The Cinematic Art of Nympholepsy: Movie Star Culture as Loser Culture in Nabokov's *Lolita*

The most recent film adaptation of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* faced serious opposition before finally being released in the United States. Director Adrian Lyne was initially unable to get an American film company to distribute his film. According to Lyne, the film risked being construed under the 1996 Child Pornography Prevention Act as child pornography even though an adult body double of the fourteen-year-old actress playing Lolita was used for the nude scenes (which ended up on the cutting room floor, in any case).

Lyne's travails getting his film to its intended audience might be regarded as merely another instance of the censorial interference that began with the novel's publication and accompanied its first film adaptation by Stanley Kubrick in 1962. Nabokov's manuscript was initially rejected by American publishers on the grounds that it was obscene, and Kubrick's film was so thoroughly censored in Hollywood that he concluded "if I had realized how severe the limitations were going to be, I probably wouldn't have made the film." Although its narrative of pedophilia may well have hindered the novel's publication and limited the explicitness and/or distribution of its film adaptations, it is not, I suggest, primary among what the author and directors of *Lolita* deem as its shortcomings. Broadly speaking, the pedophilia theme has led readers (and film reviewers) to view the novel and its cinematic adaptations either as a romantic love story or as pornographic trash.

Discussion of *Lolitas* in these terms is, to be sure, authorized by the novel itself and the Afterword. Yet pedophilia is, in fact, only one of many problems that have been cited by Nabokov, Kubrick, and Lyne in their attempts to explain the central difficulty of (re)telling the story of *Lolita*. For example, even before American distributors refused to back Lyne's film, he considered his adaptation a failure, saying "it's such a bloody marvelous book that, no
matter what, you’re fucked. You are doomed to failure.” Kubrick did consider his film’s unrealized erotic potential when referring to its failure at the box office. Yet other contemporary and even earlier films suggest that Kubrick’s placement of blame on censors is not particularly accurate or convincing. Elia Kazan’s 1956 Baby Doll, for example, was (and may be still) considered quite erotic, despite the fact that Carol Baker (Baby Doll) was even older than Sue Lyons (Lolita). Kubrick’s rejection of Nabokov’s screenplay and its rewrites also suggests his desire to distance his film from the novel and its potentially salacious content when he represented it on screen. His failure to adapt Lolita on film seems to be just that, his failure. As Kubrick conceded in a 1972 interview, “if it had been written by a lesser author, it might have been a better film.” Nabokov regarded Lolita as a failure even as he defended it from the charge that it was pornographic. In his Afterword to Lolita, Nabokov asserts that Lolita couldn’t really work as he wanted since he was forced to use a “second-rate brand of English” (230) to write it. Moreover, Nabokov wrote a screenplay at Kubrick’s invitation, but its excessive length, among other things, made it impossible to film. Nabokov’s own view of his novel as a failure and his subsequent impossible-to-film screenplay, then, call into question the notion that Kubrick and Lyne were merely running into problems particular to film adaptations.

If the reasons why various Lolitas have failed to deliver what their author or director wanted are not simply reducible to the taboo sexual theme and external threats of censorship, then one may ask what is the reason for their failure. In response, I want to focus what follows on Nabokov’s conflation of pedophilia with cinema. I will show that for Nabokov stardom is necessarily failed. Cinematic metaphors run rampant in Humbert Humbert’s account of Lolita’s seduction and betrayal. The affair, Humbert argues, was made possible because he resembled a movie star to Lolita, and ends when Quilty offers her a chance at Hollywood, something Humbert cannot do. Lolita is perceived by the adults in her life—Humbert, Charlotte, and Quilty—as a star. References to movies pervade the novel. Consider just a few examples: Lolita reads movie magazines and loves going to the movies; Quilty makes porn movies; Humbert sees himself as a director, camera, and leading man. The novel’s consistent invocation of filmic metaphors to describe Lolita invites us to read her as a literary version of Hollywood’s child star. Her career is as short-lived as the average child star’s: as first Humbert’s lover and then Quilty’s whore, Lolita’s career spans roughly four to five years. (She then settles down, pregnant and a waitress at the over-the-hill age of seventeen.) Humbert scrupulously remarks throughout the confession that he is working with the wrong medium. He is convinced, and he obviously wants his reader to become so, that Lolita could be forever his, that his seduction would be a complete coup, if only he could film her rather than write about her. In short,
Humbert uses film as a metaphor to account for his own failure at rendering Lolita immortal. What Humbert cannot overcome (and, to an extent, neither can Nabokov in his screenplay) is the fleeting nature of his own fame, imagined or actual. Lolita is at once a chance for the male narrator (and author and director as well) to redeem and make immortal their own stardom, and the recognition that this stardom will always entail failure since it depends on making into a star a girl who will outgrow those features which made her capable of being a star in the first place.

