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Lolita : Examining “the Underside of the Weave”

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Note on the editions of *Lolita* used in this paper: for practical purposes, both the references from *The Annotated Lolita* and the 2006 Penguin edition are given in this paper, with the annotated version coming first, as in for instance: (*Lolita* 59/64-65).

- 1 Nabokov repeatedly claimed he had no ear for music, and that he knew nothing of music. However, his cousin was the famous composer Nikolai Nabokov, he grew up in a family of music lovers,¹ and his own son Dmitri was a recognized tenor who sung for the Scala in Milan. If those biographical elements were not enough to shed a doubt on his claims, every reader can be struck by the utmost musicality of his poetic prose, as illustrated in the celebrated opening of the novel under scrutiny in this paper.² The aim of the present study is to stress the importance of music and song in Nabokov's *Lolita*, and also in Kubrick's interpretation of it in his film. Indeed Kubrick's adaptation does bring about, as Linda Hutcheon puts it, a "transcoding process" from the code of writing into the code of film (Hutcheon 7), which is itself multisemiotic, as it associates moving and still images, language, and, of course, music.
- 2 The purpose of the present analysis is threefold: it begins with a scrutiny of songs in the novel, in order to turn to the function of music in characterization, in both novel and film. We will finally draw from those analyses the illustration of how both works use music to organize a subtle destabilization of signs that undermines the first-degree reading or viewing.

1. Songs in the novel

- 3 Humbert repeatedly associates his lust for nymphets with musical terms,³ and the key scene, as far as music and song are concerned, is the masturbation scene on the living room davenport, one sunny Sunday morning. Interestingly enough, Humbert presents this passage like a theatre scene, a *show* for the reader, to which the latter is even invited to participate (“I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay” *Lolita* 57/63). Indeed, the whole point of this scene is that Humbert pretends to be doing something while he is performing something else. The importance of music is stated from what would be the stage directions in a play:

Main character: Humbert the Hummer. Time: Sunday morning in June. Place: sunlit living room. Props: old, candy-striped davenport, magazines, *phonograph*, Mexican knickknacks [...]. She wore that day a pretty print dress that I had seen on her once before, ample in the skirt, tight in the bodice, short-sleeved, pink, checkered with darker pink, and, to complete the color scheme, she had painted her lips and was holding in her hollowed hands a beautiful, banal, Eden-red apple. She was not shod, however, for church. And her white Sunday purse lay discarded near the *phonograph*. (*Lolita* 57/63, my emphasis)

- 4 Surprisingly enough, even though the phonograph is mentioned twice in this passage, no music is actually played on it during the scene. Yet, Nabokov never repeats an element out of mere chance. Here the phonograph signals that music should be paid attention to. Indeed, musical terms recur throughout the passage. To evoke the contortions he resorts to in order to masturbate without being noticed, Humbert explains that he “managed to *attune*, by a series of stealthy movements, my masked lust to her guileless limbs” (*Lolita* 58/64, my emphasis; note that music is here paired with the idea of concealment through the keyword “masked”). Humbert then goes on explaining how he proceeded to perform his masturbation trick without being noticed. In order to give some excuse for the rhythm of his movements, he proceeds to sing a popular tune:

Having, in the course of my patter, hit upon something nicely mechanical, I recited, garbling them slightly, the words of a foolish song that was then popular—O my Carmen, my little Carmen, something, something, those something nights, and the stars, and the cars, and the bars, and the barmen; I kept repeating this automatic stuff and holding her under its special spell (spell because of the garbling), and all the while I was mortally afraid that some act of God might interrupt me, might remove the golden load in the sensation of which all my being seemed concentrated, and this anxiety forced me to work, for the first minute or so, more hastily than was consensual with deliberately *modulated* enjoyment. The stars that sparkled, and the cars that parkled, and the bars, and the barmen, were presently taken over by her; her voice stole and corrected the tune I had been mutilating. She was *musical* and apple-sweet. Her legs twitched a little as they lay across my live lap; I stroked them; there she lolled in the right-hand corner, almost asprawl, Lola the bobby-soxer, devouring her immemorial fruit, *singing* through its juice, losing her slipper, rubbing the heel of her slipperless foot in its sloppy anklet, against the pile of old magazines heaped on my left on the sofa—and every movement she made, every shuffle and ripple, helped me to conceal and to improve the secret system of tactile correspondence between beast and beauty—between my gagged, bursting beast and the beauty of her dimpled body in its innocent cotton frock. (*Lolita* 59/64-65, my emphasis)

- 5 Once again, Humbert dazzles the reader with virtuoso poetic prose: the long sentences create a sense of suspension and tension akin to the narrator’s fear of not bringing his

action to fulfillment; the words of the song are playfully transformed into rhyming pairs and even display a creative neologism “The stars that sparkled, and the cars that parkled”. The participation of Lolita in the process is reflected in her taking on the singing, while her repetitive actions, rendered in a rhythmical system of alliterations betray the rubbing and bumping noises produced by Humbert’s action. The whole scene is itself embedded in the expression “secret system of tactile *correspondence* between beast and beauty”—indeed Humbert is trying to make two distinct actions coincide: playing with Lolita and masturbating against her legs. Moreover, the hypallage (a recurrent stylistic feature of Humbert’s) at the end of the quote—“her dimpled body in its *innocent* cotton frock”—recalls that the whole scene works on the mode of displacement.

