita*'s narrative style, the memoir of a pedophile and murderer simultaneously seeking absolution and applause, investigates the relationship between a seductive mass media and its prurient and Puritanical audience. Implicit in the narrative technique is the audience's own participation in the mediation of reality.

To anyone who has ever enjoyed a novel without feeling the need to see the movie first

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Introduction

Vladimir Nabokov's emigration from his birthplace in Russia, throughout Europe, and finally to the United States offered him a unique perspective on many different cultures and a broad understanding of societies, norms, and cultural practices. Nabokov left Russia with his family in 1919 during the Bolshevik Revolution; his father was assassinated three years later by Russian reactionaries (Field 9). The hardships endured in such a politically explosive atmosphere at an early age, along with a privileged education at noted schools throughout Europe, aided in molding Nabokov's cynical yet poignant writing. Nabokov does not offer a simplistic or obvious answer to the problems of culture and moral conflicts facing his characters in the novel *Lolita*; rather than urging one point or moral lesson in the novel, he instead offers various insights on popular cultural themes and practices in the United States while allowing the reader to ponder the examples of human behavior in a darkly humorous tone.

In order to accentuate the cultural clash between the Old World of Europe and the New World of America, Nabokov utilizes word play and clichés from various European cultures to mock the American pretenses of assumed multiculturalism as depicted in characters such as Charlotte Haze. Ironically, a novel satirizing American popular

culture may in fact be the “Great American Novel,” a phrase that refers to the concept of a novel that “perfectly represents the spirit of life in the United States at the time of its publication. It is often presumed to be written by an American author who is knowledgeable about the state, culture, and perspective of the common American citizen” (Brown 3). Given this description of citizenship, a Russian émigré can be considered one of the great American novelists. Nabokov’s novel captures mid-twentieth century Americans’ interactions during an era marked by a growing desire for knowledge of current events thanks to a booming postwar economy and technological advances in media. By 1945 Nabokov had gained U.S. citizenship and exhibited a keen understanding of the activities and attitudes of the typical American. The cultural critique he offers in *Lolita* also picks up on the growing salience of pictorial media in daily life, as evident in advertisements, the entertainment business, and a news industry that increasingly catered to entertainment interests. The protagonist’s own understanding of American culture is regulated through popular imagery, as exemplified in the comparison he makes in the novel: “[B]y a paradox of pictorial thought, the average lowland North-American countryside had at first seemed to me something I accepted with a shock of amused recognition because of those painted oilcloths which were imported from America in the old days to be hung above washstands in Central-European nurseries, and which fascinated a drowsy child at bed time with the rustic green views they depicted” (152). America presents itself to the Old World through romanticized pictures and advertisements for tourism. Similarly, much of the novel pertains to voyeurism and solipsism in media forms frequently found in Hollywood celebrity culture.

Lolita illuminates postwar American culture in an astute way that not many other novels have since done. Nabokov goes beyond the typical socio-political critiques of capitalism and consumerism by incorporating a media study of the rising popularity of film. While many might assume that the novel carries a message about the horrors of pedophilia, Nabokov instead highlights a very different antagonistic force tearing the moral fiber of American culture. The novel explores the increased ease of prying into the lives not only of Hollywood celebrities, as in *Lolita*'s magazines, but of neighboring citizens as well. American culture is thus marked by voyeurism, from obsession with private celebrities' lives to the more sinister desires for knowledge of others' tragedies or transgressions of cultural norms.

Nabokov's critique of American popular culture's consumption of images in *Lolita* only becomes more apparent through the failures of later film adaptations. Passively watching a film, for most people, requires less critical assessment than reading a novel. Thus, the majority of the audiences of Stanley Kubrick's and Adrian Lyne's films find less satire and cultural critique involved in *Lolita* than would the reader. The novel is constructed around Humbert's confession, which provides an example of voyeurism and insight into American popular culture from the vantage point of an Old World émigré. For a director to successfully make a film adaptation bear a resemblance to Nabokov's work, it must be self-critical just as Humbert's confession in the novel pokes fun at its own readership. Only a film looking for artistic credit rather than commercial success could possibly adapt Nabokov's satire for a small academic audience.

The first instance of an adaptation involved Nabokov working in conjunction with director Stanley Kubrick. Nabokov had transcribed his novel to a screenplay with some minor alterations for Kubrick's use in creating the film; however, most of the screenplay went unheeded by Kubrick and a much-censored and butchered version made it to theatres in the 1962 release. Kubrick does not include many of the traveling scenes integral to the novel's cultural commentary on materialism and American kitsch, and also leaves out many literary puns such as the infamous Enchanted Hunters hotel name. Though this film catches the dark humor of the tragicomic novel, it fails to identify with the fundamental conflict between America's voyeuristic desires and its moral notions, as well as much of the obsession with solipsism in Hollywood popular culture.

The second film adaptation of *Lolita* was directed by Adrian Lyne in 1997. Mirroring Nabokov's initial difficulty in getting his novel published, Lyne's film was not released in the United States until 1998 due to censorship regulations regarding child actors and depictions of sexuality. This film remains fairly loyal to the original plot but fails to capture the tone. Lyne's *Lolita* is overly sentimentalized, complete with violin soundtrack and a nihilistic tone of despair which leaves little room for Nabokov's acerbically humorous treatment of the story. Lyne includes the critique of visual culture through Lolita's perusal of celebrity magazines and her typically American desire to become either a dancer or an actress, and his film follows the road trip through the American Midwest and rather disturbingly illustrates Lolita's manipulation of Humbert's desires in exchange for material goods and money; however, Lyne fails to capture Nabokov's satirical tone and media commentary which is integral to the treatment and understanding of *Lolita*.

Though both films had some success in their own rights, neither director fully captures Nabokov's relentlessly penetrating examination of American culture. Kubrick's film captures Nabokov's tone but changes the storyline substantially, and Lyne's version follows the plot but misses the whole purpose of tragicomedy when he over-sentimentalizes the relationship, trying to create a finite moral ending that Nabokov may have purposely avoided. Both films fail to critique their own participation in the media culture that Nabokov explores. Film as a medium often times is less able to coerce its audience to be as critical in their understanding of the work as a text. Cinematic audiences merely viewing actions on a screen exhibit less critical thought than an individual analytically reading a text. As demonstrated by *Lolita*, a work which investigates vision and viewing, a film audience is likely to overlook the concept of voyeurism completely.

This paper attempts to highlight how Nabokov's *Lolita* replicates the tendency of contemporary American society to ostracize violent or immoral behavior in media while remaining fascinated by it in reality and, simultaneously as Nabokov publicizes American society's voyeuristic tendencies through representations of textual and pictorial media, the cinematic adaptations of *Lolita* themselves only serve to fortify the novel's initial claims about visual media. I will discern the ways in which culture or art have dominant influence over the other in comparison between text and film. I believe that since literature is an art form freer of socio-cultural constraints than film, it is better able to transcend conventions of its time period than film, particularly in regards to censorship and critical response. Whether it be the printing revolution that brought on a more secularized society (as I will discuss in regards to media studies theorists Friedrich A.

Kittler and Elizabeth E. Eisenstein), or the postmodern movement that brought on repetition in imagery and replaced parody with pastiche (in regards to Frederic Jameson's cultural critique of late capitalism), art forms are not only shaped by the culture in which it is created, but shape the culture as well. Nabokov's *Lolita*, situated in the movement from modernism to postmodernism notes that the introduction of pictorial media have had a reductionist effect on individuals, creating consumers in a mass market rather than creative individuals.

