



Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-
speaking world

3 | 2010

Lolita : Examining “the Underside of the Weave”

“Putting the geography of the United States into motion”: Kubrick’s *Lolita* as an American Travelogue

Zachary Baqué



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/1654>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.1654

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Zachary Baqué, “Putting the geography of the United States into motion”: Kubrick’s *Lolita* as an American Travelogue”, *Miranda* [Online], 3 | 2010, Online since 26 November 2010, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/1654> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.1654>

This text was automatically generated on 16 February 2021.



Miranda is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

“Putting the geography of the United States into motion”: Kubrick’s *Lolita* as an American Travelogue

Zachary Baqué

- 1 When Nabokov agreed to sign the “motion picture agreement” about the adaptation of his novel *Lolita*, he sent a letter¹ to Victor C. Thaller, the treasurer of Putnam, the American company which published the novel in 1958. In this letter, Nabokov clearly explains how he would like to be paid: “50% in cash and 50% in so many government bonds or other safe stock”. In order to justify his cautious financial request, he writes: “I may seem overcautious to you—but I am a European who went through two disastrous inflations [...]” (Nabokov 1990, 262). What is of interest here is the reference to an implied difference in the way Americans and Europeans envision financial and thus social agreements. Interestingly the novel to be adapted also deals with this clash of cultures. Humbert Humbert, the epitome of the European, relishes in detailing his impressions of a country that challenges his erudite tastes. Against accusations that the novel may be “anti-American”, Nabokov explains: “I am trying to be an American writer and claim only the same rights that other American writers enjoy” (Nabokov 2006, 359). Among these rights, he mentions the possibility to depict “North American sets” for reasons of “depth and perspective”. He then explains: “I needed a certain exhilarating milieu. Nothing is more exhilarating than philistine vulgarity” (Nabokov 2006, 358). Although it is made quite clear that the America of the book is a pure authorial construct, the novel nevertheless offers a European point of view on the New World, that of Humbert. Stanley Kubrick, who directed the adaptation, is himself an example of this transatlantic migration: he moved from the US to England during the production of the movie and *Lolita* was almost entirely shot at Elstree studios in England. What remains of this European view of America in a movie directed in England by an American *émigré*? In his analysis of the two movie adaptations of *Lolita*, Robert Stam explains: “While the foreign-born Nabokov had shown himself to be a

master observer of Americana, paradoxically, the American-born Kubrick had filmed the novel as if he were a foreigner" (Stam 119). This remark is part of an argument that Adrian Lyne's version (1997) has a "better grasp of Americana" (Stam 119). Although it is true that attention to American minutiae is less prominent in Kubrick's adaptation than in the original novel, the movie still offers a distinct, almost foreign, depiction of American space and traits. I will argue here that Kubrick's *mise en scène* and the actors' incarnation of characters are somehow filtered through Humbert's ironic voice about the United States. Kubrick's film is here analyzed as the travelogue of a European in America. A travelogue is a literary or cinematic text which depicts the journey of a traveller who includes descriptions of foreign lands and remarks on local customs. In a way Humbert is such a traveller, first from Europe to the US then across the American continent. *Lolita*, the novel, can be seen as a fictional travelogue and the same could also be said for the movie, contrary to what Richard Corliss claims in a poem: "When Kubrick put my darling on the screen,/I saw my words made whispers, twelve made teen,/Back roads made backlots, US made UK" (Corliss 10). All of the interior scenes were indeed shot in England, but the movie also includes a couple of shots made in America by the movie's second unit. These establishing shots are sufficient to anchor the fiction in an American context. By the simple process of editing and the Kuleshov effect, the interiors become as American as their inhabitants. The purpose of this paper is precisely to analyze Kubrick's America in *Lolita*.

- 2 In the novel, at the beginning of Part II, Humbert explains that during his and Lolita's "extensive travels" (Nabokov 2006, 163), he "had to devise some expectation, some special point in space and time for her to look forward to, for her to survive until bedtime" (Nabokov 2006, 170). The strategy to put Lolita in such a frame of mind is made quite clear: "putting the geography of the United States into motion" (Nabokov 2006, 171). In a way, this is exactly what Kubrick's movie does: it visualizes and literally puts into motion the words of the book. One of the goals of this paper is thus to analyze the "putting into motion" of America in the movie.

