

Passion and Possession:

The Visual in the Portrayal of *Lolita* by Nabokov, Kubrick, and Stern

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A book.



A film.



A photograph.

Prompted by a visit to the Stanley Kubrick Archive, housed at the University of the Arts London, this visual essay initially set out to create a taxonomy of designed objects (e.g., sunglasses, Coke bottles, drinking straws, and a collection of guns) found in selected interpretations of Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* (1955). As researchers, we were also interested in the serendipity of archives generally, and the way in which the discovery of one set of materials often leads to finding another. In this archive, links were found between Nabokov's use of designed objects and how such objects were represented in Kubrick's film (MGM, 1962) and in the film's publicity shots, taken by the noted American photographer Bert Stern. In addition, our intent for this piece was to move outside of an already well-trodden territory of analysis found in literary and film criticism (Stam, 1992; Vickers, 2008; Jenkins, 2005) and present an alternative reading of this integrated relationship through the visual. Our focus was on the properties of color and form and their respective meanings as narrative devices in the three versions: book, film, and publicity photographs.

Nabokov, Kubrick, and Stern were already important figures in the arts in the 1950s and early '60s. Nabokov's novel was published in 1955 and the film was released in 1962, the same year that Stern's highly stylized publicity photographs appeared. The relationship between the three is important to note: Kubrick developed Nabokov's screenplay into a film and knew Stern from their time together as staff on *Look* magazine.

Our research process began with the formation of a visual taxonomy in order to analyze the

relationship between the different authorial approaches and trace the interwoven narratives. In order to achieve this, the logical starting point was Kubrick's black-and-white film and his original continuity script: a stack of single 8.5 x 11-inch sheets of textured pink paper with hand-scrawled annotations and drawings inserted methodically into the margins (and housed in a gray boxboard binder). The Stern material consisted of boxes of dozens of 35mm Kodachrome slides.

What is intriguing is how Nabokov's use of color is translated into the work of Kubrick and Stern, each of whom have adopted very different approaches. Kubrick and Stern build the emotional tensions of the film's characters through lighting, pace, atmosphere, and expressions (Paquet-Deyris 2010: 2) and the use of designed elements. Kubrick's film is shot completely in black-and-white—yet, in the continuity script, there are clear instructions for objects to be specific colors. His fastidiousness has often been speculated to be an expression of an obsessive-compulsive disorder, and the extreme lengths he went to collect source material was recently the subject of a documentary (Jon Ronson's *Stanley Kubrick's Boxes*, 2008). His preoccupation with color and meaning, for example, can be seen in his instructions for placing red tapered dinner candles on the dining room table, which is the setting for a conversation between Humbert and Charlotte (Lolita's mother) about Lolita's development and "interest in those fascinating creatures known as the opposite sex" (Kubrick, 1962: 30.04 min).

On the other hand, Stern's slides are rich and sultry, using lighting to intensify the hues of red,

yellow, and pink. Some of the images of the teenage actress Sue Lyon, who played Lolita, were published in *Look* in July 17, 1962, and were determinedly not salacious, in tune with the general-interest orientation of the magazine. Some of the outtakes, however, were much more racy, as the archive demonstrated.

Nabokov sets his story in America of the 1940s and early 1950s. The main character, Humbert Humbert (born in Paris and an immigrant to America), is a literary scholar who ends up in the fictitious New England town of Ramsdale. America at the time, is in the grip of a type of social conformity (Muller, 1982: 265). The rise of suburbs brings with it bored housewives and gray-suited commuters. Such characteristics are enhanced by Kubrick's choice of black-and-white film. Lolita, in contrast to her setting, is a "naughty but nice" girl, a teen with sex appeal—a quality that persuades the initially reticent Humbert to take up Charlotte's offer to become a lodger in the family home. In Kubrick's film, Humbert first encounters Lolita wearing a floral bikini, large oval-shaped sunglasses, and a broad-brimmed feathered straw hat, and reclining on a blanket replete with portable radio and open books. As Graham Vickers remarks: 'Here she is at last: Lolita made flesh' (Vickers, 2008: 117).

