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The Maniac in the Garden:  
*Lolita* and the Process of American Civilization

In *Lolita*, Nabokov provided America with a new literary childhood, challenging both the Romantic myth of adolescence and the pastoral myth conveyed by travel narratives to the New World. From a comparative analysis of the novel and its two cinematic adaptations, *Lolita* stands out as an embodiment of the “garden” described by Leo Marx, soon to be invaded by Humbert’s “machine.” The result is a powerful and disturbing representation of America as youth, uncovering the violence and coercion of any act of civilization.

**Keywords:** Nabokov, Lolita, adaptation, (American) civilization, youth

I keep repeating, in a kind of zestful, copious, and deeply gratifying incantation, the English word “childhood,” which sounds mysterious and new, and becomes stranger and stranger [...]

—Vladimir Nabokov (1951)

Commenting on the genesis of *Lolita* (1955), Vladimir Nabokov famously wrote in the afterword to his novel, “It had taken me some forty years to invent Russia and Western Europe, and now I was faced by the task of inventing America” (“On a Book” 312). If by using the verb “to invent” Nabokov meant, in line with *The American Heritage Dictionary*, “to produce or contrive (something previously unknown) by the use of ingenuity or imagination,” then his self-appointed task was to reimagine an idea of America different from the traditional one. In a sense, “America” is a literary product of Christopher Columbus’ journals, as well as a fictitious construction largely based on the reports of the early European explorers who first traveled to the New World. In his revisionary work, significantly called *Invention of America* and dating back to 1948, Mexican historian Edmundo O’Gorman argued that there has been no actual “discovery” or subsequent civilization in the first place, but a retroactive invention of the American continent. The difference between discovery and invention is nothing less than the difference between a providential narrative and a critical interpretation; between destiny and history, to quote Myra Jehlen’s words (679).

When *Lolita* was first published—by Olympia Press in France, since four American publishers refused it—a number of critics notoriously accused the novel of being “sheer unrestrained
pornography” (Gordon 6), “repulsive,” and altogether not worth of “any adult reader’s attention” (Prescott 17). Yet Nabokov declared that what pained him “considerably more than the idiotic accusation of immorality” (“On a Book” 315) was the charge of Lolita’s anti-Americanism, and this testifies to the seriousness of the author’s aim of providing the country of his voluntary exile with a new literary childhood. From this point of view, the critical fortune of Lolita’s two cinematic adaptations is emblematic. If Stanley Kubrick’s quite unscandalous 1962 movie thrived on the alleged outrage of the titillating topic (the posters shouted, “How did they ever make a movie from Lolita?”), Adrian Lyne’s 1997 film suffered a censorship very similar to the one that occurred to the novel: since the film couldn’t find a distributor in America, it premiered in Spain, and only in August 1998 the cable network Showtime broadcasted it in the United States. It is significant that, despite the repeated charges of immorality, no critic has ever accused the movies of being anti-American, or even acknowledged such a critique as a main theme.

I contend that in writing his first American novel (not only written in America, but set in America as well), Vladimir Nabokov, a Russian émigré imbued with European culture (similar in this to his narrator Humbert Humbert), linked what James W. Johnson called the “new mythos of man’s youth” (5)—the modern writers’ myth of adolescence that “sees life as a chaotic, transitional process lost between some vanished pattern of values and an unknown future” (10)—to the travel narratives to the New World he had probably read in his childhood. Such narratives conveyed a pastoral idea of “America as nature’s garden, a new paradise of abundance” (75), as Leo Marx stated referring to Robert Beverley’s History and Present State of Virginia (1705). I argue that Lolita places itself in the American literary tradition Marx identified in his seminal study, The Machine in the Garden (1964), and that both Kubrick and Lyne, in adapting the novel to the screen, have grasped such an important aspect of the novelist’s critique and successfully remediated it to the grammar of cinema, using “visual references […] in place of the dense texture of verbal punning and allusion which Nabokov uses throughout the novel” (Burns 246).

Youth has been a central symbol in American culture since the foundation of the nation. If the Declaration of Independence can be considered as a child’s rebellion against an oppressive parent, the subsequent revolts of youth were essential to the vitality of the nation, so that youth movements were often linked to progress and innovation, to revolution and transformation. Conventionally, the literary child symbolizes hope, promise of a better future, renewal of the country and the continuity of generations. Yet, as many commentators have pointed out, the figure of the child in American fiction has always functioned as “a cultural construction that changes over time and within societies” (Pifer 1), addressing topical questions related to contemporary sociocultural processes. In the United States, the Romantic cult of the innocent child has been strongly challenged since its very origins, because, as Ihab Hassan noted, “the European strain of romantic agony was tempered by the spirit of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman” (320) that provided literary children and adolescence in general with a peculiar robustness and pragmatism.

In her recent work on the representations of childhood in American fiction, Zofia Kolbuszewska argued that the figure of the child functions as “both a product of the national narrative of identity and an uncanny dark figure questioning its unity and consistency” (23). Commenting on the “revised” figure of the “(neo)Romantic child,” she aptly concluded,

On the one hand the image of the Romantic child, on which American national narrative depends for coherence and appeal, lends this narrative a stability of timelessness, mythical force and a dynamism stemming from the sublime repression. On the other hand, thanks to its function as an unstable, shifting, signifier of signification, the
Romantic child-figure destabilizes the national narrative by uncovering, at a particular historical moment, its suppressed dark double, that is, a reality of corruption, racial and gender inequality, disenfranchisement, and anxiety about death and decay. (231)

From Huckleberry Finn to Holden Caulfield, from Pocahontas to Lolita—not to speak of Toni Morrison’s Beloved—American literature is indeed full of precocious adolescents with a rough edge, continuously challenging the Romantic myth of the child’s innocence while representing the contradictions of the young nation during its crucial historical moments.