1. Europe meets America

- 3 A travelogue needs the recognition of a point of view, of its context of enunciation so to speak. Although most films are narrated by the film equivalent of a third-person narrator, a voice-over belonging to one of the characters can privilege one point of view. This is exactly what happens in *Lolita*'s second scene. Over images of travel, a voice-over explains:

Having recently arrived in America where so many Europeans had found a haven before, I decided to spend a peaceful summer in the attractive resort town of Ramsdale, New Hampshire. Some English translations I had made of French poetry had enjoyed some success and I had been appointed to a lectureship at Beardsey College, Ohio. Friends had given me several addresses in Ramsdale where lodgings were available for the summer.

- 4 Although this voice remains anonymous, the audience may recognize it as belonging to the man who has just killed Quilty in the previous sequence. This voice implies that what we are about to witness is the recollection of a man speaking from an unclear place. There is thus a temporal gap between the enunciation of this voice and the images of travel. This is what David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson call a "nonsimultaneous diegetic voice" (Bordwell and Thompson 336-337) which belongs to a

reminiscing narrator who is also the main protagonist in the story.² It implies that the story will be told from a European perspective. We understand that the owner of the voice is a European who decided to flee Europe for some unknown reason, that he is an intellectual who has friends. This arrival tends to disconnect Humbert from his past and may recall the idea that one can start anew in America. This voice-over thus tends "to privilege Humbert's point of view" (Jenkins 38). In a way this point of view channels our perception of the film.

- 5 What should also be accounted for in this opposition between Europe and America is the relevance of accents. In the previous scene, the specificity of Humbert's accent was made explicit. When he asks Quilty if he remembers a girl called Dolores Haze, both he and Quilty pronounce her name in different ways: in this difference of pronunciations (with or without an emphasis on the t) lies the culture gap between Europe and America. On the one hand, there is "Humbert's pomposity" (Nelson 78) with a European voice and his use of complex words such as "idiosyncrasies"; in fact, his trouble can be perceived when he stumbles on one of those "obviously European polysyllabics" (Nabokov 2006, 220) as when he stumbles upon "extracurricular". On the other hand there is Quilty's more laidback American accent, which moves from a Bronx accent (Kagan 97) to an imitation of a Western cowboy. In the prologue, Humbert's encounter with America is thus a vocal one. Quilty soon recognizes his foreign nature when he suggests that Humbert is either "Australian or a German refugee". This mediation of the voice is the channel that allows for a deeper exploration of America understood now in its spatial dimension.

2. American space

- 6 It first seems necessary to introduce some theoretical remarks on the representation of American space in films. The "indexes of reality", to quote Christian Metz, are filmic elements which allow the filmmaker to anchor his fiction in America, which is itself a fantasized representation of the United States. It appears that there may be three ways of analyzing American space onscreen. The first function of American space can be called its poetic function, with an attention paid to the toponyms of different places. In his analysis of cinematic space, André Gardies distinguishes between places the names of which are attested geographically, socially or historically and those the names of which are purely fictive (Gardies 77). Even if the name of towns are fictive in Kubrick's *Lolita* as there is no such place as Ramsdale, NH, in the United States, what matters is the connotation of these names. Ramsdale could well be understood as a small valley (dale) where male sheep (ram) gather, thus evoking a pastoral nature unsoiled by human activity. However, a ram can also refer in formal English to a sexually active male. The very name of the town thus condenses the arrival of Humbert in a provincial rural place that was not waiting for him. Quite similarly, Beardsley, the "invented town" in Ohio where Humbert is supposed to teach in the fall, is a reference to "Aubrey Beardsley, the 'decadent' Art Nouveau artist" from the 19th century. (Appel 362). Humbert is thus the ram that destroys the tranquillity of "the pastoral simplicity of New England America" (Nelson 66) and Beardsley is the place where Humbert's decadence will become all too visible and audible, as suggested by Miss Lebone's intervention during a particularly loud row with Lolita. In this list of names that sound American, one should also mention Camp Climax with its obvious sexual connotation. If

Humbert's travels across the US are verbal in the book, as evidenced by the list of places visited, they become visual in the movie.