Thus these three authors are stylistic directors. What follows is a visual essay that explores their authorial positions—that of the writer, filmmaker, and photographer. It aims to show how notions of eroticism and femininity are negotiated and at times subverted, offering a new perspective on the classic tale of one man's obsession with a teenage girl. †



Pink-rimmed azure eyes, 8

Crimson frock, 19

Pink panties, 30

Pinkish cozy, 40

Eden-red apple, 63

Candy-striped davenport, 63

Checkered with darker pink, 63

Red candles, 71

Frock (pink texture), 74

Purple robe, 78

Robed in red, 85

Pink mountains, 86

Rosy honey in a Girl Scout uniform, 88

Purple-robbed, 94

Pink paper, 101

Innocent pink napkin, 101

Dirty pink frock, 110

Swimsuits (dream pink, frosted aqua), 120

Gingham, with a pattern of little red apples, 125

Two pink pigs, 133

Pink old fellow, 133

Pink and bald, 133

Frilled, pink-shaded nightlamps, 134

Blood-red armchair, 156

Purplish spot on her naked neck, 157

Pink pig, 157

Pink sponge, 159

White-and-pink little bedrooms, 165

Red springchair, 166

Red-peaked cap, 176

Red shorts, 181

Red Sweater, 212

Staircase glazed with ruby, 218

Adam's apple, 219

Menstruation, 220

Miss Redcock, 220, 221, 224

Green and pink, 226

Print-flowered lap, 229

Flaming pink, 231

Red had left stains, 232

Dingy red ribbon, 232

Red Indians, 238

Red Rock, 238

Red icebox, 240

Apple trees, 241

Red hood, 242

Aztec Red Convertible, 246, 247

Red Yak, 246

Rosebud degenerate mouth, 248

Glossy red beast, 249

Imperious red shadow, 249

Rosy daze, 251

Ultraviolet darling, 251

Mauve mountains, 254

Rosy lips sucking, 257

Red boat bottom, 259

"Cherry Orchard," 261

An apple, 261

Sunburnt bright pink, 266

Red approached me, 266

Aztec Red bathing briefs, 269

Burning red, 273

Rose tasted, 273

Chestnuts and roses, 274

Lavender, 275

Rosy and russet, 276

Purple dressing gown, 280

Red-roofed houses, 280

Red fiend, 281

Red underlip, 289

Red hair, 290

Lips: scarlet, 291

Pink men, 295

Roses, 299

Rosegray, 300

Strawberry, 306; (*wild*), 328

Red mud, 306

Pink-rimmed glasses, 307

Adam's apple, 312

Rose from her grave, 314

Redhaired guy, 314

Red's brother, 315

Violet whiff, 316

Beautiful pink, 318

It was rosy, 319

Red tail-lights, 321

Sherry-red letters, 321

Red mirror, 321

Pink letters, 322

Fat pink dad, 326

Red ticket, 329

Garnet-red light, 330

Rosy anticipation, 332

Purple bathrobe, 335

Purple target, 344

Royal purple, 346

Big pink bubble, 346

Purple heap, 348

Burgundy, 349



Scene 62:

Red bow tie, paisley pattern

Scene 43:

Lolita—Red velvet bodice

Scene 41:

Lolita—Small pink & white strapless dress—white organza dress pink stripes

Pink button-through cardigan, open

Scene 47 31.10.60:

Vivian—Red nail varnish

Scene 48 31.10.60:

Chocolate cake, paper plate green edge—pink spoon

Scene 50 31.10.60:

Charlotte—Pink nail polish

Pink shade light on

Red candles on

50: A pink glow is in Charlotte's cheeks, her eyes sparkle

Scene 50a 31.10.60:

Lolita—Red box purse

Scene 54 5.11.60 55A:

Lolita—Pink & white check short-sleeved shirt-waist

Pink leather belt

Scene 55 5.11.60 54K:

Red leather chair

Scene 60:

Pink blanket on unmade bed with white sheets

Scene 73b 14.11.60 84:

Eight big, red-faced men

Scene 74 14.11.60 85:

Lolita—Pink, white check gingham dress

Pink button-through cardigan sleeves pushed up, open

Humbert—Red dot & lattice patterned silk tie

White bg

Scene 80 14.11.60 91:

Porter—Maroon braces

Scene 81 14.11.60 92:

Pink/white check dress

Pink belt lying along edge table

Scene 91 14.11.60 100:

Lolita—Red dressing gown

Scene 103:

Humbert—Red & white spot & line silk tie

Mrs Starch—Rose nail varnish

Scene 105:

Sofa back with black red white design

Scene 126:

White lilac green leaves yellow & red tulips daffs

Pink & white striped paper (bouquet)

Lolita—Red dressing gown

(Dialogue) Lolita: "By the way, I need some things. My polka dot jumper, my pink silk pyjamas and the red rayon housecoat."

Scene ? (out of sequence, back of p.150):

Lolita—False pink nails

Scene 100:

Humbert—Key ring of several keys red tab

Scene 131:

Miss Fromkiss—Red jacket round shoulders

Scene 134A:

Humbert (Pointing the red crayon line on map)

Notations as presented in original Editing and Continuity Script



Book:

Nabokov, Vladimir (1955, reprint 2006) *Lolita*. London: Pocket Penguin Classic.



Film:

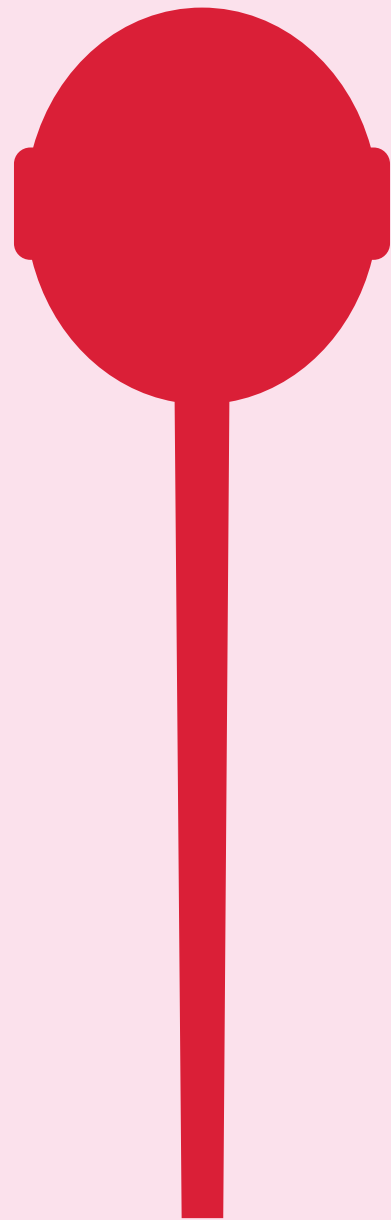
Kubrick, Stanley (Dir) (1962) *Lolita*, black-and-white, 152 min, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer with Seven Arts Production, U.K.

Davies, P., (1960–1961) Editing and Continuity Script [manuscript] Stanley Kubrick Archive SK/10/3/12 London: University of the Arts London Archives and Special Collections Centre.



Photographs:

Stern, Bert, (1962) Bert Stern Slides [Kodachrome transparencies/slides. Processed by Jack Ward Color Service 202 East 44 N.Y.] Stanley Kubrick Archive SK/10/9/7/2 London: University of the Arts London Archives and Special Collections Centre.



- [] 28 Lollipops (yellow, red, and green)
- [] 12 Apples
- [] 6 Ice-creams (lollies and sundaes)
- [] 5 Bubblegum (pink)



Scene 48 31.10.60:

Charlotte—Pink rose on back of dress

00:24:35:

Jean Farlow—Self belt & self rose ceut/vre?

F--- waist?



Scene 55a 59:

Charlotte—Dark grey flower frocked negligee ¾ sleeves

Rose nail varnish

60:

Black Housecoat with pink roses on top



Scene 55c 5.11.60 61:

Wallpaper in Charlotte's room—White bg red roses encircled
by wreaths with blue bows on top

00:15:37:

Landing wallpaper stripes of rosebuds

00:12:30



Scene 58:

Charlotte—Black dress with rose stripes



Scene 100 14.11.60 99A:

Rose covered towel on back of Humbert chair

00:47:31



Scene 103:

Mrs Starch—Rose nail varnish

Notations as presented in original Editing and Continuity Script



Kubrick, 1962: 1:45.46 mins

Quilty as Doctor Zempf, the BeardIsey High School psychologist:

"You see, Lolita is a sweet little child but the onset of maturity seems to be giving her a certain amount of trouble."

