

Losing Lolita: *Lolita* in Popular Culture

From Kubrik's 1962 film adaptation of the novel, to the lyrics of Lana Del Rey's "Off to the Races," popular culture has reproduced Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* in a variety of different forms. In mass media, the titular Lolita has typically been represented precociously, placed in erotic environments and often alongside sexually suggestive objects. Although the novel embraces the taboo topic of pedophilia, mass media has subtly normalized the hypersexual image of Lolita. In doing so, popular culture has ignored Nabokov's artistry of writing a book that, because it is purely from the perspective of a pedophile, plays with the reader's emotions and is a "first-rate work of fiction [in which] the real clash is not between the characters but between the author and the world" (*Speak, Memory* 214). Nabokov's linguistic puzzle within *Lolita* has subsequently been lost in translation. In popular culture, *Lolita* has prompted a hypersexualization of girlhood with the construction of a voyeuristic "imaginative pedophilia,"¹ which emphasizes Lolita's sexuality rather than appreciating the novel's aesthetic bliss, revealing that mass media has all the characteristics of Nabokov's definition of a "bad reader."²

The 1962 film poster for Kubrik's movie adaptation of Nabokov's *Lolita* unveiled the very first image ever seen of Lolita, one that was far removed from the innocent twelve-year-old victim in the novel; instead, she was now infamously depicted as a sex object adorned with the suggestive lollipop and heart-shaped sunglasses that have "become a 'loose trademark' that signify a young, sexually available girl" (Bertram 17). Once Kubrick had bought the rights to *Lolita*, he asked Nabokov to write the screenplay, but his attempt was so ambitious that it

¹ This "imaginative pedophilia" is the image of Lolita that is propagated in popular culture, an image that misses Nabokov's point concerning "artistry."

² "For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm" (*Lolita* 314-5).

allegedly would have required a seven-hour film (Nastasi). Therefore, although Nabokov's input had been requested, Kubrik had the final say, and it was his visual interpretation that the world first witnessed. Despite Nabokov's involvement in the creation of the extra-textual version of his novel, he had always remained adamantly opposed "to any kind of representation of the little girl" (Arons). As Ira Wells notes, from the moment the world first glimpsed that movie poster, "the merely textual Lolita ha[d] been lost to us forever" (Wells).

This new image of Lolita, as first displayed on movie posters, was accompanied by the contentious question: "how did they ever make a film of Lolita?" (Kubrik). With reference to the controversy surrounding the casting and ultimate portrayal of Lolita, producer James Harris stated that "we knew we must make her a sex object – she couldn't be childlike. If we [make] her a sex object ... It's gonna work" (Nastasi). This change from the girl with "long-toed, monkey-ish feet" (*Lolita* 51) and "thin, knobby wrist[s]" (58) to Kubrick's presentation of Lolita as a sexualized adolescent — Sue Lyon was fourteen at the time, playing a Lolita who was in her mid-teens instead of being twelve — was distracted by the fact that society could not handle a pedophilic relationship on screen. Instead, the age discrepancy within this relationship had to be reframed through the creation of a safer imaginary space established by the use of a seductive, older girl. This imaginary pedophilia is the awareness that the actress presented seems to be of legal age, thereby allowing the viewers to indulge in the fantasy that she is under age without being forced to face the discomfort of witnessing true pedophilia. In so doing, the story line shifted away from true pedophilia in order to create a seemingly sympathetic understanding of one man's desire to be with a sexually attractive young woman, instead of emphasizing the discomfiting feeling of committing a crime against an innocent victim. Lolita appears

throughout Kubrick's film in poses that show off her womanly curves and suggest that she knows more about life and sexuality than the twelve-year-old girl of the novel. In effect, the combined use of imaginary pedophilia and the objectification of Lolita, paired with the first extra-textual image of her character, contributed to the new, false portrayal of Lolita that pop culture has embraced.