In the upcoming chapters I will focus mainly on the novel's depictions of human nature in relation to cultural practices within American society, specifically with regards to voyeurism and the rise of media forms as vehicles of entertainment rather than information. I will compare how the message from Nabokov's novel plays out in the two film adaptations by Stanley Kubrick in 1962 and Adrian Lyne in 1998. Nabokov's novel provides an astute satire of the media-saturated consumer culture of mid-Twentieth Century America, a culture that the films only seem to reinforce. In Chapter 1 I will discuss the novel's critique of media culture in America. I will then compare Kubrick's and Lyne's films to the novel and provide criticisms from the release of each films in Chapter 2. Then I will conclude by providing an overview of the main attributes of the novel and each film, and what the implications of the failure of each *Lolita* adaptation means for media studies.

Chapter 1: Cultural Voyeurism in Vladimir Nabokov's

Lolita

Vladimir Nabokov did not find a publisher in the United States for his novel *Lolita* until 1958, three years after its initial publication in France. The subject matter of *Lolita* was contested then and remains so. However, the discriminating reader can look past the ostensible plot about an adult male's love affair with a twelve-year-old girl and enjoy the novel for its artistic merit and critical assessment of modern American culture of the 1950s. Ironically, Nabokov, a Russian émigré, may very well have written the great American novel, as suggested in such essays as "'April in Arizona': Nabokov as an American Writer" in which author Susan Elizabeth Sweeney acclaims this novel among others by Nabokov as having "capture[d] the US from the perspective of a seasoned traveler in space and time, [and] thus great American novels, which extend a national narrative tradition – and transform it" (Sweeney 334). Nabokov utilizes the narrative form of a first-person point-of-view account, offering a confession in order to manipulate the reader into sympathizing with a character she or he may normally find abominable. Though Humbert Humbert is a pedophile himself, his written confession provides insight into morally hypocritical aspects of the culture which shuns him. During his description

of the love affair with Lolita, Humbert points out various properties of the New World in America such as the preoccupation with image, materialist consumption, and ease of voyeurism with the aid of new media technology. Rather than being active participants in a community, people become detached observers, eager to watch another person's misery or transgressions but not so willing to admit to their own faults. Through the confessional form, Nabokov toys with the conflicting moral properties of society by drawing the reader's interest to a tale that should be shunned as violent and immoral by society's standards, thus coercing the reader to mirror various characters' actions within *Lolita*. Humbert's urgency in telling the story of his love for the character Lolita is in direct response to society's morbid fascination with tragedy, often sensationalized by media. Given the public's obsession with the grotesque, *Lolita's* confessional narrative form gives the American reader what she or he would be otherwise snooping for, leaving the reader with a discomforted feeling after gaining knowledge of sensational crime. Nabokov's *Lolita* represents the voyeuristic and at times sadistic aspects of contemporary media, particularly influential in a confessional narration which simultaneously implicates the reader in Humbert Humbert's actions while at the same time condemning him, thus mirroring the tendency of contemporary American society to ostracize violent or immoral behavior in media while remaining fascinated by it. Nabokov thus publicizes American society's voyeuristic tendencies through representations of textual and pictorial media.

Noted scholar Alfred Appel, Jr. calls Nabokov's *Lolita*, "a burlesque of the confessional mode, the literary diary, the Romantic novel that chronicles the effects of a debilitating love, the *Doppelganger* tale, and, in parts, a Duncan Hines tour of America"

(Appel 213). Because an outsider's perspective can often provide clarifying revelations on an issue, Nabokov fashions his narrator as a member of the Old World confronting the New. Nabokov inserts a deviant well-educated and snobbish émigré, Humbert, into the conventions of contemporary entertainment fiction. In so doing, the novel toys with the reader's preconceptions of media, which Humbert describes in Americans as "the obscene mind [that] was the result of considerable literary inbreeding in modern fiction" (Nabokov 206). *Lolita* herself exists as a symbol of the ideal consumer, reflected in Humbert's statement "no matter how I pleaded or stormed, I could never make her read any other book than the so-called comic books or stories in magazines for American females" (Nabokov 173). In a culture saturated with advertisements and low-brow reading material, the characters' thought processes mirror the unoriginality and mass production of the media they subscribe to. Humbert's own self-aware narration – cognizant of his situation as deviant within a similarly deviant world – points out cultural flaws of mid-twentieth century American's voyeurism from an alien perspective.

In Nabokov's *Lolita*, Humbert attempts to offer in his confessional narrative a textual alternative to the American obsession with a popular media that is flawed. The comparison between him and his doppelgänger Quilty illustrates the antagonism between high art and popular commodified art. Humbert attempts to immortalize *Lolita* through written text as opposed to Quilty's desire to use her as a passing image in his pornographic film productions. During his confrontation with Humbert after the second kidnapping of *Lolita*, Quilty defends his actions by reasoning "[m]y memory and my eloquence are not at their best today but really, my dear Mr. Humbert, you were not an ideal stepfather, and I did not force your little protégée to join me. It was she made me

remove her to a happier home” (Nabokov 301). Quilty acknowledges the fact that his character and style of art do not contain the same amount of eloquence as Humbert’s confession. Quilty’s cinematic endeavors cater to prurient interests that have little need for literary finesse, while Humbert offers his soul to the reader in print. Quilty also illuminates that Lolita’s kidnapping, if it can be called that, was not coerced. Lolita actively sought celebrity on screen, no doubt influenced by pictorial media glamorizing Hollywood celebrity lifestyles. Lolita represents the ideal consumer, not only of material objects but also of celebrity culture. Humbert discusses the difference between theater and literature that he perceives when lamenting Lolita’s involvement in Quilty’s school play entitled *The Enchanted Hunters*, stating “I detest the theatre as being a primitive and putrid form, historically speaking; a form that smacks of stone-age rites and communal nonsense despite those individual injections of genius, such as, say, Elizabethan poetry which a closeted reader automatically pumps out of the stuff” (Nabokov 200). Humbert differentiates between theatre as a form of entertainment and literature, such as poetry, as a more academic form of writing. For Humbert, theater and film are media that require less critical assessment than literature. The need for immersion within the story is less necessary in film; viewership turns the actively participating reader into a passive consumer of images and sound, much like the American character Lolita.

Humbert is clearly well read not only in the classics as is illustrated through his numerous literary references, but also in contemporary texts and world news. Humbert illustrates throughout his narrative that in his contemporary American culture more people seek daily news articles than literature for reading entertainment, as illustrated in descriptions of Lolita’s fascination with newspapers in which “she studied the

photographic results of head-on collisions,; she never doubted the reality of place, time and circumstance alleged to match the publicity pictures of naked-thighed beauties; and she was curiously fascinated by the photographs of local brides...” (Nabokov 165); Humbert astutely picks up on this tendency and not only uses the same medium for justification in his confession, but also uses this medium to satirize the larger cultural perspective. Many news stories noted throughout the novel sensationalize societal transgressions such as kidnapping or murder, and people actively seek out such pessimistic news. *Lolita* portrays the same sensational occurrences, but through Humbert’s satirical remarks which attempt to make the reader critically aware of her or his own cooperation in this sensationalism.

The propensity towards voyeurism and intrusive gossip apparent in Humbert’s complaints is persistent in the novel. The advent of growing media technology, especially apparent in film, caters to the obsession with knowing details of others’ lives. Humbert reiterates the common warnings of surveillance as found in treks to hotels across the nation:

We wish you to feel at home while here. *All* equipment was carefully checked upon your arrival. Your license number is on record here. Use hot water sparingly. We reserve the right to eject without notice any objectionable person. Do not throw waste material of *any* kind in the toilet bowl. Thank you. Call again. The Management. P.S. We consider our guests the Finest People in the World (Nabokov 210).

