

#### ABSTRACT

Nabokov's *Lolita* is narrated in first person by pedophile Humbert, who is self-conscious and knows he is being judged. The Humberts in the two film adaptations also narrate, but Stanley Kubrick's movie (1962) goes beyond using a strict voice-over narration, whereas Adrian Lyne's version (1997) adopts a solemn tone.

KEY WORDS: irony, narration, voice-over narration, film adaptation.

### "A SHINING EXAMPLE OF MORAL LEPROSY": HOW THE NARRATIVE CHOICES IN *LOLITA* AND ITS FILM VERSIONS LEAD (OR NOT) TO IRONY

---

Dolores Aronovich Agüero\*

#### RESUMO

*Lolita*, de Nabokov, é narrado em primeira pessoa pelo pedófilo Humbert, que tem consciência de estar sendo julgado. Os Humberts nas duas adaptações para o cinema também narram, mas, enquanto o filme de Stanley Kubrick (1962) utiliza mais que uma rígida narração em off, a versão de Adrian Lyne (1997) adota um tom solene.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: ironia, narração, narração em off, adaptação filmica.

---

\* Professor at Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina.  
E-mail: lola@lost.art.br

It is difficult to disagree with Sarah Kozloff in her powerful work about voice-over narration, *Invisible Storytellers* (1988), when she claims that “Stories depend upon who tells them” (p. 62). Indeed, *Lolita* the novel is narrated in first person by the pedophile Humbert Humbert, and that makes all the difference. It would have been another book had it been narrated by Lolita, or by Charlotte, or by Quilty, or by the fake psychiatrist who opens the novel. Even if it focused mainly on Humbert, the story would have been radically diverse if it were told in third person. By controlling the narrative, Humbert offers us his point of view and no one else’s. And, though he may experience a few changes during the story, his tone is vibrant and egocentric throughout. He is surely what Wayne Booth defines as a self-conscious narrator, one who knows he is writing his memoirs (*A Rhetoric of Fiction*), and he is doing so only two months after killing Quilty and seeing Lolita for the last time. More than that – Humbert knows he is being judged, since he addresses us, “ladies and gentlemen of the jury,” again and again. The Humberts in the two film adaptations also narrate, even though the 1962 film goes beyond a strict voice-over narration, and although the pervert in the 1997 version adopts a solemn tone. These contrasts will be discussed throughout this paper.

In *Narrative Discourse*, Gérard Genette points out that there is a big difference between mood, that is, between who is the character whose point of view guides the narrative, and voice, that is, who the narrator is. I will approach here what Genette calls voice. Genette dislikes the terms first-person or third-person narrator because, for him, the choices are between having “the story told by one of its ‘characters’ or [having] it told by a narrator outside of the story” (p. 243-244). The real question, for Genette, lies in “whether or not the narrator can use the first person to designate *one of his characters*” (p. 244). The novel *Lolita* constitutes what Genette labels a homodiegetic narrative. In other words, it is told by a narrator who is a character in the story (p. 244-245). In fact, Humbert’s case is one which Genette refers to as extradiegetic-homodiegetic, that is, “a narrator in the first degree who tells his own story” (p. 248).

Thus, Humbert’s unreliability as a narrator is a matter of voice, not mood. Humbert is unreliable because there are several instances in which he is dishonest with his readers. An example of his dishonesty appears when, in defending pedophilia, he mentions Dante, who fell in love with Beatrice when she was only nine (p. 19). But he “forgets” to inform us that Dante was also nine, and children’s love for other children does not constitute a crime. After Humbert delineates this brief history of literary pedophilia to justify his obsession with nymphets, he concludes, “But let us be prim and civilized. Humbert Humbert tried hard to be good” (p. 19). By distancing himself from

the narration and writing this passage in the third person, Humbert is already being ironic, and he is also distinguishing his role as narrator from his role as character. As a narrator, he is witty and self-assured. As a character, or at least what comes through the dialogues, he is a coward, constantly scared of being disclosed. The effect is as if he were talking behind people's backs.

But even though Humbert comes through as unreliable, we have to trust him in some matters. For instance, we have to take his word that Lolita seduced him, not the other way around. His narration is too lively and full of details for us to discard it, and besides, it is the only account of the facts we have. We do not know Lolita's version. True, after their first sexual relation she tells him, "You revolting creature. I was a daisy-fresh girl, and look what you've done to me. I ought to call the police and tell them you raped me. Oh, you dirty, dirty old man" (p. 141). But Lolita says so smilingly, and he believes – and so do we – that she is kidding, especially because she was not a "daisy-fresh girl," since she had had some kind of sexual experience with Charlie, a boy at the camp. Of course, we cannot believe our ears when Humbert admonishes Lolita, "I am not a criminal sexual psychopath taking indecent liberties with a child. The rapist was Charlie Holmes; I am the therapist [...]" (p. 150). Humbert seems psychotic to us, his effect on Lolita is far from a therapeutic one, and Charlie was no rapist. We certainly cannot trust him on this, and we are willing to bet Lolita does not either.

But can we trust Humbert to be as handsome as he believes? Here are just a few examples of his vanity: according to his modest self, he is "an exceptionally handsome male; slow-moving, tall, with soft dark hair and a gloomy but all the more seductive cast of demeanor" (p. 25), and "a handsome, intensely virile grown-up friend" (p. 49); and he has "all the characteristics which, according to writers on the sex interests of children, start the responses stirring in a little girl: clean-cut jaw, muscular hand, deep sonorous voice, broad shoulder" (p. 43). Humbert just cannot get over himself. If anybody missed any of his numerous descriptions, he reminds us again on page 104: "I do not know if in these tragic notes I have sufficiently stressed the peculiar 'sending' effect that the writer's good looks – pseudo-Celtic, attractively simian, boyishly manly – had on women of every age and environment." His effect, on us at least, is not "sending" at all – it is rather ridiculous that a person can be so much in love with his looks. But there is nothing in his narration to prove him wrong. Charlotte does find him attractive and Lolita does too, or so he claims, and he infers that Charlotte is jealous of Jean Farlow, their neighbor (p. 88). The two film versions vary in how they transmit this important trait of Humbert's personality. Stanley Kubrick does not show Humbert praising himself, but by having all the women characters in the film falling for him, the director is, in a way, conveying Humbert's vanity.