- 7 This second level of analysis of American space, and which can be called its realist function, lies in the distinction made by Gardies between place and space: a place is the actualization of space, which remains entirely virtual (Gardies 71). It is thanks to the visualization of American places that the audience is able to mentally construct a fictional American space. The high angle shot of a plane flying over Manhattan, as a place, immediately produces America as a mental space for the audience. The same can be said for a similar shot over Ramsdale. In order to create an American space, Kubrick uses shots of places (Manhattan, a train station, a bird's eye view of Ramsdale, forward tracking shots on typically American streets) dissolving into each other. The dissolves are used as visual ellipses for the whole travel from an undefined place in Europe to Ramsdale, NH. Similar tracking shots following a car driving along streets also open and conclude the segment in Beardsley. These transitory scenes help define the general American space that is the locus of *Lolita*. As mentioned before, a voice-over claiming that the images are of America and a couple of establishing shots are sufficient for the audience to believe that the unfolding story takes place in America. Between the bath scene and the scene at Camp Climax, Kubrick also includes shots of roads (with toll booths and a boat to cross a river) to signify both the time spent travelling and the American dimension of this journey. The same is also true when Humbert and Lolita flee from Beardsley: the camera aptly records American roads and the specific road signs of the American highway system. Moving from one place to another recalls the narrative structure of a typically American film genre, the road movie.
- 8 Here, it is possible to envision the third level of analysis of the American space. America exists in the mind of the audience as a collection of pre-existing images glimpsed in previous films. In a way, each cinematic image of America is in itself a palimpsest of past images. What is thus created is a double visual reference. First of all, some of the shots can recall other films, such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) especially in the car chase through the Southwest. This reference is emphasized by the musical score which may sound similar to Bernard Herrmann's music for *Psycho*. Secondly, and probably more importantly, these shots on the American landscape also operate as metatextual references that inscribe the movie in a specific genre. Although it would be preposterous to claim that *Lolita* is a road movie, it nevertheless borrows elements from this genre, both in terms of narrative structure and of visual motifs.
- 9 The structure of a road movie lies in the tension between pure movement and stasis. To a certain extent, this is true for *Lolita*. If we exclude the opening credits, the movie begins like a road movie with a long forward tracking shot following a car driving in the fog towards an indeterminate destination. The driver of the car is unknown at first but the purpose of this shot is literally to put the audience on the road, to make it move along the flow of the narrative. It can be seen as an interesting threshold between the production of the film (the credits) and the fiction that begins, as if it were necessary to place the audience in a certain state of hypnotic trance so that its members suspend their disbelief.³ Even if the camera follows the car, it places the spectator in the forward movement of narration, as if the role of the car were to slowly attract him or her into the movie itself. In *Lolita*, this camera movement is found four times after the first one (which is repeated at the end of the movie) and it always signifies a change of place, the progressive acceptance of new rules: from reality to fiction, then from Europe to

America as a taxi drives in Ramsdale, then from one place to another as Humbert's car enters Beardsley with his voice-over urging the spectator to "forget Ramsdale [...] and to accompany [them] to Beardsley College", then from Beardsley supposedly to Hollywood, and finally, when Humbert drives to see Lolita after her letter. Movement is also represented by pans following the car, by dissolves that connect the shots, and also by medium close-ups of Humbert and Lolita in the car. Thanks to the technique of front projection, the portion of the road visible through the rear-view and lateral windows can be seen moving, thus giving the impression that it is the car which is moving. To a contemporary eye, this technique reveals the construction of the film but this type of shot could also be understood as encapsulating the two narrative tropes of the road movie evoked earlier, movement and pause. It looks as if the moving background were placed under the static foreground. These shots are thus usually placed at the junction between travelling scenes and static scenes on the side of the road.