Surveillance becomes apparent in Humbert and Lolita’s hotel visits which are supposedly anonymous and private places of temporary domicile. The almost schizophrenic attitude

of the management in the above statement illustrates the hypocritical attitudes of a culture of distrust. The hotel management uses textual media to record automobile license numbers and personal luggage. The manager's note warns guests that they are being watched, yet at the end tries to establish a bond of false feelings of trust. Where the beginning of the letter states they will eject "objectionable persons," the ending claims that they believe their guests to be the "Finest People in the World." If the management truly believed this, there would be no need for such excessive surveillance and policies on ejecting hotel visitors. Media attitudes of investigation invade most aspects of Americans' lives, from newspaper articles to hotel visits.

Nabokov's *Lolita* satirizes the reader's common expectations of a sensationalized story by displaying the sinister relationships Humbert has with fellow characters in a comedic light, through various references to vaudeville and Humbert's own descriptions of grotesque impersonations from comic media. Elements of vaudeville are most apparent in Humbert's battle with his doppelganger Quilty in the end of the novel:

Wiggling his [Quilty's] fingers in the air, with a rapid heave of his rump, he flashed into the music room and the next second we were tugging and gasping on both sides of the door which had a key I had overlooked. I won again, and with another abrupt movement Clare the Impredictable sat down before the piano and played several atrociously vigorous, fundamentally hysterical plangent chords...(Nabokov 302).

Quilty's body parts, fingers and buttocks, are described as moving frantically and erratically during his flight from death, and his performance of piano concerti seems ridiculous and foolish under the circumstances. His actions are humorous, but in context

they reflect an inappropriate and ‘detached’ response (Nabokov 303). Rather than conventionally fleeing for his life, Quilty performs until his last moments when Humbert describes him saying “under his breath, with a phoney British accent... ‘Ah, that hurts sir, enough!’” (Nabokov 303).

Much like Quilty’s vaudeville death throes acted out as though for others to watch, Humbert’s confession is written for an audience. *Lolita* is about America’s overwhelming concern with spectacle and interaction with an audience. The people of post-war America reveled in overtly moralistic values yet illustrated a divergent interest in choices of trashy entertainment and daily news. Daily media inform people of perverse tragedies yet do not provide information about how to rectify related social ills. Thus, media in such a way encourage their audiences to be detached voyeurs, absorbing stories as interesting conversation pieces rather than a call for action. Gossip columns proliferate and the general public loves to hear a tantalizing scandal. As such, people become fascinated by the lives of others to the point of interpreting their own lives as spectacle. The consensual ingestion of his confession makes each reader individually complicit with Humbert’s own actions and feelings throughout the text. Alfred Appel, Jr. notes:

“Anybody can imagine those elements of animality,” [134] he [Humbert] said, and yet a great many readers wished that he had done it for them – enough to have kept *Lolita* at the top of the best-seller list for almost a year, although librarians reported that many readers never finished the novel. The critics and remedial readers who complain that the second half of *Lolita* is less interesting are not aware of the possible significance of

their admission. Their desire for highbrow pornography is “doubled” in Clare Quilty, whose main hobby is making pornographic films (Nabokov 441).

Instead of writing detailed accounts of Lolita’s sex life and abuses by her elders, Nabokov uses wordplay to insinuate sexual puns. Phrases such as “Duk Duk Ranch” (Nabokov 276), slang terminology for copulation, and Humbert’s plea to Lolita – “I want you to leave your incidental Dick, and this awful hole...” (Nabokov 278) – might elicit an immature giggle; however, this is about as racy as the novel gets. Humbert’s literary confession leaves much to the imagination in regards to sex acts.

Rather than a pornographic treatise, Humbert’s confession provides a critique of media culture. Many critics have tied the plot of *Lolita* to various newspaper accounts which Nabokov had access to during the conception of his novel. In the article “What Happened to Sally Horner?: A Real-Life Source of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*,” Alexander Dolinin describes that among such news stories were “noted newspaper reports of accidents, sex crimes, and killings: ‘a middle-aged morals offender’ who abducted fifteen-year-old Sally Horner from New Jersey and kept her for twenty-one months as his ‘cross-country slave,’ until she was found in a southern California motel; G. Edward Grammar’s ineptly staged murder of his wife in a poorly faked motor accident...” (Dolinin 1). Charlotte’s death by car accident was most likely influenced by Grammar’s murder, though Humbert was at best indirectly responsible for Charlotte’s flight in front of the car’s path. Dolinin cites the differing versions of Sally Horner’s kidnapping in the news, each of which proves more dramatic than the last. Thirteen-year-old Sally Horner was abducted by 52-year-old Frank LaSalle on a journey across the

nation after he caught her stealing and threatened to blackmail her. Humbert similarly threatens Lolita with the prospect of being orphaned, telling her “you, happy neglected child, will be given a choice of various dwelling places, all more or less the same, the correctional school, the reformatory, the juvenile detention home, or one of those admirable girls’ protectories where you knit things, and sing hymns, and have rancid pancakes on Sundays” (Nabokov 151). Humbert compares himself to this news story multiple times to emphasize the perversity of daily media. Newspapers depend on sensational and grotesque stories to attract readers’ interest. After a surprise run-in with Lolita’s former neighbor, Humbert recalls: “It was Mrs. Chatfield. She attacked me with a fake smile, all aglow with evil curiosity. (Had I done to Dolly, perhaps, what Frank Lasalle, a fifty-year-old mechanic, had done to eleven-year-old Sally Horner in 1948?)” (Nabokov 289). Characters project stereotypes on their peers that reflect media accounts of extraordinary instances; yet by imposing such suspicions, they display their obsession with such controversy. Audiences pay particular attention to graphic violence and deviation from socially acceptable behavior. *Lolita* reproduces scenes of violence from reality in order to comment on the masses’ morbid obsession with the grotesque in life.

Nabokov critiques the rise of consumerism through American popular culture throughout *Lolita* in the form of comical reflections on the fabricated as reality; life often is compared to film and other media rather than vice versa. In his article “The Making of Nabokov’s Fiction” Walter Cohen states that “[i]n *Lolita*, Nabokov manipulates the reader’s response...for the purpose of creating a complex but unambiguous moral effect:”

The America of *Lolita* is ruled by media manipulations – by movies, menus, magazines, radio, advertisements, brochures, catalogs, and comics.

These forces of ideological control primarily promote consumption, fostering the belief that buying is the legitimate means to happiness...The novel thus satirizes contemporary capitalism, a society in which the commodity reigns supreme, in which values have been converted into things (Cohen 344).

Humbert buys Lolita's compliance in his constructed affair by observing her naïve propensity to surrounding consumerist culture. Her values have been shaped by advertisements and entertainment magazines that project materialistic values that overshadow other values relating to sexual morals or personal integrity. Thus Lolita yearns to attain the glamorous celebrity lifestyle, highlighted in her love affair with playwright Quilty, at the cost of her childhood and quite possibly her future.