Far from being a disabling liability, however, Humbert's failure to achieve stardom for Lolita and for himself is an enabling excuse. Nabokov consistently positions his protagonist as a loser inside of this story, although Humbert certainly thinks otherwise. In loser fashion, Humbert believes he covers all grounds possible as an artist and a lover. Not only does he feel his child-lust is proof of his literary genius (he sees Poe and later Dante and Petrarch as his forerunners), but he also feels confident that his vision of Lolita as a star is totally earth-shattering. Humbert's directorial debut, which is of course a figment of his imagination, is crucial to pinning him down as a true loser. When Humbert goes Hollywood in his head, he imagines he has gained total control over his subject. Moreover, he possessively considers, like a crazed fan, that Lolita is his discovery alone. Now that he supposedly has rendered Lolita into a starlet, only he can really see Lolita for what she is. Humbert's status as a loser is also signaled by his need to control the image of Lolita, which corresponds to an even stronger need to control the way Lolita views him. Because Humbert sees his subject as famous, he thinks Lolita will be his greatest fan, will see him as a movie star. Yet it is paradoxically because of the different ways in which Humbert fails in these various arenas that he is able to tell the story of the novel. The loser produces precisely by constantly imagining a medium (usually film) to which he doesn't have access that would (supposedly) be truly adequate to the narrative he wishes to tell.

In suggesting that failed stardom and the loser, not pedophilia, constitute the real subject of Lolita, I do not mean in any way to skirt the issue of pedophilia, to marginalize it as merely an arbitrary figure. For the larger question the novel invites is why Nabokov, Kubrick, and Lyne would want to (re)tell a story about necessarily failed Hollywood stardom as a story about child stardom. In the remainder of this essay, I pursue this question both through a close reading of Lolita's use of cinematic metaphors and by contextualizing those metaphors in relation to the history of the child star, a phenomenon which had already played itself out, as we will see, by the time Nabokov began writing his novel. In my conclusion, I will consider the place stardom and the loser have not only in the circulation of Lolita as a figure in popular culture but in contemporary pedophilic narratives as well.
By nature I am no dramatist, I am not even a hack scenarist' Vladimir Nabokov writes, commenting on the filming of his novel Lolita (dir. Stanley Kubrick). He continues by imagining himself as a literary dictator: "If I had given as much of myself to the stage or the screen as I have to... writing... I would have advocated and applied a system of total tyranny, directing the play or the picture myself, choosing the costumes, terrorizing the actors, mingling with them in the bit part of a guest, or a ghost, prompting them, and, in a word, pervading the entire show with the will and art of one individual." Nabokov's comic exaggeration of his role as tyrant is not an after-effect of seeing his novel botched in its Hollywood make-over. As I have already suggested, it is in fact congruent with a concern with cinema that runs throughout his novel. Humbert Humbert resembles Nabokov in seeking to use cinema as a means of control over memory and visual representation. By mirroring Nabokov's fantasy of the cinema as a medium devoid of any limitations, Humbert feels better equipped to portray Lolita and imagine a way in which he can "fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphae" (134). While Nabokov believes that the screen can transform his book into poetry and further immortalize its artistic value, Humbert believes film can forever capture and embody the magic of nymphae, leaving this magic unmarred by previous attempts and failures or future renditions.

Both Humbert and Nabokov can feel they enjoy a control made possible by their ability to imagine that they cover all aspects of a subject. Their control, however, proves illusory since Humbert is not only unable to literally reproduce Lolita in a filmic medium or direct his adaptor in how to do so, but he is also mistaken in believing he and his nymphae are on the verge of a new medium at all. In fact, Quilty has already transformed Humbert's narrative in his play The Enchanted Hunters. His art, then, has already been interpreted before he can even put it on paper, much less catch it on film. Similarly, Kubrick's film of Nabokov's novel did not resolve the latter's insecurities over artistic control already apparent in Lolita's Foreword and Afterword: the former mocks a Freudian reading of the novel and the latter insists that the novel be read in formalist terms.

Nabokov's own problems with artistic control are explored through Humbert Humbert. Humbert's blindness to how his work is being read, even as he believes he is well-equipped in the way of critical formulas and approaches, both helps him record his manuscript and renders him helpless in the hands of his readers. By not seeing how his work is already in the process of being transformed, Humbert can imagine control over his subject. Recognizing that "Lolita will not forever be Lolita" (65), Humbert uses film as a proleptic defense against losing her to those witnesses who would attempt to reformulate her. Since film works only as fantasy, however, Humbert risks
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losing control over the definition of his art to a series of doubles with whom he competes, such as the playwright and pornographer Clare Quilty, who takes advantage of Humbert's initial foresight, using it as a stepping stone to the next limit and leaving Humbert in the dark.

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Humbert Humbert's use of cinematic metaphors makes explicit what is at stake, for Nabokov, in Lolita's representation of pedophilia and incest, namely, control over the means of visual representation and male adult memories of childhood sexual desire. What marks Lolita as a desirable nymphet for Humbert is the way she can be remembered through implicitly filmic terms. At the start of his confession, Humbert provides his reader with "two kinds of visual memory" (11) associated with the two central nymphets in his life, Annabel and Lolita. The first is Humbert's remembrance of Annabel, whose image he "skillfully recreates in the laboratory of [his] mind, with [his] eyes open" (11). Notably, he recalls her appearance through the artifice of literature, seeing her in descriptive terms, such as "honey-colored skin" and "big bright mouth" (11). The second type of visual memory surfaces with Lolita, unhampered by words as her "objective, absolutely optical replica" is "instantly evoked, with shut eyes, on the dark insides of [his] eyelids" (11). Whereas Annabel's imaginative resurrection involves a piecing together of fragments, Lolita's image is projected onto Humbert's closed eyelids as a unified whole.