- 10 The second narrative moment in road movies is the pause in the journey and it allows the characters to meet fellow travellers (Quilty as a policeman, as a German psychologist and as a voice on the phone) and to resume their relationships. It is during these scenes of high emotional intensity that the characters gain depth. In its second half (starting with the journey from Ramsdale to Camp Climax) *Lolita* is thus based on the narrative tension between stasis and movement that is characteristic of the road movie. But the movie does not only display a generic narrative structure, it also features visual motifs of the genre. The most commonplace of the American road movie is the motel. Even if Nabokov regretted that "the different motels at which they stopped" had not been stressed enough (Appel 355), the movie offers a couple of shots of motels. One can think of the motel where Humbert stops when Lolita is in the hospital or a little earlier when she has just learnt about her mother's death. In his analysis of American motels, Bruce Bégout explains that the very anonymity and efficiency of motels make them ideal places for lovers, runaways and petty thieves. It is quite normal that Humbert chooses to sleep in what he hypostasized as "the Functional Motel" (Nabokov 2006, 163), after the scene at the Enchanted Hunters where, in the middle of a police convention and already taunted by Quilty, Humbert had sex with Lolita. In order to avoid arousing suspicion, motels are perfect hideaways. It should be made clear that the motels in the film operate as metonymies for all the motels visited by Humbert and Lolita in the book. A furtive shot on the side of the road implies that there were others before and will be more afterwards. A motel in *Lolita* condenses all the motels in the journey simply suggested by dissolves, pans and tracking shots. What is a signal for the character as a driver (the promise of vacancy and a room with TV) becomes a sign for the audience, a sign of the economic and intellectual system that produced it (Bégout 67). In a way the movie and the book tell the story of how Humbert tries to acquire the codes necessary to decipher American signs.
- 11 Another typical place of the road movie is the gas station. There are two important stations in the movie: the first one is where Humbert finds Lolita in a phone booth after their loud argument about the play. The shot is highly reminiscent of paintings by Edward Hopper,⁴ another visual reference that anchors the movie in an American genealogy. The second one is where Humbert spies on Lolita talking to a stranger, which entails another argument in the car. Placed before and after arguments, gas stations visually and rhythmically punctuate the deteriorating relationship between Humbert and Lolita. By including typically American places such as the motel and the gas station, the movie aims at defining America as a system of signs one has to

interpret. Beyond this representation of American space, the movie also offers a definition of what it means to be an American.

3. American culture

- 12 Another aspect of the travelogue is the description of the inhabitants of a foreign country. As a fictional travelogue, *Lolita* presents two characters who define themselves and their community as American. When Charlotte offers a tour of the house, she explains that they are "very fortunate here in West Ramsdale" because they are "culturally advanced with lots of good Anglo-Dutch and Anglo-Scotch stock".
- 13 By siding culture with Europe, she also implies that in a way, most Americans have European ancestry. It seems as if being able to prove one's European genealogy automatically guarantees a certain level of culture. At the end of the 18th century, St. John de Crèvecoeur asked the question "What is an American?" He replies: "He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudice and manners, receives new ones from the government he obeys, and the new ranks he holds" (Crèvecoeur 70). He also adds "The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas and new opinions (Crèvecoeur 70). In America in the late 1950s, the movie implies, the main principle is to find one's European ancestry, inventing oneself a past, thus equating new ideas with ancient prejudice and manners. After the American settlers came waves of immigration of which Dr Zempf is the perfect incarnation.
- 14 It appears that Dr Zempf is the actualization of the German refugee Quilty refers to at the beginning of the movie. He begins his explanation by saying: "We Americans, we are progressively modern". What is funny in this grotesque character is the gap between the content of the sentence and the ridiculously strong German accent with which it is uttered. Once again, an American of European descent emphasizes the necessary modernity of the country but as he refers to a degenerate form of Freudianism, he fails to match St. John de Crèvecoeur's definition of an American. As Quilty impersonates Zempf, we can infer that he merely tries to impose on Humbert one of the codes mentioned earlier and which are necessary to understand America. Quilty's ironic framework to grasp American culture is nevertheless based on a precise definition of American identity as inherently modern.
- 15 This vulgar modernity is the object of uttermost contempt on the part of Humbert. Throughout the movie, James Mason embodies Humbert as being supremely contemptuous of so-called American culture, contrary to the book in which a certain fascination for "philistine vulgarity" (Appel 315) can be felt. Two opposite versions of American culture are represented in the movie and both irritate Humbert. On the one hand, there is of course Charlotte Haze who fantasizes about going to Paris. Called "an elephant cow in heat" in an analysis of the movie (Corliss 42), Charlotte embodies the tacky cultural pretentiousness of lonely suburban housewives. Everything about her cultural aspiration is entirely fake: her collection of paintings (Dufy, Van Gogh, and Monet) are reproductions, she believes that a mediocre TV writer is a literary genius and that pairing Dr Zhivago and Dr Schweitzer in a talk is very stimulating intellectually. Her pretension can also be perceived in the foreign words she peppers her sentences with, such as "monsieur" or the grammatically incorrect "départez" in her love letter or "piazza" to mean porch or finally "señora" to explain that she only