Lolita is not just a satire lampooning the shortcomings of contemporary media culture, but also a study of imprisonment by dominant society's valuation of voyeurism and surveillance. Nabokov explained that his creation of the novel was influenced by the news story about the first documented drawing done by an animal, a drawing by an ape of the bars to its own cage. Andrew Field discusses the implications of such a symbolic story in chapter eleven of his book *Nabokov: His Life in Art*: "The notions of man being essentially an invisibly caged animal and of art itself as a kind of beautiful caging can be followed throughout Nabokov's writing;" in the specific case of *Lolita*, "[h]is impulse was thus to create a portrait of a man imprisoned in passion, but not in 'blind passion'...This man [Humbert] was to draw the bars of his own cage which would be of different dimensions than the real ones of prison" (Field 324). Humbert imprisons himself in his aesthetic solipsism of Lolita and his idealized love. Humbert becomes a

prisoner doomed to disappointment by creating an idealized vision of the child Dolores in his nymphet Lolita. In the essay “‘Lolita’: Nymphet at Normal School” Eric Rothstein suggests Humbert, “[l]ike the ape, can draw only the traces of his own and Dolores’s confinement, a tale of continual cross-continental motion in the blue cage of his car or stops in motel rooms he sees as paradisaal prison cells” (Rothstein 49). The cross country journey within a car symbolizes the covert imprisonment most Americans faced in the 1950s: the automobile allowed for freedom of movement throughout the nation, independent of public transportation schedules and destinations; however, it also constrained the driver to various hotel stops and roadside diner meals. Humbert’s travel across the nation remains an incarceration, surrounded by surveillance such as highway patrol officers and hotel sign-in records. Humbert sets himself up to face numerous moral and societal conflicts all in the name of a love which very likely is pure fantasy on his part as noted in his confession. His solipsism of Lolita creates a fantastic ideal through his eyes rather than realistic documentation of the girl’s life.

If one is an animal caged by art, then what are the implications for imprisonment when art is largely defined by commercial interests? The time period in which the novel is set is marked by a rise in consumerism, material kitsch, and loss of aesthetic values in mass produced art in what Karen Jacobs describes as “a range of spectatorial positions – voyeurism, consumerism, tourism, aestheticism – which the photograph historically helped to redefine” (Jacobs 264). The advent of mass printing of photographic images had a profound effect on Westerners’ visual perception, imposing dominant visualization structures such as the solipsistic gaze, which reduces subjects to fragmented segments, and preoccupation with surface entertainment. The average reader has dominant social

mores ingrained in her/his perception of the surrounding world. In a society of mass produced images, conformity and uniformity become sublime attributes of materials, as well as individual beings. When a person like Humbert conflicts with sexual norms, the audience is shocked and appalled; yet his contrast with social norms highlights the careful attention paid to such transgressions by voyeuristic “moral” members of society. Humbert’s confession is like a finger pointing to the reader, imposing a similar guilt for being complicit in such moral transgressions through the act of voyeurism. The obsession with social conformity and avoidance of moral taboos draw people’s attention to the very transgressions they claim to find detestable. Immersed in a media-saturated society that follows the adage “if it bleeds it leads,” people become voyeurs of the grotesque; the horrifying incidents which are shunned in reality are revered in print.

Lolita is largely about the projection of idealized values, both in Humbert’s projection of a lost childhood love on Dolores, and media’s projection of aesthetic values on the population. Humbert repeatedly describes his gaze on Lolita, more often detailing disjointed body parts rather than the girl’s possible life as a child outside his sexualized vision and desires. In her essay, “Fixing an Image: Solipsism and Photography in *Lolita*,” Laura Barrett discusses the role imagery plays throughout the novel. She states that the “increasing references to various media – the phonograph and magazines that furnish the props for the ‘scene’ Humbert so calculatedly ‘replay[s],’ both classical art and postmodern kitsch, the multiple fairy tales and Greek myths – conspire to reduce Lolita to just another representation in a long line of representations” (Barrett 2). Nabokov’s novel is ultimately about representation and the relation of voyeur to text or image. Humbert’s adoration of Lolita translates in his confession to an idealized

representation of the girl. Through a long twisted series of events, Lolita's and Humbert's lives are ultimately ruined, and Quilty is dead. The novel is made up of one image after another, pieced together to create a subjective reality, which in turn mirrors the realities created in American society by advertising and celebrity culture. In such a way, the novel points out the powerful covert effects various media, especially visual, have on the unsuspecting populace.

Lolita solipsizes its own form by offering Humbert's subjective view of the events in bits and pieces as he understands them, rather than from an objective omniscient narrator. The events surrounding Humbert and other characters he meets are offered in broken pieces of Humbert's recollections during his confession. His selective memory thereby renders more conspicuous the guiltily alluring properties of media to the audiences' or, in this case, readers' psyches. Nabokov draws an audience in to investigate Humbert's case only to turn the gaze upon the audience itself as participant in the cycle of transgressions. John M. Ingham discusses further forms of solipsism in his essay "Primal Scene and Misreading in Nabokov's *Lolita*" when illustrating the nature of the relationship between Humbert and Quilty in the statement, "Humbert moves toward prison and aesthetic solipsism...Humbert kills Quilty so that it will be he, not Quilty, who immortalizes Lolita in 'articulate art'" (Ingham 40). In his written confession Humbert attempts to counter Quilty's baser form of plays and film which cater more to passing fads rather than literary immortality; however, Humbert's confession fails by serving a more self-absorbed role in competing with Quilty's possession of Lolita rather than some altruistic immortalizing art form. Humbert recalls "I could have filmed her! I would have *had* her now with me, before *my* eyes, in the projection room of *my* pain and despair!"

(Nabokov 231, my emphasis). Humbert proves an overbearing possessor rather than compassionate lover to Lolita which is why she eventually runs away. In the media-saturated culture in which the novel is set, the characters can't help but to separate each other as well as themselves into ambiguous solipsistic remnants of their former existence.

People do not seek out media in order to hear the mundane everyday events of their own lives; audiences and readers seek sensationalism. But what if stories of perversion are daily features of a media-saturated public? Audiences pay particular attention to graphic violence and deviation from socially acceptable behavior. Humbert's confession in Nabokov's *Lolita* highlights the prurient interests of media savvy Americans and what type of stories they actively seek out. People are interested in sensational, high action, tragic stories about each other. The popular forms of media during mid-twentieth century America cater more to instant gratification in imagery rather than textual content. The American characters in the novel are concerned with fame and Hollywood glamour at the cost of personal integrity. Characters such as Lolita lose sight of the reality of danger present in their precipitous position and instead focus on the segments that resemble celebrity culture. With the rise in consumption of photography and cinema, most people became accustomed to looking at pictures of people rather than reading about them; imagination became less necessary, and the majority of the population became a mass of gazers and onlookers rather than active participants.

Chapter 2: Film From Within and Without the Text

Nabokov's *Lolita* is full of references to film and the relationship between the audience and characters from film (which is usually perceived shallowly or at face value) in Hollywood culture. Film and photography become a means of holding an image in static isolation and ultimately a means of disembodiment. Much of Humbert's memory is shaped by images frozen in time and cinematic dramatizations of events in his life. The critical theme in the novel *Lolita* is that the reader is implicitly involved in the voyeuristic aspects of reading, as highlighted by the novel's critique of the American public's obsession with the grotesque in sensationalized media stories. Nabokov was effective in transferring accusations of guilt from the persecuted pedophile, an obvious target, to the voyeuristic reader. However, when it comes to adapting a critique of its own form, cinematic endeavors representing *Lolita* seem to have failed at illustrating the implications of reader or audience guilt in voyeurism. Although it would be nearly impossible to recreate a completely faithful representation of the novel due to time constraints alone, neither Stanley Kubrick's nor Adrian Lyne's film seems to grasp the essential tone and message of Nabokov's *Lolita*. Stanley Kubrick's adaptation of *Lolita*, released in 1962, replicates the dark comedic aspects of the novel; however, much of the

brutal satire of contemporary culture is lost due to the film's virtual elimination of the cross-country travel sequences and its emendation of other scenes. Adrian Lyne's *Lolita*, released in 1998, remains faithful to the word of the novel for the most part but fails to effectively capture the comedic aspects, resulting in a sentimentalized and sensational story, the very object of Nabokov's satire in the novel. Kubrick's film seems the better of two evils in its comparison to the novel. While Lyne's film is able to execute more of the scenes from the novel without fear of as much reprisal from the censors as Kubrick faced in the early 1960s, the latter film becomes enmeshed in plotline rather than the underlying message, a message that distracted the reader from the novel's "elements of animality" (Nabokov 134). So far in the case study of *Lolita*, film has not served as a useful means of illustrating the commonalities between Humbert's solipsism of Lolita and the readers' or audience's solipsism of all characters they read or see. The lack of the audience's awareness about its own transgressions indicates the failure of cinema to effectively critique its own form the way Nabokov's textual depictions has.

