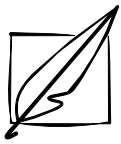

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A case for rewriting *Lolita*

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ABSTRACT

This paper calls for new versions, or rewritings (Lefevere 1992), of Nabokov's 1955 (in) famous novel *Lolita*. The call is a reaction to the features found in Adrian Lyne's 1997 film adaptation and the respective AVT versions of Lyne's and Kubrick's 1962 adaptations, which seem to support popular visions of *Lolita* that do not fit in with current sensitivities regarding the topic nor, it is argued, with a deeper, more careful reading of Nabokov's work. For years, there have been calls for *Lolita* or some of its adaptations to be cancelled as indecent or immoral, while many of those who market the Lolita 'brand' do so from a very similar (smutty) interpretation of the story. This study sets out to show how *Lolita* can serve the purpose of denouncing child abuse and sexual exploitation, and there is ample textual evidence in the novel to prove it.

Keywords: rewriting, AVT (audiovisual translation), child abuse, Lolita, Nabokov, Kubrick, Lyne.

1. Introduction. A false dichotomy and a paradox?

The aim of this study is to revisit certain interpretations of Nabokov's novel *Lolita* (1955), i.e., its two film adaptations of the same name, by Kubrick (1962) and Lyne (1997), along with their AVT versions, and a traditional widespread image of what *Lolita* symbolises or what a 'Lolita' may be. A secondary goal is to further develop a previous study (Zabalbeascoa 2016) on the effects of censorship and prejudice in audiovisual translation (AVT) as well as in critical and social receptions of *Lolita*. Herein, *Lolita*, in italics, refers to any existing version of the story, and Lolita, with no italics, to the character. The theoretical framework is André Lefevere's (1992) 'rewriting' theory. This theory considers translation to be part of a broader concept,

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rewriting, which is useful for our purposes because it also includes film adaptations. In a sense Lefevere's theory is a precursor of transmediality, allowing as it does for multimodality as well as shifts in purpose, as found in *Skopostheorie* (Vermeer 1978), for example. The methodology used is an interdisciplinary qualitative analysis of selected examples and features gleaned from intensive readings of the novel, multiple viewings of the two film versions and their subtitles, and a review of scholarly work on the topic. The examples and their analyses are a synthesis of the data collected from the samples found in the primary sources (the novel, the film adaptations, and their subtitles), and in scholarly work (e.g., Biltereyst 2015; Richards 2012; Duckett 2014; Zabalbeascoa 2016). The hypothesis is that the film adaptations and their respective AVTs are not entirely satisfactory renderings or representations of the novel, allowing room for new translations and even new film adaptations. A related hypothesis is that new adaptations from more sophisticated and nuanced interpretations may change a traditional popular reception of Nabokov's work. *Lolita* is often accused of promoting underage sexual promiscuity and portraying certain men as victims of sexual provocation or condemnation by an intolerant society. In a completely different light, *Lolita* can be seen as a story warning about the dangers of (domestic) child abuse and sexual assault, where a 12-year-old girl does not need to be a heroine of any sort to earn the right to be seen as the victim. Victims are defined solely by the crimes or accidents they suffer, not by any good or bad action or moral quality, especially when they have no blame and no means to avoid their fate. From this approach it also becomes clear that new improved audiovisual translations can only provide better renderings of the film directors' adaptations, not necessarily of the novel. Even if the AVT translators consult the novel they are still bound to offer a rendering of the film director's version, including ways in which it may depart from the book it is adapting. Better ways to get closer to Nabokov's work include: (i) a completely different sort of marketing of the *Lolita* brand, so to speak, a shift from referring to *Lolita* always in relation to non-normative romance and symbols sexual precociousness, fantasies, and femmes fatales, towards seeing the pre-teen character as a victim of child abuse, and how fantasies like the notion of nymphets are indeed myths; (ii) a shift in academic and critical studies and reviews of the novel; (iii) the production of new film adaptations, also with more AVT quality for foreign distribution.

The reasons why certain feminists and guardians of moral values would rather see *Lolita* forgotten when not actively boycotted (Klemesrud 1981, Freixas 2022) may be based on the same interpretation of the story

as those who market *Lolita* as a smutty romantic story. This is the false dichotomy: either you defend morality and attack the promotion of sex between little girls and older men, or you defend non-normative love affairs, including large age gaps, and the seductive power of little girls over older men. It is false and paradoxical because these opposing positions, 'either you are for or against' are essentially based the same reading of the story, and it is also false because the whole dichotomy (moralist censors versus amoralist libertarians) shuts out any other interpretations, some of which can be sustained with considerable textual evidence.

2. What we are dealing with in AVT. From revisiting to rewriting

Following Lefevere's theory, each film version is a rewriting of the novel, and Lyne's film can be said to be a rewriting of Kubrick as well as Nabokov; and each AVT version is a rewriting of the English-language film. Given that discussions about translation are often framed as a debate about errors, in the case of *Lolita* one would like to know if any 'errors' are the cause or a consequence of misconceptions about Nabokov's text. From an ideological perspective, what might be considered an error for some could be accepted as a necessary intervention or correction by interest groups intending to set the record straight, in one direction or the other. And what remains to be seen is whether the translator is fully aware of the broad range of possible interpretations (and vested interests or hidden agendas) or whether the choice or selection of an 'unsuspecting' or ill-prepared translator might even turn out to be an effective means of censorship, as pointed out in an earlier study of the same topic (Zabalbeascoa 2016).