Humbert:

"I really don't think this is a fit topic."



"[Quilty] sits in the darkened living room opposite Humbert. A thin light falls on the end table between them, on which stands an empty Coke bottle with a straw in it, an objective correlative for Lolita and her connivance in Quilty's game."

(Corlis 1994: 29)

☰ *"There, snugly wrapped in a white woollen scarf, lay a pocket automatic: caliber .32, capacity of magazine 8 cartridges, length a little under one ninth of Lolita's length, stock checked walnut, finish full blued."*

p.216

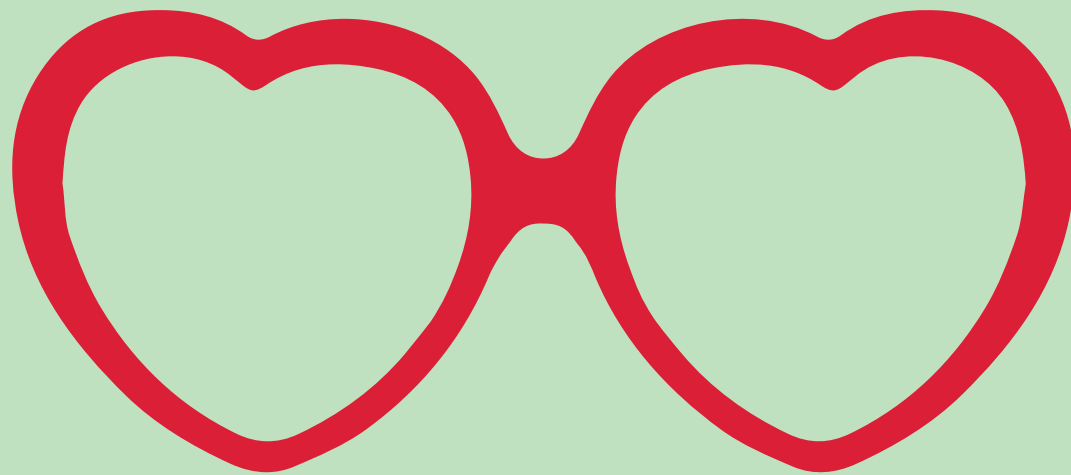
◎ 00:53:01:
The gun lies on the bedside cabinet in the foreground, bottom left of frame, pointing towards the bed.
Scene 55c 5.11.60 61:
Orange satin pochette holds gun
small automatic
2" over (overhang on table)





Lolita's sunglasses are different in the book, film, and photographs and suggest different interpretations of the scene: in the book she is peering over "dark glasses" (mysterious); in the film she removes her oval-shaped sunglasses (sultry) when Humbert arrives; and in Stern's publicity photographs, the sunglasses are red-rimmed and heart-shaped, evoking a more erotic, sensual attitude. Here the color red adds to visual narrative. On the film's poster, this is reinforced through the juxtaposition of a red lollipop, which Lyon holds in her mouth (another iconic object that does not appear in the film), but also by Stern's recognizable stylistic use of lighting and color saturation.

Stern purchased the sunglasses at a dime store in Sag Harbor, New York, where the shoot was taking place (Panzer, 2005: n.p.). The association with cheap, garish fun was thus underlined—the seaside being the place of carnival and abandon, where society's rules are temporarily suspended. Stern talks about his photographic work generally, saying, "I get obsessive about the things I am looking at. I want them, and I put them in the camera, and they are mine" (Laumeister 2011: 1:33 min). Such fixation reminds the viewer of Humbert's own fixation on Lolita and the tension between characters—in this case between the camera and the subject.



*"How did they ever make a movie of Lolita?"

(*Lolita* film poster, British Quad, 1962)

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* Women's Design + Research Unit (1994–) was founded to raise awareness about women working in visual communication and related fields.

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