Jean is flirtatious with him, and so is Miss Starch, Lolita's piano teacher, not to mention Charlotte. Adrian Lyne's Humbert, on the other hand, is too deadly serious to be vain. Moreover, the Farlows and Miss Starch do not exist, so his relation with Lolita is more of a private affair.

More than any other character in the novel, Lolita and Charlotte do not really exist outside Humbert's narration. Booth mentions a narrator's privilege, or his or her access to what other characters think and know, and he affirms that "Complete privilege is what we usually call omniscience" (*Fiction*). Humbert has almost no privilege as a narrator. He is by no means omniscient. He ignores Quilty's mere existence, he wants to know as little as possible about Charlotte, and, towards the end, he admits how unfamiliar he was with Lolita's ideas: "[...] I simply did not know a thing about my darling's mind [...]" (p. 284). He, as a narrator, even disguises most insight about himself as a character. But he has the privilege – power would be a better word – to mold the other characters, manipulating information about them. Charlotte, for one, has no life at all far from his very unflattering descriptions of her. Everything she says and does is channeled through him. Lolita exists mainly through him, though she does have a past of her own. In Kubrick's version she even tells Humbert in the end, "I don't suppose it ever occurred to you that when you moved into our house my whole world didn't revolve around you." In the novel, Humbert points out that Lolita cries every single night (p. 176). Lolita is strong and independent enough to be able to escape Humbert, leave Quilty, and meet and marry Dick. Hence, almost all of her universe revolves around Humbert's narration, but not all.

It is Quilty, however, that most definitely proves Humbert's lack of privilege as a narrator. Quilty certainly has a life of his own. In the novel we know of his existence through Humbert's clues – Charlotte mentions a famous playwright, and Quilty's brother, a dentist, is also suggested. In Lyne's film these hints are also present, and whenever Quilty appears his face is covered in smoke, making him a foggy character until Humbert finally finds out about him. This is coherent with the film's voice-over narration, which ignores Quilty until the end. In Kubrick's version Quilty is an extremely important character, and to solve the problem of Humbert's ignoring a person who appears so much, the story moves his death to the beginning of the picture, and the rest is told in flashback. This anticipation may not seem so outrageous considering that, in the novel, Nabokov gives us glimpses of Quilty and his fate as early as page 31. But in Kubrick's film Quilty is shown in several scenes in which Humbert is not even present. This is possible because, after all, the movie's narration does not happen entirely through Humbert.

Although Kubrick's film contains instances of voice-over narration, it is not wholly narrated by Humbert. To explain this, first of all, we need to

define what voice-over narration is. For Kozloff, it is “oral statements, conveying any portion of a narrative, spoken by an unseen speaker situated in a space and time other than that simultaneously being presented by the images on the screen” (p.5). To illustrate, it is better to cite Lyne’s version, in which voice-over narration is in full force. The voice-over narration present in the film fulfills all the conditions in Kozloff’s definition so that it can be considered voice-over: we hear Humbert speaking (*voice*) and we do not see him narrating (*over*) (p. 2-3). We should note that voice-over narration is distinct from interior monologue, in which we hear the character’s thoughts, though s/he is not narrating anything. For example, in Kubrick’s film there is a moment of interior monologue when Humbert looks at a gun and thinks about using it to kill Charlotte. These are his words:

No man can bring about the perfect murder. Chance, however, can do it. Just minutes ago she had said it wasn’t loaded. What if I had playfully pulled the trigger then? “She said it wasn’t loaded. It belonged to the late Mr. Haze. She was having her morning tub. We had just finished talking about our plans for the future. I decided to play a practical joke and pretend I was a burglar. We were newlyweds and still did things like that to each other. As soon as it happened I called an ambulance, but it was too late.” Simple, isn’t it? The perfect murder.

This constitutes interior monologue rather than voice-over narration, for Humbert is simply thinking out loud. In interior monologue, which Genette prefers calling *immediate speech* (p. 173), and which to him relates to mood, not voice, there is no time gap between past and present. The character is thinking without a clear-cut distinction concerning time.

Kozloff also distinguishes between types of voice-over narrators. There are frame narrators, or narrators whose words open and close a film; there are micro-narrators, or narrators whose voice appears in less than 25% of a film (p. 52). The narrators that dominate a film she calls embedded narrators, and this is clearly the case with Lyne’s Humbert. But the truth is that it is complicated to place Kubrick’s narrator in any of the above definitions. In spite of Kozloff’s belief that Kubrick’s *Lolita* has as much of an unreliable first-person narrator as *A Clockwork Orange* (p. 117), this is not a consensus among other scholars. Mario Falsetto, in his essay “Narrational Gaps: Absence and Presence in *Lolita*,” divides the film into thirty-five narrative units. Of the thirty-five, according to him, only five involve Humbert’s voice-over. He also mentions that Quilty is so important in the film that his presence can be detected, either implicitly or overtly, in sixteen of the film’s thirty-five narrative units (p. 17). For Greg Jenkins, Kubrick’s version still privileges Humbert’s point of view, although the story no longer channels through him (p. 38).

For Pauline Kael, the film goes beyond adopting a simple narrator, and Peter Seller's routines as Quilty also serve as a kind of narration, commenting on the action (p. 205-206). Brian Henderson's observation comes in handy: he observes that voice-over narration in cinema can and is usually dropped in the course of a film, while it is rare for a narrator to disappear in a literary work (p. 15).