The idea behind this study is not to tell translators how to translate certain words or utterances from the film, but to go into a deeper understanding of what is at stake and what the options are (or were, for existing translations), and the consequences of going for one option over another. Why *Lolita*? For several reasons, including, *Lolita* has long been presented as controversial or misunderstood (Lemay 2002). Its story and style are complex, including many devices and features of sophisticated storytelling and character portrayal. As if this were not enough there have also been attempts to (over)simplify its contents and contribution, rendering *Lolita* both as a story and a term, an empty signifier, whereby almost anyone can adjudicate almost any meaning to it (she-devil, temptress, wayward child, victim, rebel, manipulator, trendsetter, heroine, a story of forbidden

love, of sin, pornography, patriarchy, drama, comedy, crime, adventure, road trip, parody, social satire and observation, etc.). And while ambiguity and polysemy are powerful features of any work of art, when an artist's proposal is simply stripped of meaning and purpose so other people can appropriate it then this does not seem akin to an enriching exercise of hermeneutics.

The kind of interpreting that goes into this study is a critical look at multiple sources, based as much as possible on verbatim samples from the works under study, in response to possible preconceptions or prejudice about *Lolita* based more on hearsay or ideological agendas that people may be extremely reluctant to change.

In this respect, after so many decades since *Lolita* first appeared, there still seem to be two clearly opposed camps with two distinct hypotheses of what the Lolita theme and character is about. In one camp, we have those who believe that Lolita as a character has a tremendous amount of agency and *Lolita* as a story is a subgenre of romantic drama, love and sex, and is somehow defended and promoted by the author (e.g., Freixas 2022), where age difference is a serious obstacle because of social prejudice. In the other camp (e.g., Burke 2003; Richards 2012; Duckett 2014; Bilteryst 2015), *Lolita* is a story about a dangerous sick man, suffering from antisocial personality disorder who preys on underage girls, and whose cunning and intelligence is wasted on simply achieving his predatory goals. Within the latter interpretation, Lolita, the girl, is essentially a victim, and the author is much more interested in exploring the psyche of the predator, than the girl's. A translator can use one of these two interpretations (or construct a completely new reading, which would be fascinating, too) when searching for solutions to specific lines in the dialogue.

Good examples of this (1 and 2) can be seen when Humbert first lays eyes on Dolores Haze, in an enactment of falling in 'love at first sight' with Lolita, and the dialogue that ensues. In (1), Kubrick 1962, Humbert suddenly agrees to rent a room from Charlotte, Lolita's mother, after making his dislike for the house quite clear. (2) is Lyne's 1997 version of love at first sight.

(1) Charlotte – What was the decisive factor? My garden?
Humbert – I think it was your **cherry pies**.

(2) Charlotte – That's my Lo. … And these are my lilies.
Humbert – I love lilies.
Charlotte – Lily's a nice name, don't you think? Beautiful.
Humbert (sees Lolita, who smiles back at him, and he is riveted)
– Beautiful! … How much did you say the room was?

Kubrick makes Humbert say 'cherry pies' as an extremely vulgar reference to Lolita as a young virgin. Charlotte is not meant to understand this, of course. The fact that it is so outrageous helps to make it unthinkable to her. The audience, however, are given more clues than Charlotte, to enable them to decode this double meaning. For the translator it is a typical problem of translating wordplay, usually one of the hardest things to do in translation. The AVT in several languages that I have had access to (Spanish, German and Italian) simply translate the polite meaning of cherry pies so that all the important revealing details about Humbert's real intentions towards Lolita, and fake love, are lost. And these kinds of challenges for AVT are lost too often and especially at crucial moments like this one, when double meaning or allusion or irony or cynicism are the tools with which Kubrick constructs character portrayal and develops the plot (Neuhaus 2003), including foreshadowing techniques, boosted by the camera work and the musical score. Lyne's lame attempt at double meaning (2) is reduced to the ambiguity of whether 'beautiful' refers to the lilies or Lolita; in Lyne's version, Charlotte is not aware of any double meaning because she has her back turned when Humbert says this while staring at Lolita. (1) sets a trend of wordplay in Kubrick's film, also present in Nabokov, and essential to unlocking certain interpretations, that is largely absent in Lyne, making Lyne's AVT easier, in principle. However, the Spanish subtitles for Lyne are ridden with typos and several questionable solutions. This lends force to the idea that, for some reason, *Lolita*, regardless of its version, tends to be carelessly translated, and for some reason this carelessness plays into the hands of traditional interpretations of the story. In (3) Headmistress Pratt outlines Lolita's school's educational priorities. It is one of the rare occasions that Lyne reflects a playful Nabokov phrase.