- 6 Conversely, Humbert’s coming climax is paired with a decomposition of the song’s lyrics, as he no longer listens to them:

Lolita had been safely solipsized. The implied sun pulsated in the supplied poplars; we were fantastically and divinely alone; I watched her, rosy, gold-dusted, beyond the veil of my controlled delight, unaware of it, alien to it, and the sun was on her lips, and her lips were apparently still forming the words of the Carmen-barmen ditty that no longer reached my consciousness. Everything was now ready.

The nerves of pleasure had been laid bare. The corpuscles of Krause were entering the phase of frenzy. The least pressure would suffice to set all paradise loose. [...] Suspended on the brink of that voluptuous abyss (a nicety of physiological equipoise comparable to certain techniques in the arts) I kept repeating the chance words after her—barmen, alarmin’, my charmin’, my carmen, ahmen, ahahamen—as one talking and laughing in his sleep while my happy hand crept up her sunny leg as far as the shadow of decency allowed. (*Lolita* 60/66)

- 7 One should underscore here how Humbert, to connote his mounting excitement, playfully dissolves the name Carmen in his religious chanting “ahmen, ahahamen”. One has to recall that the scene takes place on Sunday morning, at service time. This reflects Humbert’s repeated claims that the whole business is innocent, and his use of the Biblical intertext from *Genesis* in the passage. The religious chanting “ahmen, ahahamen” can in fact also be read “ah, men, ah, ah, men”, thus producing a *double entendre* effect. Once everything is over, Humbert ends the chapter with a transcription of the lyrics, or, as he often acknowledges, his own recreation of them:

At this point I may as well give the words of that song hit in full—to the best of my recollection at least—I don’t think I ever had it right. Here goes:

O my Carmen, my little Carmen!

Something, something those something nights

And the stars, and the cars, and the bars and the barmen—

And, O my charmin’, our dreadful fights.

And the something town where so gaily, arm in

Arm, we went, and our final row

And the gun I killed you with, O my Carmen

The gun I am holding now.

(Drew his .32 automatic, I guess, and put a bullet through his moll’s eye.)

(*Lolita* 60-62)

- 8 The point of this analysis is not to go back to the Carmen subtext, which has been abundantly commented upon. This reference to Mérimée’s famous novella (and to the no less famous opera by Bizet) is meant to create the impression that Humbert will end up killing Lolita as Don José does: indeed, at this point, the reader does not know yet whom the narrator killed.

- 9 Nabokov did consider music as an important element of his novel turned into a film. He had even imagined a *Lolita* song that recurs throughout the movie (and which he had asked Kubrick to have his son sing for the final production):

Lolita, Lolita, Lolita!
 For ever tonight we must part:
 Because separation is sweeter
 Than clasping a ghost to one's heart
 Because it's a maddening summer
 Because the whole night is in bloom
 Because you're in love with a strummer
 Who brings his guitar to your room.
 You know he's a clown and a cheater
 You know I am tender and true—
 But *he* is singing now Lolita
 The songs I've been making for you!
 (*Lolita: A Screenplay* 127)

- 10 This song, which Kubrick did not use, is in fact very different from the songs *Lolita* likes in the book. These songs are no 1950s rock'n roll, but syrupy love songs by crooners, which Humbert despises:

Mentally, I found her to be a disgustingly conventional little girl. Sweet hot jazz, square dancing, gooey fudge sundaes, musicals, movie magazines and so forth—these were the obvious items in her list of beloved things. The Lord knows how many nickels I fed to the gorgeous music boxes that came with every meal we had! I still hear *the nasal voices of those invisibles serenading her, people with names like Sammy and Jo and Eddy and Tony and Peggy and Guy and Patty and Rex, and sentimental song hits*, all of them as similar to my ear as her various candies were to my palate. (*Lolita* 148/166, my emphasis)⁴

- 11 To have an idea of what those songs were like, one could listen, for instance, to Guy Mitchell's "My Heart Cries For You", which nicely echoes the trip of *Lolita* and Humbert throughout the US. Here is an excerpt from the lyrics by Carl Sigman and Percy Faith, the composer:

If you're in Arizona, I'll follow you
 If you're in Minnesota, I'll be there too
 You'll have a million chances to start anew
 Because my love is endless for you
 My heart cries for you
 Sighs for you, dies for you
 And my arms long for you
 Please come back to me
 An unimportant quarrel was what we had
 We have to learn to live with the good and bad
 Together we were happy, apart we're sad
 This loneliness is driving me mad
 My heart cries for you
 Sighs for you, dies for you
 And my arms long for you
 Please come back to me
 Please come back to me
 Please come back
 Come back, come back to me

