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Shadow of a Double: Taking a Closer Look at the Opening of Kubrick's *Lolita*

Lara Delage-Toriel

- 1 Contrary to what the title may suggest, this paper does not deal with a comparison between Stanley Kubrick and Alfred Hitchcock. Were I to refer to Hitchcock, I think I would rather discuss his affinities with Nabokov, with whom he almost collaborated and shares, among other things, a liking for cameo appearances, two of which were included in his screenplay (once under the guise of Vivian Darkbloom (Nabokov 1974, 146), whose anagrammatic function is pointedly marked, and once as a butterfly hunter giving *Lolita* and Humbert a brief taxonomic lesson (Nabokov 1974, 128)) but are absent from Kubrick's version. One could also trace similarities between some of the ingredients in *Lolita*'s plot and those we find in *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943): both films present the uncommon relationship between a teenage girl and an older relative, and are set in typically peaceful small towns, with a main male character who skillfully conceals his dark crimes behind the amiable mask he parades before society. But my analogy will stop here, for the wink at Hitchcock's film essentially serves the purpose of making the word 'doubt' shimmer behind the word 'double'. This shimmer reflects the doubts that first arose in my own mind when I started noticing certain puzzling aspects of duality in the opening sequence of Kubrick's *Lolita*. This sequence, which stages the duel between Humbert Humbert and his *doppelgänger* (literally 'double-goer' in German), Clare Quilty, is in my own opinion, one of Kubrick's most successful instances of creative rewriting.
- 2 Much has already been said about Peter Sellers' clownish antics, his protean improvised impersonations, as well as the brilliant *trouville* of the Roman ping-pong game, that blow out of proportion the parodic dimension which Nabokov had originally injected into the scene in his novel. Still more importantly, Kubrick reshuffles the chronology of the original narrative, in which the confrontation and murder of Quilty only appeared towards the end. According to the director, this major structural

upheaval was made in agreement with the novelist as they were working on the screenplay together in Hollywood. In a 1970 interview with Joseph Gelmis, Kubrick makes the following statement:

I discussed this approach with Nabokov at the very outset, and he liked it. One of the basic problems with the book, and with the film even in its modified form, is that the main narrative interest boils down to the question, "Will Humbert get Lolita into bed?" And you find in the book that, despite the brilliant writing, the second half has a drop in narrative interest after he does. We wanted to avoid this problem in the film, and Nabokov and I agreed that if we had Humbert shoot Quilty without explanation at the beginning, then throughout the film the audience would wonder what Quilty was up to. Of course, you obviously sacrifice a great ending by opening with Quilty's murder, but I felt it served a worthwhile purpose. (Phillips 88)

- 3 By making explicit a murder which in the novel remains a tantalizing question mark until the end, Kubrick transforms the traditional 'whodunnit?' of detective stories into a 'whydunnit?' which foregrounds the relationship between Humbert and his double, and thus relegates the relationship between Humbert and Lolita to a position that is less prominent than in the novel. This choice ties in with Kubrick's overall decision to emphasize Quilty's presence throughout, partly as a response to Sellers' incredibly colorful and versatile acting, and partly to compensate for the impossibility of doing full justice to the erotically-loaded relationship between Humbert and Lolita. Quilty, who in the novel is never fleshed out and dwells in the shadows until the duel, here appears in full view (especially for the film viewer) in no less than sixteen out of thirty-five narrative units, as Mario Falsetto has pointed out (Falsetto 18). Furthermore, whereas the novel begins and ends with the word 'Lolita,' Kubrick has the film open and close with the word 'Quilty,' called out by Humbert/Mason. The confrontation between Humbert and Quilty thus produces a rival story to the main story, capable of sustaining a tension throughout.
- 4 The final sequence of the film mirrors the opening sequence, but, strangely enough, it isn't a perfect double and one may notice several discrepancies between these two versions of the same event. The most obvious difference is in the soundtrack: whereas in the first case, there is a subtle interweaving of 'real' sounds—the bottles, the harp—and the soundtrack music—a tune on the harpsichord rife with tension—, in the second instance, the soundtrack music, this time a lush symphonic piece, gushes forth with such melodramatic intensity that the 'real' sounds are completely drowned. The other conspicuous difference is in the editing: in the final sequence there is a fade to black after Humbert calls Quilty that elides their entire dialogue as well as the shooting itself in order to focus eventually on the image of the painting, which serves as a backdrop to the final end credit or epilogue. But there are more subtle differences that show that the two sequences are distinct not only because of the editing, but also because the takes themselves aren't the same. For instance James Mason doesn't hit the same bottles, nor do we find the same bottle in Quilty's veiled lap, and Mason doesn't look at the harp's cords at the same moment—to take but a few examples. This kind of detail requires very close examination, and few spectators will have noticed the trick on first viewing the film, in the same way that Nabokov's playful embedding of Quilty's name within the narrative is unlikely to be perceived by the first-time reader. In both cases, the artist's trick is so deft that it may only meet the eye of the curious or studious gazer. Indeed Kubrick is at pains to make us believe that the two takes are the same: the point of view is the same, Mason's trajectory follows the same course and he makes the same gestures (for example that hand, briefly resting on the pillar, then plucking

