

REFLECTIONS ON TRANSFORMING LOLITA: THE (DE)GENERATION OF AN IMAGE

Communitas

ISSN 1023-0556

2002 7: 31-44

Anton Roodt*

ABSTRACT

This article deals with Vladimir Nabakov's "Lolita", a literary work discovered by Graham Greene in 1955, as image. More specifically, the transformation of Nabakov's original image and the subsequent absorption of "Lolita" as image into mass culture are highlighted. Salient aspects discussed with reference to "Lolita" are: changes in the fashion world where extremely young models are employed, often appearing in very erotic advertising; cloning of the image, especially by big business; and the movement of "Lolita's" image into cyber space typified by Japanese Kisekai and other virtual idols. The crossing-over of "Lolita" into popular culture continues unabated, and offers many opportunities for studying the manipulation of messages in efforts to try and capitalise on the changes in, and obsessions of, mass society. Indeed this famous work of Nabokov has spawned a vast number of offspring, exploiting the exploited Dolores Haze, the teen American nymphet and female interest of the novel, who becomes the sexual obsession of an older intellectual émigré, Humbert Humbert.

*Anton Roodt is an architect in private practice based in Bloemfontein.

INTRODUCTION: *LOLITA* IS BORN IN FRANCE

When *Lolita* was (finally) published by Maurice Girodias' Olympia Press in France, Vladimir Nabokov was hardly a novice. This Russian novelist and poet had, by then, written 11 novels, a study on Gogol, his autobiography *Speak, Memory*, and short stories and poems (Jong 1988).

Lolita, hailed by Graham Greene as one of the best three novels of 1955, was published that year by the Olympia Press because all the American Publishers approached by Nabokov turned down the manuscript. Olympia Press was known for its willingness to publish works of a *risqué* nature.

Thus *Lolita* started out life in France, as did her central character Humbert Humbert:

Lolita was, above all, literary.

American puritanism

is more comfortable with sex

when it stays in the gutter than when

it rises to the level of art (Jong 1988).

But, copulation as art? The perceived subject-matter, "paedophilia as pornography", preceded and ultimately sealed the popular fate of the book – understandably so, given the mood of the time. Nabokov, after the fact, wondered "if I had made her a boy, or a cow, or a bicycle, Philistines might never have flinched" (Boyd 1991:288).

Lolita was subsequently issued by mainstream publishers such as Weidenfeld and Nicholson in the United States, Britain and Canada. To date, it has sold more than 14 million copies.

LOLITA: THE STORY IN BRIEF

The novel tells a story of a middle-aged man, Humbert Humbert, who falls in love with a 12-year-old girl and has a sexual relationship with her for two years. She absconds with another, even more perverted, man and Humbert tries to uncover his identity. He ultimately does so and kills him. *Lolita* marries and moves to Alaska where she dies in childbirth.

The charm of the novel lies in the conspiratorial nature of the telling: the reader is drawn to Humbert Humbert and, despite his heinous behaviour, indulges his obsession to the climactic end. This Nabokov

accomplishes by his linguistic virtuosity on the one hand, and his structural ability on the other that –chesslike - weaves a web of clues and strategies, which only becomes obvious with rereading and annotated sustenance.

Thomas Frosch (in Rivers and Nicol 1982) argues that *Lolita's* plot structures are infused with the diemonic (uncanny powers possessed by beings midway between gods and people), which is a primary characteristic of romance as a literary mode. This is the tale of Eros and Psyche – the man destroys (the women as maidens) and forces them into an evolution toward mature womanhood (Johnson 1989).

Charles Rollo's review of *Lolita* (1958) is more to the point. "The novel's scandal-tinted history and its subject – the affair between a middle-aged sexual pervert and a 12-year-old girl – inevitably conjure up expectations of pornography. But there is not a single obscene term in *Lolita* and aficionados of erotica are likely to find it a dud (Rollo 1958).

A TRANSFORMATION OF THE VISUAL: ATTENUATING THE CATWALK

For Nabokov great art is "magic music, magic words" (Quenell 1979:43) Nabokov paints word-pictures: in *Speak, Memory* (his autobiography) he uses "blue-white" (shadows on bright snow), "misty-blue", "azure", "dove-blue". Nabokov is a visual writer who wishes to make his readers *see* (Quenell 1979:14).