I counted seven, not five, moments of voice-over narration in Kubrick's adaptation. They are mostly informative, helping us to locate the characters in space, as the first one shows ("Having recently arrived in America, where so many Europeans have found a haven before, I decided to spend a peaceful summer in the attractive resort town of Ramsdale, New Hampshire"), and time, as the fifth voice-over illustrates ("Six months have passed and Lolita is attending an excellent school where it is my hope that she will be persuaded to read other things than comic books and movie romances"). In only one of them is Humbert writing in his journal. But none of these bits of narration open or close the film, so calling Humbert a frame narrator is wrong. Since he is by no means an embedded narrator, maybe the term that fits him better, if we follow Kozloff's terminology, is that of a micro-narrator. Falsetto points out that "Despite the film's subjective voice-over commentary, Humbert does not control the fictional presentation. He does not really tell the film's story. The controlling point of view is more properly supplied by the film's overall narrating function. The voice-over is just one more element in that overall function" (p. 19). Aside from Humbert's function as a micro-narrator, Kubrick's version also uses narration from the camera, one title saying "Four Years Later," one epilogue telling us of Humbert's death, a sign indicating where we are ("Camp Climax for Girls – Drive Carefully"), and Charlotte's and Lolita's letters to Humbert.

For the sake of comparison, I counted seventeen moments of voice-over narration in Lyne's film, but all of them are much longer and cover more images than the voice-over in Kubrick's. Whereas the number of sentences together in all the voice-over moments in the 1962 film only amount to nineteen, this number rises to seventy-six in Lyne's version, showing how much Humbert controls the narrative here, though this Humbert, unlike the narrator in the novel, lacks irony. The first voice-over in the 1997 film includes a reference to Humbert's past. Right after describing Lolita's name, he goes into "But there might not have been a Lolita at all had I first not met Annabel." Other narrative sentences follow, always accompanying romantic and soft-focus images of Humbert and Annabel, when both were pre-teens. These sentences are very similar to the ones in the book, but there are a distinguishing details. Whereas the novel's Humbert ponders about Annabel, "She wanted to be a nurse in some famished Asiatic country; I wanted to be

a famous spy” (p. 12), the Humbert in Lyne’s movie prefers “She wanted to be a nurse. I wanted to become a spy,” with a brief pause between sentences, while the camera depicts young Humbert looking lovingly at this Annabel. By leaving out the words *famished* and *famous*, Lyne drains the irony out of the lines. When Humbert as a boy hears his Annabel died of Typhus four months later, he cries hopelessly. The purpose of this passage in the novel is to show the roots of Humbert’s obsession for nymphets, but in Lyne’s film it serves to humanize the narrator, as well as to set the tone for Humbert’s persona: a man who suffers for love. The main difference, however, is in the delivery. The novel’s Humbert is diffusive and cheerful, while Lyne’s Humbert, impersonated by Jeremy Irons, is a tormented soul speaking in a very solemn tone. And there is no distinction between his narration and his character, both being eternal sufferers.

Jenkins draws the following conclusion about Kubrick’s Humbert, the micro-narrator voiced by James Mason: “If the novel’s narrator is garrulous to a fault, this new voice is subdued, terse, and measured” (p. 38). Yes, but it is also capable of calling attention to itself when it calls Humbert “poor Humbert,” something that Lyne never does. Lyne’s film, however, also uses other forms of narration besides Humbert’s voice, such as signs, titles indicating dates, and Charlotte’s and Lolita’s letters. Not to mention that, for Kozloff, every film contains a narrating agent, even if the film does not include voice-over at all. This is the image-maker (p.44).

Because both pictures are narrated in more ways than just by using first-person voice-over, it seems adequate to compare how the films start. In Kubrick’s version, the image-maker shows a hand painting the nails of a small foot. It is probably Humbert doing Lolita’s toenails, a scene which is repeated when the “couple” is in Beardsley, and from the start it denotes Humbert’s subservience to his obsession. The movie then proceeds to Humbert’s long and sarcastic confrontation with Quilty, until the narrator kills the molester. Gene D. Philips states that this prologue at Quilty’s mansion “firmly establishes the air of black comedy that permeates the picture” (p. 102). If the very first scenes already help to set the tone of the films, then Lyne’s adaptation opens with Humbert driving mindlessly on a deserted, bucolic road, crying and nearly crashing into a truck. He has blood on his hands, and he carries a pistol and a hairpin. For someone unfamiliar with the plot, it is possible to imagine that Humbert has killed Lolita. The voice-over narration soon complements Enio Morricone’s romantic soundtrack and the images by saying, in a serious voice, “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. Lolita.” This is almost identical to

the extract from page 9 in the book, but somehow the irony no longer exists. This is so because, in the novel, this opening comes right after the fake psychiatrist's foreword, and because before going into the many varieties of her name, Humbert the narrator teaches the reader to pronounce her nickname: "Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta" (p. 9). These mere instructions already let us know we are entering a madman's universe.