- 12 The narrator never misses an occasion to display his utmost scorn for the tastes of his American nymphet, especially in terms of film and music:

Her favorite kinds were, in this order: *musicals*, underworlders, westerners. In the first, real singers and dancers had unreal stage careers in an essentially grief-proof sphere of existence wherefrom death and truth were banned, and where, at the end, white-haired, dewy-eyed, technically deathless, the initially reluctant father of a show-crazy girl always finished by applauding her apotheosis on fabulous Broadway. (*Lolita* 170/192, my emphasis)

- 13 Once again, cultivated Humbert tries to gain the reader's sympathy by mocking the simple plots of American musicals. This passage is all the more worthy of note as it not only reflects Lolita's starlet dreams, but in fact *parodies* Lolita's acting in the school play, and pretending she does it to gain her stepfather's acceptance of a stage career. Lolita never gets to perform in the book, but in the film Humbert does applaud her apotheosis at the end, before Miss Starch reveals that she skipped her piano lessons.
- 14 Music and the Carmen theme recur in the poem which Humbert writes after Lolita escaped, and which gathers many essential motifs of her characterization:

Who is your hero, Dolores Haze?
 Still one of those blue-caped star-men?
 Oh the balmy days and the palmy bays
 And the cars, and the bars, my Carmen!
 Oh Dolores, that juke-box hurts!
 Are you still dancin', darlin'?
 (Both in worn levis, both in torn T-shirts
 And I, in my corner, snarlin'). (*Lolita* 256/291)

- 15 Many elements could be underscored in these two stanzas: the "hero", recalling the "conquering hero" ad resembling Humbert, which Lo had pinned on her bedroom wall (*Lolita* 69/76, see Appel's note p. 369); the theme of reflections introduced in the chiasmus; the recurrence of the Carmen leitmotif throughout the song; the juke box mentioned before, which is also to be found in another pictorial passage, namely one of the details in the ekphrastic description of the painting Humbert would have made to decorate the dining room of the Enchanted Hunters: "There would have been those luminous globules of gonadal glow that travel up the opalescent sides of juke boxes" (*Lolita* 134/152). A disquieting image is associated to this jukebox: the alliteration in [g] underlines the medical term "gonadal", which recalls Humbert's own anatomic terms to describe his climax during the masturbation scene ("the corpuscles of Krause"). This indicates that Humbert's perception of the world around him, especially in this passage situated right after their first intercourse, is dominated by his sexual appetite for the nymphet, despite her own feelings. Music and Humbert's sexual abuse of Lolita are thus recurrently, though subtly, paired throughout the novel, as will be further analyzed in the last part of this paper.

2. Music and characterization

- 16 As many film critics have observed, music plays an essential role in Kubrick's films, and some even consider *Lolita* to be the film in which the director first resorted to the typically Kubrickian musical techniques he was to develop in his following movies. Kubrick later said that he viewed film as a mostly non-verbal experience (as exemplified by *2001, A Space Odyssey*), and music is an essential component of the non-verbal nature of his films. Kubrick considered music had the power to "hit the viewer

at an inner level of consciousness” (1969 interview with Joseph Gelmis, in Phillips, 89).

⁵ Katherine McQuiston observes:

Close inspection reveals Kubrick's mastery in combining music (on the basis of structure, style, or both) with the narrative in subtle ways which inform the film. The use of diegetic and nondiegetic realms in *Lolita* forecasts Kubrick's famous use of preexisting music in later films. (McQuiston, 2005, abstract)⁶

- 17 She identifies four categories of musical techniques used by Kubrick throughout his works, all of which are to be found in *Lolita*:

These describe the distinctive roles played by (1) diegetic music that is heard before its source is seen; (2) monophonic music signaling danger or isolation for a character; (3) a piece that follows dialogue or narrative events in moment-to-moment correspondence and recurs in the same capacity across the film; and (4) music in the diegetic and nondiegetic realms to articulate relationships among characters and between characters and spectators. (*Ibid.*)