In writing *Lolita* as a novel enmeshed in the properties of American culture (which largely turn out to be that of Hollywood cinema), Nabokov emphasizes the American public's estimation of entertainment media and popular culture often to the exclusion of high art, such as literature. *Lolita* takes place in post-World War II America, during the rise of television and film. Nabokov's writing was largely influenced by this new media culture of America, as Barbara Wyllie points out in her statement:

The presence of film in Nabokov's fiction from 1940 on indicates the extent of his assimilation of this mode of popular culture as a fundamental element of his work and, perhaps more significantly, demonstrates a close

affinity with the concerns and preoccupations of contemporary American culture (127).

Wyllie discusses some of the implications of representations of film and cinematic Hollywood culture of 1940s and 1950s America in chapter five of her book, Nabokov at the Movies: Film Perspectives in Fiction. The “concerns and preoccupations” discussed here are those of popular culture. Popular culture of the mid-twentieth century found a widely available outlet in film, and the assimilative properties of that culture were effectively dispersed through images and film. Images speak to all people regardless of language or nationality. Nabokov incorporated a literary critique of the rise of visual media in order to highlight the weak points of pictorial media such as one-dimensional perceptions and loss of symbolism or metaphorical meaning.

Nabokov’s *Lolita* provides brash commentary on Humbert’s failings as an Old World man who values timeless literature over the contemporary (and fleeting) Hollywood fame of the local playwright Quilty. The recurring conflicts between high art and mass consumerism come to a head in Quilty’s comical death scene, which I considered in the previous chapter. Wyllie analyzes the scene concluding that:

The murder scene itself dramatizes Humbert Humbert’s transition, and the conflict of two opposing ideologies within him is illustrated by his possession of a poem in one hand and a gun in the other. The poem fails in its purpose; the gun does not...Quilty, as representative of America’s worst failings, must be annihilated for Humbert Humbert, representative of America’s true aspirations, to take his place (157-8).

The doppelganger competition between Humbert and Quilty continues through the novel, but fails to yield to a decisive outcome even after Humbert shoots Quilty. Humbert attempts poetry to impose his anguish from the loss of Lolita onto Quilty, which he mocks while treating impending doom in a surreal, joking manner. Humbert then has to revert to the use of violence, relinquishing his superior literature to the typical Hollywood fashion of cheap thrills and violence. This *deus ex machina* serves to contrast the previous literary worth of Humbert's narration, juxtaposed with a more Quilty-style sensational ending which leaves the reader feeling confused and disappointed. The contrast between the formulation of Humbert's confession in the novel leading up to the sensational and surreal ending highlights the difference between literary culture and popular film as catering more to artistic or entertainment interests.

Nabokov's *Lolita* depicts the possible detriments to culture by cinema and the consumerism of an image-saturated society. The fact that neither Kubrick nor Lyne has truly recaptured the essential message regarding sensational cinema and the prurient interests fed by pictorial media serves to support Nabokov's original satire. No film has been able to successfully adapt the essential message of *Lolita*, in regards to Nabokov's illustration of what happens when high art gives way to popular art. Both adaptations so far only reinforce the message regarding the audience as voyeurs looking to feed their prurient interests through media.

Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita* (1962)

Stanley Kubrick released the first cinematic adaptation of Nabokov's novel *Lolita* to American audiences in the early 1960s. The film met with mixed reviews. Kubrick's film did not match up with Nabokov's expectations – though the latter rewrote the screenplay specifically for Kubrick. Nabokov demurely remarked “most of the [newly invented Kubrick] sequences were not really better than those I had so carefully composed for Kubrick, and I keenly regretted the waste of my time while admiring Kubrick's fortitude in enduring for six months the evolution and infliction of a useless product” (Leitch 113). Kubrick's film was not a completely botched endeavor. He managed to retain the film noir and slapstick comedy elements from the novel and keep the overall tone of the story. However, the few moments devoted to voyeurism and the obscene (such as the scene in which Humbert hides behind a floral arrangement to watch Lolita at a school dance) do not convey the novel's critique of American popular culture. Instead, these moments create what was critiqued in the novel in order to increase box office sales.

Kubrick's cinematic depiction of *Lolita* does catch the caustic humor of the novel in such scenes as the death of Humbert's doppelganger Claire Quilty, and also hints at the culture's voyeurism, illustrated in the school dance in which Humbert's character hides behind a floral arrangement to watch Lolita. However, the film presents Lolita as an older teenager rather than a twelve-year-old child and makes Charlotte much more moralistic before her death in her lamentations to the late Mr. Haze's urn. The inclusion of Mr. Haze's remains contrast with his invisibility in the novel; this addition, however,

serves to highlight the novel's concept of replication, evident in instances when Charlotte remarks on resemblances between Humbert and her late husband.

It was a fairly well-known fact that Kubrick desired Nabokov's name on the screenplay in order to draw on the novel's fame and notoriety to attract a larger audience, regardless of whether he remained faithful to the screenplay or not. Kubrick was noted as ruing his actions: "twenty-five years after Nabokov's screenplay earned the film's only Oscar nomination [...] Kubrick acknowledged his failure to find a cinematic equivalent for Nabokov's voice when he told an interviewer: 'If it had been written by a lesser author, it might have been a better film'" (Leitch 114). Rather than acceding to Nabokov's insight, Kubrick attempted to create his own version loosely based on the novel, but only found himself director of a disjointed story which lauded rather than satirized cultural messages about consumerism and Hollywood.

Critics were disappointed by Kubrick's rendition of *Lolita*, mostly due to the diminished sexuality of the film, in response to censorship. Kubrick traded authenticity for box office sales by changing the screenplay that Nabokov had originally created. In a 1962 "Films of the Quarter" review, Stanley Kauffmann states "the savage satire, the poetic horror, the lyric sexuality were all diminished in the name of practicality" (Kael, et. al. 60) and Dwight Macdonald expands on the complaint:

The phlegmatic, inarticulate James Mason was a disaster as Humbert Humbert [...T]he other charm of the novel is its celebration of the erotic, and Kubrick has deliberately eliminated this. I see the commercial reasons – to placate the Legion of Decency and to get that M.P.P.A. seal of approval which unlocks the golden doors of neighborhood box offices.

But I'm interested in Kubrick as an artist rather than as an entrepreneur,
and I'm sorry he bowdlerized (Kael, et. al. 62).