It may well be, as James Kincaid has recently argued, that “we have, according to the needs of history and our own whim, made children savages and sinners, but we have also maintained their innocence” (53), until “the idea of innocence and the idea of ‘the child’ became dominated by sexuality” (55), with the result that this new “sexualized child” remains “a mystery to us, and a monstrosity too” (55). Whichever way one looks at the topic, it is clear that, to quote Rachael McLennan’s words, “adolescence must always be defined with recourse to the figurative” (17), functioning as “a repository of multiple adult narrative constructions regarding gendered, classed, raced, and national identities” (27); the child always occupies an “abject, in-between state” that “troubles all identity categories” (27) and stimulates productive and creative literary constructions.

I argue that, by basing his novel on “a metaphoric design which recurs everywhere in [U.S.] literature” (Marx 16), Nabokov challenged both the myth of the Romantic child and the myth of American foundation, through “the image of the machine’s sudden appearance in the landscape” (Marx 16), a machine seen “as a sudden, shocking intruder upon a fantasy of idyllic satisfaction” that is invariably “associated with crude, masculine aggressiveness in contrast with the tender, feminine and submissive attitudes traditionally attached to the landscape” (29). The opening sequence of Lyne’s film beautifully conveys such an image: we see a misty rural landscape apparently deserted, and hear the notes of Ennio Morricone’s melancholic theme; then we see a car, driven by Jeremy Irons as Humbert, proceeding through vast, green, bucolic scenery, while a flock of birds flies away as if frightened by the intrusion. The car does not proceed in a straight line, but zigzags through the road, and as the scene goes on, a close-up shows a hairpin in Humbert’s blood-stained hand and a gun sliding in the rear seat; we immediately understand, from Humbert’s devastated expression, that he has done something terrible that certainly involved violence and blood, and we infer that he has violated (or even killed) a girl. Since the beginning of the film, he is, both literally and metaphorically, the deranged machine invading the garden.

Each of the three versions of Lolita, then, is not exclusively concerned with American youth culture, of which Nabokov himself admitted his ignorance in an interview, when he stated, “I did not know any American 12-year-old girls, and I did not know America; I had to invent America and Lolita” (Strong Opinions 22). Both directors were equally aware that the writer’s focus was as much on civilization as on education, and their films, like the novel, also convey a powerful and disturbing rewriting of America as youth. Lolita is represented as an uncontaminated garden soon to be spoilt by the “machine” of Humbert’s violent plot. The narration, however, challenges us by asking how uncontaminated such garden is in the first place and how much violence and coercion the act of education/civilization requires. Most of all, Lolita reflects on the nefarious consequences of these processes. A comparative analysis of Nabokov’s novel along with its two cinematic adaptations will clarify the different ways in which Kubrick and Lyne interpreted the writer’s complex and original ideas about America and transposed them in their films.
Critics such as Linda Hutcheon and Robert Stam have recently argued that adaptations—especially film adaptations—are not to be considered as “parasites” that can be more or less “faithful” to the source text, nor mere illustrations or simplifications of an original. On the contrary, in line with theoretical movements and trends such as narratology, reception theory, deconstruction, and the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies, adaptation is now regarded as “an orchestration of discourses, talents, and tracks, a ‘hybrid’ construction mingling different media and discourses and collaborations” (Stam, *Theory* 9), which can transform source texts “by a complex series of operations: selection, amplification, concretization, actualization, critique, extrapolation, popularization, reaccentuation, transculturalization” (45). Similarly, the source text itself is no longer regarded as an untouchable piece of art arbitrarily frozen into definitive status, but as a “situated utterance” (45–46) forming “a dense informational network, a series of verbal cues which the adapting film text can then selectively take up, amplify, ignore, subvert, or transform” (46). Nabokov’s *Lolita* is particularly apt to such a process, since the author himself used in his screenplay scenes and dialogues not included in the novel, so that each adapter has to wonder to which text, if any, he has to be “faithful.”

As Humbert in the novel “thematizes the issue of the narrative capacities of film vis-à-vis novel” (Stam, *Literature Through Film* 225), so Nabokov himself thematizes the process of American civilization as strictly connected to the act of writing, even before his countryman Tzvetan Todorov, in his 1982 work entitled *The Conquest of America*, analyzed the crucial relationship between interpretation, ethics, civilization, and language. Todorov insisted that our present identity as scholars of understanding “otherness,” especially American “otherness,” largely derives from the tricky hermeneutics of conquest. In *Lolita*, Nabokov challenged such a misuse of language and, in a sense, reimagined America as a misled youth. It is possible, then, to read *Lolita* as Nabokov’s rewriting of the continent’s progressive civilization by European settlers; a civilization, he implies, obtained mostly through an dishonest use of language.