We have evidence to affirm that Humbert is being ironic throughout his tale. In *A Rhetoric of Irony* Booth claims that the first steps a reader should take when suspecting irony are rejecting the literal meaning, trying a new meaning for the new utterance, and finally deciding on a new meaning (p. 10-12). But Booth is being too reductionistic when he makes irony simply mean something else than what is written. The narrator in *Lolita* is ironic not because he means something else from what he is describing, but because of his tone. He sustains his ironic temperament throughout. For Linda Hutcheon, there are "five generally agreed-upon categories of signals that function structurally" in telling us that irony might be present in a text: changes of register, exaggeration or understatement, contradiction, simplification and repetition (p. 156). In Nabokov's novel, the first and only change of register appears after the foreword. We move from a psychiatrist's erudite language to a narrator writing in first person, telling us how much he loves himself and nymphets. Occasionally, especially towards the end of the novel, Humbert attempts a few other changes of register when he tries to sound repentant for all he has done. But these are very short, inconsistent and unconvincing. We must bear in mind that the whole book praises what Humbert calls *nympholepsy*. Once or twice Humbert mentions guilt, but confesses that desire takes over and erases the shame (p. 285). There are many examples showing that Humbert does not regret what he has done, but I will mention just one: "I would be a knave to say, and the reader a fool to believe, that the shock of losing Lolita cured me of pederosis. My accursed nature could not change, no matter how my love for her did" (p. 257). He remains a pedophile, and his "accursed nature" includes not only his passion for nymphets, but also his passion for irony. After all, would someone who really repents make such a brilliant defense of child abuse (and abusers) when he is writing this only fifty-six days after he has last seen Lolita?

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the majority of sex offenders that hanker for some throbbing, sweet-moaning, physical but not necessarily coital, relation with a girl-child, are innocuous, inadequate, passive, timid strangers who merely ask the community to allow them to pursue their practically harmless, so-called aberrant behavior, their little hot wet private acts of sexual deviation without the police and society cracking down upon



them. We are not sex fiends! We do not rape as good soldiers do. (p. 87-88)

For someone wishing to sound so repentant, Humbert surely seems to be enjoying the ride.

In the above quote from the book *Lolita* we can find other signals that indicate irony. The most flagrant one is in the last sentence, "We do not rape as good soldiers do," demonstrating contradiction. It is dubious whether good soldiers rape, or whether soldiers can be good at all. The whole passage points to a simplification and generalization of how sex offenders act and how unperilous they really are. Calling what child molesters do "practically harmless" is indeed an understatement that could only be made by a molester. The word *strangers* in the third sentence also calls attention to itself because we know Humbert is no stranger to his prey, as much as we know that most abused children are victims of relatives and friends, not strangers. Repetition occurs in this passage because of the echoes between the adjectives in the second sentence and the phrase "their little hot wet private acts of sexual deviation." The phrase "Ladies and gentleman of the jury" is in itself a repetition of a term Humbert uses throughout the book to approach us.

Then again, we have to take into account what Genette refers to as time of the narrating, which is an element of voice (p. 215). Humbert, who adopts subsequent narration because he uses the past tense (GENETTE, 1995, p. 217), is writing his memoirs from a psychiatric prison, awaiting trial for having murdered Quilty. This fact already foreshadows what is going to happen at the end. For Genette, "[s]ubsequent narrating exists through this paradox: it possesses at the same time a temporal situation (with respect to the past story) and an atemporal essence (since it has no duration proper). [...] "The narrator's present [...] is a single moment without progression" (p. 223). Before meeting Lolita in the novel, Humbert's past is narrated in very broad terms, retelling only a few experiences (in Kubrick's film, none). When they meet, it is as if time freezes. First there is a day-by-day account of his adventures trying to touch Lolita without her noticing, all of which are narrated through journal entries. When Lolita goes off to camp and he marries Charlotte, the narration becomes less detailed. After Humbert's first night with Lolita, his narrative includes only highlights of their days together. But overall, Humbert writes from prison, three years after he lost Lolita to Quilty. And still, he goes on narrating as if he is in heaven, long after he has been to hell. He narrates the pleasures in all detail, and his remorse in passing. Humbert could have chosen to emphasize grief, as Lyne does, but his regretting moments in the novel are not much more than "[...] I held her quite hard and in fact hurt her rather badly for which I hope my heart may

rot [...]” (p. 205). Genette explains that the narrator can sound ironically superior to the character because they are distinct in age and experience (p. 252). Hence, Humbert the narrator can be more ironic in the novel than his character. By the same token, the narrator can look back at his sordid affair with Lolita and attempt repentance, but the character does not.

Certainly the ironic signal that appears the most in the novel is exaggeration. Humbert’s whole style is exaggerated, as if he were hysterical and too overcome with joy. For instance, right after citing some laws about the age limits for girls, he adds: “This is all very interesting, and I daresay you see me already frothing at the mouth in a fit [...]” (p. 19). When Humbert refers to himself as a “pentapod monster” he is not only exaggerating – he is also echoing what Charlotte calls him after she reads his journal. That is, he does not go very far in his condemnation of himself. But there may be yet another reason for Humbert’s exertion of irony. According to Katharina Barbe, people use irony when they wish to criticize someone or something, but they still do not want the criticism to seem too harsh. Irony, thus, is a face-saving mechanism (p. 97). So Humbert, by being ironic, in a way is also trying to save *his* face. Not taking himself too seriously is his method for not punishing himself for his deeds. For Booth, “All truths are dissolved in an ironic mist” (p. 151). That is to say, Humbert’s topic of choice is such a taboo that he cannot deal with it straightforwardly. He needs to resort to irony.

We can find some of the signals of irony that Hutcheon mentions (p. 156) in both films, but the voice-over narration in neither of them is very ironic. Kozloff consents that the image-maker can employ irony in pictures that do not use voice-over by manipulating the editing, lighting, camera angles and soundtrack. She cites the example of the camera focusing on the word *Rosebud* on the sled just as the fire consumes it in *Citizen Kane* (p. 110). However, she explains, when a movie does use voice-over narration, two types of storytelling become visible (p. 109). She claims that when voice-over is included there occurs “a doubling of the source of the narrative, an image-maker and an imitation storyteller; thus, should the filmmaker wish, he or she can create an ironic distance between these two sources” (p. 110). Within these two structures, the filmmaker may force some ironic disparities (p. 110). Kozloff likewise reminds us that, if there is a discrepancy between the narrator’s words and the film’s images, we always tend to believe the images, not the narrator, based on the common misconception that the camera cannot lie (p. 114).