(3) Pratt – The school stresses the three Ds. Dramatics, Dancing and Dating. For the modern preadolescent, medieval dates are less vital than weekend ones.

In Nabokov the Ds are four, Dramatics, Dance, Debating, and Dating. This is one of the few AVT wordplay challenges in Lyne's version. The Spanish subtitles (*drama*, *danza y diversión*) highlight the alliteration, sacrificing the key word in the sequence, 'dating'. An alternative could have been "The ABC of our school is…" for the Spanish subtitles opening the way for a solution like "Promovemos nuestro ABC: Actuar, Bailar y Citas", i.e., acting, dancing and dating. The important element of the joke is not the repetition

of Ds but the outlandish proposition of encouraging the girls to date as part of the curriculum. This can be seen as a subtle warning by Nabokov that society has its part to play in either saving little girls from sexual predators or somehow covering up or pushing them towards them. But Lyne does not include enough of these 'warnings' to make the idea stick in the spectator's mind, and the translator misses this opportunity anyway. The Spanish word "diversion" includes any sort of fun, not restricted to or even implying dating boys. Lyne might be compared to a literal-minded translator who is overtly "faithful" in being literal in many of the quotes he lifts from the book, while at the same time, distorting a clear image of the story by being selective in the quotes. And it is in Kubrick's departures from the literal words of the novel that he proves faithful to Nabokov (1, 4 and 5), with Nabokov's blessing let's not forget, by providing a cinematic interpretation of the story of a predatory villain and an unsuspecting victim.

3. Nabokov's roadmap

Of course, a film can depart from the book it is based on as much as it likes, and this in and of itself does not make the adapted version any better or worse, just more or less similar in certain ways. But given the stature of the novel and its author, and its continued social and literary interest, over time, it does seem reasonable to spend some time picking through the intricacies and highlights of Nabokov's (in)famous piece of literature, not least because in this particular case both films are advertised and promoted by mentioning the book, and selling themselves as faithful depictions of the novel, or 'more faithful than the other film' in Lyne's case. For AVT, this raises an interesting issue of whether translators should also base their versions on the original piece of writing, and whether translating the second film should also involve using the first adaptation as a source.

I would like to argue here that neither of the two film adaptations is a fully satisfactory rendering of Nabokov's literary writing, and it would be great to see yet another film adaptation, or online platform series, capable of capturing Nabokov's nuances and playful literary style.

The novelist clearly wanted – and achieved – his work to be included as part of the Great American Novel, with such elements as a long time spent driving around the country in the true tradition of Kerouac and road movies, or the theme of American innocence compared to 'old' Europe. However, the

novel is rich enough to also include elements of the great Russian novelists, like Tolstoy, with their themes and storytelling techniques. Clearly, then, Nabokov's intention is to write something of great literary consequence, and in that respect, time seems to be on his side. Nabokov has managed to insert himself both in the list of Great American Novelists and among the great Russian authors of the 20th century, largely due to his *Lolita*. The story had to have certain characteristics that would allow for all the elements he wished to include in his novel, such as the constant travelling, a literary point of view that enabled an in-depth exploration of human nature (the ultimate theme of all literature) through a case study of antisocial personality disorder. Whatever *Lolita* has as a psychological thriller it is the portrait of the villain's mind and motivations, the downfall and tragedy of an otherwise brilliant mind in a beautiful body (a college teacher and writer with the looks of a film star) that had so much going for him. On the other hand, Nabokov declares he knows nothing about little girls, which is also a clear declaration that the novel is not mostly about, certainly not focused on, the child victim, Dolores Haze. And this is a basic point. To study a criminal's motivation and *modus operandi* it would be a distraction to focus on the victim, and the crime is very clearly one of child abuse. In (4) Kubrick's 1962 Charlotte and Humbert are playing chess. She is struggling, he is bored to tears.

(4) Charlotte – You're going to take my queen? (Lolita comes into view)
Humbert – That was my intention, certainly.

(4) is a key line in the film. Humbert spells out his whole plan and is not afraid to say so to Lolita's mother. He intends to 'take' her 'queen', as in abduct and rape her Lolita. Kubrick reinforces the message by having Lolita come into view just as he says "queen", repeating the same camera work – and musical theme – as in the parody of love at first sight (1) to underline the meaning of the words. For AVT it depends how each language refers to "taking a queen" in chess and possibilities for an essential pun referring to "taking Lolita". If the translated word is "eat" the pun works differently. And if the word is "attack", then the parody of love and romance is lost and the message of violence and villain come across quite bluntly. Example 1 had the AVT advantage of the cherry pies being mentioned only but not shown visually in any way, allowing for the translator to explore punning possibilities from a wide range of anything that such lodgings might offer (buds, flowers, honey, kittens or pussy cats, etc.) which could be used for vulgar innuendo, whereas (4) is restricted by the picture of the game of chess

being played, and even then a skillful translator might make the translated dialogue appear more as a conversation unrelated to the actual game if the pay-off were good enough in terms of coherent character portrayal of the villain. The Spanish subtitle makes Humbert say "That was not my intention". In (5) Kubrick's 1962 Lolita is keeping a hula hoop spinning around her hips. Humbert has placed himself close to her, holding a book. He does not reply to Charlotte's remark.