Humbert aptly summarizes Nabokov’s point at the beginning of his narration, when he states, “You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style” (*Lolita* 9). A movie, as it is quite obvious, cannot rely just on prose style, fancy or not, and both directors had to invent cinematographic equivalents for it in order to convey Humbert’s peculiar attitudes. This task, however, proves to be particularly challenging in the case of *Lolita*. Though Humbert laments, in a passage of the novel, that he has “to put the impact of an instantaneous vision into a sequence of words” so that “their physical accumulation on the page impairs the actual flash, the sharp unity of impression” (97), Nabokov’s mimetic prose, as Stam aptly argued, “conveys not only the images but also the feel of the editing of the films, as in the quick-cut succession of ‘close shots’ in the account of the Western” (Stam, *Literature* 226). The prose itself sometimes “provides the literary equivalent of stereophonic and later Dolby sound, where one becomes conscious of the location and thrust and directionality of sound” (227), and this paradoxically makes a literal adaptation nearly impossible.

If Kubrick, in line with the dark comedy genre he chose for his film, massively altered Nabokov’s long screenplay and relied instead on wise editing and on Peter Sellers’s improvised dialogues as filmic equivalents of Nabokovian wit, Lyne counted on Stephen Schiff’s screenplay—following more closely the structure of Nabokov’s novel—and made extensive use of music and photography in order to show the disrupting force of Humbert’s assault on Lolita. It is worth noting that both films are particularly concerned with landscape and panoramic shots, so as to provide
the story with a national perspective. In the introduction to his screenplay, Schiff acknowledged that

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. (xiii)

Critics have often analyzed Humbert’s progressive “Americanization” in the course of the novel, as well as the influence of comics and popular magazines in the developing of American youth culture. The result has been an ironic contrast between the overly sophisticated European culture of high modernism and the American cultural trends that in a few years would converge in such youth countercultural phenomena as rock ‘n’ roll, the beat movements and the hippie culture, forming the basis for the poetics of postmodernism. But there are also other dichotomies, strictly focused on the New World imagery. Though Nabokov disliked allegory and derided, in Lolita’s afterword, the “otherwise intelligent” critic who read the novel as “Old Europe debauching Young America,” or “Young America debauching Old Europe” (“On a Book” 314), nonetheless the narrator often describes Lolita’s twofold nature as an all-American mixture of “tender dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity, stemming from the snub-nosed cuteness of ads and magazine pictures” (44).

Kubrick used only a few lines from the novel in his 153-minute film, but it is significant that one of the six voice-overs is a reprise of the quoted passage describing Humbert’s obsession. During a close-up on James Mason’s/Humbert’s hands writing on his journal, we hear his voice saying: “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 eerie vulgarity.” Though Kubrick removed the explicit reference to commercial ads and popular culture, he hinted at it through the editing of the scene. When the voice pronounces the word “vulgarity,” the scene abruptly switches to Shelley Winters as Charlotte, Lolita’s mother, preparing breakfast in a modern, all-American, fully accessorized kitchen among shiny steel saucepans, while her daughter is eating cereal of a notorious brand with milk and (too much) cream. The contrast with Humbert’s refined old-style calligraphy and his erudite reflections could not be more impressive.

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Both Kubrick and Lyne understood that Nabokov looked at Lolita as he looked at America: not only through the melancholic eyes of an émigré, but also through the contradictions of adolescence, with a feeling of nostalgia for a lost, pastoral world that relates, as he wrote in his memoir, to “a hypertrophied sense of lost childhood” (Nabokov, Speak, Memory 419), as well as to a fear of an unknown future in an unexplored land. Virtually all scholars agree on the idea that adolescence is a “divided,” “paradoxical” condition, an evolving process instead of a state, an ambivalent trope which, especially in its literary representations, embodies opposite values. According to Hassan, “caught as he is between two worlds, the adolescent engages in a dialectic to reconcile both
worlds to his own [. . .]; he partakes of the past and looks to the future; he insists on freedom and seeks authority. [. . .] He appears, in fact, at once innocent and guilty, hopeful and disillusioned, Arcadian and Utopian, empirical and idealistic” (314). Kincaid has recently remarked how our present cultural discourses are organized around “notions of the child as primitive, as embodying a natural form reaching back to an earlier and more authentic stage of the species” (57), while at the same time the child still represents “the new world: the focus on the future, the confidence in the power of education” (59), embodying the future aspirations of the nation.

When he was a child, Nabokov used to embark on playful explorations of “a misty-blue sphagnum bog” that, “because of its mystery and remoteness,” he and his friends had baptized “America” (Speak, Memory 424). It is significant that both movies begin with a misty, quite gothic landscape (if one excludes the prologue of Kubrick’s film, completely removed from the context, showing a male’s hand gently applying nail polish to a girl’s foot behind the film’s credits), and with a car proceeding in the mist. It seems that both directors were aware of this aspect of Nabokov’s poetics and decided, more or less consciously, to give Humbert’s journey the characteristics of an exploration, rendering the American space as a misty, unknown territory, a wilderness that nonetheless presents also bucolic elements.

Nabokov’s son Dmitri acknowledged that one of the main themes of his father’s writing has always been the voyage, the scientific expedition, and stated that the idea of travel had tantalized him since childhood. He remembered that one of his father’s unfulfilled longings was for an expedition to some exotic, uncharted region and that, late in life, he often dreamed of foreign places (D. Nabokov 5–6, 10–11). Nabokov himself authorized a comparison between the writer and the explorer in the foreword to his Lectures on Literature, where he argued that “the work of art is invariably the creation of a new world, so that the first thing we should do is to study that new world as closely as possible, approaching it as something brand new. [. . .] The writer is the first man to map it and to name the natural objects it contains” (1). Moreover, he also explicitly compared himself to an actual conquistador, when he stated that, in consequence of his being “immediately exposed to the very best of America,” he became “as stout as Cortez” (Strong Opinions 23), paraphrasing the dictum in John Keats’s famous poem “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer.”