In sacrificing integrity for box office receipts, Kubrick prioritized money over artistic representation, illustrating what Nabokov originally critiqued in the novel. Certain aspects of the film which were under Kubrick's control, such as casting and rewriting the screenplay, changed the ultimate sentiment and underlying meanings of Nabokov's *Lolita*. One instance which the critics complained about was that in Kubrick's decision to cast the main character as a bumbling fool rather than Nabokov's intended manipulative intellectual, the dynamics of the story change. Kubrick's audiences see only a pathetic and clumsy caricature of an Old World man confronted by the rise in popularity of consumer culture centered in American cinema and advertisements.

Pauline Kael states that "the film falls apart, I think, mainly because it needs the towns and motels and highways of the U.S. and as it was made in England, this dimension of the material is lost" (Kael, et. al. 59). Some of Nabokov's most poignant discussions of American cultural kitsch take place during Humbert's and Lolita's numerous cross country journeys. Much of consumer culture in the middle of the twentieth century finds its center in automobile culture as noted in the rise of tourist traps, themed motels, rest stops, tabloid papers, and picture postcards. Kubrick trades in the underlying themes of voyeurism and the rise in consumerism in American culture for a quirky "black slapstick" (Kael, et. al. 59) movie that would be more accessible to the masses for entertainment. His concern with censorship and accessibility made this adaptation of *Lolita* a failure, which illustrated the trite culture of Hollywood, a place more concerned with spectacle than meaning.

Overall, Kubrick's film fails to capture Nabokov's *Lolita* in its totality. Understanding and effectively representing the dark humor evoked by Nabokov's novel, Kubrick nevertheless rearranged the story so as to make it almost unrecognizable from the novel. Aside from small snippets of Humbert's eagerly watchful eyes on Lolita in a few select scenes such as the high school dance, Nabokov's message regarding voyeurism is lost in Kubrick's film. Shooting the film in England also put the silver screen adaptation at a disadvantage in faithfully retelling the critique of American automobile culture and the rise in consumerism and pictorial advertisements around such societal advances along highway routes. Kubrick's *Lolita* is fairly entertaining, but serves as only an ambiguous adaptation of Nabokov's novel, feeding into Hollywood preoccupations with box office sales and recognizable movie star names rather than providing any salient critique of its own popular culture.

Adrian Lyne's *Lolita* (1998)

Confronted by many of the same problems concerning public notions of morality which Nabokov's novel initially received from the censors, Adrian Lyne's film *Lolita* met with difficulty not only in its cinematic release to the public but even earlier, initially in efforts to find funding to start the project. The film was not released in the United States until 1998 where it aired solely on the Showtime Network late at night along side soft-core pornographic shows. Much of the hope for the film's acceptance rested on the

screenplay, which Lyne eventually decided would be written by Stephen Schiff after a handful of other screenplays had been sampled. Schiff, a self-proclaimed Nabokov fanatic, discusses his endeavor to adapt the novel to screen:

[T]o set Nabokov's story in the present is to lose much of what it is about, for this was not just a novel about a grown man's love affair with his twelve-year-old stepdaughter, it was about the dawning impingement on the European mind of postwar America. It was about how the refined Old World fell into the thrall of the vulgar, beautiful, immature, and undeniably powerful young America that emerged from the Second World War. Nabokov set his novel in 1947, a singular moment in American cultural history – years before the finny, funny Fifties; before the invention of the great American teenager and the distinct consumer culture that sprang up to serve it. It was an America that had not been fully explored in the movies, and Nabokov had pinned and mounted it in the perfect pages of his novel (Schiff xiii).

From such a standpoint, one can see why Lyne's film is a too-sentimental rendition of Nabokov's novel. The screenwriter himself misreads the novel as noted in his false conjecture that Lolita's relation to Humbert is that of a stepdaughter, which is a false reading of the driving influence of the relationship in the novel between Humbert, Lolita, and Charlotte.

Schiff sees the crux of the conflict as having to do with the Old World versus New World cultures but does not confront issues of Humbert's own Americanization through consumerism, and ignores the issues of voyeuristic attitudes of people both in the

United States as well as Humbert's former homes in Europe. The implications of the novel do not lie with the taboo love affair but rather use that plot as a backdrop to illustrate problematic aspects of society, the transformation of media, and its impact on community. Unfortunately, Lyne's film seems to focus on the more harrowing aspects of Humbert's love affair, utilizing more lax rules of censorship from the time of Kubrick's film to instead to glorify the sensational and mildly pornographic elements of *Lolita*. In one scene Lolita is shown rather explicitly massaging Humbert's groin while asking for a raise in her allowance; this scene does not exist in the novel. Another embellished sex scene which is rather disturbing to watch shows Humbert raping Lolita after he suspects her of cavorting with Quilty while he was on an errand to buy bananas. This specific scene shows Humbert violently pushing Lolita down on the bed and forcing himself on top of her, all the while to the sound of her laughing deliriously. This scene is an unnecessarily graphic depiction of physically forced rape. Though coerced sexual relations between Lolita and Humbert were mentioned in Nabokov's novel, such scenes were only hinted at and through semantically ambiguous terms. Lyne highlights the more sexualized aspects of the novel, playing up scenes to provide borderline trashy pornographic entertainment which Nabokov had explicitly avoided in his novel.

Lyne does manage to capture the voyeuristic obsession with the grotesque in the one scene in which Charlotte is hit by a car and the whole neighborhood surrounds her body, staring at it. Parents are not shown ushering away the children from this spectacle but instead as simply standing in awe with the children, gazing. This scene offers the only time you see a large group of people in Charlotte's neighborhood; people leave the confines of their houses to gather as one community of onlookers to tragedy. It is one of

few successes in Lyne's cinematographic adaptation of *Lolita*, but Schiff seems to downplay such phenomena in his screenplay.

The ending of Nabokov's novel leaves the reader with a feeling of the absurd; Lyne's film leaves one with a feeling of utter despair. Lyne ultimately misses the tone of the novel, thus weakening the satirical aspect of *Lolita* in his adaptation. Lyne plays down the comedic elements of the chase scenes with Humbert in pursuit of Quilty, leading up to his death. The novel describes Quilty as making jokes and iterating clichéd phrases that sound like they belong in a popular Hollywood movie, whereas Lyne shows a much more morbid end of Quilty's life where he is desperately gasping for air up until the last bullet wound. Humbert's final monologue at the closing shot in which he reminisces on Lolita's lost childhood does not include the novel's closing statements regarding the writing process of the confession or his jail sentencing in which he states, "[h]ad I come before myself, I would have given Humbert at least thirty-five years for rape, and dismissed the rest of the charges" (Nabokov 308). The end result is that Lyne's adaptation fails to mentally toy with the audience as the novel does, and instead offers an overdramatic twisted romance story of sorts.

Overall, Schiff's translation of *Lolita* to a screenplay is too nostalgic and sentimentalized. Humbert (played by Jeremy Irons) seems too desperate in this portrayal. Actor Jeremy Irons states in the foreword to Schiff's screenplay that "art, and I include cinema in that, should make us question and test our values and make us understand why we have the laws we do" (Schiff vii). Such an attitude runs counter to Nabokov's darkly comedic tone in his novel and instead resonates with the voice of John Ray, Jr., PhD in the satirical foreword Nabokov writes from the point of view of an imaginary psychiatrist

discussing its moral implications for America's youth and federal laws in place to protect them. Lyne's film lacks much of the cultural critique that the novel depended on, and thus provides only a romanticized translation of the plotline which loses most satirical meaning.