felt truly married when she heard herself being called that way in Spanish. When Humbert asks her if her honeymoon was spent in Spain, she meekly replies that it was in Mexico. As Corliss explains: "Her name-dropping of the Great Masters [...] can be seen by Humbert as vulgar and by the mass movie audience as snooty; she is too low for the movie's tastes and too high for the moviegoers" (Corliss 41). In her attempt to please Humbert by appearing as an educated European, she keeps on making terrible mistakes, such as drinking pink champagne and by forcing him to dance the cha-cha, "one of the new moves". Her very definite view on education is probably influenced by a series of child-rearing manuals masquerading as scientifically sound. Charlotte seems to believe that high culture references should be used to prove one's cultural credentials. These references are pure surface, lacking any depth. But this eager parody of classical culture is not limited to Charlotte as it permeates the movie's representation of American culture. The date of the Declaration of Independence is present as a mnemonic device to remember Charlotte's phone number. Hollywood is hinted at as the great purveyor of debased culture: the excuse Humbert gives Beardsley College for leaving before the end of the school year is that he has been asked to work as chief consultant on a movie dealing with existentialism, "still a hot topic at the time". Hollywood and its large mass appeal can be seen as the common point between Charlotte's culture and *Lolita*'s.

- 16 On the other hand, one can indeed find *Lolita*. Placed entirely at the other hand of the cultural spectrum, she relishes in popular culture. The walls of her bedroom are covered with posters of movie stars, she is said to read only "comic books and movie romances", does not like "foreign films", as if her entire frame of mind was shaped by the Hollywood movies she sees in drive-ins. Her eating habits are also characteristic of what one imagines as the behavior of American teenagers in the late 1950s. She chews gum and blows bubbles, she drinks coke and eats chips out of the bag, and she loves sandwiches "loaded with mayonnaise" as Humbert says. In the car she tells him that what she would like to have for lunch is "a big plate of French fries and a malt". Furthermore, and it is probably what irritates Humbert the most, she is easily bored. The only interest she sees in her travels is a "squashed cat" on the road. Her limited attention span makes her a perfect target audience for mass media and cinema. Indeed the only vaguely scientific knowledge she has comes directly from an issue of the *Reader's Digest* when she tells Humbert that he might be having a heart attack. She also asks Humbert if he's afraid someone might steal his ideas and sell them to Hollywood. This second type of American culture is less ridiculed than the first but it is set in contrast to Humbert's culture.
- 17 Between Charlotte masquerading as a European and *Lolita* the uneducated child of the media, Humbert uses his parsimonious cultural references: he refers to the "'divine Edgar'" and he admits he watches "foreign films" "frequently".
- 18 The cultural tension between Humbert and the two Hazes is based on the importance the latter attach to the display of culture. If Humbert is neither Charlotte nor *Lolita*, Quilty seems to be both at the same time. His house in the first segment of the movie is filled with a weird collection of improbable pieces of culture such as Gainsborough-like paintings, a bust of Shakespeare, a harp and the bust of a woman. His culture has European pretensions as when he imitates Spartacus or when his play features fauns and nymphs out of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* but also American vulgarity, as when it is made clear that he is a successful TV writer who claims that he

could turn Chopin's "Polonaise" (the piece of music he plays hectically on the piano before being killed) into a song that "could make the hit parade". In terms of culture, Quilty is a mix between Charlotte and Lolita and his opponent is the exact opposite. Humbert's perception of American vulgarity is highly contemptuous of the three characters. What is true for American culture as seen by the ironic eye of Humbert is also relevant to appreciate another type of remark usually found in travelogues. After noting down the peculiar behaviors of a foreign people in a distinct environment, the traveller can concentrate on their general appearance.

