

The Enchanted Hunters and the Hunted
Enchanters: the dizzying effects of
embedded structures and meta-artistic
devices in *Lolita*, novel and film.

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“The Enchanted Hunters and the Hunted Enchanters: the dizzying effects of embedded structures and meta- artistic devices in *Lolita*, novel and film”

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Résumés

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This paper explores some of the various *mises en abyme* and metatextual devices in Nabokov's and Kubrick's *Lolita*, so as to explore how such devices create a poetics of reflections, and themselves reflect the manner in which the relationship to the reader/spectator is engaged by the literary and filmic

narratives. As underscored by Lucien Dallenbach, internal duplications or self-reflexive devices are double-layered: they serve a purpose in the fictional universe, and have a reflexive function aimed at disclosing one of the text's components. Self-reflexivity entails a game between the creator and his audience that is taking place outside of the diegetic world. This paper studies the function of self-reflexive devices by first focusing upon some self-reflexive features of both works, then on the prospective *mises en abyme*, and finally, on the main retro-prospective *mise en abyme* of the story, the Enchanted Hunters/Hunted Enchanters play, in both novel and film.

Cette étude des mises en abyme et des procédés autoréflexifs dans *Lolita* (roman de Nabokov, film de Kubrick) propose d'explorer la manière dont ces procédés créent une poétique des reflets qui elle-même reflète la relation du lecteur/spectateur à ces récits réflexifs. Comme l'a souligné Lucien Dallenbach, les duplications intérieures sont à double fond : elles ont une fonction dans le récit mais ont également un rôle réflexif destiné à révéler l'un des éléments de composition du texte. Ce jeu entre le créateur et son public se joue donc hors de la sphère diégétique. Cette étude aborde tout d'abord quelques procédés autoréflexifs, avant d'analyser les mises en abyme prospectives, pour enfin se consacrer à la mise en abyme rétroprospective principale de *Lolita* : la pièce dans la pièce intitulée *The Enchanted Hunters/The Hunted Enchanters*.

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Notes de l'auteur

Note on the editions of *Lolita* used in this paper: for practical purposes, both the references from *The Annotated Lolita* and the 2006 Penguin edition are given in this paper, with the annotated version coming first, as in for instance: (*Lolita* 59/64-65).

Texte intégral

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- 1 See Clark, Fraysse, Olsen or Stark in the bibliography.

1Considering the high degree of self-reflexivity of Nabokov's novel, which has been abundantly commented upon¹, the purpose of this paper will not be of rehearsing the various *mises en abyme* and metatextual devices in Nabokov's *Lolita*, but to base the coming analyses on a few examples taken from the novel and the film, so as to explore the ways in which such devices create a poetics of reflections, and themselves reflect the manner in which the relationship to the reader/spectator is engaged by the literary and filmic narratives.

2As underscored by Lucien Dallenbach in his analysis of the *mise en abyme*, internal duplications or self-reflexive devices are double-layered: they serve a purpose in the diegetic, fictional universe, and they have a reflexive function aimed at disclosing the text's structure, characterization, plot, themes, or poetics. Self-reflexivity entails a game between the creator and his audience that is thus somehow removed from the plotline: the dialogue between writer and reader, or filmmaker and spectator hence proceeds outside of the diegetic world.

3In *Lolita*, novel and film, self-reflexivity is used in various forms and for various purposes. The present paper will study the function of self-reflexive devices along three lines. First, some self-reflexive features of both works will be recalled, so as to highlight not only their meta-artistic function, but also their consequences in terms of interpretation. The analysis will then focus on a specific type of *mise en abyme* as identified by Lucien Dallenbach (Dallenbach, 83), the prospective *mises en abyme*, in order to study the type of response they engage for the reader or viewer. Finally, this paper will concentrate on the main retro-prospective *mise en abyme* of the story, the Enchanted Hunters/Hunted Enchanters play, in both novel and film.

I Some self-reflexive features in *Lolita*

4Despite its mesmerizing homodiegetic voice, Nabokov's novel never lets us

forget it is a *book* we are reading. Many metatextual or metafictional instances are scattered throughout the pages, and one could even see the constant intertextual references as further signs that place the text within the realm of fiction and underscore its fictive nature. Humbert repeatedly recalls that he is but a “paper creature” from Barthes’s “*être de papier*”), who “only has words to play with” (*Lolita*, 32/33), and amuse the reader with:

Please, reader: no matter your exasperation with the tenderhearted, morbidly sensitive, infinitely circumspect hero of my book, do not skip these essential pages! Imagine me; I shall not exist if you do not imagine me; try to discern the doe in me, trembling in the forest of my own iniquity; let’s even smile a little. After all, there is no harm in smiling. (*Lolita*, 129/146)

5In Kubrick’s movie, many details are self-reflexive and point to the cinematic nature of the movie we are watching. An equivalent of the preceding quote could be seen in Quilty’s ominous question in the prologue: “Do you like watching, Captain?”, which points to the spectator’s own situation, having come to watch a movie entitled *Lolita*, with a promising advertizing campaign and the flavor of scandal. Another self-reflexive detail is the many photos of actors pinned to the walls of Lolita’s room and surrounding James Mason before he reads Charlotte’s letter. These photos encapsulate Mason’s own image inside the frame in which he appears, and prefigure that he will be *playing a role*, that of the devoted husband in the forthcoming scenes.