For Humbert, the difference between memories is thus also a difference between the media of literature and film. Humbert notes that besides being unphotogenic, Annabel triggers a sequence of memories that he must "leaf through" (13) rather than "reel off" (41), as he does his memories of Lolita. Annabel clearly belongs to the literary realm, and as her namesake Annabel Lee would indicate, a realm haunted by Edgar Allan Poe. Lolita marks a departure from this realm, however, as Humbert projects her onto a screen. Decidedly not a protagonist, she is crowned a starlet. This difference in artistic media, however, does not constitute an absolute rift between Annabel and Lolita. In fact, Humbert places Annabel in a position that is continuous with Lolita's spotlight space center-stage. Annabel is Lolita's prototype, her precursor. Humbert is "convinced . . . that in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel" (14). Despite the fact that Lolita "eclipses completely her prototype" (40), then, Humbert still finds it necessary to cite Annabel not only as his first love but also as his point of entry into the art of what Nabokov terms "nympholepsy" (129).

Nabokov's construction and deconstruction of two ways of relating memory and media demands attention, requiring that we rethink the issue of Humbert's style and his desire for nymphets in terms of the larger cultural
shift in which Nabokov writes his novel, between literary and cinematic fame. Criticism of Lolita has long recognized how heavily Nabokov borrows from Poe (and parodies him) in his conception of Annabel. What gets lost in accounts of Nabokov's tricky use of romanticism and nineteenth-century poetry in the opening passages of Lolita is that Humbert defends his molestation not in terms of a literary, but in terms of a cinematic romanticism. The nympholepsy that Nabokov puts at Humbert's disposal is more notable for its filmic than its literary artifice, although, as Humbert laments, he has only "words to play with" (32).

To make sense of the novel's cinematic metaphors and cinematic romanticism, we need to turn briefly to the history of American cinema and the emergence of the child star. The adaptation of nineteenth-century literature was hardly a new phenomenon in the 1950s. The figure most responsible for putting the romantic novel on screen was D. W. Griffith. Unlisted in Humbert's line-up of fellow nympholepts, Griffith mysteriously embodies many of Humbert's tastes, including his love of Poe and very young girls. A failure at writing literature, Griffith turned to screen writing and directing in Hollywood, becoming to many Americans the "Shakespeare of the screen." As an aspiring novelist, Griffith greatly admired nineteenth-century writers, who often proposed a combination of sexual innocence and desirability in very young girls cast as protagonists. He particularly drew on the works of Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and the Brontë sisters for his screen narratives. Most of all, Griffith admired a fellow Southerner, Poe, who inspired one of Griffith's earlier films, Edgar Allen Poe (1909). Another early film, produced in 1908, was also revealing in regard to his peculiar literary tastes. Its title, The Adventures of Dolly, is as premonitory of Dolores Hazè's name in diminutive form as that of the bride in Charlie Chaplin's shotgun wedding to a certain Lolita is of Humbert's object of affection. Griffith's portrayal of a girl turned orphan turned victim would become a constant formula for womanhood in his work on-screen, and perhaps offscreen too, as Broken Blossoms and his leading child actress, Lillian Gish, may attest.

Nabokov's reliance on nineteenth-century romantic novels in constructing Humbert's style parallels a reliance found in Griffith's slightly altered adaptations. Most interesting, however, is Nabokov's connection to Griffith in the revamping of Annabel. Rather than propping Humbert's feet up on his prison bed and giving him the motivation necessary to reread the volumes of Charles Dickens that just happen to be in jail beside him, Nabokov turns Humbert's attention to reformulating the implied nympholepsy of past literary giants into a contemporary, modern "Is it art?" art form. Where else could a Frenchman with a prurient interest in young girls be better accommodated in this endeavor than 1950s Hollywood, a place where a studio system had coincided with the emergence of the child star?
As Marianne Sinclair has shown in *Hollywood Lolitas*, the Hollywood child star system fell into three phases. The first phase, spearheaded by Griffith and reflected by Humbert's vision of Annabel and Lolita, began in 1909, with adult viewers' demand for "the girl with the curl," Mary Pickford, and marked the transformation of the literary child protagonist into its filmic equivalent. The second phase proved to be less of an adaptation of literature, as the child became more openly seductive, although still unaware of her erotic powers, and strikingly younger. This "Doll-Baby" version of the child star is best epitomized by Shirley Temple. She would embody the cuteness and sexually unfettered love of daddy into the 1940s. In the third phase, her character would finally be transformed into the "Baby-Doll," a child star most remarkable for her new curves and the explicit use of her youth and sexual desirability to attract and exert control over her leading men. If adults demanded "the girl with the curl" in 1909, they demanded the girl with the curve in the 1950s. Lolita's peppermint breath reminiscent of Pickford's rivalry, Mary Miles Minter, embodies the beginning of this system, and her betrayal of Humbert appears to embody its end.