(5) Lolita – 31, 32, 33, … 51, 52, 53 (interrupted by her mother's presence)
Charlotte – See how relaxed you're getting! (to Humbert)

(5) reveals Lolita's innocence in playing a normal child's game, Humbert's unhealthy pleasure in it, and Charlotte's blindness to Humbert's real character and intentions. It provides the careful translator with an opportunity to recognize the importance of the rather conspicuous use of the gerund in combination with "relaxed", rather than Humbert's excitement as Kubrick's camera work (again) is suggesting. So, translations that say something like "how relaxed you are" (the Spanish version) or even worse, "how tired" or "absorbed [in the book]" (the German version) miss the opportunity to establish a clear audiovisual irony between what is said 'getting relaxed' and what is implied by the picture 'getting excited'. Importantly, Kubrick's Humbert is wearing a robe with apparently nothing underneath, somehow signaling his predatory nature, in direct opposition to Lyne, who has Lolita do some flashing from her robe after placing herself close to Humbert, in a reversal of roles. Lyne is consistent in making Lolita take the initiative.

4. Of child abuse and heroines

Lolita can – and should – also connect to other stories of child abuse and vulnerable children, like *Jane Eyre* (Brontë 1847) or *Oliver Twist* (Dickens 1837), among many more, even though this topic does not stand out as a popular theme in literature courses or book sections, important as it is. This is why agency is an important factor to add to (victims of) child abuse, be it sexual or other forms of physical and psychological aggression against the most defenceless members of society (making their perpetrators among the worst villains). In some stories about child abuse, the child acquires heroic qualities, overcoming violence and injustice with or without help from others. A recent case could be the popular novel adapted for the screen, *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens (2018), very much in the spirit of #metoo.

The value of Dolores (or, Dolly, see example 3) is that she is not a heroine, not through any flaw, but simply because we cannot all be heroes, and because maybe being a victim does not automatically make you a hero or heroine. Dolores' tragedy is that she is fundamentally and ultimately helpless to change her looming fate, which is to die during her teens (presented, as a cryptic spoiler, in the foreword as Mrs. Richard F. Schiller). It is surprising that Mrs. Dolores Schiller, aka Lolita, as a character, could have been so misinterpreted as to be depicted as a child-temptress, in the collective minds of many people, as weaponizing her charms and having at least as much responsibility, if not more, for dragging a man to his doom for having the kind of "love" that does not fit within society's norms. Dolores suffers a case of victim blaming by both pornographers who go on to create a whole new genre of pornography around the Lolita theme; and, equally from certain do-gooders who blame Nabokov for starting the whole trend, allegedly as a promoter of nymphets, and defender of the adult male victims of little girls who lure men to entrapment, with their siren qualities of Greek mythology. Adrian Lyne exploits this approach very much, whereas Kubrick offers key clues that he is in the other camp. It is these key clues that must be carefully considered in AVT. I am not saying how to translate them, but I am saying that at least they must be considered, and therefore they require a translator capable of considering them. To deliberately hire a translator who cannot be expected to be adequately sensitive to such features is, to my mind, a form of censorship, in complex works like this one, prone to misinterpretation.

What is the message or moral of the story in each one of its versions? What are the rights and wrongs? What are its values? Translators need to have answers for these questions to make their translations meaningful. Now that it has become popular to update certain classics, or modern classics, like *Snow White* (upcoming version), or *Mighty Thor* (2022), these questions are even more relevant, and they raise further questions about whether *Lolita* could have its own updated, politically corrected version, or whether it just requires a different marketing strategy. To see Dolores in the context of the theme of child abuse a brief, necessarily incomplete, list is provided below.

- Victims of predators who carry some blame (e.g. carelessness), with a lesson – moral – on how to be better or avoid the 'blameful' behaviour. A prime example would be *Little Red Riding Hood*, who really should have heeded her mother and not spoken to strangers, aka wolves, in unsafe environments.
- Mistreated but have enough heroic traits to lead them to some form of happy ending, like *Jane Eyre* or *Matilda* (Dahl 1988).

- Very 21st century 'kick-ass' kind of heroines who can get out of any kind of situation, and none of their actions are to be questioned morally, because they are female and their antagonists are male, and history owes them that. Prime example is *Where the Crawdads Sing*, the story of a poor little girl who suffers tremendous abuse and neglect, and prejudice. And all this seems to justify her as a murderess if one is to buy into the way this novel/film is marketed and reviewed.