The two film versions of *Lolita* take little advantage of giving the narrator an ironic voice. In both, the attempt is to make the voice-over more reliable and less ironic. Even in Kubrick’s picture, in which Humbert acts as a micro-narrator, he is not necessarily compromised, that is, he is not

discredited in what he says by the images showing something contrary to his words. For Kozloff, micro-narrators can be easily called into question simply because they appear less (p. 49). Granted, Humbert as a character may be compromised, but not as a narrator. Though the voice-over becomes a bit more ironic as the film progresses, Humbert is still very timid if compared to the narrator of the novel. Kubrick's first voice-over has no trace of irony at all; its function is to tell us where Humbert is going. But the image-maker has some opinions about Humbert (the character, not the narrator), and he shares them with us. For instance, after Humbert sees Lolita for the first time, sitting under the sun, the editing cuts from a full-frame close-up of the nymphet to a clip from *Frankenstein*. This may suggest that Humbert is indeed a monster. Likewise, in the second moment of voice-over, when Humbert narrates "I know it is madness to keep this journal but it gives me a strange thrill to do so, and only a loving wife could decipher my microscopic script," the camera first exhibits Charlotte in a bad mood, serving breakfast to Lolita. After the narrator mentions the "loving wife," Lolita too comes into the frame, together with Charlotte. In a way, this shot is really asking who the loving wife is. It is denoting competition between the two women in the house. This narration, also present in the novel (p. 42), is ironic because it foreshadows what is about to happen: Humbert will soon be marrying Charlotte, the loving wife who *will* decipher his microscopic script, and who will naturally be very upset by what she reads.

Humbert's third moment of voice-over in Kubrick's film, taken verbatim from the novel (p. 75), is probably his most ironic in the movie:

VOICE-OVER. The wedding was a quiet affair, and when called upon to enjoy my promotion from lodger to lover, did I experience only bitterness and distaste? No. Mr. Humbert confesses to a certain titillation of his vanity, to some faint tenderness, even to a pattern of remorse, daintily running along the steel of his conspiratorial dagger.

This is accompanied by images of Humbert locking himself up in the bathroom with his journal so he can have some privacy, with Charlotte after him. The sentences are already ironic enough – just by shifting from first to third person Humbert distances himself, making them ironic, while again telling us how vain he is – but the image-maker emphasizes the irony by starting the scene that precedes this voice-over with Charlotte waking up in a double bed, looking for "Hum" with her hand. But, before we see Charlotte, we are invited to look at Lolita's portrait on the bedside table. This shot of Lolita's photo not only reinforces the competition between the two, but also raises the possibility, for a few milliseconds, that the woman in bed is Lolita, not Charlotte.

The sixth voice-over from Kubrick's film is also very similar to the lines in the novel (p. 208): "We had promised Beardsley School that we would be back as soon as my [ironic pause] Hollywood engagement came to an end. Inventive Humbert was to be, I hinted, chief consultant in the production of a film dealing with existentialism, still a hot thing at the time." Again, Humbert speaks of himself in third person, always in a praising tone. We know Humbert is not going to Hollywood. As a matter of fact, in the novel, he plans to take Lolita across the Mexican border and then decide if he will marry her or dismiss her, now that she is getting older and his predilection is for pre-pubescent girls, not teens. In the book his cruel thoughts are also ironic because we suspect that Lolita has ideas of her own, and she will run away from him before he reaches a decision.

The moment in which Humbert reencounters Lolita is the most touching in the novel, since it is then that he realizes, as a character, that he truly loves her and wants to live with her long after she has ceased to be a nymphet. This is the point when the character meets the narrator, something that, according to Genette, usually occurs at the end (p. 226). But even this poignant instant is contaminated by Humbert's crude remarks as a narrator, and also made considerably lighter by the introduction of Lolita's husband, Dick, who is a bit deaf. To demonstrate how much Humbert controls the narrative of the novel, it is even up to him to decide what and when Dick will speak. When Dick and Humbert are shortly left together, the latter narrates:

I was sure that when finally [Dick] would open his mouth, he would say (slightly shaking his head): "Aw, she's a swell kid, Mr. Haze. She sure is. And she's going to make a swell mother." He opened his mouth – and took a sip of beer. [...] But presently I became sorry for poor Dick whom, in some hypnotoid way, I was horribly preventing from making the only remark he could think up ("She's a swell kid..."). (p. 274)

All of Dick's presence serves as comic relief. Lolita has to shout when she is near him, and Dick proves to have nothing to say to his father-in-law.

In Kubrick's version, Dick's presence and the comic relief he offers are maintained. But it is clever how the irony from the pages is transposed to the screen. Here, Dick spills a bit of beer on Humbert. And, when it is his turn to speak, he does say what in the book Humbert prevents him from saying: "She's sure a swell kid, Professor Haze. She sure is. She's just nuts about dogs and kids. She's gonna make a swell mother too. Alaska's a great place for kids, you know. Lots of room for them to run around." Not only does Dick call Humbert Professor Haze, a name the narrator despises because it reminds him of his late wife, he also calls him "Dad." Lyne's version, adequately enough, ignores Dick. Humbert decides he does not want to meet him, and, as a

result, neither does the viewer. There is little room for comic relief in this serious adaptation.