The visual transformation of *Lolita* starts in the novel itself. Humbert describes *Lolita* as being anatomically unremarkable, in what he calls an "anthropometric entry" made when she was 12:

..... hip girth twenty nine-inches; thigh girth
(just below the gluteal sulcus), seventeen; calf girth and
neck circumference, eleven; chest circumference,
twenty-seven; upper arm girth, eight, waist, twenty-three,
stature, fifty seven inches; weight, seventy-eight pounds;
figure linear; intelligence quotient, 121; vermiform appendix
present, thank God (Nabokov 1995:107).

From the above statistics (27-23-29, 78 pounds) *Lolita* is at an androgenous stage with a boy/girl anatomy. She has the features and unblemished countenance that woman long for, but accepts her body with an insouciant neglect.

Lolita, however, “lives” in Humbert’s eyes in a different way:

*Marvellous skin – oh, marvellous: tender and tanned,
not the least blemish... nymphets do not have acne
although they gorge themselves on rich food* (Nabokov 1995:41).

Packman (1982:52) offers an opinion on the use of *Lolita*’s body in the narrative of the novel. Her body is less important than the role it plays within the narrative. Her body is the instrument that provides the starting- point for the action of the narrative, it “permits” the narrative. This idea seems to fit in well with the fashion world. Slim, boyish bodies could now be marketed as hip (no pun intended) and sexy.

So it was that a 15-year-old girl from London became synonymous with “swinging” London and the Carnaby Street fashion during the 1960s. She was born Leslie Hornby, but the world came to know her as the first teenage supermodel, Twiggy. She barely weighed 90 pounds and with measurements of 31-22-32 on her 5’6” frame she was virtually a *Lolita* come to life. Sporting a short Vidal Sassoon haircut and prominent eye make-up (3 pairs of false eyelashes above the eyes and heavily pencilled-in eyelashes below), she became “the face of 1966”. In its 16 June 1999 issue *Time* called her one of the 20th Century’s most beautiful stars.

The fashion photographer Cecil Beaton referred to Twiggy’s “baby stare” and her “concave droop” (Chris at Acme Websites 2002). This is precisely what seduces Humbert:

*What drives me insane is the twofold nature of this nymphet
- of every nymphet, perhaps; this mixture in my Lolita
of tender dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity...
(Nabokov 1995:44).*

Fittingly (in a studied sort of way) Nabokov published a poem “Ode to a Model” in the same year (1955) the Olympia Press edition of *Lolita* appeared:

*from your lily-white armpit
to the tip of your butterfly eyelash,
charming and pitiful,
silly and stylish* (Nabokov 1995:xlix).

Calvin Klein is specifically known as a fashion designer of jeans and underwear and for the provocative accompanying advertising campaigns. During the late 1980s he became well-known for his designer jeans and, during the 1980s, for his underwear, modelled by nearly naked models in erotic poses.

One of his favourite models is Kate Moss:

To the Daily Mail, eager to reveal that Kate lost her virginity in the Bahamas at age 14, she has become a kind of tabloid monument to pedophilia in America, where the debate has largely settled on Calvin Klein's semi-naked images of Kate: not since Twiggy has anyone tried to draw a connection between a capriciously indifferent model and the eating disorders of thousands of young women (Horyn 1994).

In her 1995 advertising campaign for Klein's underwear she projects as being indifferent but vulnerable, sexy, but in a distracted sort of way. Other critics are more articulate and there are references to the "infantilizing [of] women" and Kate Moss has the "look" to project these *Lolita*-like qualities (Horyn 2001).

Kate Moss's personality even echoes that of *Lolita*. "Sultry silences, speaks in tongues - over a chirpy base of British half-cockney teen drawl, she liberally scatters upper-class intonations, yelps, giggles, glottal stops, mock tear-stained pleas, and wicked cackles. She's the beautiful slacker icon, who almost single-handedly shifted body image from ripe, pumped-up flesh to an attenuated preteen slump." (Mitchell 2001).

LOLITA'S TRANSITION TO FILM

Lolita made her first uncomfortable transition to film in 1962. Stanley Kubrick's version starring James Mason as Humbert Humbert and Sue Lyon as *Lolita* was probably not the late director's masterpiece.

The mood of the era, pregnant with change as it was, did not allow James Mason more than a glance at a beautiful young girl, probably the idea of "aesthetic bliss" that Nabokov wanted to convey. Plucking *Lolita* from the realm of the "thousand visualisers" remains difficult, regardless of the subject-matter. Yet, Kubrick should be considered a fortunate choice. The late director has certainly extended the visual envelope of many. Kubrick could be described as a Nabakovian director – aesthetic excess dominates the wide-ranging themes of his

work: "Barry Lyndon" (1975); "A Clockwork Orange" (1971); "2001 A Space Odyssey" (1968) and, most recently, "Eyes Wide Shut" (1999) in which Nicole Kidman portrays a nympholeptic spouse who manipulates her husband (Tom Cruise) into taking part in sexual rituals beyond his wildest expectations.