Synopsis

It is almost universal that films based on literary texts simply cannot capture the original works, due to varied difficulties faced in transferring a work from one medium to another. Rarely is it feasible for a piece of literature to be translated word-for-word into film; otherwise the film could be days long. Also, one of the principle properties of the novel is the fact that the reader has to create his or her own image of the characters and the actions taking place within the story. Linda Costanzo Cahir discusses the problem one is confronted with when comparing film adaptations to their originating texts. She elaborates on the semantics involved in the discussion of literature and film when stating, "[w]hile literature-based films are often, customarily and understandably, referred to as adaptations, the term 'to adapt' means to alter the structure or function of an entity so that it is better fitted to survive and to multiply in its new environment" (Cahir 14). Though the end of her statement brings up questions regarding the terms of "survival," Cahir is correct in delineating the semantic differences between translation and adaptation. Films are almost never complete translations of a text, but rather loosely based adaptations of works of literature. Directors looking to bring a novel into the visual realm of cinema

cannot simply follow the dialogue and plot line by line. The sentiment behind critically reading a written dialogue is different from cinema's expectations of audience consumption. The passive visual spectacle offered by mainstream Hollywood cinema (in contrast to avant-garde film) provides a material article to be consumed rather than a text to be pondered as a novel would be.

Directors ultimately have final say in what appears on screen, therefore entitling them to a degree of artistic license. Leland A. Poague discusses the *auteur* controversy in regards to theoretical issues of artistic license when bringing up the fact that film "is not concerned so much with creation per se as it is with expression, not so much with total control but with sufficient control, not so much with originality as with meaningful adaptation," further explaining that:

We must keep in mind two facts: (1) that describing a film as expressive of its director is not to deny that it may be simultaneously expressive of other personalities, and (2) that the process of film-making invests the director with final authority for what gets filmed – all other contributions (welcomed or not) are filtered through his personality, are seen, literally, through his eyes" (Poague 85).

The director largely controls what makes it through the editing process and is eventually seen by the general public, and therefore takes most credit for the outcome of a cinematic endeavor. However, contrary to Poague's emphasis on *auteurship* as being almost solely dependent on a director, many opinions and suggestions go into the making of a film, the most abundantly clear of which is the influence of actors in their portrayals of characters, illustrated by Macdonald's criticism of James Mason's indolent portrayal of Humbert in

Kubrick's film. In the case of Lyne's *Lolita*, the adapted screenplay itself was the deciding factor of whether or not to make the film. Stephen Schiff discusses the various problems Lyne had run into while attempting to acquire funding for the project based on screenplays from a number of different authors before finally settling on Schiff's product. The process of finding companies to invest in making a film also has an impact on the nature of the film, whether covertly or overtly. So, though directors get most of the credit for the creation of a film, many other factors affect the direction that a film will take.

Humbert Humbert's reminiscence that, "[w]e took in, voluptuously and indiscriminately, oh, I don't know one hundred and fifty or two hundred programs during that one year..." (Nabokov 170) illustrates film's easy digestibility. Nabokov's *Lolita* manipulates the reader into a forced self-awareness of voyeurism, whereas both Kubrick and Lyne's films fail to impart some greater meaning on the audience beyond sensationalism and prurient interests but rather concern themselves more with entertainment. That both cinematic versions of *Lolita* have proven unable to grasp the novel's critique of Americans' relationship to media suggests that popular film, at least, necessarily tells a different story than fiction. The two separate forms of media provide different portrayals of a story; each media form caters to different sensory usages in the consumption of the ultimately same story. Film often simply cannot convey what literature is meant to, usually due to differences in execution of artistic form.

The gaze that much of the novel *Lolita* analyzes through examples of solipsism becomes warped and misconstrued in the films. Roland Barthes discusses in his essay "Right in the Eyes" that "by dint of gazing, one forgets one can be gazed at oneself. Or again, in the verb 'to gaze,' the frontiers of active and passive are uncertain" (Barthes

238). Barthes points out the semantic implications of the term “the gaze” as being that of power over another through assumedly passive sight. While in the position of the voyeur, one believes that one is hidden from perception by others. Nabokov’s novel plays with this notion, with Humbert winking at the reader constantly throughout his confession. Humbert, while actively separating characteristics of *Lolita* through solipsism during his retelling of his feelings for her, insists that the reader acknowledge his own participation, his own voyeurism, and his own judgment.

Humbert on screen is cut off from discussing his predicament with the audience by the fourth wall. In relation to the dynamics of the gaze in film, Barthes states:

But it is so in the cinema [that the photographed subject is unable to gaze at you], where it is forbidden for an actor to look at the camera, i.e., at the spectator. I am not far from considering this ban as the cinema’s distinctive feature. This art *severs* the gaze: one of us gazes at the other does only that: it is my right and my duty to gaze as the other never gazes; he gazes at everything, except me (Barthes 242).

The relationship between characters and reader is lost in popular cinematic adaptations of textual works. Rather than providing a cultural critique, cinematic adaptations of *Lolita* thus far have merely provided a spectacle to be gazed at. Whereas the textual Humbert relies on his confession to draw the reader into his world, movie star Humbert is unable to do so. Humbert on screen can make some poetic universalizing statements but can not actively pursue the critical attention of his audience. He is merely an object to be looked at, his confession a spectacle of melodrama. *Lolita* the novel forces awareness of the reader’s own voyeurism in consuming the tale. Both film adaptations have not attempted

to make their audiences uncomfortably aware of their own voyeurism while watching *Lolita* but instead cater to the prurient interests of a passive entertainment-seeking audience. Interaction between Humbert and the audience is cut off by the fourth wall that is the screen and replaced with a one way relationship devoid of much critical thought. This seems to be the major flaw in cinematic adaptations of *Lolita* thus far.

Conclusion: Media Continues to be Full of Voyeurs

The novel *Lolita* provides a critique of media culture and consumerism in the middle of the twentieth century which both films fail to capture. This could be due to the specific endeavors of the individual directors, but perhaps it is due to a larger theoretical problem. The novel is able to draw the reader into Humbert's persona in a way that conventional film practices do not allow. In switching from one medium to another the underlying story in *Lolita* becomes trivialized; the larger cultural critique is lost. The avant-garde filmmaker, however, is a special case of artistry in the medium, who can indeed create "literary" subtlety in the film text. A comparison of Nabokov's work with that of writers of popular "romance" novels, for example, would likely reveal the same kind of superficiality in print that is evident in popular film. The real source of simple-mindedness on a mass scale would well be the underlying culture of consumerism which encodes both popular film and popular literature.

The development of print culture fostered an increased awareness among the masses of the possibility to think individually, apart from the crowd. In his renowned work *The Medium is the Massage* Marshall McLuhan explains how the medium itself can send as important a message as the content itself: "Like easel painting, the printed book

added much to the new cult of individualism. The private, fixed point of view became possible and literacy conferred the power of detachment, non-involvement” (McLuhan 50). Though silent reading may seem outwardly like noninvolvement, one’s thoughts are still active to the contents. The reader of Nabokov’s novel may not be interacting with others during a silent reading of the text but can still actively ponder on Humbert’s words and the societal implications of his actions. Reading encourages one to interact with the characters within the work, rather than interacting with others outside of the work; in such a way, the literary Humbert is more readily able to talk directly to the reader than the cinematic Humbert. Text encourages the reader to focus more intently on what is being said, what is occurring. A reader can imagine his or her own scenes, actively becoming involved in the creation of Lolita as a solipsized, disjointed subject within Humbert’s confession. As an individual reader, one can see one’s own implicit involvement within the text through the creation of scenery and the construction of certain scenarios. *Lolita* hints that the reader’s implicitly solipsistic view of the characters is similar to Humbert’s creation of an idealized Lo. In a printed medium, the satirical indications of this tendency to confine every phenomenon into a predetermined category (including people) into an image is more apparent. The printed form makes clearer the voyeuristic aspects of visualization. A reading public is by nature more attuned to investigate hidden meanings within words, which Humbert plays with throughout his written confession.