These types of female characters are child victims and make their way towards a happy ending one way or another, and most of them have agency, except for *Little Red Riding Hood*, who is powerless against the wolf and needs a woodcutter to come and save her. So, updating *Little Red Riding Hood* presumably involves empowering her more or challenging gender roles (EduBirdie™ 2023), as Hollywood is doing now with its female protagonists. Lolita is an uncomfortable fit in these classic categories. She is a victim, but there is nothing heroic about her, and her ending is tragic. The point of the story is that a child (or anyone else) does not need to do anything wrong or carry any blame to be a victim. Crucially, one does not have to belikeable or good to be a victim worthy of empathy and sympathy, nor does being a victim make you a hero simply because you are a victim. Dolores Haze may be 'naughty' but not in the way Little Red Riding Hood is. The whole *Little Red Riding Hood* story hinges on the premise of listen to your mother, and do not talk to strangers, or bad things can happen. The ways in which Dolores is naughty or bad (a brat) are not tied to what happens to her in the story, nor would "being good" have saved her, unlike Riding Hood. The double lock that seals Dolores's fate is that she thinks Quilty can save her, and he is just another predator. Dolly's alleged defects are no different from what is associated to normal traits for a girl of her age. Humbert, the predator, chooses her as his victim "at first sight", so he really knows nothing about her character. The important message about paedophiles and sex crimes is that we should not look into the character of the victims because that is beside the point, but elsewhere, namely two places. One, in the mind of the perpetrator, and the other in the social environment which may foster such crimes and what we can all do to prevent them. And this is precisely why the novel and Kubrick's film are not focused on Dolores other than to portray her as a poor orphaned preteen, who is just as helpless as her mother, Charlotte, to cope with cunning, good-looking predators.

At this point we really need to break down the identity of the female victim, as illustrated in (6), a verbatim quote from the novel in Lyne's *Lolita*.

(6) Voiceover – She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms, she was always Lolita. Light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta.

Dolores Haze, or Dolly (or Lo) is the actual 12-year-old character, whose father has died, whose mother has enough problems of her own, plus her own shortcomings, and Charlotte is therefore ill equipped to shelter or save her daughter from the likes of Humbert. Dolores has her humanity and identity with its good points and her failings, like anyone else.

Lolita is an identity created for Dolores Haze by Humbert, to fit his own "needs" and theories about nymphets (Lemay 2002). Dolly's tragedy is not only abuse, ranging from abduction to continued rape but also a loss of her true identity as Dolores. The irony of this loss of identity is the way the book and the films are often marketed, because this just does more harm to Dolores in stripping her of her true identity, starting with the posters, book covers, synopses, and reviews, insisting on the tropes of Lolita rather than Dolores, e.g. the heart-shaped glasses, the lipstick, the poses. Some say this makes *Lolita* ineligible as recommendable material for a period marked by #metoo.

5. Introducing Lolita

In Adrian Lyne's films, women are repeatedly depicted as scantily dressed in wet clothes to the point that water (a wet look) becomes a male symbol of female desirability and hypersexuality and is a recurrent theme in his films (e.g., *Flashdance* and *9½ Weeks*). Lyne's Lolita is introduced lying on the lawn under a sprinkler, all her clothes see-through wet, just waiting for some man to come and fall in her trap, adequately fitting a popular preconception of what a Lolita is, unfortunately. And, of course, this introduction is just the beginning of a long series of provocative scenes.

The way Kubrick introduces Lolita is quite different. She is also sitting on the lawn, in a bikini, but the key factor in the 1962 version is that she is not actually doing anything, certainly nothing provocative. All the 'love at first sight' is played out in Humbert's head and the supposed romantic scene is turned into a parody. This sets the tone and the trend for the rest of both films (in different ways). So, the translator must be particularly careful to grasp and understand all the hints, connotations, and implications, in

order to accumulate textual evidence for other such scenes as they pile up (4 and 5), or not, as in Lyne's film. Kubrick is well known as a difficult director, in many respects, so a translator would have to reasonably expect difficulties in the text. One of the best examples of this can be found in (1). In this scene, Humbert's evil, cynical personality gets the better of him and he cannot repress some sort of predatory comment to an unsuspecting mother, as part of the sick sense of fun.

(6), quoted straight out of the book, shows that Nabokov is just as difficult as Kubrick. This is a beautifully written declaration of love, like the love at first at sight scenes in both films, and just as fake, but the reader must work a bit to crack its code. Basically, what it shows is that the real name and identity of the character is not Lolita, but Dolores. Although this name is sometimes shortened to Lo or Dolly by friends and family, only the villain refers to her as Lolita. He essentially takes away her humanity and her identity and projects onto her his fantasy about nymphs and gives her a new name. The great misunderstanding, in my view, about this novel is how so many people in society have mistaken Dolores' true identity and character for the figment of a sick man's imagination. In this respect Lolita, no, Dolores, suffers from a double crime: first, at the hands of a paedophile character, and then by large portions of society who buy into this idea of hypersexualised children who lead men to their doom, all represented and lead by Lolita. This would include hypersexualized adaptations to the stage or other media (Klemesrud 1981) more or less along the lines of Lyne's adaptation. Humbert develops a whole (sick) theory around the idea of nymphets. It is clearly stated that nymphs are mythological creatures, which, simply put, means they are not real. However, some people (e.g., de Beauvoir 1960) insist that nymphets are a real thing, a dangerous kind of preteen. This is an intellectual disaster given that there is no science, no evidence to back it up. There are, however, hundreds of thousands of real-life child victims of all kinds of horrendous abuse. So, now, Lolita is synonymous with nymphet and both mean, to many people, girls who are hypersexualized, and can cause all sorts of trouble, and maybe promise some sort of magical sexual experience. The sad irony is that none of this can be inferred from either Kubrick's film or Nabokov's book unless someone is heavily biased to think that way before embarking on viewing the film or reading the book.