Lyne's movie is perfect for those viewers who judge quality in terms of fidelity to the source, and fidelity in terms of details. Lyne is very faithful to details: the "Old invalid Miss Opposite" from the novel (p. 50) comes to life in the film and waves from her veranda as Lolita leaves for camp; the dog that belongs to Quilty in the Enchanted Hunters Hotel is indeed a cocker spaniel (p. 117); the nymphet has an ice-cream soda, cherry and all, before leaving Beardsley (p. 207). The image-maker lingers on these shots, and the film is heavily edited. The slapstick sequence that appears in Lyne's version (Humbert testing Charlotte to see if she is asleep after he has given her sleeping pills) comes straight from the novel:

The last dose I had given her [...] had knocked her out for four solid hours. I had put the radio at full blast. I had blazed in her face an olisbos-like flashlight. I had pushed her, pinched her, prodded her – and nothing had disturbed the rhythm of her calm and powerful breathing. However, when I had done such a simple thing as kiss her, she had awakened at once, as fresh and strong as an octopus (I barely escaped). (p. 94)

There is even a nice touch of homage to the novel when Humbert closes the bathroom door in the hotel and in the next second he opens it, already in his pajamas, revealing how anxious he is. In the book, it goes like this: "I seemed to have shed my clothes and slipped into pajamas with the kind of fantastic instantaneousness which is implied when in a cinematographic scene the process of changing is cut [...]" (p. 128). The film gives Humbert this "kind of fantastic instantaneousness" due to its editing. Everything in the movie seems carefully studied to match the novel – except that the tone is so different.

Lyne's *Lolita* can be considered to contain complementary narration, that is, a voice-over narration that does not go against the images and vice-versa. For Kozloff, "One of the hallmarks of complementary narration is a general harmony between the words, the tone of voice, the attitude of the narrator, the style of the images, and the mood of the music" (p. 108). All those techniques in the film point in one direction only: making the movie as serious as possible. It is not that the voice-over is obvious and that it simply mimes the images, but the film offers no contrast between what is being shown and what is being said, or between Humbert as a narrator and as a character. Jeremy Irons' voice carries absolutely no irony in his narration, though he borrows several lines from the lunatic narrator from the book. Irons is not as psychologically fragile or pathetic as are the Humberts in both the novel and in Kubrick's film.

The first images we see of Lolita in Lyne's picture come with no voice-over narration, just the image-maker as narrator. While Charlotte is showing Humbert her garden, he stares passionately at Lolita, who is lying down on the grass reading a movie magazine. Her transparent dress is wet from a sprinkler nearby, but then she looks up and smiles at him, revealing her braces. The film cuts from a full-frame close-up of Lolita to a smiling Humbert who then goes after Charlotte, asking her the price of the rent. As Anthony Lane muses in his positive review of the film, "Thankfully, the dreary erotic gag of [Lolita's] first appearance on the lawn – sprinklers spurting behind her behind – makes way for a more sober style" (p. 89). This scene is bound to get laughs when compared to the prudish sequence introducing the nymphet in the 1962 version. However, it is unrealistic mainly because Humbert is left looking at Lolita while Charlotte goes on talking to herself. In the novel, the description of Humbert's first glimpse of Lolita is also an emotionally-charged moment for both narrator and character, though the former never lets relinquishes his ironic verve, which culminates when he adds, "My judges will regard all this as a piece of mummery on the part of a madman with a gross liking for the *fruit vert*" (p. 40). The only irony that survives in Lyne's scene is a brief reference to one more of Humbert's vanities in the novel, when he refers to himself and his "adult disguise" as "a great big handsome hunk of movieland manhood" (p. 39). This is probably why Lolita is reading a movie magazine in the film, but the reference only works for those who remember the line from the novel.

Another example of how some very ironic comments in the novel are delivered straightforwardly in Lyne's version occurs when Humbert fantasizes about Charlotte's death. In Humbert's narration from the novel, he says, "I long for some terrific disaster. Earthquake. Spectacular explosion. [Lolita's] mother is messily but instantly and permanently eliminated, along with everybody else for miles around. Lolita whimpers in my arms" (p. 53). In the 1997 adaptation, while the camera shows shots of Lolita's legs, and of Charlotte bossing her to make her bed, Jeremy Irons gives Humbert a solemn voice that rants: "I longed for some terrific disaster. Earthquake. Spectacular explosion. Her mother instantly eliminated, along with everybody else miles around. Lolita in my arms." His tone does the trick to mark the distinction between the two narrations, but we can also notice the omission of certain words that make one passage ironic, and the other, serious. The Humbert from the novel imagines Charlotte "messily but instantly and permanently eliminated," and the word *messily* makes all the difference. It shows that Humbert not only dreams of Charlotte's death, but of her suffering as well. This detail gives Humbert a darker, more sadistic side. The Humbert in the movie simply wants her eliminated. Also, the disappearance of the verb

*whimpers* is remarkable. First, because it gives another hint of Humbert's sadism. He longs to console Lolita for some tragedy he himself perpetrates. Second, the verb has a double meaning: "Lolita in my arms" is much less erotic than "Lolita whimpers in my arms," for *whimpers* connotes sounds produced during sex. In this sense, the line from the novel is much more ironic, since wanting one's wife killed terribly in an explosion, consoling her child and having sexual fantasies hardly go together.

There *are* a few ironic touches in Lyne's film concerning narration. For instance, in the fourth voice-over Humbert expresses, "During the six weeks we've been married, I successfully avoided most of my husbandly duties." While this is being said, the camera shows shots of him mowing the lawn and washing dishes, which could be considered husbandly duties. But we know what duties he means, and that is the reason he gives Charlotte sleeping pills. The eleventh voice-over, a line taken from the novel, is ironic because it for once refers to Humbert in the third person: "Did Humbert hum his assent? Oh yes. I sealed my fate gratefully." The pun on the character's name and the verb *hum*, and the word *gratefully*, contribute to the irony, since at this stage in the plot the narrator is paranoid enough not to be humming or grateful.

Also, there are two instances in which the use of music in Lyne's film is ironic. The first happens when Humbert checks if Charlotte is asleep. A song coming from the radio plays "I'm in the mood for love," which cleverly plays on Humbert's lack of desire for his wife. The second occurs after Humbert and Lolita are being followed by Quilty, and their car has a flat tire. The song from the radio snaps "Open the door and let me in," a refrain that is soon repeated when Lolita is left alone in a hotel.

