

**Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris, Université de Paris X, janvier 2010**  
**Org. : Journée d'Etudes/Symposium « *Lolita* [Nabokov, 1955 ; Kubrick, 1962] »**

**apaquet-deyris@u-paris10.fr**

**“Metafilmic discourse and intertextual echoes in two scenes:  
 Analyzing “At the drive-in” & “Breakfast at Humbert’s””**

An in-depth analysis of two central scenes representing some of Kubrick’s attempts at translating Nabokov’s devious intertextual play: the metafilmic echoes of Terence Fisher’s 1957 *Curse of Frankenstein* and Josef Von Sternberg’s 1930 *The Blue Angel*.

In Kubrick’s clipped version of Nabokov’s meandering prose in *Lolita*, two scenes and their framing, adjacent sections exemplify in a peculiar and spectacular fashion the art of adaptation. “At the drive-in” and “Breakfast at Humbert’s” exemplify the interplay of filmic and literary echoes and tributes the writer and the filmmaker toy with in their respective novel, screenplay and movie. They function as immersive catalysts. In her 2006 book *A Theory of Adaptation*, film theoretician Linda Hutcheon explains how “modes of engagement” are meant to help the readers and spectators experience difference and similarity between two sign systems and hence, through intersemiotic transposition, to transcode and *recode* into a new set of conventions and signs the source text and its web of intertextual allusions.

Hutcheon provides some insightful comments on the three modes of engagement—the telling mode (novels), the showing mode (plays and films) and the participatory mode (videogames)—and on adaptation at large:

A double definition of adaptation as a product (as extensive, particular transcoding) and as a process (as creative reinterpretation and palimpsestic intertextuality) is one way to address the various dimensions of the broader phenomenon of adaptation. An emphasis on process allows us to expand the traditional focus on adaptation studies on medium-specificity and individual comparative case studies in order to consider as well relations among the major modes of engagement [...] (Hutcheon, 22)

So how do the *showing mode* and cinematic codes further our perception of the visual and the aural and quite simply allow us, members of the audience, “to tell, show, or interact with (the) stories” (*Ibid.*) of a dead man in Kubrick’s *Lolita* ?

### *The Figure in the Frame*

Kubrick's consistent technique to capture emotional states involves playing with pace, lighting, atmosphere as well as settings and the actors' ranges of expression. Capturing the surge of raw emotion, the pathos of a protagonist torn apart by his divided self or ending up being nothing but a mask is at the core of his adaptive process. And the monster figure becomes one of his favorite mediums, one he literally and metaphorically frames in an alternately abrupt and distanced manner. For the spectator to understand the dark courses of the monster's private passions, Kubrick provides him with yet another *maze*, an ironic *network of filmic visual and aural echoes* superimposing on the already available intertextual network. These echoes reinterpret and sometimes even transliterate on the screen some of Nabokov's intertextual echoes and his devious narrator's comments:

[...] I am lanky, big-boned, wooly-chested Humbert Humbert, with thick black eyebrows and a queer accent, and a cesspoolful of rotting monsters behind his slow boyish smile. And neither is she the fragile child of a feminine novel. What drives me insane is the twofold nature of this nymphet—of every nymphet, perhaps; this mixture in my Lolita of tender dreamy childishness and a kind of eery vulgarity [...] And what is most singular is that she, *this* Lolita, *my* Lolita, has individualized the writer's ancient lust, so that above and over everything there is—Lolita. (47-48; 44-45)

The narrator's insistence on his formidable "lust" and the two protagonists' twofold, demonic natures is matched on screen by various filmic devices. Kubrick chose to have the two scenes stand apart in the filmic narrative:

- the first one, "At the drive-in", corresponds to section 6 in the DVD
- the second one, called "Poetry for breakfast" in the DVD, corresponds to section 13

But they actually seem to originate from the same limited passage in the source novel: in between chapters 10 & 13, pp. 37 to 58 (// pp. 35-62 in the Annotated *Lolita*), where the voice alludes to a number of elements the director will rely on in order to reconstruct

a striking visual effect. For the sake of better focusing on Kubrick's adaptive strategy, let's list very quickly some of the most significant ones:

- Charlotte being described as "a weak solution of Marlene Dietrich (39; 37); "The wings of [Charlotte's] Marlenesque nose shone [...]" (55; 51)
- Humbert describing himself as "(a great big handsome hunk of movieland manhood)" (42; 39)
- Humbert referring to "a pocket diary bound in black imitation leather [...] then I copied it out with obvious abbreviations in my smallest, most satanic, hand in the little black book just mentioned" (43; 40)
- Hum. commenting: "I know it is madness to keep this journal but it gives me a strange thrill to do so; and only a loving wife could decipher my microscopic script." (45; 42); "Moreover, I am said to resemble some crooner or actor chap on whom Lolita has a crush" (46; 43) & "If I close my eyes I see but an immobilized fraction of her, a cinematographic still" (47; 44); "[...] she snatched out of my abstract grip the magazine I had opened (pity no film had recorded the curious pattern, the monogrammic linkage of our simultaneous or overlapping moves) (63; 58)
- "Virginia was not quite thirteen when Harry Edgar possessed her. He gave her lessons in algebra. [...] "Monsieur Poe-poe," as that boy in one of Monsieur Humbert Humbert's classes in Paris called the poet-poet." (46; 43)
- "And then comes Lolita's soft sweet chuckle through my half-open door "Don't tell Mother but I've eaten *all* your bacon." Gone when I scuttle out of my room. Lolita, where are you? My breakfast tray, lovingly prepared by my landlady, leers at me toothlessly, ready to be taken in. Lola, Lolita!" (54; 50)

These quotes provide a complex intertext for Kubrick to recompose his own version of the dead man's story. They actually supply him with key elements and images all inscribing on screen a parallel system of desire which seems to be functioning as *the perfect film buff's referential grid*. By resorting to some sort of archeology of filmic knowledge, Kubrick toys with his viewers as he does with his characters, constantly testing their mastery of film history. "Marlene Dietrich", "Lola" and the "Marlenesque nose" rather *explicitly* allude to Josef Von Sternberg's *Blue Angel* young Nabokov was familiar with during his Berlin years in the 1930s. In this 1930 movie, Marlene Dietrich

used to play the part of fetching cabaret singer *Lola Lola*, and Emil Jannings that of *Professor Emanuel Rath*, lured in by the young woman. But other sections of Nabokov's text, evoking for instance some monster's lust and "ecstasy" (67; 61), as well as symbolically-laden domestic scenes are somehow intricately reformed and reorganized into different, more allusive compositions. Original elements, scenes or motifs from *The Blue Angel* (also a favorite of Kubrick's) or from Terence Fisher's *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957) focusing more specifically on the monster figure, are thus reworked and redistributed. Like Henry James' hero in *The Figure in the Carpet*, the spectator is to pursue the secret "trick", the elliptic figure and pattern in the frame and the larger puzzle that Humbert himself keeps missing in the filmic narrative.

### ***Fatal attraction***

The sudden emergence of Frankenstein's monstrous creature in the frame after the golden garden scene, the subsequent close-up of the three protagonists' "pyramid of hands", and Lolita's suggestive poses in Humbert's bedroom during the breakfast scene all stage desire in a wide variety of ways—including by using the slapstick and burlesque conventions. When she first appears on screen, the nymphet is framed in medium close-up casting a slightly derisive glance at Humbert as he takes up Charlotte's offer. The unexpected close-up of the monster's rotting face comes then as a shock to the spectator. Such a graphic and ironic effect of visual disjunction heavily relies upon a style of editing often referred to as *collision montage* (as theorized by Soviet filmmaker Sergeï Eisenstein in the 1920s). Of course there are several different interpretations of such use of spatial and temporal discontinuity, but the main one seems to foreground both the monstrous dimension of Humbert's lust and the impossible matches between all three characters. These shots of the creature's decaying face as he tears off the bandage covering up his eyes function as a somewhat "universal" filmic matrix. It seems safe to say that *all* spectators can instantly identify the monster as Dr Frankenstein's, if not the actual movie the scene is drawn from. Kubrick cuts the first shots of Fisher's original scene. Recycling a classic horror genre convention, he zooms forward on the formerly blind being whose face comes dangerously close to the camera. This fast-paced zoom-in ironically announces the current invasion of screenspace by all kinds of monsters from *Ring's* long-haired phantom (Nakata) to the body hurled at the audience in *Paranormal Activity* (Peli). Because the monster is looking toward the left-hand side of the frame, it's difficult for the diegetic *and* non-diegetic spectator to know whom he is specifically