the harp's cord, or else the twitching of his facial features). So why not give us the same take of the scene? Is this to suggest that these are only 'versions' of a reality that we will never encompass?

- 5 The second 'doubt' that springs from a double in this sequence comes from the painting behind which Quilty dies. It is the 18th-century portrait of a young lady in the style of Gainsborough. This device, whereby Humbert shoots Quilty through the painting, is entirely Kubrick's invention. If we consider the screenplay Nabokov published some years later, in 1974—and which isn't exactly that which he composed for Kubrick—, we shall notice that the sequence has been greatly expanded and transformed by the film director. Thus when Humbert fires

the impact of a bullet sets a rocking chair performing on the landing. Then he hits a picture (photograph of Duk-Duk ranch which Lolita had visited). Next a large ugly vase is starred and smashed. Finally, on his fourth fire, he stops a grandfather clock in its clacking stride. The fifth bullet wounds Quilty, and the last one fells him on the upper landing. (Nabokov 1974, 2)

- 6 Kubrick thus replaces the photograph of Duk-Duk ranch by this portrait *à la* Gainsborough, which becomes Humbert's main target: it receives indeed all six bullets mentioned by Nabokov in the published screenplay. The use of the painting as a screen to conceal Quilty's death may be considered a skilful manner of avoiding the censor's disapproval. But Kubrick turns this device into something more: he forces our gaze onto this object by a quick succession of zooms in—a focal shift that he rarely resorts to in the rest of the film, and which marks a departure from the predominantly naturalistic camera work, by drawing attention to itself as a metafictional gesture. It is indeed quite clear that we are not given Humbert's point of view here. The piercing gaze of the snarling tiger—a faint echo of the “polar bear skin on the slippery floor” (Nabokov 1955, 335) in Nabokov's novel?—also stresses this intensely scopic experience, as it sends our own gaze back to us. Likewise, Quilty's invitation to Humbert to attend executions acts as a waggish comment on our witnessing of his own execution: we are also “just watching”. “Do you like watching, Captain?”, he asks Humbert. Yes, we do like watching, and films do play with this scopophilia.¹

- 7 This metafictional gesture that dramatizes our own forced attention reminds me of what Roland Barthes writes concerning the 'punctum', as opposed to the 'studium' in his study of the art of photography, *La Chambre claire*. This is how he defines the 'punctum':

Le second élément vient casser (ou scander) le studium. Cette fois, ce n'est pas moi qui vais le chercher (comme j'investis de ma conscience souveraine le champ du studium), c'est lui *qui part de la scène*, comme une flèche, et vient me *percer*. Un mot existe en latin pour désigner cette *blessure*, cette *piqûre*, cette *marque* faite par un instrument pointu ; ce mot m'irait d'autant mieux qu'il renvoie aussi à l'idée de ponctuation et que les photos dont je parle sont en effet comme ponctuées, parfois même *mouchetées*, de *ces points sensibles* ; précisément, ces *marques*, ces *blessures* sont des *points*. Ce second élément qui vient déranger le studium, je l'appellerai donc le *punctum* ; car *punctum*, c'est aussi : *piqûre*, *petit trou*, *petite tache*, *petite coupure*—et aussi *coup de dés*. Le *punctum* d'une photo, c'est ce *hasard* qui, en elle, me *point* (mais aussi me *meurtrit*, me *poigne*). (Barthes 1980, 48-49)