By placing *Lolita* in the context of this film history, we can begin to appreciate the way Nabokov constructs Humbert as a loser. For stardom turns out not to give Humbert the power of having what Laura Mulvey calls "the male gaze" but instead marks that gaze as involving the loss of power (both of the film director and spectator): Humbert's progressive loss of control over the child star of his sexual fantasies. Before Humbert arrives in Ramsdale and encounters the sunstroke Twelve-year-old girl, Dolores, his description of nymphets is largely derived from his position as a voyeur, with the keen sensibilities of a film director, an analogy made increasingly explicit in the novel. Humbert emphasizes that the art of nympholepsy is dependent on the ability to see the nymphet. One must be able to read her difference against normal children:

Oh, how you have to cringe and hide! In order to discern at once, by ineffable signs—the slightly faded outline of a cheekbone, the slenderness of a downey limb, and other indices which despair and shame and tears of tenderness forbid me to tabulate—the deadly demon among the wholesome children; she stands unrecognized by them and unconscious herself of her fantastic power. (17)

Here the analogy between Humbert and a director is left implicit. Like a director stooping and peering into a movie camera, Humbert must “cringe
and hide” in order to capture the nymphéan child, made innocent by her unknowing seductiveness. She is safely invisible to her fellow playmates and to herself. Her appeal can only be made visible through the recording of her image. As Humbert continues his rendition of nymphétry, the film analogy becomes manifest: “It is a question of a local adjustment, of a certain distance that the inner eye thrills to surmount, and a certain control that the mind perceives with a gasp of delight” (17). Humbert implies that the nymphet is unfathomable without initially being brought into a focus conscious of distancing and spatial effects.

Humbert attempts to gain control over Lolita not only by imagining filming her but by fantasizing a contradictory identification of his imagination with the cinematic apparatus and with the leading male movie star. After his first encounter with Lolita, Humbert’s use of filmmaking devices to practice his art becomes more vital. He doesn’t simply stare at the children of Charlotte’s neighbors but “mechanically follows” (73) their comings and goings. He risks casting off his poetic nature entirely when he states that he is “not a poet” but a “very conscious recorder” (72). He even mimes a movie camera in the scene of his approach towards Lolita before he seduces her: “My arms and legs were convex surfaces between which—rather than upon which—I slowly progressed by some neutral means of locomotion . . . I seemed to see her through the wrong end of a telescope, and toward her taut little rear I moved like some paralytic . . . in terrible concentration” (54). Humbert’s fantasy of becoming the key film apparatus, the movie camera, is at its peak during the time between his two loves, Annabel and Lolita, when his automatic distance from children allows him, he thinks, to perfect his reading of nymphets. Although he carries his fantasies of recording the art of nymphétry through filmic means to Ramsdale, his desire to direct this recording becomes awkwardly entangled with his rekindled desire to act as a leading man to the nymphet he adores.

Humbert regards his identification with the recording camera and with the leading man as a liberation from his own academic bookishness, and locates this liberation in his first encounter with Lolita, after he has “cast around for some place in the New England countryside” (35). He writes that he became truly free at the moment when “Annabel Haze, alias Dolores Lee, alias Lolecia, had appeared to me” (167). This liberation signifies the reanimation of Annabel as a starlet and Humbert as a star. Humbert was able to interact with Annabel. In his later transactions with children, he could only be a voyeur. Film offers him a way to feel closer to these “isolated, removed” (20) creatures: through it, Humbert can pretend that he is directing their movements and defining their essence through his interpretive powers. Lolita marks a point at which Humbert can resume the seaside interaction with Annabel. Humbert is very conscious of Hollywood’s value in this liberation.
Because of movies, Lolita will be able to relate to Humbert, to swoon over him as she would over a poster boy.

During this "sunshot moment" of liberation, Humbert immediately assumes his "disguise" which is that of "a great big handsome hunk of movie land manhood" (39). Within five days, he remarks that he is "said to resemble some crooner or actor chap on whom Lo has a crush" (43). His interactions with Lolita are instantly translated into cinematic terms. During their "imitation of blood relationship," Humbert knows "all at once that [he] could kiss her throat or the wick of her mouth with perfect impunity" since Lolita would let him and "even close her eyes as Hollywood teaches" (48). She is "a modern child, an avid reader of movie magazines, an expert in dream-slow closeups" and "might not think it too strange . . . if a handsome, intensely virile, grown-up friend . . . " (49), namely Humbert, attempts to seduce her.

Yet as Humbert falls deeper under the spell of Lolita's star quality, he becomes more insecure and anxious, concerned with whether he is really a plausible romantic figure in her teeny-bopper world, and less concerned with the recording of his art, now set into motion under his new roof. If Humbert's desire to share in Lolita's stardom liberates him, enables him to put down his books and his translations and act, it also threatens his value as a director and as an interpreter of nymphets. This threat is realized comically in several incidents in which Humbert suffers from the dangerous symptoms of a narrative, if not nervous, breakdown. Even with a private studio and the set task of translating each day with Lolita into his diary, Humbert loses track of his scenes with Lolita as she begins to fall for his disguise.

One such scene puts Humbert in the role of a Swiss peasant. Seeing that Lolita has something in her eye, he asks her if he might lick it out. "It's right there," she said. "I can feel it." "Swiss peasant would use the tip of her tongue to lick it out." "Lick it out?" "Yeah, Shy try?" "Sure" (43). Not only does Humbert lose linguistic control for the first time in his memoir, but also, he fails to record his reactions, stopping at, "never in my life—not even when fondling my child-love in France—never" (44). The recording of his narrative slips out of his control.