- 18 As an equivalent to the Carmen subtext that created the idea that Humbert will shoot Lolita, Kubrick had a menacing score accompany Humbert's rush to Lolita's house, with horns blasting, and drums and percussive instruments creating an ominous atmosphere (this would be role #2, as identified by McQuiston). Kubrick also uses music to create patterns (role #3), which could, at first viewing, seem conventional. Quite typically, Lolita's ya ya ya theme music (with its loping guitar riff and baby doll “ya-ya-wo-wo-ya-ya” vocal) is heard *before* she appears in the film for the first time (with a typical shift of non-diegetic to diegetic music: role #1). Just like the white sock announces Lolita's appearance in both works (see *Lolita* 39/41), the music foretells her appearance even more clearly, and even enables her music to share the diegetic space with Humbert, even though she is not present yet in the frame. In the background of Humbert and Charlotte talking as Lolita's ya ya ya theme is heard, the spectator sees the large French window leading to the garden, wide open, and framed by curtains. The sunny garden from which the music comes can be seen through this large opening. This open French window, a typical frame within the frame, is thus the visual equivalent of the music: it makes the two spaces in which Humbert and Lolita stand porous to each other. Once he crosses that threshold and joins her in the garden, the story can actually begin. Conversely, as Lolita steps in the Enchanted Hunters Hotel, her ya ya ya music is heard, and one should add that she is especially associated to this theme when her *youthful* character is underscored. For example, the non-diegetic ya ya ya music is also played right when Lolita enters the frame while Humbert and Charlotte are playing chess (her mother tells her: “beddie-time, dear”), and continues to be heard through the hula-hoop scene, managing a musical continuity between the two scenes.
- 19 It is then not surprising that, during the famous bath scene after Charlotte's death, Lolita's insouciant music is being played again, while Humbert muses on his future with his stepdaughter and while the Farlows ask him “to think of [his] poor little Lolita all alone in the world”, telling him that he “must live for her sake”. She is so much on his mind that her music goes on through the bath scene and the ensuing road shots to Camp Climax (significantly enough, it stops when Charlie, Lolita's first lover, steps in). As a counterpoint to Lolita's diegetic music in the first encounter is Charlotte's own diegetic cha cha cha, which, contrary to the Lolita theme, fails to captivate Humbert (it is indeed not heard afterwards in the film). The idea of the cha cha cha seduction scene actually is one of the elements Kubrick kept from Nabokov's screenplay.

- 20 In the same way, Quilty is, like *Lolita*, clearly associated to one musical motif every time he appears or is about to appear on screen. It is first heard as Humbert steps in his manor: Quilty's motif is composed of a short series of discreet, dissonant notes. Like Quilty's presence in the book, they could almost pass unnoticed, but their chromatic disturbing nature is slightly menacing. Quilty's theme is again heard, three times: when we see the shot of the Enchanted Hunters Hotel; when he impersonates Dr Zemf (note that in this scene the music is heard just as the light is turned on, literally "revealing" Quilty in the guise of the German psychiatrist), and, of course, when Lolita and Quilty share the frame and exchange their only glance in the whole film, just before the curtain falls on the last scene of the school play.
- 21 In Kubrick's film, music thus plays a similar structural role as motifs do in the book, and brings a thematic coherence binding together visual and aural elements. Starting from an element in the novel that is both visual and musical, the present analysis will now turn to another essential musical pattern in the book. This pattern actually branches into two parts, or rather, two instruments. As Humbert visits the Haze house, we find many pictorial references connoting Charlotte's bad taste and cultural pretensions, among which René Prinet's 1901 oil on canvas, entitled "Kreutzer Sonata"⁴, above Humbert's bed: "I inspected it through the mist of my utter rejection of it; but I did discern above "my" bed René Prinet's 'Kreutzer Sonata'" (*Lolita* 38/40). Here is an image of this painting, used to advertise Tabu perfume in American magazines in the 1950s:

Kreutzer Sonata



- 22 In the *Screenplay*, Nabokov provided an ekphrastic description of this work, which clearly states his contempt for it:

a reproduction of René Prinnet's "Kreutzer Sonata"—the unappetizing one in which a disheveled violinist passionately embraces his fair accompanist as she rises from her piano stool with clammy young hands still touching the keys. (*Lolita: A Screenplay* 37)

- 23 It is worth noting that Nabokov kept this detail for his screenplay. Indeed this image gathers two essential instruments: the violin and the piano. Let us recall John Ray's words to see which character is attached to which instrument:

He is abnormal. He is not a gentleman. But how magically his *singing violin* can conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced with the book while abhorring its author! (*Lolita* 5/3, my emphasis).

- 24 John Ray equates Humbert's seductive rhetoric of desire and suffering with the sound of a violin, an instrument widely used to connote passion and pain, not only in conventions stemmed from Romantic music, but also, and especially, in Hollywood film music. Humbert himself uses this cliché to describe his painful desire for Lolita just before he goes up to room 342 where Lolita is asleep: "If a violin string can ache, then I was that string" (*Lolita* 127/144). If we go back to the Prinnet reference, we thus see that, paradoxically enough, Humbert establishes a parallel between himself and the "disheveled violinist who passionately embraces" the female pianist, i.e. Lolita, the piano-player in the book and the film. Therefore Nabokov, by articulating his rejection of the Prinnet painting, voices his rejection of Humbert's passion for the nymphet pianist. As he explains in his description of the painting, the female player is not really active in this passionate kiss: she still has her hands on the piano, and does not reciprocate the embrace. Moreover, the piano is another typical instrument of romance, which Humbert conjures up, as in a Hollywood movie, when he goes back to the Ramsdale house after Lolita refused to leave her husband for him:

Should I enter my old house? As in a Turgenev story, a torrent of Italian music came from an open window—that of the living room: what romantic soul was playing the piano where no piano had plunged and plashed on that bewitched Sunday with the sun on her beloved legs? All at once I noticed that from the lawn I had mown a golden-skinned, brown-haired nymphet of nine or ten, in white shorts, was looking at me with wild fascination in her large blue-black eyes. I said something pleasant to her, meaning no harm, an old-world compliment, what nice eyes you have, but she retreated in haste and the music stopped abruptly, and a violent-looking dark man, glistening with sweat, came out and glared at me. I was on the point of identifying myself when, with a pang of dream-embarrassment, I became aware of my mud-caked dungarees, my filthy and torn sweater, my bristly chin, my bum's bloodshot eyes. Without saying a word, I turned and plodded back the way I had come. (*Lolita* 288-289/329)

- 25 As Pekka Tammi observed, this passage refers to Ivan Turgenev's 1859 *Home of the Gentry*, which is largely parodied by Humbert (notably the scene during which the hero chastely confesses his love on a bench, recalling the divan masturbation scene in *Lolita*). As Tammi explains, Nabokov "transform[s] a tale that purports to be a love story into a parody of all existing love stories" (Tammi 9). However, what is to be noted in the above quote is that despite his referring to Romantic literature and music, Humbert is perceived here, quite literally, like the dirty old man he is (literally and metaphorically). Piano music is just *not* for him: indeed, the other pianist with whom Lolita has the romance of her life is Quilty, who, as in the film, plays the piano for Humbert (*Lolita* 302-303) before being shot. It is moreover thanks to the piano lessons Lolita takes with Miss Lempereur (like Emma Bovary with Mademoiselle Lempereur) that she is able to see her lover.⁷ The piano thus stands for the reciprocal desire between

Lolita and Quilty, Humbert's double, who "had *tuned* [his clues] to [Humbert's] mind and manner" (*Lolita* 249/283), using another musical metaphor.

- 26 Kubrick playfully uses those elements from the novel, debunking Hollywood music clichés. Indeed, while the whole murder scene recalls some western elements (the saloon pianist, this time being shot), it does not use western-like music at all. On the contrary, Quilty, telling Humbert that "he looks like a music lover", begins to play a Polonaise by Chopin (a paragon of Romantic music), and tries to create lyrics, hoping it will make the hit-parade. Kubrick attracts the spectator's attention to the music being played by placing a harp in the foreground, and Quilty at the center of the frame, sitting at the piano. European high-brow cultural references are here combined with popular culture, in a quite hilarious moment which denounces the easy recipes used in hit-parade music.⁸
- 27 Humbert shoots Quilty-the pianist in both novel and film, confirming that the piano is not *his* instrument. At this point, one should note that the violin, Humbert's instrument, recalls words like "violent" and "violate", two words that characterize Humbert. As Leland de la Durantaye pointed out, quoting Arendt, Humbert's essential flaw is "his inability or unwillingness 'to think from the standpoint of someone else'" (Durantaye 5). This is illustrated by a key-passage, at the end of the masturbation scene, when Humbert triumphantly declares "Lolita had been safely solipsized" (*Lolita* 60/66). The alliteration in [s] underscores the terrible formula "safely solipsized", and recurs in his following musing on the masturbation episode:

I felt proud of myself. I had stolen the honey of a spasm without impairing the morals of a minor. Absolutely no harm done. The conjurer had poured milk, molasses, foaming champagne into a young lady's new white purse; and lo, the purse was intact. Thus had I delicately constructed my ignoble, ardent, sinful dream; and still Lolita was safe—and I was safe. What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own. (*Lolita* 62/68-69)

- 28 The repeated denials (note the many negations) in this excerpt enhance the irrational obsession of the narrator. The most important aspect of the above quote is that Humbert somehow dismisses his action through an essential shift, or rather, as Durantaye phrases it, a division:

Humbert's erotic reverie leads him to make a fundamental division between Lolita in her own right and person, and "another, fanciful Lolita" which is the object of his semi-discreet desire and which he himself "created". The next step is the most artistic and perilous one as he credits his *image* of Lolita with more "reality" than the "real" little girl at his side. (Durantaye 70)

- 29 So doing, Humbert negates Lolita-the person, and replaces her with a Lolita "having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own". This crucial substitution therefore paves the way for Humbert's remorseless rape of the girl during two years. As Durantaye explains, for Humbert, Lolita ceases to be "an ethical subject and becomes an aesthetic object" (Durantaye 71), which creates yet another perversion of Humbert's artistic gifts. This also recalls the beginning of Humbert's confessions, in which his desire, presented in a poetic, *aesthetic* form, comes first, while the judiciary, hence *ethical*, address comes second.
- 30 Durantaye formulates the moral flaw in Humbert's character in the following very clear terms:

While Humbert initially describes this imaginative appropriation as a form of shielding Lolita from the beastliness of his desires, it is precisely this method of aestheticizing Lolita that leads to the monstrous acts of the latter half of the book. This scene of venal masturbation leads directly to Humbert's later mistreatment of Lolita by offering her for the first time an image of Lolita separated from her "real" existence, a template for a variously unconscious Lolita, a Lolita considered as an aesthetic object. (Durantaye 71)

- 31 In his final recognition of the harm he did to Lolita, it is again through music that his awareness is expressed:

As I approached the friendly abyss, I grew aware of a melodious unity of sounds rising like vapor from a small mining town that lay at my feet, in a fold of the valley. One could make out the geometry of the streets between blocks of red and gray roofs, and green puffs of trees, and a serpentine stream, and the rich, ore-like glitter of the city dump, and beyond the town, roads crisscrossing the crazy quilt of dark and pale fields, and behind it all, great timbered mountains. But even brighter than those quietly rejoicing colors [...] both brighter and dreamier to the ear than they were to the eye, was that *vapory vibration of accumulated sounds* that never ceased for a moment, as it rose to the lip of granite where I stood wiping my foul mouth. And soon I realized that all these sounds were of one nature, that no other sounds but these came from the streets of the transparent town, with the women at home and the men away. Reader! What I heard was but the melody of children at play, nothing but that, and so limpid was the air that *within this vapor of blended voices*, majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic—one could hear now and then, as if released, an almost articulate spurt of vivid laughter, or the crack of a bat, or the clatter of a toy wagon, but it was all really too far for the eye to distinguish any movement in the lightly etched streets. I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demure murmur for background, and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord. (*Lolita* 307-308/350-351)

- 32 Harmony, or "concord" is the notion dominating this highly intersemiotic passage. Indeed it not only evokes the "melody of children at play", but it does so by weaving together musical and pictorial elements (the colors, the image of the quilt, the "lightly etched streets"), through an impalpable metaphor, that of *vapor*, recalling Lolita's last name, Haze. Note the very musicality of the passage through the assonances and alliterations vibrating in the long sentences ("the crack of a bat, or the clatter of a toy wagon"), and how the sound vapor is rendered in a typical oxymoronic association of contradictory elements that are paired: "majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic". Harmony comes from the beautiful combination of opposites, just like the little city is beautiful and bright thanks to the glitter coming from its waste dump. Moreover, this key-passage stresses another essential element in the musical motifs of the book: voices, as it is because of those childish voices that Humbert comes to the awareness of his evil deeds.

3. Voice and music

- 33 In the novel, female voices are repeatedly associated with music. Humbert describes Monique's voice as having "melodious silvery precision (a bird, a very bird!)" (*Lolita* 21/21), and he depicts Charlotte's voice in the following terms:

there came from the upper landing the contralto voice of Mrs. Haze, who leaning over the banisters inquired melodiously, "Is that Monsieur Humbert?" (*Lolita* 37/39)

- 34 Humbert is especially sensitive to Lolita's voice:

Humbert Humbert is also infinitely moved by the little one's slangy speech, by her harsh high voice. Later heard her volley crude nonsense at Rose across the fence. Twanging through me in a rising rhythm. Pause. "I must go now, kiddo." (*Lolita* 41-42/44-45)⁹

- 35 If one recalls the opening lines of Humbert's confession, one should underscore how it sensually delights in the possibilities of voicing, articulating sounds, and especially the sounds from Lolita's name. However, Humbert also uses music and voice to connote the discrepancy between appearance and reality:

Charlotte, who did not notice the falsity of all the everyday conventions and rules of behavior, and foods, and books, and people she doted upon, would distinguish at once a false intonation in anything I might say with a view to keeping Lo near. She was like a musician who may be an odious vulgarian in ordinary life, devoid of tact and taste; but who will hear a false note in music with diabolical accuracy of judgment. (*Lolita* 84/93-94, my emphasis)

- 36 Humbert's lies are betrayed by his intonation: the music of voice reveals the truth (Humbert's lust), and exposes the gap between appearance and reality / signifier and signified, which Humbert endeavors to hide not only from Charlotte, but also from the reader. In fact, through the narrational voice, Nabokov instilled such false intonations to warn the reader against the seductive inflexions of Humbert's voice.

- 37 Quite characteristically, Humbert uses music when his hypocrisy is at his highest, for instance when he tries to convince Lolita that their relationship is perfectly normal:

I quote again: Among Sicilians sexual relations between a father and his daughter are accepted as a matter of course, and the girl who participates in such relationship is not looked upon with disapproval by the society of which she is part. I'm a great admirer of Sicilians, fine athletes, *fine musicians, fine upright people*, Lo, and great lovers. (*Lolita* 150/169, my emphasis)

- 38 Similarly, he uses the musical notion of harmony in hypocritical, ironic terms. For example, to qualify his married life with Charlotte: "Even in *the most harmonious of households*, as ours is" (*Lolita* 91/101, my emphasis; note the alliteration that signals the hyperbole). However, Lolita clearly perceives the false tune in Humbert's musical metaphors, and consequently he calls her a cynic:

"Some day, Lo, you will understand many emotions and situations, such as for example the harmony, the beauty of spiritual relationship."