- 8 The puncturing of the painting by the six bullets is a literal illustration of the 'punctum', that “little hole” renting the surface of the screen and coming to fetch us as the camera zooms in on the painting. By forcing our gaze onto this painting, Kubrick loads it not only with lead but also with meaning. Although the lady's clothing is

different, it is quite recognizably a metaphorical substitute for the eponymous nymph: our very first view of the painting's 'model' [17:37] shows her with a broad hat that is reminiscent of the hat in the painting; the young girl lies in a typically pictorial position, that of the recumbent nymph, almost a nude, gazing, motionless, at the man who is fated to depict her. Like the painting, she appears to be a decorative element within her surroundings, on a par with the flowers—lilies—which Charlotte proudly exhibits. The parallel between *Lolita* and these flowers is established through the very phonemes that compose the word “lilies” (Nabokov 1955, 43): they have the lilting quality, that “lyrical lilt” (Nabokov 1973, 26) which Nabokov had appreciated in the word “*Lolita*”. The parallel is further brought home in the very syntax of Charlotte's presentation: “That was my Lo, and these are my lilies” (Nabokov 1955, 43). Moreover, one may notice that the girl's pose in the film sets off the curves of her body, that form an S: it is the Serpentine line, or line of beauty, which the 18th-century painter William Hogarth established as a chief criterion for successful painting in his essay, *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753). In the opening sequence of the film, the trajectory traced by the six holes also highlights the serpentine line of the girl's silhouette [11:38].

- 9 These holes that pierce the young lady's body announce what the film will abstain from showing: the violation of her young life through violent sexual penetration. The shooting of the painting seems all the more appropriate since it is in keeping with Humbert's comparison of the gun to a phallus: “We must remember that a pistol is the Freudian symbol of the Ur-father's central forelimb” (Nabokov, 1955, 245—for once, Humbert seems quite happy to endorse Freudian theory).² The painting also directs our attention towards the triangular relationship between *Lolita*, Quilty and Humbert. The intimate connection between Quilty and *Lolita* is suggested by the fact that when the first bullet hits the girl's dress, it is Quilty who moans with pain, as though this were his crowning histrionic act, a case of ventriloquism. One may also notice another significant element: the shadow of the banister, that projects bars onto the painting ([11:30]), a visual metaphor of *Lolita*'s confinement, which reminds one of those bars in the *Jardin des Plantes* which Nabokov uses in his afterword (Nabokov 1955, 353) to characterize Humbert's imprisonment.
- 10 Finally, the choice of a period painting is in tune with the rest of the furniture in Quilty's mansion—with its neoclassical statues, ornate pillars, antique harp and chandelier—, but it also bespeaks Humbert's creative refashioning of a mythical creature derived from his European culture—as when he describes the American landscape in terms of Claude Lorrain and El Greco paintings (Nabokov 1955, 172)—, far removed from the modern American girl *Lolita* really is. As I have shown in an article on Nabokov's pictorial representation of women,³ one finds a recurrent tendency in Nabokov's fiction to conflate the charms of “old masters and young mistresses,” to borrow a pun from *Ada* (Nabokov 1969, 4). The ironic assimilation of *Lolita* to a painting is further underlined in the film when Quilty cynically compares human beings to potential pieces of furniture. As he approaches the painting, he tells Humbert: “I've got some nice friends who could come and keep you company. You could use them as pieces of furniture. There's one guy who looks just like a bookcase”. Before she even appears, *Lolita* is already presented as an iconic figure and an artefact. The bullets puncturing *Lolita* may metaphorically kill her, yet as a work of art, she remains immortal.⁴ It is worth marking that there is no mention of her death in the text of the epilogue. To a first-time viewer, not all these signs are perceptible, and in fact the

shooting of the painting may also induce the spectator to make false assumptions, in the same way that the Carmen intertext in the novel sends us on a wild goose chase by making us imagine Humbert will be Lolita's Don José and he will kill her. Kubrick cancels out some of the novel's suspense by staging Quilty's death at the start of the film but the narrow focus on the painting opens up new vistas of interpretation that will sustain the intrigue.