A related loss of control occurs again in his first attempt at writing a scene with Lolita. Humbert plays the main character, "Humbert the Hummer" (57). Since there are few lines in this semi-screenplay, his monologue is embedded in the soundtrack, "something nicely mechanical," "O my Carmen" (59). He sings to Lolita: "O my Carmen, my little Carmen, something, something, those something nights . . . the stars that sparkled, and the cars that sparkled, and the bars, and the barmen" (59). Humbert fails to get his lines straight as the star of his scene.

These narrative tremors (examples of which could be multiplied), arise from Humbert's desire to hierarchize the unified image of himself as a star over his underdog, behind-the-scenes role as a director, and seriously compromise
his ability to continue perfecting his art. They foreshadow a weakness in Humbert’s interpretive powers which will be taken advantage of by Humbert’s rival, Lolita’s new director, Quilty.

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Although Humbert makes his knowledge of movies and the mechanics of filmmaking evident in his cinematic metaphors before arriving in America, his status as loser is signaled by his questionable timing in celebrating Lolita as a child star. Coming from the relative obscurity of sanatorium life, Humbert shows up in America and thinks his art and the desire it maps out are in vogue. He doesn’t detect the falling popularity of the child star and the impending end of Hollywood’s studio system. Using the language of filmmaking is Humbert’s way of taking control of the next transformation of his art. As he falls wholeheartedly into his new role as a movie star, he fails to recognize that this latest version of nymphetry is on its way out. In fact, it already is out. Nabokov may have placed Humbert in a time warp, then, but didn’t make his molester hundreds of years out of date. Rather, Humbert came closer to being forty years out of it.

The child star phenomenon of the 1930s, noted before for its creation of Shirley Temple, was almost strictly entertainment for adults.13 Humbert is responsible for taking Lolita to two hundred movie matinees in the course of a year. The liberation embodied by Lolita does not only entail Humbert’s opportunity to act as a leading man to a child who can match and eclipse his first love. It also transforms Humbert’s desire from an obscure thing of the past to a popular form of worship in the present. Instead of seeing that this new form of worship is beginning to stage its demise and change again, Humbert mistakes it for the budding manifestation of nymphet magic. As he writes after being seduced by Lolita, he is “not concerned with so-called sex at all. A greater endeavor lures [him] on. To fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets” (134).

Humbert desires to fix a fluid, mutating instance of youth. Lolita symbolizes to Humbert the process of becoming and its myriad possibilities in contrast to the mature woman, a stable product of that process. What Humbert doesn’t see is that Lolita is in the third and last phase of child stardom. She embodies the “Baby-Doll.” Humbert does not foretell that Lolita will end up seducing him since his focus on the nymphet is dated. He still sees the child star as a cross between the heavily influenced literary version of the nymphet and her next role as the “Doll-Baby.” Lolita’s growth has exceeded his interpretive limits. He can no more see the “haggard angel” (125) floating behind her than he can see her latest cinematic equivalent. Humbert’s despair over Lolita’s inevitable maturation and then her abandonment coincides with
the end of Hollywood studio stardom (child and adult alike). Whereas stars were hired through exclusive contracts by major studios during the studio system’s heydays, in the 1950s stars could sell their wares more freely and with far less loyalty to studios.13 Lolita parallels closely the starlet’s career shifts as she casts around for a new director and raises “the bonus price of a fancy embrace to three, and even four bucks” (184). Almost as a direct response to this reduction in contractual value and necessity, films began to portray the child star more as a “Baby-Doll” than a “Doll-Baby”. The Baby-Doll, who is nearing eighteen rather than eight, is far more likely to hold power over her leading man.

The two trips taken by Lolita and Humbert reflect this switch of roles signaled by the eclipse of the child star. In the first trip, Humbert provides a shape for Lolita’s days, planning their frequent motel stops around a variety of tourist traps. In the second trip, however, Lolita terrorizes Humbert with a mapped-out-in-advance pattern of travel and play, as she quickly draws him further west.

Humbert is marked as a loser in that his own tragic end is the consequence of his blindness to a change in style: the transformation of a literary characterization of child idolatry to a filmic characterization had long since reached its outer limits and undergone yet another change. Consistently noted for his creator’s touch as a stylist, Humbert ruptures the reader’s expectations by skipping a beat in the American style machine. Quilty, a playwright, goes unnoticed by Humbert since Humbert views theater as “a primitive and putrid form” (200), and he fails to catch the fact that The Enchanted Hunters is a “quite recent and technically original composition which [had] been produced by a high brow group in New York” (201).