But for every one of those bits of irony there is a dramatic scene, and the image-maker focuses on several nasty pieces of narration that do not really connect to the story. Rather, they relate to the advertising school of filmmaking Lyne comes from, and to the image publicity has built of nymphets. John Marks observes that the media has iconized nymphets, transforming them into "a child-slut making love to the camera, so to speak" (p. 71). Some of the shots in Lyne's film are reminiscent of this icon. For example, the ways his Lolita (Dominique Swain) eats a banana or a cherry seem like a male sex fantasy. And, it seems, to match these shots there are scenes that focus on phallic symbols, such as a pencil being sharpened or a dog's leash being held by a middle finger. These are some annoying details that do not add anything to the plot, though they remind us of the director's style. But it is no less ironic that Stephen Schiff, the screenwriter of the 1997 film, has declared in an interview that Sue Lyon's Lolita looks like a porn star (Suellen Stringer-Hye, par. 16).

There are few scenes that occur in both films, but, in those that do, it is possible to see that Kubrick stresses the ironic, and Lyne, the romantic. In any case, both are less ironic than how it appears narrated in the novel. For instance, the moment in which Lolita runs upstairs to bid Humbert farewell, before leaving for camp, is only a paragraph long in the novel, but it gains importance in the films. In the book, Humbert narrates:

A moment later I heard my sweetheart running up the stairs. My heart expanded with such force that it almost blotted me out. I hitched the pants of my pajamas, flung the door open: and simultaneously Lolita arrived, in her Sunday frock, stamping, panting, and then she was in my arms, her innocent mouth melting under the ferocious pressure of dark male jaws, my palpitating darling! The next instant I heard her – alive, unrapped – clatter downstairs. The motion of fate was resumed. The blond leg was pulled in, the car door was slammed – was re-slammed – and driver Haze at the violent wheel, rubber-red lips writhing in angry, inaudible speech, swung my darling away [...]. (p. 66)

This scene in Lyne's film captures all the details mentioned by Humbert's narration: Lolita is seen running in slow-motion, and then shots of her legs appear. Lyne uses no dialogue or voice-over in this scene, only romantic music – thus, we are left with Humbert the character only, not the narrator. Lolita jumps on top of Humbert, puts her legs and arms around him, and kisses him on the mouth. As she leaves, she gives him a sly look. This is much more erotic and explicit than in the novel. In Kubrick's film the romantic piano score prevails. Lolita gives Humbert a very brief kiss on the cheek and pleads "Don't forget me." Though the scene is dramatic, Lolita's line is ironic, for we know Humbert will never forget her, so her wish is quite superfluous.

In Kubrick's film, this sequence proceeds as Humbert, almost crying, goes to Lolita's room and throws himself on her bed. The maid appears and gives him a letter, remarking that Charlotte has ordered her to hand it to him. Therefore, Humbert does not suffer the initial suspense (and hope) he does in the novel, when he thinks the handwriting might be Lolita's. In the book Charlotte's confession is much longer (p. 67-68), but Kubrick's version seizes the gist of it, though the most ironic sentence – "Your old-world reticence, your sense of decorum may be shocked by the boldness of an American girl!" (p. 68) – is left out. But the most interesting point in the picture is not necessarily Charlotte's letter, but James Mason's reading of her letter. It is he whose voice appears, not Charlotte's. As he reads, he comments on her ideas by using his facial expressions and tone of voice, while the romantic music remains low and unobtrusive. At first Humbert



is perplexed, but his attitude gradually changes to a hysterical mocking of poor Charlotte:

This is a confession: I love you. Last Sunday in church, my dear one, when I asked the Lord what to do about it, I was told to act as I am acting now. You see, there is no alternative. I have loved you from the minute I saw you. I am a [Humbert chuckles] passionate and lonely woman. And you are the love of my life. Now you know. So you will please at once pack and leave. This is a landlady's order. I am dismissing the lodger. I am kicking you out. Go! Scram! [Humbert ridicules her French] *Partez!* I shall be back by dinnertime. I do not wish to find you in the house. You see [Humbert sniffs], *chéri*, if you decided to stay, if I found you at home, which I know I won't [Humbert gives a knowing look], and that's why I'm able to go on like this, the fact of your remaining would only mean one thing. That you... [Humbert laughs hysterically; his laughter continues throughout], that you want me as much as I do you, as a life-long mate. And that you are ready to link up your life with mine forever and ever and be a father to my little girl. Goodbye, dear one, pray for me, if you ever pray.

Humbert goes on laughing. As he lies in bed, the camera moves from him to Quilty's ad on Lolita's wall. It is as if the film were tired of making Charlotte the victim of Humbert's disdain – now the trick is on *him*, who does not recognize his potential rival.

In Lye's version, after Lolita leaves, a desolate Humbert sits in his studio. After a fade-out, Humbert reappears already in Lolita's room. He throws himself inside Lolita's wardrobe, but is interrupted by the maid with Charlotte's letter. The maid eyes him suspiciously and mumbles to herself as she leaves, "What the hell you doing in there?" Humbert sits down on the bed, with the letter in one hand and a doll in the other. Unlike Kubrick's version, there is no laughter or music as the camera shows Jeremy Irons reading the letter, now with Charlotte's (played by Melanie Griffith) voice:

This is a confession: I love you. I'm a passionate and lonely woman, and you are the love of my life. Now you know. So please, destroy this letter and go. I shall return by dinnertime and you must be gone by then [Humbert pauses, confused]. You see, *chéri*, if I found you at home [image dissolves to montage of photos from the 40s on Lolita's wall] the fact of your remaining would mean only one thing: that you want me as much as I do you [one of the photos shows a little girl with her father, mimicking Lolita's previous embrace with Humbert, and a housewife waving on the back. There is a red heart between father and child, and inside is scribbled "H.H."] as a life-long mate [the camera goes back to Humbert] and that

you are ready to link up your life with mine forever and ever, and be a father to my little girl.