looking at. In Kubrick's adaptation, it could actually be any of the three viewers, including of course, Lolita with "nymphaean evil breathing through every pore" (141; 125). In the film within the film section, once he starts staring at the doctor (Peter Cushing) out of his one good eye, the monster (Christopher Lee, who would also play Dracula in Fisher's eponymous work produced by Hammer, the following year) starts fighting to survive independently from his creator. The effect of the disjunctive cut from Lolita's angelic face to this raving face is emphasized in Kubrick's adaptation by the grainy, virtually documentary-like style of the black and white images and the strident music. The chiaroscuro of Frankenstein's lab redoubles the play on light and shadow of the three shot in the car front seat. As the monster is unmasked and escapes in the fictional dimension of Terence Fisher's color film, Humbert Humbert's "fatal lust" (52; 48) & *hubris*, very much akin to Dr Frankenstein's, are let loose like "a great and insane monster" (140; 124) in the realistic dimension of middle-class, suburban America. But the close framing of the spectators' horrified gazes is also an ironic metafilmic comment on our own horror at watching raw desire erupt in such a violent manner.

#### SEE:

- 1- Fisher's scene : birth of a monster: a monster watching his own monstrous creature emerge (DVD *The Curse of Fr.*: 47:32-47:48)
- 2- Kubrick's sequence "At the drive-in" (DVD # 6)

Kubrick's cut to Humbert's pleasant and distinguished face in the middle of the frame enhances the notion of a mask soon to be ripped. And the subsequent "hand work" exemplifies the circulation of lust between the protagonists. As Richard Corliss points out in "Lolita from Lyon to Lyne", this extremely brief scene is one of the most suggestive and "allusive vignettes" (Corliss, 37) in the movie: the characters' hand positioning captures onscreen the erotic charge of this sulfurous threesome. A close shot shows the two women's hands clutching at each of Humbert's hands and knees, as if ravenous lust and attraction had also very much to do with the landlady and her daughter. Here the notion of some *tragic fall* is ironically transferred to some *fall into the parodic and even bulesque dimensions*, especially with Charlotte's pathetically intense form of desire. This is a consistent trend in Kubrick's version. Humbert's guilt is somehow displaced onto other characters, mainly Lolita and Quilty, so that the pedophile hero can more easily circumvent censorship. Humbert quickly disengages his

left hand from Charlotte's hold to start patting and grasping Lolita's, thus literally and symbolically siding with the daughter. This quick hand choreography unfolds against the rather unusual backdrop of sections of the protagonists' bodies. Only hands and knees and a segment of Humbert's stomach register on screen in a low-key lighting, thus underlining the synecdochic dimension of the protagonists' hands. Their furtive moves recreate on a smaller scale the furious dance of desire at work between the three players. The alternated shots of the faces engrossed in the movie drama and the hands' trajectories stealthily inscribe the competition between the two women. When Charlotte realizes she's holding Lolita's pinky, she steals a disapproving glance at the incongruous "pile of hands" and quickly withdraws as all three make as if nothing had happened: Lolita scratches her nose, Humbert protectively folds his arms and Charlotte grabs the wheel. In between the disjunctive cut and the fade to black, this diminutive scene only lasts for 37 seconds (time codes: 17.55-18.32), but it nevertheless functions as a highly programmatic scene. It already encodes within the frame the mother's elimination from the classic love triangle and the tragic undertones of the entire story. It also redesigns the contours of Humbert and Lolita's "special relationship" by providing very early on the spectator with its *undercover* side. In the next chess-playing scene with Charlotte after the fade out, Humbert is still tuning up his strategy. When she complains, "You're going to take my queen...", he slyly replies, "This is my intention, certainly!", while Lolita walks into the room in her nightgown and strikes a suggestive pose by his side.