If Humbert is a stylist and Lolita has no meaning for him except as a performance of style, then Humbert surely couldn’t have missed seeing that his own style was outdated. Humbert’s romantic failure occurs when he can’t fix the magic of nymphet or keep up with it. Just as Lolita loses her power to dazzle, Humbert loses his power to direct. His reinterpretation of the art of nymphet is again being reinterpreted by someone else, leaving Humbert in the dust, much like the pathetic antique furniture of Charlotte’s house. Upon his arrival there, this combination of the old and the new convinces Humbert that he is in the wrong environment: “I could not be happy in that type of household; with bedraggled magazines in every chair and the kind of horrible hybridization between the comedy of so-called functional modern furniture and the tragedy of decrepit rocking chairs and rickety lamp tables with dead lamps” (38). If Humbert is made uneasy by furniture that loses its interior royalty, he is made more uneasy by how quickly Lolita devours his image and spits him out. As she “slouches” in the “bored way she cultivated” (147), Humbert directs her to kiss him.
Come and kiss your old man . . . and drop that moody nonsense. In former times, when I was still your dream male, you swooned to the record of the number one throb-and-sob idol of your co-evals [Lo: Of my what? Speak English]. That idol of your pals sounded, you thought, like friend Humbert. But now, I am just your old man, a dream dad protecting his dream daughter. (149)

Humbert writes that Lolita haunts his sleep, appearing “in strange and ludicrous disguises as Valeria or Charlotte or a cross between them” (254). This conflation of Humbert’s leading ladies reveals Lolita’s replacement as her star status shrinks. Before the 1950s, it was charming to adults if a child mimicked adults. After the baby boom, however, it became even more charming if adults mimicked children. Valeria, with her “imitation of a little girl” (25), marks the new style of the female star. Mary Miles Minter turns into the kind of ditz made famous by Marilyn Monroe. Humbert’s child star matured, to use his own words, into a “large, puffy, short-legged, big-breasted, and practically brainless baba” (26). Children in their androgynous forms were quickly forgotten by adults.

In a sense, Lolita as a starlet is a loser, too. Even as Humbert laments his loss of Lolita as a fan, she is also seeing her character undergo a role reconstruction that she, as a starlet, cannot endure. Although she was able to make the switch from “Doll-Baby” to “Baby-Doll,” as Marianne Sinclair puts it, with relative ease, the final mutation of her part leaves her out of date and place.16 She invites her tragic fall when she swaps Humbert, the artist with his studio bedroom, for Quilty, the commercial playwright and pornographer with his Duk Duk ranch. She is indispensable to Humbert, the embodiment of a style which ensured the continuation of his art. For Quilty, however, she is merely a B-movie actress, a potential child porn star, and is let go without a moment’s notice when she fails to perform to his subhuman standards.

In their different ways, Humbert and Lolita both lost their claims to fame in a rapidly enveloping obscurity. After being pushed out of adult Hollywood, child worship underwent a splitting apart of the elements Humbert found so fascinatingly nymphaean in their blended form. Innocence would be taken over by Walt Disney and reconstructed as a kid’s thing. Sexual desirability would be privatized and turned into criminal porn by the likes of Quilty. The mutation of a style that had provided Humbert with the filmic interpretation and adaptation of the child-centered literary narrative leaves both him and Lolita obsolete as it is wiped off the screen before either can exercise their talents. “The rest is a little flattish and faded” (305), Humbert informs the jury after he has killed Quilty.

This doesn’t, however, leave his inferiority in relation to Quilty unaccounted for. As Humbert tells us, he is “covered with Quilty” (306). Perhaps
he means that he is drowning in the sense of his own artistic impotence. Humbert, after all his pains, has returned to solitary confinement with an old set of child encyclopedias and some volumes of Charles Dickens to keep him company. Oh, and of course, a copy of Who’s Who in the Limelight, just a little reminder left for Humbert to index his assumed failure to capture any of the nymphet’s essence for his art.

5

If Nabokov can tell a story about going out of style, it is because his own position is continuous with Humbert’s, as I suggested in my introduction, though not identical. Nabokov positions himself as well as his narrator as a loser in relation to Hollywood movie culture. The payoff is that Nabokov retains some measure of autonomy precisely by including the ways Lolita might be read and mocking them. The novel’s modernist features, particularly its resistance to interpretation, its elusiveness, register Nabokov’s adoption of the loser position. That Nabokov witnesses his novel being filmed with a screenplay not his own, rather than merely fantasizing about having it filmed makes explicit an already complex relation between author and character in which both are differentiated and bound together by the ways they imagine their audiences. Nabokov shares Humbert’s concern about being misread. Just as Humbert nurtures a fantasy of controlling the directions that reformulations of nymphettry would take, Nabokov frames his book in extra-heavy typescript to avoid anyone’s possible insights, or intrusions, into his novel. As “John Ray,” he states that Lolita is not so much “offensive” as it is “unusual” (5). More importantly, he informs the reader that Vivian Darkbloom has written a biography of Quilty, titled “My Cue” (4). As Alfred Appel, Jr. notes, Vivian Darkbloom is an anagram for Vladimir Nabokov.17 And Quilty is Humbert’s double. So in a sense Nabokov is doubling Humbert in his endeavors as a biographer. He is writing a eulogy just as Humbert is, since Humbert’s Lolita, the nymphet Lolita, has long since died. In his Afterword to Lolita, Nabokov repeats Humbert’s reprimand to Freudsians for misinterpreting Lolita and manages to make a formalist reading obsolete by coupling the purely aesthetic value of a work with bliss. Nabokov shares with Humbert a quality of self-consciousness marked by his awareness of his readers, who also stand in as a kind of jury. He consistently second-guesses his reader’s response, from what the reader might think of his style to how he might read Humbert’s persona. For example, Humbert assumes that his reader expects him to kill Charlotte and, later on, Lolita. He openly chastises his reader for doing so: “Then I pulled out my automatic—I mean, this is the kind of fool thing a reader might suppose I did. It never even occurred to me to do it” (280). Furthermore, Nabokov turns the constraints of writing in English rather than
Russian into the reader’s problem: “My private tragedy . . . is that I had to abandon my natural idiom, my untrammeled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue for a second-rate brand of English, devoid of any of those apparatuses . . . which the native illusionist . . . can magically use to transcend the heritage in his own way” (317). Nabokov states that any interpretations his reader might have of his work are not the result of the limitations of the English language but the reader’s ignorance; any reading by an American would necessarily be “out of focus” (316) since that reader has never read or translated his work written in Russian.