6Many instances of a frame within the frame can be noted throughout the film, but one in particular is to be recalled. Just before Humbert sees Lolita for the first time, and as her music is playing in the background, foretelling her presence outside in the garden, an interesting shot is worth analyzing. Charlotte and Humbert are in the foreground, and she gives him her phone number (1776: the Declaration of Independence, as Humbert notes: Lolita escapes from him on July, 4th in the book). In the background, the large French window leading to the garden is wide open, framed by curtains, showing the sunny garden from where the music comes. This open French window, a typical frame within the frame, is thus the visual equivalent of the music: it makes the two spaces in which Humbert and Lolita stand permeable to each other. Once he crosses that threshold and joins her in the garden, the story can actually begin.

7In a different manner, Lolita’s famous pin-up pause in the discovery scene forecasts her fascination for celebrities and actors. Her mother even explains that “she sees herself as a starlet” (which is the profession assigned to her by Humbert in the book: “profession: none, or “starlet”” *Lolita*, 255/291). Actually, Sue Lyon became a starlet in her own right after the release of *Lolita*, and this self-reflexive reference via the word “starlet” pronounced by Charlotte, therefore parallels the pictures of actors pointing to James Mason, but through *language* this time, and not through an *image*. Like in the novel, Lolita seems quite fixated upon

Hollywood. To Humbert who locks his diary up in a drawer, she asks: “Afraid somebody’s going to steal your ideas and sell them to Hollywood?” Kubrick uses this occasion to foreground the reality of the film market, probably in a reference to his own difficult relationship with Hollywood and his unyielding desire of independence.

8 There are further references to movies inside the *Lolita* movie, but not uniquely to Hollywood films. On the contrary, those references are to “foreign films” and “art movies”, i.e., in the parlance of the time, those scandalous European movies with nude scenes. The first reference is to be found the morning after Lolita’s and Humbert’s first sexual intercourse. Their conversation hints at what happened in the morning and, perhaps emboldened by the experience, Lolita asks Humbert: “Have you ever seen any of those, you know, those foreign films?” She then says, “I don’t like ’em.” This confirms that she is a Hollywood fan, and maybe implies that the average American public does not appreciate those “foreign films”! In fact, Quilty uses her infatuation for Hollywood to take Lolita to his ranch near Santa Fe, as she explains to Humbert when he sees her for the last time:

Lolita: “I figured I could take anything for a few weeks ’cause I loved him. He was going to Hollywood to write one of those spectaculars and he promised to get me a studio contract but it never turned out that way. Instead he wanted me to cooperate with the others in making some kind of a... You know, an art movie.”

Humbert: “An art movie!”

Lolita: “Yeah.”

Humbert: “And you did it?”

Lolita: “No, I didn’t do it. So he kicked me out.”

9 As it is often the case in the 1962 adaptation, the movie’s sexual connotations are a lot less direct than in the book. Here is how Lolita explains the corresponding episode:

“Oh, weird, filthy, fancy things. I mean, he had two girls and two boys, and three or four men, and the idea was for all of us to tangle in the nude while an old woman took movie pictures.” (Sade’s Justine was twelve at the start.)

“What things exactly?” [...]

“It is of no importance now,” she said pounding a gray cushion with her fist and then lying back, belly up, on the divan. “Crazy things, filthy things. I said no, I’m just not going to [she used, in all insouciance really, a disgusting slang term which, in a literal French translation, would be *souffler*] your beastly boys, because I want only you. Well, he kicked me out.” (*Lolita*, 277/315)

- 2 “I wonder what my academic publishers would say if I were to quote in my textbook Ronsard’s “*la ve (...)*”
- 3 Humbert mentions the “corpuscles of Krause” (*Lolita*, 60/66), a “gonadal glow” (*Lolita*, 134/152), o (...)

10 One can observe here one of Humbert’s typical traits: he persistently veils sexually-connoted terms in a foreign language (this time through a literal translation, removed from the actual meaning of Lolita’s word). So doing, he severs the signifier from the signified for the reader who does not master the language he uses. He typically does it to evoke genitals², or often resorts to scientific terms for them, similarly breaking the bond between the two parts of the sign for the non-specialized reader³. In his typical hypocritical manner, he here claims he wants to preserve the reader’s shy eyes, but merely draws the veil of a literal translation on the activity he himself cannot suffer to imagine. If Kubrick transferred the idea of the porn movie at Quilty’s ranch into his film, he connoted the sexual scenes thanks to a reference to a *genre* (the art movie), thus using a metacinematic device. The reference to “art movies” in the film is also geared at the audience: were they expecting an art movie (i.e. with nude scenes) when they bought their tickets for *Lolita*? Or, more profoundly still, what exactly is an art movie?