***Lessons in body language (Cf. Corliss (2), Film Comment, 37)***

The alternation between the official and intimate aspects of Humbert and Lolita's interaction, is one of the film's catalysts. Body language becomes increasingly explicit but Kubrick still has to comply with the limitations imposed by the Production Code. He once again uses Nabokov's "built-in" cinematic dimension to suggest the professor's growing dependency on Lolita's body. He conflates four different types of literary and filmic allusions into one single scene to foreground the relentlessness of Humbert's compulsion.

**See the various references to:**

- His writing in his diary in a "microscopic script" (45; 42),

- German-born Hollywood actress Marlene Dietrich & more specifically her starring in *The Blue Angel*,
- Edgar Allan Poe's life and works,
- The fact that he used to give his own nymphet "lessons in algebra" (46; 43).

Even though these diverse elements are unevenly distributed in the three chapters I was referring to earlier (Chapters 10 to 13), Kubrick recombines them into one central scene of subjection while paying visual and aural homage to Sternberg's *Blue Angel*.

#### SEE:

##### **1- 3 scenes & 1 still shot from Von Sternberg's *Blue Angel*:**

**1/ 38:10-40:40: The make-up scene at the Blue Angel cabaret featuring Lola Lola & Prof. Emanuel Rath & chronicling the beginning of his enslavement**

**2/ 56:48-58:30: The breakfast scene at the Blue Angel**

**3/ 1:13:16-1:16:40: The stockings scene underlining the prof.'s abject subjection & foregrounding the defeated clown he's turned into**

**4/ 1:35:32: (still shot/plan fixe) The prof. in a straitjacket (= a distant matrix of the scene at the hospital when Humbert is being held down by attendants & threatened with a straightjacket, just like Blanche Dubois at the end of Elia Kazan's 1951 film *A Streetcar Named Desire*)**

##### **2- Section N° 13 in Kubrick's DVD: "Poetry for breakfast"**

Kubrick briefly reverts to *a low key style of lighting* (as opposed to the high key one he favors most of the time) as he frames in close-up James Mason's hands writing a journal entry. This rather mysterious style characteristic of *film noir* actually creates a sense of suspense and adds to the tragic dimension of the events about to occur. It also operates as a visual pendent to the aural specificity of the scene. As Humbert reads in voice-over fragments of his diary redoubling two of the excerpts I already quoted (and whose order Kubrick reverses in the filmic narrative):

- "I know it is madness to keep this journal but it gives me a strange thrill to do so; and only a loving wife could decipher my microscopic script." (45; 42)

and

- “What drives me insane is the twofold nature of this nymphet—of every nymphet, perhaps; this mixture in my Lolita of tender dreamy childishness and a kind of eery vulgarity [...] And what is most singular is that she, *this* Lolita, *my* Lolita, has individualized the writer’s ancient lust, so that above and over everything there is—Lolita”. (47-48; 44-45) ],

there is a slight echo to his words. The soundtrack therefore also reverberates and brings to the fore the tragic part the diary is soon to play. The essence of the scene however seems to reside mostly in the stark contrast between the surface “comic” trend and the underlying “tragic” one. In the middle of this second occurrence of the voice-over, right after Humbert’s words, “a kind of eery vulgarity”, there’s a suggestive cut to a shot of leopard and apron-clad Charlotte cooking breakfast in the kitchen. The alternate editing (alternate montage/cross-cutting) makes for a delightful vignette of suburban domestic life & petty rivalry & jealousy. Still angry at her daughter for ruining her romantic evening with Humbert, Charlotte yells at Lolita who makes a face at her in close-up. The subsequent cuts hasten the pace to the moment when Lolita, who is to bring “Professor Humbert” his breakfast tray, starts eating his bacon strips and knocks on his door.