What seemed to happen with the onset of film and cinema is that society reverted to the passive absorption of visual and oratory spectacle, relying on what information is given rather than discerning one’s own individual thoughts or conclusions. The film

versions of *Lolita* offer the directors' vision of the story. The need for immersion within the story is less necessary while film viewing turns the would-be independently thinking and imagining reader into a passive consumer of images and sound. Critical thought is less essential in the viewing audience who has grown accustomed to visual spectacle as light entertainment rather than social criticism. Thus the viewer's ability to invert her/his thoughts on voyeurism in *Lolita* and to realize her/his own compliance in solipsism through the action of watching a film alone is greatly reduced. Viewership as opposed to readership assumes that the gaze is natural. A popular film audience, at least, is prone to be less critical of its own actions because the medium itself tends to marginalize adverse affects through the distancing of one's own solipsistic gaze. The cultivated critical vision of the avant-garde's audience should, however, be considered as an exception to the cinematic fatuousness of popular cinema's consumers. We continue to wait, in any case, for a filmic rendering of *Lolita* that is worthy of the novel's subtlety.

McLuhan echoes Humbert's paranoia during his cross country automobile travels in the claim that "[e]lectrical information devices for universal, tyrannical womb-to-tomb surveillance are causing a very serious dilemma between our claim to privacy and the community's need to know" (McLuhan 12). Though Humbert complains of the forms of surveillance in his hotel stays in the late 1940s, early 1950s, afterwards he would have been bowled over by the common usage of surveillance cameras and various other technological media whose purpose is to watch people's private lives in the name of security. Media has facilitated surveillance, but not just surveillance in the name of safety; it has fostered a culture of busybodies and voyeurs. People want to know about each other through distanced media. Communities become increasingly distrustful and

compartmentalized, generating separate people watching their surroundings through the solipsizing gaze.

In regards to media forms and their impact on society, Elizabeth L. Eisenstein argues that “the notion that society may be regarded as a bundle of discrete units or that the individual is prior to the social group seems to be more compatible with a reading public than with a hearing one” (Eisenstein 106). Prior to the printing revolution, texts were a rare commodity and the majority of people depended on the power of the few to orally disseminate knowledge. The printing revolution gave individuals power to create their own one-on-one relationship with a text. Societies became more democratic, knowledge was able to flow more freely, and multiple ideas and opinions were able to flow through social discourse due to freer access to printed materials. The individual, able to process ideas independently, was regarded more highly than the masses. One could discern meaning in the world actively in one’s own mind in a silent reading rather than having to depend on passively obtaining knowledge through another’s translation in oral culture. Much like oral culture, popular film projects a story to the masses. Consumerist film makes it less critical for a person to actively create her/his own translation and understanding of what is happening in a plot. Popular cinematic audiences become more reliant on the director to offer a straightforward message because visual spectacles are offered for entertainment at face value. The audience in a movie theater becomes one big mass, similar to the listening audience of an oral storytelling culture. Rather than emphasis on a personal reading of a book, film now reverts to providing one generalized depiction of a story for the masses. Through film, emphasis is

once again placed on the masses as a collective entity rather than literary culture's reverence of the individual.

In Nabokov's *Lolita*, Humbert attempts to offer in his confessional narrative a textual alternative to the overwhelming American obsession with media. The comparison between him and his *doppelgänger* Quilty serves as the epitome of his cultural critique. Humbert attempts to make Lolita immortal through written text as opposed to Quilty's attempt to use her as a passing image in his pornographic film productions. The tension between Quilty and Humbert mirrors the competition between literature and the newly popular medium of storytelling that arose in the early Twentieth Century, the cinema. The popularity of film in the 1950s trivializes any underlying message from a story into mere entertainment, whereas text more readily allows for aesthetic treatment of a subject. Friedrich A. Kittler discusses in his essay "The Mother's Mouth" the advantages of textual mediums:

The silent or even dead marks of writing accomplish what the sound of the lips – the colloquial, animal, or at any rate empirical play of voices and mouths – is unable to do: writing reproduces unembellished accents from the profoundest regions of the soul as clearly as direct speech would sound. The minimal signified as the murmuring source of language remains merely itself as long as it does not speak; the stylus comes to its aid (Kittler 65).

Text enhances speech; it utilizes language to make communication more concrete and easily accessible to the reader as opposed to a listening audience. Written dialogue is available for closer scrutiny than the spoken words of a film. The reader of Nabokov's

Humbert is better able to sympathize with his confession in textual form than the Humberts viewed on screen. Kubrick's Humbert lacks much of the internal dialogue that was integral to the original Humbert, and Lyne's characterization comes off as too desperate and at times pathetic. Both of the cinematic Humberts are more detestable than the textual one; the film Humberts can only offer their visual actions and some dialogue. Textual Humbert offers his soul to the reader, his innermost thoughts and motives, in print. He also can reach out to the reader in pleas or in connections to newsworthy events of his time which neither film utilizes.

Kittler offers insight on the medium of film in another text, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. He discusses the aspect of technological reproducibility rampant in cinematic media forms. Much like Humbert's allusions throughout his textual confession, "[m]edia 'define what really is'; they are always already beyond aesthetics" (Kittler 3). Lolita is a girl whose understanding of her surrounding world is shaped by cinematic Hollywood culture. Her ideal man is based on magazine pictures of movie stars. Humbert even begins to see his actions and those of others in relation to conventional film clichés. Kittler further states the implications of a culture that promotes visual media over that of text: "sound film and video cameras as mass entertainment liquidate the real event" (Kittler 133). Just as Humbert does, people begin to see their lives in relation to popular movies.

The underlying power of consumer culture, coupled with the mass production of imagery in media culture, turns culture into an industry with the purpose of distracting the populace from individual thought and replacing it with controlled "safe" ideas of consumption and materialism. Much like oral culture before the onset of print, people

consume statements provided by industries such as Hollywood cinema rather than analyze artistic expression to arrive at an independent conclusion or thought. Frederic Jameson discusses the movement from meaning to consumption in art forms between the modernist era to postmodernism:

What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assign an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation. Such economic necessities then find recognition in the varied kinds of institutional support available for the newer art, from foundations and grants to museums and other forms of patronage (Jameson 4-5).

The drive to produce commercially viable art forms leads many artists to strive for “safe” expression that can guarantee patronage. This consumer-based interest leads much of popular art, such as Hollywood film, to strive for conservative repetitions of what is known to be commercially successful, rather than experimenting and perverting conventions as avant-garde art and films do.

In the novel, Nabokov critiques this transition between modernist and postmodernist aesthetics of art through his critique of the rise of cinema and the popular uses of the new pictorial media that gained so much consumerist appeal so quickly in post-WWII America. Due to the fact that Kubrick and Lyne were both working within the Hollywood industry to produce their respective film adaptations of *Lolita*, they

ultimately fail to capture Nabokov's critique of the rise of consumer-driven culture in America as exemplified through visual media. Cultural consumption leads the society's members to intellectually atrophy; commercial sales prevail over new inventions and artistic expression. Nabokov saw this growing delineation between popular and avant-garde art forms and provided a critique of the decline of invention in pictorial media underlying Humbert's narration. Both films have not captured the message regarding Americans' obsession with pictures and watching as a form of consumption connected to capitalism in art forms because the films are centered in the movement that Nabokov originally criticizes.

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