The New World pastoral imagery is particularly apparent in the episode of Humbert’s very first encounter with Lolita, and Kubrick and Lyne adapted this crucial scene in different but altogether effective ways, laying emphasis on the traditional American dichotomies between garden and wilderness, civilization and primitiveness, refinement and vulgarity. In the novel the encounter is described with an abundance of sea and garden imageries, and it recalls the sighting of land after a long voyage: “There came a sudden burst of greenery [. . .] and then, without the least warning, a blue sea-wave swelled under my heart and, from a mat in a pool of sun, half-naked, kneeling, turning about on her knees, there was my Riviera love peering at me over dark glasses” (V. Nabokov, Lolita 39). Lolita is soon assimilated to “some little princess [. . .] lost, kidnapped [sic], discovered in gypsy rags through which her nakedness smiled at the king” (39); she is significantly called a “nouvelle,” and Humbert’s “discovery of her” is presented as “a fatal consequence of that ‘prince-dom by the sea’” (36) in his past, which, besides being an obvious allusion to Edgar Allan Poe, cannot but remind the old world of European aristocracy. Her Hispanic name, Dolores, and the “Mexican trash” in the front hall introducing her “discovery,” help situate the novel’s colonial subtext.

Kubrick preserved the Mexican imagery in the scene of Humbert’s arrival at Charlotte’s house. She mentions her honeymoon there (a detail also present in Nabokov’s published screenplay) and, hardly a minute later, when Humbert stumbles on a Mexican wooden panel—the equivalent of the
counterfeit “painted screen” that, in Nabokov’s screenplay, Charlotte confesses they bought “at the store here to match our Mexican stuff”—she associates the cheap reproduction with Lolita, angrily remarking that she told her “ten times to keep that in her room” (Lolita: A Screenplay 704). A very similar scene is to be found in Lyne’s film, when Melanie Griffith as a not very convincing Charlotte explains to a dazed Humbert that she and her late husband “adored Mexico,” remarking, “The whole idea of a culture that sophisticated—and we think of them as primitive.” Charlotte’s banal remark gave the director the opportunity to put in her mouth an unaware critique of the process of American civilization and of its contemporary society, when she adds with a smile, “I mean, look at us!” Behind her, affixed on a closed door, we see something resembling a red Hispanic cross, similar to those drawn on the conquistadores’ banners during their “civilizing” missions.

Kubrick made clear that Lolita’s destiny is tightly connected to that of the American continent in its youth also by following a hint in Nabokov’s screenplay. When Humbert asks Charlotte for her telephone number, she gives it as “1776,” the year of the Declaration of Independence, as Humbert casually points out. Similarly, in the novel, Lolita escapes from her abductor’s custody on the fourth of July, Independence Day. In their journeys, Humbert and Lolita mainly move westward, following the direction of the nation’s historical development, and when they eventually arrive in California, Lolita’s myth, as well as the nation’s, vanishes, and the dream evaporates again in a misty landscape: “the fog was like a wet blanket, and the sand was gritty and clammy, and Lo was all gooseflesh and grit, and for the first time in my life I had as little desire for her as for a manatee” (V. Nabokov, Lolita 167). If the end of the nation inevitably brings an end to its exploitation, then the end of childhood and the coming of age signal the end of any sexual attraction.

Most importantly, in Kubrick’s adaptation the whole scene of Humbert’s first encounter with Lolita revolves around an ambiguous—and rather amusing—connection between Lolita and the back garden. Immediately after her mention of the Declaration of Independence, Charlotte, in a final attempt to make Humbert stay, tells him: “You must see the garden before you go . . . you must!” The scene cuts to the famous shot of a “half-naked” Sue Lyon as Lolita reading a book “from a mat in a pool of sun” (V. Nabokov, Lolita 39). In hearing her mother’s voice, she slowly peers at the camera “over dark glasses,” while Humbert appears in mid-shot, dazzled and “breathless,” certainly not because of the garden. Charlotte remarks that she can offer him, among other things, “a sunny garden” and her “cherry pies” (apt substitutes for the lilies of Nabokov’s screenplay). When a transfixed Humbert accepts the deal, she naively asks him, “What was the decisive factor? My garden?” In this way the audience grasps the pun and inevitably associates the garden with Lolita. In a later scene, when Peter Sellers as Quilty, Humbert’s doppelgänger, is approached by Charlotte during a party, he remembers their first meeting only when she reminds him, “And afterwards, you know, I showed you my garden.” As a result, Quilty becomes immediately responsive and asks, “ Didn’t you have a daughter with a lovely name?”, linking again the garden with Lolita and her sexual attractiveness.

Lyne structured the scene in a similar way, but he developed the colonial suggestion by making Charlotte use the word “piazza” to describe her garden, following Nabokov’s novel. The noun recalls a Mexican, exotic, quite fairy atmosphere (lost in the Italian dubbing, since “my piazza” becomes “la mia Versailles”), which, instead of hinting at a primeval, uncontaminated garden, gives the idea of a civilized space, a territory won from the wilderness, the result of “a life’s work,” as she punctuates while showing Humbert her garden. It has been necessarily a hard labor “to keep it healthy and green.” Immediately after this conversation, the camera frames an
alluring Dominique Swain as Lolita lying on the grass, reading magazines and getting drenched with water from the sprinkler, so as to suggest the image of a wood nymph, rising indeed from a “princedom by the sea” (V. Nabokov, Lolita 9). Incidentally, the Italian historian Pietro Martire d’Anghiera described the native girls encountered by Columbus in a very similar way, as “splendid naiads, or nymphs of the fountains” (D’Anghiera 119).