- 11 However there is still more to this painting, and here is where I reach my other crucial enigma. If one pays close attention to the sequence, one cannot help noticing that the portrait of the lady is already shown, in pristine condition, earlier on in the sequence, when James Mason first enters the mansion. Standing upright, but on its side, against the entrance wall, it seems to be waiting to be used in the next take, as though the set designer had forgotten to conceal some of the props on the set. It would seem a rather bold assumption to attribute this odd doubling to a mere oversight: as a trained photographer, Kubrick was extremely conscientious about the construction of images. The first photograph that earned him money (25 dollars) at the age of 16 was of a street newspaper vendor on the day of the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt. The photograph appears to be taken off the cuff, rather in the manner of Cartier-Bresson's "*instant décisif*". The vendor seems immersed in some kind of reverie, perhaps induced by the news that surrounds him, but in fact he was made to adopt a very specific pose in order to conjure up this illusion of spontaneity. I believe the same pretence is at work in this opening sequence of *Lolita*. Each object has a specific function and like Quilty's acrobatic skits, the surface style of the house's interior yields the key to Quilty's inner space. Its ill-assorted clutter, combining high and low forms of cultures, the ping-pong table and the harp, the statues and the boxing gloves, down to the sound patterns, that adroitly combine the twang of the harpsichord with the sharp resonance of the glass bottles, all this reflects the chaotic personality of Humbert's alter ego. Within this baroque *bric-à-brac*, the painting appears as just one more element in the decor; a redundant object at that, since it isn't a unique work of art. The double occurrence of the painting would thus seem to betray its bogus nature, its mere function as a prop on an eminently theatrical stage.
- 12 Yet the devaluing of the objet doesn't necessarily entail a loss in significance. Far from being gratuitous and purely ornamental, it would seem that it enounces a truth, a truth that reflects one of Paul Cézanne's most famous statements: "Je vous dois la vérité en peinture, et je vous la dirai" (to Emile Mâle, 23 October 1905). In the same way that Cézanne resorts to another art (that of writing), to express a truth he nevertheless professes to express in his own art, Kubrick uses painting to encapsulate a truth about his creative gesture. For Humbert shoots the picture in the same way as Kubrick shoots his own picture. Only Kubrick's picture is a moving image. The advantage of a painting is that it is static, and is therefore easier to grasp and fix. As all metaphors, it condenses, and even cristallises the creative process. I am using the verb 'cristallise' not in reference to Stendhal's famous theory of cristallisation in his essay on love, but rather to Jacques Gerstenkorn in his study of metaphor in films. In this case, the painting would correspond to what Gerstenkorn calls a "micro-cristallisation" (Gerstenkorn 74), a cristallisation in miniature. Gesterkorn defines 'cristallisation' as "toute mise en abyme fondée sur un jeu de ressemblance" (Gerstenkorn 70). According to him

L'insertion d'une cristallisation dans le cours du récit produit un effet énonciatif d'autant plus fort qu'elle donne au spectateur une vision plus ou moins totalisante de l'œuvre qu'elle réfléchit. (Gesterkorn 77)