Due to the strict censorship of the 1960s, there is another aspect to popular culture's image of Lolita that is not completely encapsulated within Kubrick's conception of her. Lacking in his version of the character is the dimension of the "sexually precocious young girl," as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary – this would later be introduced by Adrian Lyne in the 1997 adaptation of the novel. Although Lyne's movie arguably follows the storyline more closely than does Kubrick's, Dominique Swaine, the actress cast for the role, was again fourteen, unlike the textual Lolita. Despite having her first appear as a childlike figure, she quickly takes on the role of seductress and is portrayed as instigating her sexual relationship with Humbert. Throughout the film, the cinematography features close-ups of Lolita's curves, and she is often associated with phallic imagery that appears sexually suggestive to the viewer. Lolita is shown sucking on, rather than eating, a banana in the front seat of the car, an unnecessary and sexually laden aspect to her character.

In both Kubrick and Lyne's adaptations of *Lolita*, the titular Lolita deviates from the linguistic puzzle Nabokov creates for the reader by objectifying the Lolita character. Portraying Lolita as a hypersexualized character in film undermines the aesthetic bliss of Nabokov's novel in that viewers no longer have the chance to think, dissect, and understand the various dynamics that are laced into Nabokov's works. These aspects demonstrate how challenging it can be to

translate aesthetic bliss to different mediums. Instead, viewers merely take the relationship at face value and shift the blame of the perverse relationship from the pedophilic Humbert Humbert to Lolita in order to alleviate the guilt they feel at playing witness to his crimes. In film, she becomes a manipulator with clearly devious intentions, instead of an innocent victim subjected to the whims of an older man in a position of power.

Lolita's transformation into a sex object initiated the filmic motif of the sexually precocious girl. With this concept in mind, more recent movies like *Labyrinth* (1986), *Stoker* (2013), and *Fish Tank* (2009) employ the trend of the objective sexualization of young women and imaginative pedophilia, although the characters in these films are, again, much older. Perhaps the best demonstration of how popular culture has skewed the aesthetics of the textual Lolita in favor of a safer pedophilic imaginary space comes from the description of the main character in a 2014 film entitled *Ask Me Anything* (Burnett). This film depicts a young woman named Katie Kampenfelt in a gap year between high school and college, who blogs about her relations with older men. Katie is described as "an archetypal version of Lolita – a seductive, attractive, dishonest underage girl" (Ferrugia). These attributes are those which Nabokov expressly did not want to be represented in any representation of Lolita - hence the reason the original 1955 publication of the novel was accompanied by a plain green jacket without accompaniment by any pictorial representation. Nabokov's Lolita was never portrayed as being seductive, nor were nymphets necessarily attractive; in the novel *Lolita*, she is described as having "gooseberry fuzz [on] her shin" (*Lolita* 43), a girl who "should wash her hair once in awhile" (45). The aforementioned description of Katie as an archetype of Lolita reveals the extent to which the Hollywood film industry has distorted the textual image of Lolita.

The “Lolita Effect” - that is, the sexualization of younger girls in order to create imaginary pedophila - can be seen in many television programs today, particularly in the popular ABC Family show *Pretty Little Liars* (Goldsmith), which normalizes the hypersexualization of young, prepubescent girls. The show, which has been on air since 2010, revolves around a clique of high school-aged teens who often find themselves in taboo relationships with older men (Glennon). For instance, one of the show’s longest lasting couples is that of Aria (played by Lucy Hale), a teenage student, and the local high school English teacher, Ezra (played by Ian Harding). Furthermore, the show also includes direct allusions to *Lolita* through one of the girls’, Alison’s, obsession with the novel. Alison (Sasha Pieterse) has a dark-haired alter ego named Vivian Darkbloom, which is not only an anagram for Vladimir Nabokov, but also a character who makes cameo appearances in a few of his works, including *Lolita* (*Lolita* 221). A parallel to Humbert’s relationship with Lolita, Alison is said to have had a secret relationship with her step-father, Byron, who also happens to be an English professor. Whereas many of the other actresses in the show are years older than the characters they portray, Pieterse was only fourteen years old when she first started playing the seventeen-year-old Alison, who soon becomes involved with older men. The sexualization of her younger features above all other characters in the show, combined with direct allusions to Nabokov’s novel in the naming and characterization of her figure, all seem to play off of the allure of the “Lolita Effect” created by popular culture.