It is worth remembering that little Lolita has a famous “ancestor” in one of the first book-length accounts of the New England colonies: The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, & the Summer Isles (1624), by John Smith. Pocahontas, the native girl who allegedly saved Smith’s life in a ritual ceremony, was described as a seductive child of about twelve when she “got his head in her arms, and laid her own upon his to save him from death” (Smith). One of the first “literary” contacts (and one of the most famous, to be sure) between settlers and natives is based on a European adult man who is sexually attracted by an American child. If historians are right in suggesting Pocahontas was a nickname that in the Powatan language signifies “little wanton,” then American literature was actually inaugurated by an ante litteram nymphet. Though scholars have recently challenged the romance between Smith and Pocahontas, as well as the reliability of Smith’s account, nonetheless, the myth has become a fundamental element of American culture, and it would be no marvel if Nabokov had Pocahontas’ legend in mind when he based his reinvention of America on an unreliable European narrator falling in love with a precocious New England wanton.

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According to Todorov, Columbus, like many of his contemporaries, believed that “names, or at least the names of exceptional persons, should be in the image of their being” (26). So he styled himself as the evangelizer (Christopher: “Christum ferens”) and the colonizer (or Colòn, “repopulator”). He was profoundly concerned with the choice of the names for the virgin world before his eyes, though he knew “perfectly well that these islands already have names”; nonetheless, he sought “to rename places in terms of the rank they occupy in his discovery, to give them the right names,” because “nomination is equivalent to taking possession” (27). Proper names are ultimately devoid of meaning: they serve only for denotation, but not directly for human communication. The entire dimension of intersubjectivity, of the reciprocal, human value of words as reference, escapes the colonist. Behind the feeble pretext of protecting real people’s privacy, in the novel Humbert renames every character in the story according to his own will, plays with the meanings of proper names, and continuously mangles and misspells them. Lo, Dolores, Dolly, Carmen, are only some of the names he gives to Lolita, according to his own thoughts of the moment, so that the reader has the feeling that Lolita is not a real child, but exists mainly in Humbert’s obsessed language. The novel’s very first voyage is a journey of the language, the three-step trip of the tongue in pronouncing Lolita’s name, a journey that Lyne superimposes to the physical journey of Humbert driving his car at the beginning of the film.

The similarities between Humbert’s conduct and that of the early European explorers acquire a new relevance in this context. In the course of the novel, Humbert presents himself as a “writer and explorer” (V. Nabokov, Lolita 75), adding the name Edgar to his own in honor to Edgar Allan Poe, author of The Narrative of the Life of Arthur Gordon Pym, which features an exploration to the Pole that reminds readers of Humbert’s own expedition to Arctic Canada. He also attempts to seduce Lolita by recounting his adventures and inventing a supposedly heroic encounter with a polar bear. In Lyne’s film, an idyllic scene shows Humbert, Charlotte, and Lolita sitting on the
porch while water pours from a fountain and birds sing in the garden. In order to deviate Charlotte’s attention from Lolita’s nasty behavior, Humbert recounts funny stories about a weather expedition to the North Pole he participated in, though he self-consciously remarks that his comrades “were lying of course. It was very hush-hush.” When he says that he shot (but missed) a polar bear, Lolita remarks that it is “a lousy thing to do,” and eventually the conversation switches to skin-rugs. In a later scene, described on Schiff’s published screenplay but of which there is no trace in the movie’s final cut, Humbert, perusing Quilty’s mansion, “passes a bare room with mirrors and a polar bear skin rug” (Schiff 206). Indeed Quilty, as Humbert’s evil double, did shoot the polar bear Humbert only boasted about, fulfilling the “lousy” process of civilization.

If, according to Todorov, Columbus’ discovery is actually subject to a goal, which is the narrative of the voyage, then the equation between the explorer and the writer is inherent to American literature since its beginnings. Humbert writes a journal, too, where he records the bad weather conditions that “interfered with that picnic on that unattainable lake” (V. Nabokov, Lolita 50), and, in Lyne’s film, another scene deleted from the final cut shows Humbert and Charlotte diving in a big lake, while he fantasizes an uxoricide. In the novel, Humbert describes nympholepts like himself as “lone voyagers,” “bewitched travelers,” or, notoriously, “enchanted hunters” (16–17). Explorers, conquerors, and hunters are, of course, the characters who first shaped the American continent, and it is significant that in both films such elements become inscriptions on motels’ neon signs and images in advertisements and magazines: America’s shaping forces are now purely commercial.

Many distinctive elements of the American conquest are disseminated in the novel and do not escape the trained reader; yet their significance has been trivialized by popular culture and by the author’s cunningness as well. A concrete replica of Christopher Columbus’s flagship is the habitat for “a large troop of monkeys” (V. Nabokov, Lolita 158) in a zoo in Indiana (and it is significant that an ape in a cage is at the novel’s origins); the Aztec is a red convertible driven by Humbert’s rival and pursuer Quilty; the color of the car haunts Humbert’s imagination, who begins to fear the “red ghost” (217), the “red beast” (219), the “red fiend” (247), echoing the devilish descriptions of the natives made by the Puritan settlers; the sign advertising “Indian ceremonial dances” specifies that they are “strictly commercial” (157). Only in this ironic sense, then, can Humbert be the “conquering hero,” shown in the full-page ad affixed to the wall above Lolita’s bed. It is significant, however, that in Kubrick’s film, the looming face in the poster is that of Quilty, advertising a notorious brand of cigarettes. He is the one who will finally conquer her.