- 13 This is precisely the case here: the painting acts as a means of *mise en abyme* that brings into perspective the elusive reality of *Lolita/Lolita* as pure representation. What we have here is the reproduction of a reproduction that is itself a reproduction, the picture of a picture that may or may not be authentic, and that is, in any case, an artistic reproduction of reality. This regression seems to echo Nabokov's own perception of reality, as enounced in an interview: "you can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you can never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable" (Nabokov 1973, 11). Nabokov expresses the same belief in the pregnant parenthesis that follows the term 'reality' in his afterword to *Lolita*: "(one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes)" (Nabokov 1955, 354). The portrait of the young girl performs that very same function: it is a quote that frames *Lolita/Lolita*. One may also tentatively suggest that the presence of the portrait in the entrance highlights the fact that there is an Ur-*Lolita* that is *always already* there, in the wings: let us not forget that when Nabokov's Humbert ushers us into his story, *Lolita* is already represented as a double of Annabel. If *Lolita* is always already there, we might also venture that she is never really there—what repetition expresses is indeed the impossibility of authenticity in representation.
- 14 Although the film marks in many ways a clear departure from Nabokov's novel, Kubrick also shadows Nabokov like a *doppelgänger*, and his choice of a pictorial *mise en abyme* is remarkably—if unconsciously—'faithful' to Nabokov's aesthetics. As we watch the end of the film, we cannot help calling to mind Nabokov's own statement about endings: "I think that what I would welcome at the close of a book of mine is a sensation of its world receding in the distance and stopping somewhere there, suspended afar like a picture in a picture: *The Artist's Studio* by Van Bock" (Nabokov 1973, 72-73). One of the pitfalls of the film is its objective representation of a figure, *Lolita*, that is a figment of one man's phantasm. By shooting *Lolita*, Kubrick has killed, in some sense, Nabokov's creature. The shooting of the portrait may thus also be a reflection on the relationship between representation and death, the portrait of the lady functioning here as a psychopomp. These preoccupations run throughout Nabokov's œuvre until his very last novel, *The Original of Laura*, which also stages a process of *mise en abyme* by featuring within its own pages the creation of a novel, *My Laura*, the heroin of which is also the main protagonist of *The Original of Laura*. The main storyline of *My Laura* seems eerily germane to the issues this paper has been grappling with, and thus *My Laura* will be given the final word: "The 'I' of the book is a neurotic and hesitant man of letters, who destroys his mistress in the act of portraying her" (Nabokov 2009, 121).

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NOTES

1. Ironically, the spectator's scopophilia is frustrated by Quilty's death behind the screen of the painting.
2. The film displays other innuendoes of this kind, as when Charlotte strokes this same pistol, formerly owned by the late Mr. Haze, while fondly reminiscing about him, or when Humbert spills its bullets at the close of a scene of sexual anti-climax. Many thanks to Zachary Baqué for reminding me of this.
3. "Brushing through 'veiled values and translucent undertones': Nabokov's Pictorial Approach to Women." *Transatlantica* 1 (2006). 22 October 2010. <http://transatlantica.revues.org/index760.html>

4. This obviously reflects the final notes of the novel, which proclaim *Lolita*'s immortality as a work of art, alongside "the secret of durable pigments" (Nabokov 1955, 352).

ABSTRACTS

The opening sequence of Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita* is one of the film's most memorable moments, one which immediately sets a darkly humorous tone, thanks in part to Peter Sellers' virtuoso impersonations and spirit of improvisation. But beyond these spectacular aspects, certain apparently marginal features in the composition of the sequence have held our attention, notably because their significance is not immediately perceptible. These consist in motifs of duplication at various levels—especially in the editing and the make-up of the set—that offer important hermeneutic leads regarding Kubrick's *mise en scène* of representation itself.

La séquence d'ouverture de la *Lolita* de Stanley Kubrick présente l'un des moments les plus mémorables du film. Grâce en partie aux imitations virtuoses de Peter Sellers et à son esprit d'improvisation, elle donne immédiatement la couleur, celle de l'humour noir, qui préside au film. Cependant, au-delà de ces aspects spectaculaires, certains traits apparemment marginaux dans la composition de cette séquence ont retenu notre attention, notamment parce que leur signification n'est pas immédiatement perceptible. Il s'agit là de motifs de duplication ou de dédoublement à divers niveaux (tout particulièrement le montage et le décor) qui offrent d'importantes pistes herméneutiques concernant la mise en scène, par Kubrick, de la représentation elle-même.

INDEX

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