"Bah!" said the cynical nymphet. (*Lolita* 112/126)

- 39 The same type of ironical counterpoint is provided by music in Kubrick's film. The opening Love Theme, a romantic piano melody by Bob Harris, which could be seen as Humbert's theme, is extremely ambiguous, and reflects the gap between appearance and reality / signifier and signified, that Kubrick also wished to enhance both diegetically and extradiegetically. A lot of critics were puzzled by the music in the film, finding it at odds with the contents. My point is that this impression was created on purpose, so as to recreate the uneasiness one feels while reading the book, in a very subtle manner, since Kubrick could not show Humbert's scandalous pedophilia. Such use of music endeavors to enhance the gap between what is represented and what actually happens. For example, after being heard for the first time in the credits, the Love Theme only recurs when Lolita leaves for camp, and runs up the stairs to say goodbye to Humbert, accompanied by swirling syrupy violins, crescendo and accelerando. The emotional climax corresponds to Humbert's tears, but this

melodramatic element is then undermined by the fact that Humbert bursts out laughing as he reads Charlotte's letter, with the love theme still playing in the background, somehow at odds with the comic nature of the scene. As the many photos of actor's faces around Humbert indicate in this passage, he is a *hypocrite*, i.e. etymologically an *actor*, who will perform the loving husband to stay close to Lolita. Hence the romantic piano theme can be seen as satirical in that scene: it enhances the gap between appearance and reality. As the film progresses, the Love Theme only recurs when Humbert loses Lolita, first at the hospital, and then when she refuses to leave Dick for him. One should notice that minor keys are more stressed in those scenes, somehow underlining the pathetic nature of the character.

- 40 In the corresponding scene in the novel, Nabokov used the cinematic device of diegetic music reflecting the situation:

She closed her eyes and opened her mouth, leaning back on the cushion, one felt foot on the floor. [...] I knew all I wanted to know. I had no intention of torturing my darling. Somewhere beyond Bill's shack *an afterwork radio had begun singing of folly and fate*, and there she was with her ruined looks and her adult, rope-veined narrow hands and her goose-flesh white arms, and her shallow ears, and her unkempt armpits, there she was (my Lolita!), hopelessly worn at seventeen, with that baby, dreaming already in her of becoming a big shot and retiring around A.D. 2020 and I looked and looked at her, and knew as clearly as I know I am to die, that I loved her more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth, or hoped for anywhere else. (*Lolita*, 277/316, my emphasis)

- 41 This *song* of "folly and fate" encapsulates Humbert's story via a powerful alliteration. Yet, as Kubrick himself stated, "once you're dealing on a nonverbal level, ambiguity is unavoidable" (Phillips 90). For him, music was the very vector of nonverbal communication. One could then perceive the *Lolita* piano theme which opens the movie (the music of Humbert's love for Lolita) in two opposite manners. Some critics interpret it as extremely ironic. Many critics find it (ridiculously) touching, completely in keeping with Mason's pathetic tears at the end of the movie. For instance, Robert Stam thinks it actually strengthens the normalizing of *Lolita* and Humbert's relationship evoked earlier:

The theme music by Nelson Riddle subliminally reinforced this normalization effect, by supplying a static, premodernist, rather syrupy muzak-style love theme. The very lack of dissonance and discontinuity in the music, and the fact that it does not change or progress either rhythmically or melodically, implies a lack of dissonance in the relationship. (Stam 115)

- 42 One could object to this interpretation that the music reaches its melodramatic climax precisely when Lolita, in their last scene together, refuses to go back to Humbert, and his sincere love is pitted against her indifference to his feelings. Kubrick did look for a touching scene at this point in the movie: it took twelve days to shoot it and attain the fragile balance of emotion that this scene, which he saw as the climax of the story, manages to bring out. However, even if in that scene, the tragic feeling is the point—and there Chion finds the over-melodramatic music at odds with Mason's very convincing dignified tears (Chion 117)—it is often difficult to decide whether the melodramatic score is parodic or not, as Michel Chion points out (Chion 119). Just like Nabokov leaves for the reader to find for himself if Humbert should be trusted or not, Kubrick obliges the spectator to interpret the function of music in his film.
- 43 Humbert's own song of desire makes him deaf to Lolita's cries at night. His personal little night music is the only one resounding throughout the pages, until some

undercurrent motifs emerge to reveal his criminal ignorance of Lolita's feelings. It is thus quite apt that the one key-song of the book, the Carmen song, plays such a determining role in the very scene in which he solipsizes Lolita for the first time, and ignores her person to use her nymphet body. Music thus works as one of the undercurrent motifs that undermine Humbert's attempts at convincing us he is not a rapist: he is the violinist/violator of the story.