4. American sex

- 19 The America Humbert discovers is much more sexually explicit than his very own perversion. Charlotte, his first encounter with an American body, constantly puts her body on display as evidenced by the sheer vulgarity of her over tight outfits. Her body seems ready to escape from the constraints of her attire as if flesh operated a sort of Freudian return of the repressed, since she envisions herself as a pure mind. Charlotte perfectly incarnates the discrepancy between intellectual aspirations and bodily imperatives. When she flushes the toilet thinking "that good, old-fashioned, quaint plumbing [...] should appeal to a European", her gesture is symptomatic of the way Humbert is constantly reminded that bodily functions are put on display in America. She wants to be seen for what she is (an intellectual) but what others perceive (Humbert and Quilty) is a desperate woman eager to be loved. This bodily display is at its height when Charlotte dances, either clumsily revolving around Quilty at the summer dance or pushing Humbert against a wall when she wants to teach him the cha-cha. In the latter scene, this bodily overflow runs into logorrhoea: in a fit of despair after Lolita's return from Mona's party, she yells at Humbert that she might well be "a foolish romantic American girl", thereby implying that she will never have the European poise that prevents Humbert from expressing his emotion with Charlotte, whatever these emotions may be. When she dances, what makes her look pitiful, both in the eyes of her fellow dancers and those of the audience, is her complete denial of the most commonplace rules of proxemics. She literally throws herself at the partners she desires, forgetting that before reaching that degree of physical proximity it is necessary to engage in what Dr Zempf calls "the mating ritual". Charlotte's body expresses what her words dare not express, as when she whispers in Quilty's ear about what the audience supposes is a casual sexual encounter.
- 20 In the whole movie, sex cannot be explicitly stated, due to the laws of censorship. So it is either made apparent by the constant displays of bodies, which puts Humbert in the position of the voyeur twice in the film (peeping over a book as Lolita plays with a hula hoop delineating her hips, and later on at the summer dance), or hinted at by several sexual innuendoes. These are too numerous to be mentioned here but one should distinguish between sexual puns that are explicitly meant as such, from those for which a character may perceive a double meaning. Among the first type of sexual references, one can quote Jean Farlow who explains that she and her husband are "both broad-minded" thus hinting at a potential swingers practice. Or Charlotte's pun on the word "peace/piece" when she offers a tour of her house. In the second category, there is Quilty's grin when Charlotte explains that Lolita is about to have "her cavity filled" by his uncle or the juxtaposition of the word "cherry pie" with a close-up of Lolita's face.

During the game of chess, Charlotte is afraid that Humbert is "going to take her Queen" and he replies that it is certainly his intention. Here the movie expects the spectator to catch the pun, thus placing him or her on an equal footing with Humbert. In this sex-crazed America, Humbert appears quite tame. In fact the only sexual pun he makes suggests that he is not sexually aroused by this constant display of bodies ready to be embraced: when Charlotte tells him that when she is in his arms, she "go[es] limp as a noodle" he replies that he knows the feeling. Obviously she fails to catch the nuance.

21 Ultimately, it seems that *Lolita's* America is purely a fantasy designed in Humbert's deranged but omnipotent mind. Contrary to the novel and despite the discreet voice-over, the movie is not told by a first-person narrator but it seems that everything, from Kubrick's *mise en scène* and editing to the way the actors incarnate their characters, always on the verge of overacting, is filtered by Humbert's point of view. In the novel, even if everything is channelled through Humbert's voice, it still seems possible to distinguish his overstatements and his prejudice. The reader can feel pity for Charlotte and can loathe the actions of Humbert as a character. In the movie, this possible distancing of the character from the narrator is impossible. Although technically point of view shots are strangely limited in a movie that deals with its protagonist's voyeurism, the audience perceives the diegetic reality as it is perceived by Humbert. The America he discovers and tries to understand is a pure creation of his mind, as are Charlotte, Lolita and even Quilty, as if they were emanations from his unconscious bubbling up to the surface of his creative bent. His awkward body, lost in a world of loose physical relations, is the main point of the audience's identification. The audience thus feels annoyed by Charlotte and paranoid when Quilty appears. The latter two and Lolita are, to quote Corliss, "characters as seen by the distorting eye of Humbert, the casting director of his fantasy" (Corliss 43). The promised travelogue with its descriptions of strange foreign lands and their weird inhabitants might have well been the mental construct of its main character, thus revealing the fundamental lie upon which any fiction claiming to reproduce the real is based. As Nabokov writes: "It is childish to study a work of fiction in order to gain information about a country or about a social class or about the author" (Nabokov 2006, 360).