Continuity is achieved through a medium close-up of Humbert still writing at his desk. Once again, the camera frames his hands in close-up as he locks his diary up in a drawer. The high-angle shot seems almost to correspond to one of Lolita’s subjective shots and somehow materializes her domineering viewpoint and assertive postures as she circles around him and eventually settles next to him in a rather laid-back manner. Even though it is Humbert who gives her a lesson in American poetry, she’s clearly framed as the one in charge here. Like Lola Lola in Sternberg’s adaptation of Heinrich Mann’s novel *Professor Unrath* (1905), Lolita is a few lines away from gaining absolute control over the professor. The exchange between teacher and pupil is of course riddled with hilarious remarks such as Lolita’s “Who’s “the Divine Edgar”? Edgar who?” Beyond this parodic “literary” discussion, Kubrick seems mostly interested in staging the young girl’s new mastery over the older man. If the brutal emergence of the creature’s hideous face in the frame earlier on mainly served as an apt metaphor for the violence of Humbert’s depravity, the breakfast scene seems to have been manufactured to highlight the *femme fatale*’s manipulative cruelty. As the first

secret bond between the pair is being created, “I would NEVER give away any of your secrets!” Humbert exclaims, Lolita tests the limits of her erotic power over Humbert. In a strange reversal of roles with the fictional Lolita and Humbert, it is now the former who ruthlessly toys with the latter’s emotional balance.

Her “trained poodle” demonstration, as she rewards him by holding up a piece of egg for him to nibble on, is yet another echo of Dietrich’s “stockings scene”. Lola Lola forces the enamoured Rath to help her put her stockings on while he’s on his knees at her feet. This original scene of degradation seems to be a matrix in more than one way since it also evokes Kubrick’s toe-painting prologue *and* session at Beardsley, thus endlessly resonating throughout the entire movie. Just like Professor Rath who ends up heating up his wife’s curling iron to please her, Humbert is utterly *displaced* from his former role as an educator. Once Lolita has dismissed his analysis of Poe’s “Ulalume” with a peremptory “Well I think it’s a little corny to tell you the truth”, he’s relegated to the submissive posture of a mere avid supplicant. Kubrick frames him frantically grabbing Lolita’s arm to get a *big* bite as she’s towering over him.

These two scenes clearly chronicle the progression of Humbert’s enslavement, but they also sketch a very different type of itineraries for the film’s protagonists. Like Frankenstein, the doctor is cursed by his creature. And the *Blue Angel*’s subtext allows Kubrick to “control[...] his film’s outspokenness” (Jenkins, 54), as he “softens and romanticizes the bond that holds the couple together” (*Ibid.*). The very composition of these sections forever sends the spectators back to their filmic sources and it also points at *its being a lesson in adaptive strategy*, an example of the “fortunate” “deviations” from his script (Corliss (1), 64) Nabokov was saluting in the director’s work. In this sense, Stanley Kubrick’s *showing mode* is immersive *and* comes close as well to being *interactive*, as it imposes on us a complex “cinematic chess game” (Nelson, 77), a “puzzle/skill testing” game (Hutcheon, 23) which redoubles and amplifies the fictional one.

**Selected bibliography**

Baxter, Peter, *Just Watch! Sternberg, Paramount and America*, London, BFI Publishing, 1993.

Bénoliel, Bernard, "F. Comme Frankenstein", *Les Cahiers du cinéma* n° 491, Mai 1995: 10.

Corliss, Richard (1), *Lolita*, London, BFI Publishing, 1994.

(2), "Lolita from Lyon to Lyne", *Film Comment* v. 34, n. 5, Sept. 1998: 34-39.

*Cahiers du cinéma* n° 168, juil. 1965, "Josef von Sternberg ou le cinéma de l'enthousiasme": 11-27.

Hutcheon, Linda, *A Theory of Adaptation*, New York, London, Routledge, 2006.

Merigeau, Patrick, *Josef von Sternberg*, Paris, Edilig, 1983.

Nelson, Thomas Allen, *Kubrick: Inside a Film Artist's Maze*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982.