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

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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.‡
Scene 62:
Red bow tie, paisley pattern

Scene 43:
Lolita—Red velvet bodice

Scene 41:
Lolita—Small pink and white stripes dress—white organza dress pink straps
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

Scene 54.5.11.60.54:
Lolita—Pink & white check shirt-waist
Pink leather belt

Scene 55.5.11.60.54K:
Lolita—Red box purse

Scene 59.3.11.60.50:
Lolita—Red bow tie, paisley pattern

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

Scene 80.14.11.60.91:
Porter—Maroon braces

Scene 81.14.11.60.95:
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 Stanch—Rose nail varnish

Scene 105:
Sofa back with black red white design

Scene 116:
White lacq. green leaves yellow & red tulips daffs
Porter—Maroon braces

Scene 131:
Humbert—Key ring of several keys red tab

Scene 134A:
Lolita—Painting the red crayon line on map

Notes as presented in original Editing and Continuity Script.
28 Lollipops (yellow, red, and green)
12 Apples
6 Ice-creams (lollies and sundaes)
5 Bubblegum (pink)
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.”

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)

”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.”

Quilty as Doctor Zempf, the Beardlsey 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.”

(Corlis 1994: 29)
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 Lyn 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 reveals the viewer of Humbert’s own fixation on Lolita and the tension between characters—in this case between the camera and the subject.

References:

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


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