People on the conservative side have cried out against the film for their political reasons (e.g. all the forms of censorship each version had to go through before and after publication or release), while at least some progressive feminists (e.g., Klemesrud 1981, Freixas 2022) have warned

about the dangers of *Lolita* from a different political angle but with the same biased interpretation. Moving from prudish, conservative, family values censorship to censorship by progressives and liberals: for both, *Lolita* sets a bad example, and should discreetly be made to disappear from screens and shelves.

The title is a big misnomer, as a complex proposal inviting us to find out about a madman's obsession, but its irony can easily be missed. In any case, the book begins with the declaration of its full title, much clearer in its meaning: *Lolita: The Confessions of a White Widowed Male*.

What lends more plausibility to the double identity of Lolita and Dolores is a similar, almost parallel, dynamic in Humbert's identity. There is another (villainous) character, Claire Quilty, who in the simplest analysis is a kind of alter ego to Humbert. Some critics have ventured the interpretation that Quilty might be a figment of Humbert's imagination, in a situation of some kind of schizophrenia, another imagined character to add to Lolita as a fantasized version of Dolores. In both cases, the more fictional characters, Lolita and Quilty, viz-a-viz the more real ones (Dolores and Humbert) are more carefree, less constrained than Dolores and Humbert by social norms, who have their sulky, antisocial moments, and, most importantly, their tragic side, dying without ever fulfilling their real potential. Whereas Dolores dies tragically at seventeen in childbirth, Lolita lives on, as nymphets do, in legend and in folklore. The tragic endings of Dolores and Humbert are narrated outside of the first-person account, in a prologue written by a fictitious John Ray, Jr.

6. The male gaze. Drama and humour

Point of view is a key element of *Lolita*. For Nabokov, the main event is in the first-person singular of Humbert, though it is unwise to forget the key foreword and afterword, written respectively by a fictional doctor, and the author, who argues why the story is not pornographic and why it is not a love story, but the story of an obsession. Kubrick also tells the story from Humbert's point of view but from a more detached, third person perspective. Lyne veers more towards Humbert and Lolita as a couple, locked in a relationship doomed by social convention, where Lolita has as much agency and responsibility as Humbert. This is in keeping with Lyne's other films, like *Flashdance*, *9 ½ Weeks*, *Indecent Proposal*, and *Fatal Attraction*, where the female characters carry some negative agency or responsibility. Lyne,

in this sense, appropriates *Lolita* for his own cinematic tastes and themes. Lolita sitting in front of an open fridge is a direct reminder of the same prop used in *9 ½ Weeks*. Kubrick typically introduces humour as a code for the audience to understand who the villain is, and how he can (and should) be laughed at as a pathetic figure, wasting his talents and his looks in predatory behaviour. Along with humour, Kubrick also uses music, always the same upbeat, playful jazzy tune, to help us see the irony and laughable pathos of certain scenes.

Comparable scenes provide evidence of Kubrick's inclinations compared to Lyne's. In one such scene Humbert drives away from Camp Climax with Lolita, essentially abducting her. As in so many other of Kubrick's scenes, Lolita does very little and does not say much, with only a hint of ambiguous flirtation ("you haven't even kissed me yet, have you?"), which could be interpreted as playful, not in earnest; after all, Dolores is a big fan of Hollywood. It is interesting how the dialogue is almost exactly the same in Lyne's version, but the scene plays out differently, audiovisually, with profoundly different implications. In Kubrick's version Lolita's utterance is immediately followed but a cut to a shot of the car from behind revving up and shooting down the highway. The audience is left to interpret this as they see fit, but one metaphorical interpretation is that of the revved-up engine as a reference to Humbert's sexual arousal, given his fantasy and his very real plan to ravish Lolita. In Lyne's film, the car immediately stops, after Lolita has changed her clothes in plain sight of Humbert, and as they stop by the roadside, Lolita literally jumps on top of Humbert and starts kissing him hard on the mouth.

When the two characters stop at a hotel, The Enchanted Hunters, the scene at the reception desk also plays out differently in Kubrick's version opposed to Lyne's. Kubrick sets up a previous encounter between the receptionist and Quilty, with a lady-friend hanging on his shoulder. Quilty and his friend serve as a stark contrast to Humbert and Lolita, when they come in moments later. For example, Lolita is dressed in virginal white, a picture of chastity, while Quilty's friend is dressed in shiny black, and looks dangerous, while Lolita is the opposite. All they have in common is that they say nothing. Quilty's conversation with the receptionist is bizarre in its intimacy and its innuendo, but when Humbert is facing the receptionist, called Swine, he is stiff, unnatural, and has guilt written all over his face. He is the villain, and the audience is made to laugh at him rather than identify with him. Lyne's Humbert, on the other hand, comes across as mumbly and awkward, but a sad fellow. The villain, in Lyne's

adaptation, is Quilty, shrouded in mystery, supported by dark music, and sitting in dim light. He talks eerily to Lolita, who crawls across the carpet in a two-piece outfit, revealing her midriff. Kubrick's scene, here, is representative of his technique in this film, of using humour and music to ridicule Humbert as a pathetic liar and cheat. Quilty and Humbert are no different from each other. Lyne's approach is to underscore Quilty as the villain, so patently as to almost throw Humbert and Lolita together as a couple, who need to save themselves from this danger and any others that might come their way.