- 44 Piano and violin recur at another point in the book, but this time in a cinematic simile, used to enhance the discrepancy between Humbert's vision of the gas station and the accompanying music (this is a sign that he is losing control: during this interlude, Lolita went to talk with Quilty):

Radio music was coming from its open door, and because the rhythm was not synchronized with the heave and flutter and other gestures of wind-animated vegetation, one had the impression of an old scenic film living its own life while piano or fiddle followed a line of music quite outside the shivering flower, the swaying branch. (*Lolita* 211-212/240)

- 45 This passage somehow represents the use of music in both novel and film. Just as in this description of a musical soundtrack at odds with the scene depicted (very similar to Kubrick's film), Nabokov created a subtle discrepancy between Humbert's musical voice and the movements of "the shivering flower" he is conjuring up, namely, Lolita.

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NOTES

1. His parents had a subscription to the Saint Petersburg opera, and they frequently had private concerts given at their affluent house on Morskaya Avenue.
 2. Lara Delage-Toriel and Xavier Fassion beautifully illustrated the musical potential of Nabokov's writing during the *Lolita* Toulouse Conference, in their musical exploration of *Lolita* through reading, songs, music and sound objects.
 3. See for instance the image he uses to compare another nymphet to Lolita, just before the fateful scene at the Enchanted Hunters: "and there, and some elfish chance offered me the sight of a delightful child of Lolita's age, in Lolita's type of frock, but pure white, and there was a white ribbon in her black hair. She was not pretty, but she was a nymphet, and her ivory pale legs and lily neck formed for one memorable moment a most pleasurable antiphony (in terms of spinal music) to my desire for Lolita, brown and pink, flushed and fouled" (*Lolita* 126, my emphasis).
 4. See A. Appel Jr.'s note, who identifies all these popular singers, pp. 386-387 of *The Annotated Lolita*.
 5. Interview with Joseph Gelmis (1969) available online:
<http://www.visual-memory.co.uk/amk/doc/0069.html>
 Date the site was last visited: 22 October 2010.
 6. Dissertation abstract available online:
<http://app.cul.columbia.edu:8080/ac/handle/10022/AC:P:6289>
 7. As many critics have pointed out, *Lolita* acts just like Emma Bovary who pretends she goes to her piano lessons, while she uses these opportunities to see her lover Léon.
 8. The song by Guy Mitchell "My Heart Cries for You" was indeed written in 10 minutes by the two composers, who used an old French tune as a basis.
 9. The tennis metaphor associated with music also points to one of the "nerves of the novel" (*Lolita* 316/360): the chapter describing Lolita playing tennis (*Lolita* 230-234/262-266).
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ABSTRACTS

The aim of this paper is to stress the importance of music and song in Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), and also in Kubrick's interpretation of it in his film (1962). Indeed Kubrick's adaptation does bring about, as Linda Hutcheon puts it, a "transcoding process" from the code of writing into the code of film (Hutcheon 7), which is itself multisemiotic, as film associates moving and still images, language, and, of course, music. The analysis begins with a scrutiny of songs in the novel, as Humbert uses songs to not only screen his deeds like in the davenport scene, but also to fuel his contemptuous vision of Lolita. Then the study turns to the function of music in characterization, in both novel and film: the film's characters are associated to musical themes that reflect thematic patterns of characterization in the novel. We will finally draw from those analyses the illustration of how both works use music to organize a subtle destabilization of signs that undermines the first-degree reading or viewing.

Cette étude s'attache à souligner l'importance de la musique et des chansons dans *Lolita*, tant dans le roman de Nabokov (1955) que dans l'adaptation filmique qu'en réalisa Stanley Kubrick en 1962. En effet, comme l'explique Linda Hutcheon (Hutcheon 7), l'adaptation met en œuvre un processus de transcodage du code écrit au code filmique, qui est lui-même multisémiotique,

puisque'un film associe images mouvantes et fixes, langage et naturellement musique. Cette étude s'ouvre sur une analyse des chansons dans le roman (Humbert utilise en effet les chansons non seulement comme écran à ses agissements, comme dans la scène de masturbation dominicale, mais aussi pour souligner le mépris qu'il a pour les goûts et la culture de Lolita). Ces analyses permettent ensuite d'étudier les fonctions de la musique en termes de caractérisation dans le roman comme dans le film : dans l'adaptation les personnages sont associés à des thèmes musicaux qui font écho à certains motifs du roman. Enfin, ces éléments permettent de montrer comment chaque œuvre utilise la musique pour organiser une subtile déstabilisation des signes.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Lolita, Kubrick, musique, chanson, motifs, multisémiotique, intersémiotique

Keywords: Lolita, Kubrick, music, song, patterns, motifs, multisemiotic, intersemiotic

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