The theme of sexual obsession returns 37 years after Kubrick's film version of "*Lolita*" (1962). In Adrian Lyne's 1997 version of *Lolita*, Schiff's screenplay reiterates an important point, namely that Humbert Humbert's enormous intelligence is always defeated by his obsession (with Lolita):

The ornate curlicues of Nabokov's prose, which are so much fun to dip and slide with on the page, simply don't work in a movie....Humbert himself, allows us only glimpses of Lolita...

(Stringer-Hye 1996).

Jeremy Irons as Humbert is an inspired choice. As a seasoned European actor (his role as Charles Ryder in "Brideshead Revisited" no doubt providing ample limbering-up) brings Humbert to life as the licentious émigré who defiles the suspecting pre-teen waif *Lolita*.

The hegemony of the visual is underscored by the disturbing quality of the film. In reading the book the reader is anaesthetised by the nebulous flow of language, but the film brackets and punctuates events and the naked Quilty running screaming along the dark corridor of his lustpalace, only to be executed by Humbert, remains as a disturbing finale.

THE MEDIA LOLITA: COMPLETE SYNERGY

The media *Lolita* is not a recent phenomenon. One may recall the look of Elizabeth Taylor in "National Velvet". But more recently, in the 1996 movie "Stealing Beauty", Liv Tyler probably comes closest to the Lolita image as a work of art.

In the world of pop music, matters have gone much further. Since Twigg, the commodification of the *Lolita* image has proceeded apace and now, the post-Kubrickian space and time, has been honed to perfection.

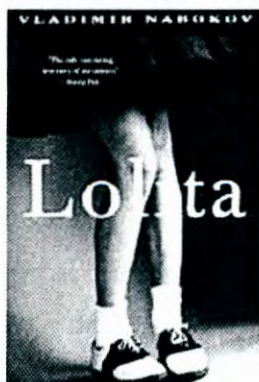
Britney Spears is currently the uncrowned queen of the 21st Century *Lolita* divas. Her pop opponents include Christina Aguilera, Alicia Keys, and Avril Lavigne. However, Britney Spears is the triumph of media synergy and packaging. On stage and on her (latest) CD cover

she is portrayed in revealing clothes, styled to become a personal, and copyable trademark. She has a studied vulnerability, like a girl who has had to grow up too quickly. She is torn, one is led to believe, between the excitement of attaining adulthood on the one hand and losing her innocence on the other. Her music is likewise “designed” - “composed” being too limiting a word. On “Britney” the song titles commence as follows:

1. I'm a slave 4 u
2. Overprotected
3. Lonely
4. I'm not a girl, not yet a woman, and so on.

This could have been *Lolita*, autobiographically committing her shallow life and personality to CD.

In the case of Britney Spears, *Lolita* as an image has been completely commodified, and at the same time sanitised. The image is that of a young girl – however, not as young as *Lolita* and one who prefers boys. Snippets from her private life are “planted” to stir up mild controversy: her erstwhile preacher is worried that her performances are too *risqué*. She countered by pointing out the perils of sweating in swaddlings.



Twiggy defined the look of the 1960s.



Cate Moss in the famous Calvin Klein advertising campaign.



Britney Spears in 1999, young and fresh faced.



Britney Spears in designer performance mode (2002).

LOLITAS BY THE DOZEN: ATTACK OF THE CLONES

The spontaneous appearance of individual, or even the careful reconstruction of particular *Lolitas*, could never satisfy the demand.

Alexis Petridis argues convincingly that record companies are aiming the sale of music CD singles at the under – 14s (Petridis 2002).

His 9-year-old example loves Britney Spears, and would only buy a Robbie Williams CD if it was for her mother! When Britney Spears emerged, her fan base consisted of girls in school uniforms somewhere between 8 and 13-years-old, caught between childhood and adolescence (... not a girl, not yet a woman...), the so-called tweenager.