In the novel, Humbert uses the word “civilization” only twice, and in both passages Nabokov ironically winks at the twisted meaning the narrator gives to the word. First, Humbert singles out what he feels as the contradictions of “a civilization which allows a man of twenty-five to court a girl of sixteen but not a girl of twelve” (Lolita 18); later he remarks on the “melancholia and a sense of insufferable oppression” that followed his “return to civilization” after an Arctic expedition (34). In both cases Humbert sees civilization as an oppressive, coercive force. Ironically enough, in a later passage, when he is about to abduct Lolita from the camp, he states that all he wanted to do was to give Lolita “a sound education, a healthy and happy girlhood” (111).

At the beginning of Kubrick’s adaptation, when Humbert faces Quilty with a gun, the latter presents himself as Spartacus, dressed as a Roman senator, and asks his opponent, “Have you come to free the slaves or something?” Besides being an ironical reference to Kubrick’s previous film, the scene sets one of Lolita’s main themes, the contrast between civilization and slavery. Seconds later, Quilty asks Humbert to play a ping-pong game “like two civilized senators,” and
then, when Humbert fires his gun at him, he desperately repeats, “Why don’t you and I sort of settle this like two civilized people?” In a later scene, when Charlotte finds Humbert’s diary and begins yelling at him, he invites her to “sit and discuss it quietly, like civilized people.” The concept of civilization is always brought in the conversation when something unpleasant is going to happen, and in both cases the word is used to justify or resolve the consequences of monstrous behavior. Both calls for civilization, however, remain unheard, and in both cases the immediate result is death—of Quilty by Humbert’s gun and of Charlotte by a passing car.

In Lyne’s film the word “civilization” does not appear, yet the director hints at the crucial concept in a subtler way. After a dramatic scene in which Humbert tells Lolita about her mother’s death and she ends up in bed with him, crying, the scene cuts to a car crossing a bridge, and Humbert’s voice-over says, “It was then that we began our extensive travels all over the United States.” Once the car has crossed the bridge, the radio in the car begins broadcasting a famous song by the Andrew Sisters, whose lyrics, perfectly discernible in the movie, say, “He tells the native population that civilization is fine / [: : :] That civilization is a thing for me to see”; Humbert and Lolita sing together the refrain: “Oh bongo bongo bongo I don’t want to leave the Congo / Oh no no no no no.” Then they start speaking and joking, but the song goes on in the background, stating, “Bingle bangle bungle I’m so happy in the jungle. I refuse to go [: : :]” It becomes clear that the song functions as a literal comment on the situation when the following words—“I see how people who are civilized bang you with automobiles”—are heard precisely when Humbert loses for a moment control of the car because of Lolita’s teasing. The scene ends with the song joyously stating, “Civilization? No no no no, I’ll stay right here.” Tellingly enough, from then on the couple will no longer experience moments of happiness.

Humbert also has his own ideas about the proper education of youth, but while in the novel Nabokov sustains a thorough critique of American schools and institutions, in Kubrick’s film Humbert’s positions are rather untenable, since they are only pretexts to justify his own obsession. After the scene when Lolita learns about her mother’s death, we see a car cruising on a road, while Humbert’s voice introduces Beardsley as “an excellent school, where I hope that she will be persuaded to read other things than comic books and movie romances”; the college’s program, as any of Nabokov’s readers knows, is altogether different. Later, when Humbert is arguing with Lolita still dressed as a nymph after her theatrical performance, he proposes to her to go away again, and when she asks, in order to dissuade him from his project, “What about my education?”, Humbert immediately answers, “What sort of an education do you think you’re getting here? You got a much better education when you were traveling around with me.” Though Humbert probably refers to the refined art and the erudite poetry he occasionally taught her (in a former scene he was reading her a poem by Poe), the audience easily understands what kind of “sentimental” education she has already received and will go on receiving. When Quilty, disguised as Dr. Zempf, the school psychologist, provocatively asks Humbert, “Has anyone instructed Lolita in the facts of life?”, he answers, “I really don’t think this is a fit topic,” while the audience immediately grasps the ironic contradictions in Humbert’s thought, as well as his growing fear about his situation.

Lyne tried to maintain Nabokov’s critique of those American girls’ schools where “medieval dates are of less vital value than weekend ones” (V. Nabokov, Lolita 178), but the tight cinematographic rhythms did not allow him to develop the theme properly. In a deleted scene, Humbert discusses the topic of education as a real “civilizing mission” with a recalcitrant Lolita while driving his car: “You’ll go and you’ll like it, and you’ll get the fine education that I always wanted for you. And you’ll not be one of those ridiculous vulgarians you’ve always hung around with. You’ll learn to write, for God’s sake, you’ll learn to speak properly and sit properly and
walk properly [...]]” (Schiff 129). While he is talking, Lolita kicks him from the rear seat and yells, “What do you know? Who asked you? Who asked you about anything? You’re a stinker, and you don’t know the first thing about America or girls, or how to be a dad [...]]” (Schiff 129), obviously echoing Nabokov’s declarations. The later scene with Miss Pratt and Reverend Rigger of the school board discussing with Humbert Lolita’s reticence to talk about sex matters lacks the incisiveness of Seller’s inventiveness and improvisation, serving only the purpose of alerting an already paranoid Humbert about the dangers inherent to his situation.