In its general sexualization of young girls alongside a lack of imaginary pedophilia, the “Lolita Effect” is especially prevalent in child beauty pageants and competitions like those featured in *Dance Moms* and *Toddlers in Tiaras*, where girls ranging from infants to tweens are subject to conventional sexualized beauty standards in competition. These girls are augmented

into sexual objects with excessive makeup, fake teeth, fake eyelashes, fake tans, and even fake breasts, as is particularly the case in *Toddlers and Tiaras* (Mirabello), which has featured routines of toddlers impersonating sex symbols such as Julia Roberts' prostitute character in *Pretty Woman* (Hernandez 163). The disturbing reality of these child beauty pageants is satirized in the 2006 film *Little Miss Sunshine* (Arndt), in which a family drives their seven-year-old daughter, Olive, to the Little Miss Sunshine beauty pageant. Her routine for the talent portion of the contest consists of an overly sexualized stripper act choreographed by Olive's grandfather, which draws attention to everything that is wrong with the "Lolita Effect" in pageantry. Pop culture's tendency to sexualize increasingly younger girls far below the legal age of consent exposes the problem of the "Lolita Effect" when not justified by imaginary pedophilia, in that it takes away the safe space of having girls be of legal age.

The influence of *Lolita* in the sexualization and objectification of teenage girls is also witnessed in numerous advertising campaigns. These campaigns mostly feature Caucasian women above the age of consent, wearing scandalous outfits while placed in environments typically associated with pre-teens. The argument can once again be made that this type of advertising promotes imaginative pedophilia since the use of overage models allows the viewer to justify the sexualization of childhood and the children involved. One of the most famous advertising campaigns that perpetuates the "Lolita Effect" is a Calvin Klein jeans campaign released in 1980, which features a young Brooke Shields. The actress is depicted in positions that were regarded as sexually provocative at the time, and was doubly controversial since Shields had become famous two years prior for her role as a child prostitute in the film *Pretty Baby*. In the decades following this campaign, this type of child sexualization became increasingly

prevalent: examples of this include Britney Spears posing provocatively on the cover of a 1999 *Rolling Stone* issue clad in lingerie in a child's bedroom, and Russian supermodel Natalia Vodianova being featured in *Vogue Japan* suggestively holding a teddy bear between her thighs as she gazes seductively into the camera. Even models like Kate Moss have been unable to shy away from this disturbing trend, with her feature spread in Italian *Vogue* in 1992 entitled "Charming Lolita," which depicts her with shoulder-length curls and red sunglasses, reminiscent of Stanley Kubrick's representation of Nabokov's protagonist. As such, it can be argued that the "Lolita Effect" made its entrance into mainstream advertising campaigns in the early 1980s through to the 1990s.

In more recent years, the hypersexual Lolita has continued to appear in pop culture. In 2011, Marc Jacobs made use of the "Lolita Effect" in its campaign for the new fragrance "Oh, Lola." Jacobs justified his choice of seventeen-year-old Dakota Fanning as the poster girl by stating that she was a "contemporary Lolita," describing the perfume itself as "more of a Lolita than a Lola ... 'Oh, Lola' is sensual, but she's sweeter" (Whitelocks 4). The campaign sparked a large amount of controversy, and was subsequently banned in multiple countries, due to the fact that Dakota looked younger than her seventeen years, as well as because of the sexually provocative placement of the perfume bottle held between her thighs. American Apparel has similarly come under attack for its back-to-school ad campaign which displays provocative images of women dressed in schoolgirl attire. The fashion line in question, which featured 'Lolita' branded skirts and shirts (e.g. the "Lolita mini skirt"), was eventually banned in the United Kingdom. One particularly controversial image shows a girl in a plaid skirt - an image traditionally associated with teenage pornography - bending over into a car, reminiscent of the

road trip in Nabokov's novel. Coupled with the fact that this shot was rumoured to have been taken without the initial consent of the model, it was seen to promote sexually predatory behaviour (Srivats 2013).