A recent “Frontline” programme investigated the creators and purveyors of popular culture in the United States (Rushkoff 2001). They are known as the merchants of cool and have made teenagers the hottest consumer target group in America. After their ratings began to fall, MTV conducted an exhaustive study of teenagers’ lives. Two stock characters to attract the teen consumer emerged from this study. The female character is known as the “midriff” and is the “highly-sexualised, world-weary sophisticate”. The male counterpart is the “mook”, infantile and boorish, “crude, misogynistic – and very, very angry.”

Lolita could represent the early and relatively unsophisticated version of the midriff. *Lolita* longed for escape from the boredom of her everyday existence and found escape in music, advertisements in popular magazines, diners and even in the theatre, especially low-brow. The school at Beardsley that *Lolita* attended in any event eschewed intellectual pursuits in preference to dramatics, dance, debating and dating (Nabokov 1995:177).

Nabokov is fascinated by the vulgarity of things. The Russian word *poshlost* is the kind of vulgarity that “buries facts behind gestures and pretences” (Quenell 1979:48). It turns the “actual into the unreal, the low fact into the lofty cliché, the essential into nothing in particular” (Quenell 1979:48–49). According to Nabokov, the American Dream is a totally *poshli* concept. It is situated in the magazine picture: the fake family bonhomie, the impossible unblemished beauty, the hyper-privileged gaze into a landscape. True *poshlost*, according to Nabokov, in “powerful” or “moving” novels is not obvious. To some degree all human beings depend on it and for that reason so does art (Quenell 1979:50).

The commercial machine relentlessly colonises any vestiges of “original” culture and turns it into *poshlost*. When teenagers were questioned why “rage rockers” such as Limp Bizkit appealed to them, they invariably responded that it belonged to them (Rushkoff 2001). The marketers have successfully turned acts like Eminem and Limp Bizkit into mainstream award winners.

Does the industry fan a cultural infatuation with music and imagery that glorifies violence and sex as well as anti-social behaviour and attitudes? It certainly appears to be the case. The Pop Idol winners are very popular with the pre-teens. They are not so much interested in musicianship as they are in personalities. By pre-defining the pop star’s personality it enables fans to buy into the whole package (Petridis 2002).

For the merchants of cool the pre-teen music fan becomes the mediator between the subject and object of desire. The *Lolita* image is legitimately transferred to the pre-teen who aspires to become Britney Spears, who (legitimately) acts out all the possible *Lolita* scenarios by means of visual and aural innuendo.

Thus, battalions of pre-teens are “formatted” to acquire (at a price) the gestures and pretences of *Lolita*, but (fortunately), like a bikini wax, the results are attractive in the young; not permanent and abandoned when other interests develop.

DIGITAL DOLORES

It was inevitable that *Lolita* would find her way into the virtual world. Hamilton (1997:1) focuses attention on the rise in popularity of virtual idols in Japanese popular culture. Sexuality has now been packaged without the necessity of a human being, the created being infused with a sensuality of its own. The heroines of Japanese anime (animation), kisekae dolls on the internet and virtual pop-starts such as Kyoko Date are part of this phenomenon.

The interaction between human and machine has created new conditions under which sexuality could be explored. Derek de Kerckhove, successor to McLuhan, argues that with the advent of television and computers we have moved information processing from the brain to the monitor screen. These electronic media are manipulated to create sophisticated relations with our whole nervous system and our senses, creating in the process a new psychology (Burnett 2001:7).

Although less visual than anime, *Lolita* is also a realistic novel, whereas anime has a distance from perceived reality that creates an atmosphere within which sexuality may be explored (Hamilton 1997:1).

Heroines in Japanese anime generally share common physical traits: the legs account for approximately two-thirds of the character’s height and the eyes are extremely large (Hamilton 1997:3). One might speculate on reasons why Japanese males (mostly) find this attractive. Western eye shape is viewed as more attractive by Japanese and is thus over exaggerated in the animation. The long-limbed bodies also reminds of the drawings fashion designers make, which accentuate the legs and eyes. *Lolita* at 12 years was 57 inches tall, 1.5 inches shorter than the 50 percentile girl at that age.

Unlike *Lolita*, the animated images are without flaw, the features that are perceived as sexually appealing – legs and breasts – are exaggerated and combined in a seductive artificial image.

The limited interaction between viewer and machine has been the focus of several attempts to extend this interaction. Kisekae is a

program that operates much like a conventional paper doll and was primarily aimed at young girls, but was soon exploited for sexual manipulation. All that was needed was to change some of the accessories. The sailor suit (a Japanese “sign” of innocence when worn by a young girl) was already evident. Some leather items and lacy panties were added and the sexual nature of Kisekae was made explicit (Hamilton 1997:6).