7. Other approaches through the media

The popular, albeit unfortunate, perception of *Lolita*, as the story of youthful sex, forbidden fruit, excitement, danger, has also grown over the years, due, among other reasons to the way Nabokov's novel was marketed, and the same might be said about Kubrick's film. So many people are familiar with the provocative film poster, later used to cover the book, as well. In Lyne, this went a step further, as has already been pointed out. *Lolita* fits in Lyne's filmography, as a logical development after *Flashdance*, *9½ Weeks*, *Fatal Attraction*, and *Indecent Proposal*. And in line with this development, we later have adaptations like *Fifty Shades of Grey*, in feature film format and *YOU* as a TV series. Depending on which camp you are in you might believe that *Lolita* is the precursor of these kinds of productions, or that the origin can be found in a misreading and a misappropriation of Nabokov's story, which has nothing to do with dangerous sirens, or women who like to spice up their sex life, even at the risk of putting themselves in danger, or romanticised portrayals of stalkers or men who use their status to lure women into submissive relationships (un)willingly or (un)wittingly. Just as we have likened *Lolita* to a sort of rewriting of *Little Red Riding Hood*, especially with its element of warning little girls about 'wolves', is *Fifty Shades of Grey* an updated version of *Cinderella* mixed with *9 ½ Weeks*, a rewriting of *Pretty Woman*? Lolita has the same age as the 12-year-old prostitute in *Taxi Driver* (1976). This victim of child abuse, Iris, is trapped into prostitution by a pimp, and there is a bizarre kind of character who wishes to save her.

By virtue of intertextuality, personal interpretations, and hidden or not-so-hidden agendas, it is not so difficult to find connections, if one is so inclined, between *Lolita* and a whole range of different stories in books and films. However, it would be interesting to establish some ground rules.

One would be to distinguish between a work of film or literature from the way it is advertised and marketed. Another would be to give priority to opinions and interpretations based on first-hand experiences (reading Nabokov or watching Kubrick, for instance) over hearsay and second-hand evaluations. An increasing body of academic and non-academic (internet) analyses of Nabokov and Kubrick's work is gradually converging on fairer appraisals of their work, even if we accept the inevitability of subjectivity in most analyses, drawing from hermeneutics, postmodernism, discourse analysis, deconstruction, or other interpretative tools. They will always be more useful, no matter how disparate, than prejudiced opinions, seeking to reinforce certain tenets. In this light, *Lolita* is not about love, because it includes elements of infatuation, crush, and obsession, but not honest, reciprocated, healthy love. It is not about sex, in any of its forms, it is not about sexual practices such as sadomasochism. If we accept that rape is an act of violence, an aggression, not an act of sex, then *Lolita* is about violence, namely child abuse in various forms. *Lolita* is not pornographic, nor is it an excuse or motivator for pornography, not any more than virtually all the classics and popular stories that have been appropriated by pornographers. *Lolita* is not even much about Lolita (Dolores Haze) as espoused above. It is definitely not about good vs evil, as there are no characters that embody good. The story insists on Charlotte and Dolores as victims, as ordinary, flawed, human beings. There are no princes or woodcutters to come and save the Haze family. *Lolita* is a profoundly ironic story, so we need to look at other ironic pieces of literature for inspiration to crack the code, so to speak. One such reference might be found in Mark Twain's brilliant short essay, *Advice to Little Girls*, which like *Lolita* is misleadingly ironic in its title as it is not advice and likely not really addressed to little girls. The fascination of these stories is, apart from the beauty of their forms of expression, the way they invite us to explore the complexities and contradictions of human nature (and ironic titles).

A theme that can be seen in *Lolita* is the beauty and the beast, or a variation of it. Nabokov does not present us with a physically ugly monster, who is beautiful beneath his skin, but with a 35-year-old psychopath (often reported to be middle-aged!) who, in Dolores' eyes, looks exactly like a handsome movie star she adores, and is also educated, smart, and charming when he wants to be. Lolita is beautiful, too, but the rest of her alleged beastly temptress qualities are projected onto her, as argued above, by the predator as a form of justification, or, sadly, later on, by certain social groups and business interests.

8. Rewriting Lolita. Recurring restrictions

André Lefevere (1992) proposes a compelling theory of translation based on the concept of rewriting. For Lefevere, rewriting encompasses all kinds of activities and processes in society, such as new editions, anthologies, reviews, academic courses and bibliographies, and translations. For this scholar, literary fame, is only sustained over time, not by repeated reading, but by constant rewriting. Should *Lolita* be kept in our collective minds by rewriting, or would it be better for it to fall into oblivion by inaction if not by book banning? And if it is to be rewritten (including translated) what options are open? Is it possible to break the false dichotomy of *Lolita* as a sexy story or a product or symptom of patriarchy's evils and injustices (Freixas 2022), by looking at the issue through the lens of awareness-raising for social problems like child abuse?