If in Kubrick’s film the oppressive and morbid equation of Lolita with the American continent is conveyed by the ghostly rippling of a harpsichord during shots (mainly taken in England) privileging gothic, barren landscapes, with Quilty’s “Pavor Manor” recalling a medieval castle and the “Enchanted Hunters” motel eerily similar to a haunted mansion, Lyne’s film, through Howard Atherton’s superb photography, “does convey the Arcadia of America that Nabokov loved with shots of nature, filmed in the American South” (Watts 301). Such panoramic shots and vast landscapes have a striking counterpart in Morricone’s haunting themes that convey the sense of a sad beauty, forever lost. Yet, according to Charles Taylor, Lyne’s “immaculate period reproductions: suburban lawns and downtowns seen through a creamy, nostalgic haze” are “entirely wrong for Lolita”; he argues that, “in keeping with Nabokov’s portrait of pop America [...], we need to see a world of soda fountains, movie theaters, Kumfy Kabins.” Though this nostalgic atmosphere would be appropriate in the last part of the film, when Humbert understands he is losing his grip on Lolita, Lyne extended it to the whole film, making nostalgia the prevalent feeling. On the other hand, the numerous scenes inside the car are ironically punctuated by pop tunes and happy refrains, so as to underline the overturning of roles between conqueror and conquered, or master and slave.

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It is significant that Humbert directs his attention only to the particular kind of children he calls “nymphets.” In the novel he describes their age range in spatial terms, as “the boundaries—the mirrory beach and rosy rocks—of an enchanted island haunted by those nymphets of mine and surrounded by a vast, misty sea” (V. Nabokov, Lolita 16). The age of a nymphet is a constantly moving frontier inevitably doomed to vanish, like America’s historical one. A nymphet won’t be young forever; she will grow old and lose her attractiveness. At the end of the novel, when Humbert visits a “hopelessly worn” (277) seventeen-year-old Lolita, he understands that the frontier has finally vanished, so that he describes their situation making large use of spatial denotations: “‘Lolita,’ I said, ‘this may be neither here nor there but I have to say it. Life is very short. From here to that old car you know so well there is a stretch of twenty, twenty-five paces. It is a very short walk. Make those twenty-five steps. Now. Right now’” (278; italics added). After Lolita’s final refusal, America disappears for Humbert as well; the countryside becomes vague, and civilization vanishes: “night had eliminated most of the landscape. [...] The surrounding country, if any, was a black wilderness” (281). The places that were accurately described now reduce to a generic “black warm night, somewhere in Appalachia” (281). Finally, roads become unknown quantities in an equation, called “paved x” and “paved y” (281). Without Lolita, America will always remain “terra incognita.”

In his groundbreaking work on the importance of the frontier in American history, Fredrick Jackson Turner showed how “the disintegrating forces of civilization entered the wilderness” (12), while, at the same time, the frontier “strips off the garments of civilization and arrays [the colonist]
Critique in the hunting shirt and the moccasin" (4). We have to bear in mind this paradoxical situation in order to understand how “in the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized” (22). As a result of their “colonizing” mission, they acquired what Turner considers peculiar American traits, such as “coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness,” a “restless, nervous energy,” a “dominant individualism, working for good and for evil” (37). At the end of Lolita, Humbert has indeed acquired some of these traits, necessary for the conquest of the land. In the novel he talks to Lolita in what he acknowledges as a “horrible careful English” (V. Nabokov, Lolita 280), occasionally slips into slang—“you got it all wrong,” he says (278)—and becomes obsessed with his gun, like a cowboy. The most American of Nabokov’s novels could not end but with a gunfight, with Humbert performing “a kind of double, triple, kangaroo jump,” while discharging his gun at a curiously effeminate Quilty, who comically cries “Ah, that hurts, sir, enough!” (303).

The gun is a central symbol in Kubrick’s film, and it symbolizes Humbert’s definitive Americanization; according to Dan E. Burns, Humbert himself “is epitomized as a pistol” (248). The gun appears in the opening sequence, when Humbert faces Quilty at the ping-pong table, pointing it at him without hesitation. When he sees the gun, Quilty immediately enters into the “saloon” atmosphere and says, “I never found a guy who’d sort of pull a gun on me when he lost a game.” The gun belonged to Charlotte’s late husband, who bought it when he learned he was terminally ill, and in a sense, since Humbert uses it to kill his double Quilty, it served its original suicidal purpose. When Charlotte shows it to Humbert, he is initially afraid of it, but once he grasps it and finds out it is loaded, he fantasizes he could kill his wife with it. By the end of the film, he knows how to handle it, and he uses it to kill Quilty in a scene that configures as a parody of the decisive shootouts in Westerns. Since Quilty hides behind a mock Gainsborough portrait of a young woman, with him Humbert also shoots Lolita’s childhood. On the other hand, the unconvincing “Grand Guignol” scene of Quilty’s murder falls at the end of Lyne’s film, and though, according to Caryn James, it “belongs in another film,” it dramatizes the men’s grotesque physical struggle described in the novel, though it misses the ironic linguistic counterpart and eventually results in a failure.