Rorikon manga is a *Lolita*-style genre in which young girls (mostly in sailor-style uniforms) are portrayed in explicitly sexual situations. The societal taboo increases the appeal of the animation (Hamilton 1997:12). Idol Otaku (very devoted fans) add to aspects of the animation character, or even write so-called fan fiction. Facts are invented if they are not readily available. This is in some way what Pia Pera was trying with her “fictitious” account of *Lolita’s* diary (Udovitch 1999 and Kakutani 1999).

The transformation of the digital Dolores is not over. Greater or complete interactivity is the ultimate prize. The love affair of Rick Deckard in “Blade Runner” with Rachael, a replicant, i.e. a part human, part artificial being, articulates this wish. Andy Lipman (in Hamilton 1997:9) defines interactivity as having the following elements: *interruptability*, each participant may interrupt the other mutually and simultaneously; *graceful degradation* means that unanswerable questions must be handled in a way that does not terminate the conversation; *limited look-ahead*, which means that there is a limited predictability of the shape of the conversation by each party; and *no default* means that the conversation must not have a pre-planned path and the impression of an infinite database.

For the time being, however, the Humbert Humberts could safely tour cyberspace without fear of rejection, dejection or detection.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Since Nabokov created his *Lolita* as a creature of his imagination, she has appeared in many guises and we now recognise her even much further back in history.

In this article it was demonstrated how the *Lolita* has been appropriated by artists and charlatans alike. *Lolita* has become a series of images, some piercing the complexity of the original character whilst others use her name as a bookmark for pornographic websites. A strange result has been that Nabokov and his *Lolita* are now

sandwiched by search engines in a convoy of pornographic sites less erotic than even the original work.

Lolita has crossed over into popular culture and depending on one's viewpoint either becomes a signpost to indulge in dark sexual obsessions or serves as a warning or a reminder against excesses of the flesh and the mind. Somewhere in between is the futile quest to possess the innocence of a child while inflamed with the passions of an adult.

Lolita has become a sign whose message is continually manipulated as art and technology advance into uncharted territory.

REFERENCES

- Boyd, B. 1991. *Vladimir Nabokov. The American years*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Burnett, R. 1999. *Critical approaches to culture, communications and hypermedia*. <http://www.eciad.bc.ca/~rburnett/atd.html>
- Chris at Acme Web Sites Inc. 2002. *Swingin' chicks* of the '60s. <http://www.singin chicks.com/twiggy.htm>
- Hamilton, R. 1997. Virtual idols and digital girls: Artifice and sexuality in Anime, Kisekae and Kyoike Date. *Bad Subjects* No. 35. <http://eserver.org/bs/35/hamilton.html>
- Horyn, C. 1994. *The thin girl*. http://www.katesite.com/articles/9405_allure.html
- Johnson, R.A. 1989. *She – understanding feminine psychology*. Berkeley: Harper Perennial.
- Jong, E. 1998. *Lolita* 30 years later. *New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/07/20reviews/16009.html>
- Kakutani, M. 1999. "Lo's Diary": Humbert would swear this isn't the same *Lolita*. <http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/10/24/daily/102999pera-book-review.html>
- Mitchell, E. 1994. *America's obsession*. http://www.kate-site.com/articles/9409_spin.html
- Nabokov, V. 1995. *The annotated Lolita*. London: Penguin Books.
- Newitz, A. 1993. Madonna's revenge. *Bad Subjects* No 9. <http://eserver.org/bs/09/Newitz.html>
- Packman, D. 1982. *Vladimir Nabokov. The structure of literary desire*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.
- Petridis, A. 2002. Pop of the tots. *The Guardian*, August 30. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/critic/feature/0,1169,782431,00.html>
- Quenell, P. (Ed.). 1979. *Vladimir Nabokov. A tribute*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.
- Rivers, J.E. & Nicol, C. (Eds.). 1982. *Nabokov's fifth arc*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Rollo, C. 1958. *Lolita*, by Vladimir Nabokov. *The Atlantic*. <http://www.theatlantic.com//unbound/classrev/lolita.htm>

Rushkoff, D. 2001. Synopsis: merchants of cool.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/show/cool/etc/synopsis.htm>

Stringer – Hye, S. 1996. *An interview with Stephen Schiff*.

<http://www.libraries.psu.edu/iasweb/nabokov/schiff1.htm>

Udovitch, M. 1999. *Lo.Lee.Ta*.

<http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/10/31/reviews/991031.31udovitt.html>