These types of advertising campaigns and media depictions of Lolita have reduced Nabokov's heroine from an emotionally complex character to a mere body with hypersexualized physical traits. This is one major aspect of popular culture's coopting of Lolita: in the novel, Humbert Humbert considers personality an important factor in determining a girl's "nymphet potential" - "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, stemming from the snub-nosed cuteness of ads and magazine pictures" (*Lolita* 44). Indeed, given that "Nabokov insisted that there should be no little girl at all on the book's cover because he was in the business of writing about subjective rapture, not objective sexualization," it seems that Nabokov would disapprove of the Lolita that has emerged through advertising (Graham 44).

What is interesting in these commercial campaigns is that they have always chosen to focus on Lolita as opposed to Humbert, the narrator and arguable 'protagonist' of the novel. Such an omission brings to light the contradiction between the audience's willingness to vilify Humbert's pedophilic activities while simultaneously indulging in and perpetuating them. This omission is no doubt due to the fact that including Humbert in such images of the sexualized Lolita would destroy their romanticism; however, by removing Humbert, the photographer entices the viewer instead to play the role of the pedophilic voyeur.

Lolita's legacy is also evident in the branding of musicians where women are encouraged to sexualize girlhood in their outfits and hairstyles. As discussed above, Britney Spears'

controversial 1999 *Rolling Stone* cover was not the only such depiction of her. In fact, it became part of her brand to dress like a “sexy” girl, predominantly in the 1990s at the beginning of her career. One example of this can be seen in Britney Spears’ music video “Hit Me Baby One More Time,” in which she is presented as a girl in school wearing a uniform that is obviously altered to expose more skin (Dick). Though Britney’s brand eventually focused more on her sexuality rather than the concept of girlhood, by no means did this general trend cease. For example, Katy Perry also brands herself as childlike despite being twenty-six and clearly having the bodily proportions of an older woman (Wells). In Perry’s promotional art for her song and music video “Teenage Dream,” Perry poses on a lawn and imitates Lyne’s *Lolita*, wearing similar high-waisted shorts and suggestively holding a pair of sunglasses in her mouth. The song’s lyrics also express the idea of vestigial childlikeness paired with hypersexuality, explaining that Perry “got a motel / built a fort out of sheets” and intends to “go all the way tonight” (Perry and McKee 2010). This sexualization of girlhood is a similar invitation to the imaginative pedophilia that disturbed readers about Humbert Humbert; though the readers knew that *Lolita* did not literally exist in the physical world, there was nevertheless something disturbing in Humbert’s insistence that the readers should collaborate with him in recollecting the rape of a child (Wells). The ethical questions that are evident in Nabokov’s *Lolita* do not translate to this type of hypersexual branding of musicians, since the viewer implicitly accepts this sexualization by continuing to support the performer because the viewer knows that said performer, regardless of her outfit, is of legal age.

The Veronicas, a pop rock duo, also allude to *Lolita* in their music by presenting an empowering portrait of relationships between young women and older men in their songs. In

2012, the Veronicas released a single entitled “Lolita,” in which the singers explore the powerplay inherent in intimate relationships between people who differ in age and sex. The duo presents this sort of relationship as empowering, stating that “I’m your Lolita, La Femme Nikita, / When we’re together, you’ll love me forever / You’re my possession, I’m your obsession” (Origliasso and Origliasso 2012). The allusion to the French film *La Femme Nikita*, which concerns a female criminal who becomes a secret spy-cum-assassin, as well as the repeated use of imagery of women holding weapons in the music video, reveals The Veronicas’ interpretation of the main girl as being empowered by her relationship with an older man. Such references to the empowerment of Lolita prompts one to forget that, in the original novel, Humbert is the ‘author’ of the story, meaning that throughout the text her voice is filtered through him. Moreover, by opting to emphasize Lolita’s autonomy and power throughout the song, the singers undermine the moments in the text where Humbert’s control of the narrative slips and he admits to Lolita’s suffering by describing her in tears. In sum, The Veronicas depict Lolita not as she is in Nabokov’s novel, but as the young girl depicted in film who instigates the relationship and has become an object of sexual attraction.