In conclusion, we can see that, in the novel, Humbert begins his narrative as a sophisticated European émigré approaching America with a mixture of fascination and revulsion. He is obsessed by his own mythicized European childhood, and he struggles to regain it in the young American continent. In order to do so, he catalyzes his desires toward a child, but his appreciation is a destructive one. He is armed with the most powerful weapon of the civilizer: the word, a refined language. He literally “talks like a book.” Even for Todorov, Western civilization subdued natives because of its superiority in human communication; “[l]anguage is the perfect instrument of empire,” as the Bishop of Avila told Queen Isabella of Castile in 1492 (Elliot 125). In one of his rare moments of lucidity, Humbert recognizes that “Lolita had been safely solipsized” (V. Nabokov, Lolita 60). The literal translation of this sentence in the Russian version reads, “Lolita’s reality was successfully canceled.” With Lolita, Humbert adopts an attitude similar to the early European explorers, who, in order to describe the New World according to their providential narratives, erased the natives’ inconvenient reality.

Stephen Schiff explicitly acknowledges this aspect of the novel; introducing his screenplay, he argues that “Lolita herself is so much a figment of [Humbert’s] imagination that she barely exists on the page” (xv). Nonetheless, he further specifies, “I had to reinvent her, piecing her together from my own adolescence and from adolescents I knew,” since, according to him, Nabokov’s “ear for the rhythms of American adolescent speech circa 1947 is not always perfect”
In his search for an exasperated realism, and in order to render a literal adaptation of the novel, Schiff’s screenplay, as well as Lyne’s film, in the end proves mostly “unfaithful” to the spirit of Nabokov’s multifaceted masterpiece. In fact, though fidelity is no longer regarded as an indispensable aesthetic goal for adaptations, and though Stam, among others, has recently theorized the “unlikelihood, [...] even the undesirability of literal fidelity” (Theory 17) for every creative adaptation, nonetheless adaptations remain always “inherently ‘palimpsestuous’ works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts [...]”, created and then received in relation to a prior text” (Hutcheon 6). When the “characters as constructed and projected during our reading” fail to fit “the embodied actors/characters witnessed on screen” (Stam, Theory 23), or when an adaptation does not gain “the critical consensus within an ‘interpretative community’” (15), then we regard it as “unsuccessful,” since it fails to transfer the “creative energy” of the source text, establishing with it a less than fruitful dialogue.

On the other hand, Kubrick structured his film following an opposite path, which passes through an exasperation of fictitious elements (like the Gothic references, the improvised nonsense dialogues, the fairy tale atmosphere) in order to underline the erosion of reality provoked by Humbert’s intrusion in the (not so much) uncontaminated American Arcadia. In this way his adaptation, though less “faithful” to Nabokov’s screenplay, grasped the quintessence of the novel.

Leo Marx concluded his study by arguing that “in the end the American hero is either dead”—like Quilty—or totally alienated from society, alone and powerless” (364)—like Humbert. He cannot rescue the pastoral idyll of youth’s uncontaminated garden, because, as Nabokov implies, such an idyll never existed in the first place. “And if, at the same time,” Marx went on, “he pays a tribute to the image of a green landscape, it is likely to be ironic and bitter” (364), just like Nabokov’s novel. If Kubrick’s film privileges the ironic counterpart of the American dream, unmasking the conquest’s black humor and rehearsing the dark comedy of civilization, Lyne’s adaptation shows the bitterness of disillusionment, the murderer’s belated repentance. In the final scene of Lyne’s film, Humbert’s machine stops in the middle of the garden. He gets out of it, the only standing figure in an ocean of green, and listens to the (imaginary?) voices of invisible children from a distant valley, regretting that Lolita’s voice is not there. Like America, she has been bereaved of childhood, and like America, she has definitely grown old.

Notes

1 For a thorough analysis of the relationship between Nabokov’s novel, his published screenplay, and the two filmic adaptations of Lolita, see also Robert Stam, “The Metamorphoses of Lolita,” in Literature Through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation (223–43). For an analysis of Nabokov’s attitudes toward film and cinema, and for an exploration of all Lolita’s references to movies, stars, and spectatorship, see Alfred Appel, Jr., Nabokov’s Dark Cinema. Finally, for a commentary on Nabokov’s work and comic strips, see Clarence Brown, “Krazy, Ignaz, and Vladimir: Nabokov and the Comic Strip.”

2 Reflecting on the contemporary discourses about pedophilia, Kincaid argued that “our story of child molesting is a story of nightmare, the literary territory of the Gothic,” stating that “instead of offering solutions, such tales tend to paralyze; they do not move forward but circle back to one more hopeless encounter with the demon” (10). In this sense, according to the critic, the Gothic—especially what he calls the “Orwellian Gothic” rhetoric—“assumes and creates a terror so urgent it excuses the most brutal appeals” (11).

3 It is safe to remember that in the Elizabethan age the word wanton conveyed the notion of “ill-bred,” “poorly brought up,” “uneducated,” and so “playful,” “unrestrained,” “lacking in discipline,” and did not have the sexual and unmoral connotations it has today. Nonetheless, all such adjectives are, in the course of the novel, also variously associated to Lolita.
4When Humbert finds a list of Lolita’s classmates—significantly inscribed on the reverse of an unfinished copy of a map of the United States—he sketches some aspects of their lives starting from their names. He also singles one of these out, the mysterious Aubrey McFate, who ends up embodying the devilish force that will be responsible for Humbert’s misfortunes.

Works Cited


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