Beyond culture wars or ideological battles regarding sexual freedom and dignity, and where each one of us stand regarding the *Lolita* debate, there is another more theoretical, cinematic debate, on how films, as translations, should or can stand alone, and have their own value, regardless of whether they are faithful to the text they are based on. Some people might watch or talk about Adrian Lyne's *Lolita*, for instance, completely oblivious or ignorant of Kubrick's own adaptation or even Nabokov's novel.

It is paradoxical for #metoo activists like Freixas to attack Nabokov's work as pornographic and as a defence of child abuse when in fact the novel admits a totally different reading, with far more textual evidence. So, the paradox is that in the new world order, people are under the impression that another film adaptation is not needed, while at the same time, a better, more faithful film adaptation, seen through the eyes of feminist awareness of social traps and lurking dangers for little girls, seems most timely. Timelier, say, than any of Hollywood's superheroines, that largely display the same problematic issues of male superheroes but perpetrated by women, which somehow is supposed to make such actions better, just because it is a woman doing them.

What are some of the options for rewriting *Lolita* through the lens of Lefevere's rewriting theory?

- Retranslate Kubrick's film adaptation.
- Retranslate Adrian Lyne's version.
- Bring out new editions and new translations of Nabokov's novel. Hopefully, in better circumstances than Penguin's intention to rewrite parts of *Matilda*, in a bizarre attempt at political correctness.

- Market and review Nabokov's novel (and possibly Kubrick's film) in a different way, stressing the elements of the story that are most relevant to today's world.
- Make a new film version of *Lolita* and better or alternative AVT versions.
- Promote written or AV (e.g., Youtube) essays with insightful analyses.
- Promote better scholarship and dissemination of research in the field of *Lolita* studies in connection to child abuse dealt with in literature among other intertextualities.

The first option seems feasible and desirable for Kubrick's version, given that Kubrick seems to try to portray Lolita and Humbert in way that admits a modern interpretation of the film, like the book, as a warning to unsuspecting parents and little girls to beware of wolves in disguise, coupled with the wider observation of social responsibility of communities and institutions to do more to improve children's safety and wellbeing. Retranslating Lyne's film for the same purpose seems much more improbable given all its audiovisual elements, like Lolita's provocations and Humbert's forlorn looks, and Quilty's image as the villain accompanied by ominous music, etc.

One fascinating area of study is the amount and variety of book covers and jackets, throughout the world, that *Lolita* has gone through (Bertram – Leving 2013), show an interesting selection). In brief, we might say that the covers have evolved, though discontinuously, from the very first one, with no graphic artwork, to the iconic sunglasses and heavy lipstick borrowed from Kubrick's film poster, or similar strategies of revealing some flesh in little girls' clothes (or just socks, in one cover), to attempts at depicting the girl as a victim, and even an experimental depiction of Humbert on the cover, to signal who the book is mostly about, as signaled, too, in the alternative 'Confessions…' title.

Regardless of the greatness of Kubrick's film, or the number of direct quotes from the novel in Lyne's, Nabokov's novel does not really have a satisfactory adaptation. Much of what has been presented here is geared towards defending the need or desirability for another feature film, or series adaptation of *Lolita*. One that could be distributed and marketed to restore Dolores' dignity and her right as a fictional character to be recognised as a victim even if she has no heroic qualities or does not serve as a role model, or precisely because of these traits. So that she can be seen by the whole world as an innocent little girl who does not deserve to be victim blamed. To quote from the novel's foreword:

> *Lolita* should make all of us – parents, social workers, educators – apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world.

For translating, AVT or otherwise, the bottom line seems to be that *Lolita* is one of the best instances you will ever find of a situation that forces its translators to be committed to a certain reading and to have to live with the consequences of the choices made. If ever there was a clear case of a text that one could not translate by means of presumed objectivity it is this one. You cannot 'just translate' it, meaning by that, that you simply apply so-called translation techniques somewhat mechanically, to stay as close to the source text as possible and let the reader or audience draw their own conclusions. You must use the tools of textual analysis, literary theory and criticism, film studies and theory, and, ultimately one's own critical reading and powers of discernment to go out on a limb and offer the public your best shot. It is not that *Lolita* adaptations should not be used to downplay the gravity of child abuse and sexual exploitation, while promoting the Lolita Syndrome, it is a matter of stating that, properly framed, adapted, presented and translated, *Lolita* can serve as a warning about this threat to society.

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Lolita
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1997 Directed by Adrian Lyne. USA.
Snow White
2025 Directed by Marc Webb.
Taxi Driver
1976 "Directed by Martin Scorsese. USA.
Thor: Love and Thunder
2022 Directed by Taika Wititi. USA.
Where the Crawdads Sing
2022 Directed by Olivia Newman. USA.
YOU
2018-23 Created by Greg Berlanti and Sera Gamble. USA.

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