Yet a striking difference sets Humbert apart from Nabokov when they each become active in their cinematic fantasies. Humbert is so intent on getting his star persona in order as an actor in *Lolita* that he loses control of its direction and unwittingly forfeits his imagined film of *Lolita* to Quilty. Nabokov seems to believe that given different circumstances, such as a new medium or a more personal language, his art would be under his complete control. A key part missing in Nabokov’s cinematic fantasy, unlike the fantasy belonging to Humbert, is the audience’s reaction to Nabokov’s usurpation of artistic control. Thus, he fell to his task wholeheartedly, writing that “the screenplay became poetry which was my original purpose.” Nabokov found a way to do what he couldn’t do in writing *Lolita* the first time: to make *Lolita* a poem. The obvious reason he could not do this in his written version is that he took his reader’s reaction into consideration enough to know that a poetic rendition of *Lolita* would be a flop. Without a constricting audience informing how he worked out his screenplay, Nabokov exercised artistic freedom and control of his fantasies.

This blindness to his audience, and particularly the producers and directors in that audience, however, causes Nabokov to lose precisely what he fantasized about having more of, namely, artistic control. Nabokov’s work in film was limited to collaborations made in the adaptations of his novels. Even in this capacity, his involvement was made possible by the various TV and movie studios merely as a token of their respect. When Stanley Kubrick and James Harris decided to rethink *Lolita* in terms of its cinematic value, they asked Nabokov to write the screenplay with only a gesture of “courtesy” in mind. Nabokov misread this request, seeing it as his chance to become a dictator. Unlike his Foreword and Afterword to *Lolita*, Nabokov’s screenplay does not include conscious responses to his audience’s or producer’s critiques. Despite the extensive problems he had publishing his novel, he didn’t seem to foresee that similar problems would inevitably attend the production of a film of his novel, as he turns his camera into a “Nabokamera” that “glides around” and “dips into” and “withdraws with a shudder.” Nabokov failed to see that his masterpiece-screenplay was completely unfilmable. As a result, he loses his chance at making even the smallest contribution to the screenplay, which was taken over and totally revamped by Kubrick and Harris.
In compensation, Nabokov ended up adopting a position similar to Humbert's as he fell back upon the novel Lolita as his true artistic creation. His novel and, ironically, his readers become meaningful to Nabokov as they do Humbert when faced with the impending failure of their imagined filmic adaptations. As Nabokov writes in a later poem:

So let the film versions of my novels reek
Of grimey hands upon some choice antique.
I know those nitrate reels will decompose.
But each good reader will preserve my prose,
And his creative memory will save
My Laughter in the Dark and King Queen Knave.
He'll play the true Lolita and Despair
In his cinémathèque imaginaire.20

It is only in a poem, part of another novel, Pale Fire, that Nabokov is belatedly able to imagine a kind of artistic control, a control for which the cinema stands as a necessarily failed metaphor.

6

In closing, I would like to consider the question of Lolita's legacy. Adrian Lyne's remake of the film is just one instance of a broad dissemination, as it were, of the Lolita figure, a figure which almost daily seems to take up a larger space in the nation's fantasy life, resulting in a proliferation of Lolita blow-up dolls, mail-marketed incestographies, and a systematic, therapy-driven "recovering" of memory of incestuous child abuse. While Lolita is a novel about pedophilia (it is only technically about incest since Humbert is Lolita's stepfather), Lolita's spin-offs are represented in terms of literally incestuous child molestation, a practice that now appears to be a "sexy" discussion topic not only on talk shows and other mass cultural media but in the "high cultural" discourses of literature and criticism.21 Rather than regard the remake of Lolita as just one more example of what one critic has termed the present novellistic "incest scene" or tabloid fodder like JonBenet Ramsey, I want to explore just why incest has become so thematically alluring during a time noted for parents' absence in, indeed neglect of, their children's lives.22 More particularly, I want to focus on the less predictable, less obvious development of the Lolita figure in American mass culture, namely, the loser movie romance. In films like Badlands (dir. Terence Malick, 1972), Wild at Heart (dir. David Lynch, 1990), True Romance (dir. Tony Scott, 1993), California (dir. Dominic Sena, 1993), Natural Born Killers (dir. Oliver Stone, 1994), and Love and a .45, (dir. C. M. Talkington, 1995), the relation between stardom, the loser, and
incest has been reconfigured so that incest is disentangled from the loser and from stardom. The male character is generally domesticated, even feminized, and the Lolita figure becomes conversely masculinized.