22 In his afterword to the novel Nabokov writes:

Although everybody should know that I detest symbols and allegories [...], an otherwise intelligent reader who flipped through the first part described *Lolita* as "Old Europe debauching young America", while another flipper saw in it "Young America debauching old Europe". (Nabokov 2006, 357)

23 This dilemma is both simplified and resolved in Kubrick's adaptation. Simplified in the sense that debauchery is entirely placed on the American side and that this is a love story from the start, not a lust story becoming a story about love. Solved in the sense that "Young America" may well be shown as a pure European fantasy, a pure construct of "the formal and civilized exterior of Humbert's Europeanism" (Nelson 70). In a way, this study of *Lolita* seen as the travelogue of an intellectual European in the New World makes it possible to say that Humbert is the movie's great symbolic organizer, even if he is not technically its narrator. The written mention of Humbert's death superimposed over the punctured face of a painted lady is ironically meant, as John Ray writes in the foreword, "for the benefit of old-fashioned readers who wish to follow the destinies of 'real' people behind the 'true' story" (Nabokov 2006, 2). This sudden oscillation in the audience's belief as to the nature of the movie (fact or fiction) points at the constructed nature of the movie itself but also turns Humbert into the audience's

main point of identification. Believing that characters somehow keep on existing beyond the limits of representation to end up dying like individuals in the world outside fiction is powerful enough for the audience to side with Humbert, no matter how contemptible and punishable his deeds might have been. Kubrick's *Lolita* is the posthumous reminiscence of Humbert's travels in the America of his mind.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bégout, Bruce. *Lieu commun : le motel américain*. Paris: Allia, 2003.
- Bordwell, David and Kristin Thompson. *Film Art: an Introduction*. 1979. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997.
- Corliss, Richard. *Lolita*. London: BFI, 1994.
- Crèvecoeur, J. Hector St. John de. *Letters from an American Farmer and Sketches from 18th-century America*. 1782. Ed. Albert E. Stone. Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1986.
- Gardies, André. *L'Espace au cinéma*. Paris : Méridiens Klincksieck, 1993.
- Jenkins, Greg. *Stanley Kubrick and the Art of Adaptation: Three Novels, Three Films*. Jefferson, NC, and London : McFarland, 1997.
- Kagan, Norman. *Le cinéma de Stanley Kubrick*. Paris : Ramsay, 1979.
- Metz, Christian. *Le signifiant imaginaire : psychanalyse et cinéma*. 1977. Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1993.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita*. 1955. London: Penguin Red Classics, 2006.
- . *Vladimir Nabokov: Selected Letters 1940-77*. Eds. Nabokov, Dmitri and Bruccoli, Matthew J. London: Vintage, 1990.
- . *The Annotated Lolita*. Ed. Alfred Appel Jr. New York: Vintage, 1991.
- Nelson, Thomas Allen. *Kubrick: Inside a Film Artist's Maze*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.
- Stam, Robert. "Film and narration: two versions of *Lolita*". In *Twentieth Century American Fiction on Screen*. Ed. Palmer, R. Barton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 106-126.

NOTES

1. The letter was sent to Victor C. Thaller on September 17, 1958.
2. This remark about the first use of the voice-over in the movie does not apply to other instances of voice-over in the same film. Some of them use the present tense, some are direct addresses to the audience while others are heard simultaneously to what images show.
3. A similar shot, albeit from a high angle, can be seen at the beginning of *The Shining* (1980).
4. See for example http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=80000

ABSTRACTS

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the representation of America as seen by a European in Kubrick's *Lolita*. The movie is understood as a fictionalized travelogue where Humbert Humbert is the great organizer whose point of view channels the representation of America and determines the way actors incarnate characters. Despite claims that the movie does not render visually the travels of Humbert and Lolita through the United States, Kubrick anchors his fiction in a determinate setting. The three levels of American space (poetic, realist, and metafictional) help us to understand Humbert's ironic stance on American culture and his feeling of estrangement in a sex-crazed America.

En analysant la représentation de l'Amérique perçue par un Européen dans le *Lolita* de Kubrick, il est possible d'envisager le film comme travelogue fictif dans lequel le point de vue d'Humbert Humbert médiatiserait la représentation de l'Amérique et la façon dont les acteurs incarnent les personnages. En dépit de certaines critiques qui reprochent au film d'être une version anglicisée du roman de Nabokov, Kubrick ancre sa fiction dans un espace déterminé. Les trois niveaux d'américanité de l'espace (poétique, réaliste, métafictionnel) permettent de mieux saisir l'ironie avec laquelle Humbert observe la culture américaine et son aliénation dans une Amérique obsédée par le sexe.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Lolita, Amérique, cinéma, espace américain, culture américaine

Keywords: Lolita, America, cinema, American space, American culture

AUTHORS

ZACHARY BAQUÉ

Maitre de conférences

Université Toulouse 2-Le Mirail

zachary.baque@univ-tlse2.fr