Similarly, Lana Del Rey alludes to Lolita in her 2012 album *Born To Die*, which idealizes the relationship between a girl and a father figure. Del Rey’s album explores the innocence possessed by young girls in conjunction with their relationships with older men; and, like The Veronicas, she too idealizes this coupling. Explicitly, the album references *Lolita* in her song entitled “Lolita,” and again in her song “Carmen” – a nickname given to Lolita by Humbert that was itself inspired by a song. Furthermore, in the song “Cola,” she references Lolita and Humbert leaving for the road when she sings: “Come on Baby, let’s ride / We can escape to the

great sunshine / I know your wife that she won't mind" (Del Rey 2012). Similar to Lyne's film adaptation, "Cola" presents Lolita as the instigator of her relationship with Humbert without questioning his intentions in the act. Both lyrical depictions of the character Lolita fail to see the complexity of the situation she is faced with - namely, the question of rape - and choose, instead, to fetishize childhood as an appropriate age to begin relationships.

In order to understand why *Lolita* is misrepresented in popular culture, Nabokov's intentions in his novel must be examined and compared with popular culture's interpretation of his work. Nabokov's "aesthetic bliss," according to the Nabokovian scholar James McDonald, "plays an exquisite and enchanting game with his readers" (352). Aesthetic bliss is thus geared towards the 'good reader' who looks for the patterns, themes, play on words, and allusions that are prevalent throughout a given novel. On the other hand, popular culture focuses solely on the titillating representation of Lolita developed by mass media, ignoring the aesthetic complexities central to Nabokov's text. Popular culture has misinterpreted Lolita by hypersexualizing her rather than attempting to solve Nabokov's intricate puzzle. Although the hypersexualization of Lolita may not perfectly fall into what Nabokov deems "topical trash,"³ popular culture's representation of Lolita is similar to Nabokov's definition of it - that is, as "huge blocks of plaster" (*Lolita* 315). This plaster-like quality gives off the notion of being an inauthentic representation of the original, much as popular culture's representation of *Lolita* is a sham of the novel itself. Since popular culture focuses most on Lolita's sexuality, it has invariably distanced

³In the afterword to *Lolita*, Nabokov explains the following: "For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm ... All the rest is either topical trash or what some call the Literature of Ideas, which very often is topical trash coming in huge blocks of plaster that are carefully transmitted from age to age until somebody comes along with a hammer and takes a good crack at Balzac, at Gorki, at Mann" (314-315).

itself from the novel's emphasis on aesthetic bliss.

Popular culture acts as a 'bad reader' of Nabokov's novel by overlooking the intricate complexities of *Lolita*. Nabokov explains that being a bad reader is "more boring or more unfair to the author than starting to read, say, *Madame Bovary*, with the preconceived notion that it is a denunciation of the bourgeoisie" ("Good Readers and Good Writers" 1). Because the central character of *Lolita* has become a symbol of sexuality, its representation in popular culture has made *Lolita* seem like a novel solely about pedophilia and hypersexuality rather than one which emphasizes aesthetic bliss. In the afterword to *Lolita*, Nabokov remarks upon these preconceptions when he writes about first sending the books to publishers: "they [the readers] expected the rising succession of erotic scenes; when these stopped, the readers stopped, too, and felt bored and let down" (*Lolita* 314). By anticipating the reader's reactions, Nabokov isolates the 'bad readers' from the 'good' by showing that the former readers only follow the sexual aspects of the book, while ignoring the chess-like patterning involved in the creation of aesthetic bliss.

The translation of Nabokov's *Lolita* into popular culture has ultimately resulted in the loss of its meaning. Popular culture has continued to propagate a sexually precocious notion of Lolita through advertising, fashion, film, and music; as these forms of mass media continue to practice 'bad reading' through the hypersexualized representation of Lolita, the aesthetic bliss exemplified in Nabokov's novel will eventually be replaced by an overly sexualized image of girlhood. While the novel carries the sense of 'art for art's sake,' film or musical adaptations are deeply influenced by the continued hypersexualization of Lolita and a sense of discomfort associated with the topic of pedophilia. Through its translation into pop culture today, the

complex nuances and complexities developed in Nabokov's text have been forgotten.

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