This scene ends with a close-up of Humbert, who resigns, sadly. The inclusion of the photograph, which also comes from the novel (p. 69), is highly ironic, since it echoes Charlotte's request that Humbert should be a father to Lolita – and there is nothing Humbert wants more. But here his character does not really mock Charlotte, as the narrator does in the novel and as the character does even more in Kubrick's adaptation. The decision to have Griffith voicing the words of the confession already empowers Charlotte, making her considerably less ludicrous. I see it as a flaw in Lyne's narrative that his Humbert quickly agrees to marry Charlotte *after* she has exposed her plans of sending Lolita to a boarding school. Both in the novel and in Kubrick's adaptation, Charlotte only tells Humbert after he marries her, which makes sense. After all, he would not espouse a woman he despises if he knew he would seldom see Lolita.

Another moment that is present in both films is Lolita's letter to Humbert, after he has not seen her for three years, towards the end of the story. In the novel, the letter (266) is at least three times longer than in either of the films, and it is ironic because it includes Lolita's slang ("I'm going nuts," "really grand," "the dough will just start rolling in"). Lolita exposes her wit by writing "This town is something. You can't see the morons for the smog," but this part disappears from the letter in the films. In Kubrick's version, this is rather an anti-climatic moment, for it comes right after Humbert leaves the hospital. The image shows us a sheet in a typewriter and the letter being typed onto the paper. There is no voice, no music score, no reaction shots, just the sound of the typing as the letter writes itself: "Dear Dad, How's everything? I have gone through much sadness and hardship. I'm married. I'm going to have a baby. I'm going nuts because we don't have enough to pay our debts and get out of here. Please send us a check." The image then cuts to a car driving in a poor section of some city, with suspense music in the background letting us know of Humbert's state of mind.

In Lyne's film Humbert receives a manuscript letter. As he reads it out loud, romantic music plays. Humbert is seen smoking and seems quite composed. Although the letter is a bit longer in Lyne's version, informing us of how much money Lolita needs and that Dick has been offered a job in Alaska, there is no irony in it whatsoever. But the image cuts to Humbert drinking and practicing shooting at a shirt, which also reveals his intentions.

Lyne's film ends with Humbert looking down at a town as he waits for the police to arrest him. His voice-over says in a melancholy tone, "What I heard then was the melody of children at play, nothing but that. And I knew

that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that chorus." The words are accompanied by a close-up of his face, and then of Lolita in close-up looking at him, lying in bed, facing the camera. Thus, it ends with Humbert's serious self-condemnation, and then an informative title stating that "Humbert died in prison of a coronary thrombosis on November 16, 1950. Lolita died in childbirth on Christmas day, 1950." Curiously, it sets the date of their deaths back two years. The epilogue in Kubrick's film, on the other hand, strangely "saves" Lolita, for the title card informs, "Humbert Humbert died of coronary thrombosis in prison awaiting trial for the murder of Clare Quilty. The End." The letters cover the smiling portrait of a lady that appears at the beginning of the picture, symbolizing Quilty's death and, maybe, Lolita's loss of innocence. Though this last image is ironic, it is not nearly as ironic as the final pages of Nabokov's novel.

Yes, Humbert the narrator does point out, in the book, that he regrets the absence of Lolita's voice from the concord of children playing (p. 308). But the paragraph that comes immediately after demolishes any sentimentality, for it describes Humbert's choice of a pseudonym for himself: "There are in my notes 'Otto Otto' and 'Mesmer Mesmer' and 'Lambert Lambert,' but for some reason I think my choice expresses the nastiness best" (p. 308). Then he alleges he is against the death penalty. Humbert's very last words in the novel are directed to Lolita:

One had to choose between C. Q. [Clare Quilty] and H. H., and one wanted H. H. to exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations. I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita. (p. 309)

Does this sound like a very regretful man? For Lyne, Schiff and Irons, he sure does, and they chose to make Humbert ashamed of his tale from the start. Kubrick and Mason evade the issue of guilt, though Humbert is punished for his deeds. Clearly neither of the Humberts that narrate the films is as ironic as the Humbert narrating the novel, who decides to express, after a hundred pages of cynicism, "Oh, let me be mawkish for the nonce! I am so tired of being cynical" (p. 109). And then, of course, he succeeds in being cynical for the next two hundred pages.

#### REFERENCES

BARBE, Katharina. *Irony in Context*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1995.

- BOOTH, Wayne C. *A Rhetoric of Irony*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. 11th ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961. 1975.
- FALSETTO, Mario. Narrational Gaps: Absence and Presence in *Lolita*. *Stanley Kubrick: A Narrative and Stylistic Analysis*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1994. p. 16-21.
- GENETTE, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse*. Trans. lated by Jane E. Lewin. Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1980. 6th printing 1995.
- HUTCHEON, Linda. *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- JENKINS, Greg. Chapter 2: *Lolita*. *Stanley Kubrick and the Art of Adaptation*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company Publishers, 1997. p. 31-68.
- KAEI, Pauline. *Lolita. I Lost it at the Movies: Film Writings, 1954-1965*. New York: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1965. 1994 2nd ed. p. 203-209.
- KOZLOFF, Sarah. *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-over Narration in American Fiction Film*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
- KUBRICK, Stanley, (dir). *Lolita*. USA, 1962. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. 152 min.
- LYNE, Adrian, (dir). *Lolita*. England/France/USA, 1997. Samuel Goldwyn Films. 137 min.
- NABOKOV, Vladimir. *Lolita*. New York: Vintage International, 1997.
- PHILIPS, Gene D. Chapter 5 – Child's Play: *Lolita* (1962). *Stanley Kubrick: A Film Odyssey*. New York: Popular Library, 1977. p. 100-131.