A compelling feature of the present loser film spin-offs of Lolita is the relegation of incest to a past figure, both individual and collective in character. Along similar lines, molestation has moved from being relatively implicit to explicit in these films. Badlands, for example, implies that Holly's father has sexually abused her by noting from the start the absence of Holly's mother (she's dead) and the possessiveness of her father when it comes to her seeing boys. The implication of incest allows the viewer to make sense of why Holly approves of Kit's decision to first murder her father and burn her house down, and it explains as well why Holly allows Kit to take her off to live in the wilderness. More explicitly, Wild at Heart pictures Lula's escape with her outlaw boyfriend, Sailor, as a break from an incestuous childhood (in a flashback, we see her uncle molest her). True Romance, on the other hand, has only to mention Alabama's roots in Florida white trash and career beginnings in Detroit as a call girl to leave her marked by incest. Perhaps Oliver Stone wins the medal for making totally explicit the father's sexual molestation of Natural Born Killers' female protagonist, Mallory.

By pushing incest into the woman's past, the loser male in these films is made tame when it comes to domestic relations, however violent he may be when it comes to criminal activity. With the exception of Natural Born Killers, each film marks the male loser as gradually more gentle and reliant on his female sidekick. In Wild at Heart, Sailor objects when a robbery ends up entailing murder. True Romance goes a step further by moving from an initial scene in which Clarence kills Alabama's ex-pimp to scenes in which Alabama kills a hit man who has beaten her savagely to the final scene in which she rescues Clarence after he has been shot above his left eye. In Love and a .45, the male protagonist always carries an unloaded gun when committing robberies and needs his girlfriend to kill his enemies (as he espouts a philosophy of non-violence).

As the loser male is perhaps most domesticated in these films, a loser girl both authors and authorizes their romance. This introduction of the Lolita-protagonist's voice, quite literally in Badlands and True Romance, is the central dramatic change made to Nabokov's novel. Yet far from producing a feminist rewriting of Lolita, it is precisely this change in the gender of the author that eventually permits the male loser's fantasy to be fulfilled. Whereas Badlands does permit Holly some critical distance through her voice-over (it is quite clear that she thinks Kit's dream of keeping her to himself and playing James Dean in the woods is idiotic), later leading Lolitas do everything possible to keep their loser boyfriends' fantasy lives on fire. Both Lula and Alabama are virtual cheerleaders of the loser fantasy life. Sailor and Clarence believe they
are reincarnations of Elvis. Like the loser Humbert, they latch onto women who they feel mirror their interests in star culture. When the star is taken seriously, it's the man who gets to identify with the star (as in Badlands and True Romance). But when the star isn't taken seriously, as in Love and a .45, stardom is associated with the woman character (who happens in this case to be named Starlene). By being accidental outlaws, they are all the more attractive to their partners in faux crime. Besides, Lula and Alabama are clearly into their loser boyfriends/husbands for other reasons, such as snakeskin jackets and the cute outfits they get to wear, rock and roll, kung-fu movies, and fast cars. The loser guy's movie accessories and possessive, monogamous romantic posture do it all. The new Lolita, in short, is an expression of the male loser's fantasy: she will take a beating to protect him, won't steal his money or get knocked up with his child; she will wait out his prison sentence, break all familial ties and the law in order to be with him, and above all, be "one hundred percent" when it comes to sex. Humbert never had it so good. Perhaps we are now beginning to see him for what he always was: a loser, but nonetheless, a star.

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Notes

This article is greatly indebted to Richard Burt, who acted as editor, style-savior, and magazine-thief. He is, by far, the wildest loser-girl fantasy come true.


3. See, for examples of this approach, Trevor McNeely, "Lo' and Behold: Solving the Lolita Riddle," in Lolita, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1993), 134-48, and Thomas Frosch, "Parody and Authenticity in Lolita," eds. Charles Nicos and J. E. Rivers (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 171-87. While I agree that Nabokov's choice of style for Humbert does undercut criticism of him as a pedestal by inspiring laughter at his ill-suited romantic posturing, I suggest that Nabokov nevertheless makes high-cultural literacy compatible with molestation rather than the reverse. Indeed, it may be that Nabokov's construction of Humbert as an urbane academic molester, rather than a country-bumpkin half-wit molester, is precisely what American publishers found so revolting about the novel. Humbert makes it clear that he has literary precursors (with whom he identifies): Dante, Petrarch, Poe, and nineteenth-century romantic novelists. He interprets their works as artistic accounts of nympholepsy.


Cited by Corliss in *Lolita* 12.


Charlotte informs Humbert that Lolita sees herself as a starlet. She certainly resembles one in Humbert’s star treatment. Like Valeria, she wins Humbert’s enduring adoration through her powers of mimicry and her style. Thus he recalls “in the projection room of his pain and despair” (241), Lolita’s tennis playing, a sport in which her mimicry and lack of inhibition gave Humbert “a chance to rest from the nightmare of unknown betrayals within the innocence of her style, of her soul, of her essential grace” (233).

Cited by Corliss in *Lolita* 19.

Idem.


Ibid. 13, 37, 44, 93.


Cited by Corliss in *Lolita* 19.

Idem.

Ibid. 11.

For literature, see, for example, the Lolita spun-off by A. M. Holmes, *The End of Alice* (New York: Scribner, 1996). For criticism, see, for example, the recent special issue of *New Art Examiner* 25.9 (June 1998) devoted to Lolita’s heirs.