11 The film does comment on its own status as film, and embeds many references to cinema within its images and dialogue. However, the film’s degree of self-reflexivity and allusiveness hardly compares to the novel, which is saturated with intertextual references, teems with metafictional comments and displays many texts-within-the-text, some of which are to be analyzed in this paper. *Lolita* contains an achievement in literary pastiche, namely the death-sentence poem Humbert composed for Quilty, seeking “poetical justice” (*Lolita*, 299-300/341-342). As pointed out by many critics, his long poem is a parody of T. S. Eliot’s famous “Ash Wednesday”, but the repetitive aspect of Eliot’s poem is ridiculed by the poor quality of the verse, and by Quilty’s sarcastic comments which break the poem’s continuity. In that passage occurs an interesting reversal: Humbert, who had been hypnotizing the reader with his brilliant poetic prose up to this point, now appears as a *manqué* poet, whose ludicrous verse is mocked by his alter-ego, Clare Quilty, a *successful* writer. Indeed, as Humbert had said earlier “I am no poet. I am only a very conscientious recorder” (*Lolita*, 72/80).

12 Moreover, it seems that Humbert does not realize that his poem is a pastiche of “Ash Wednesday”. Somehow, it is Nabokov who undermines his character’s poetic attempts, communicating to the reader who recognized the parody that his character’s virtuoso prose is not worth admiring. As Lucien Dallenbach pointed out concerning the *mise en abyme*, those devices only achieve their function if the reader perceives their double nature: not only do they have a meaning within the diegetic world, but they have a deeper significance once the reader perceives the parodic twist. Among the many allusive techniques displayed in the book, parody, a form of repetition with variation in which Nabokov excels,

holds a special place within the metafictional tricks of the book. Using parody, Nabokov invites the reader who could see the echo to explore the mechanism of creation, as Linda Hutcheon explains: “Parody is, therefore, an exploration of difference and similarity: in metafiction it invites a more literary reading, a recognition of literary codes” (Hutcheon, *The Metafictional Paradox*, 25). Through parody, the author asserts his ascendancy, and creates a type of complicity with his reader, over his character’s shoulder. As a text-within-the-text, the “Ash Wednesday” parody has a key-function: it flaunts the artifice of Humbert’s writing, and is placed at the very moment when he is about to commit his second crime. This poem, which does not express any regrets, contrary to the long poem he writes after Lolita’s departure, is a mere unleashing of his anger for having lost Lolita. As such, “poetical justice” backfires at him, and sentences him to be ridiculous, by sabotaging his futile attempt at avenging himself.

13 *Lolita*, novel and film, also provides embedded structures that function as typical *mises en abyme*. It is indeed interesting to see how Kubrick and Nabokov make use of what Linda Hutcheon considers to be “one of the major modes of textual narcissism, the *mise en abyme*” (Hutcheon, 1984, 4).

II Prospective *mise en abyme*

14 As Dallenbach explains, prospective *mises en abyme* are placed early in the book, and in them are encoded the forthcoming events (Dallenbach, 83). The most obvious example, in the film, is the most literal *mise en abyme* of the whole work, namely the insertion of an excerpt from Terence Fisher’s *The Curse of Frankenstein* during the drive-in scene. The choice of embedding a horror movie within his own creation is Kubrick’s subtle way of telling the audience it is another type of horror movie we are watching. This short scene reveals many intricate aspects. First, one should note that the very short sequence of Fisher’s movie chosen for *Lolita* only contains four shots: one medium shot of the monster taking his bandage off, one medium shot of Dr. Frankenstein, one close counter shot of the monster’s face, and one medium shot of both the monster and his creator, as the creature attacks the latter. Hence, tension is already quite high at this point in the film, and it even grows and grows, as the trumpets and horns blast out ominous dissonant chords that surprise the spectators aurally just as the vision of the monster had shocked them visually. After those four shots, the movie is no longer seen, but its presence is vividly felt through the music, screams and the changes in the reflection of the light streaming from the screen onto the characters seated in the car. The tension provoked by the horror movie is especially reflected in the two female characters’ faces, and illustrated by their grabbing Humbert’s hands at exactly the same moment, prompted by a scream from the movie. In fact, we are only given the soundtrack of the movie they are watching, and do not hear any of the sound coming from inside the car. At one point, Lolita screams, and her scream aptly matches a scream from *The Curse of*

Frankenstein, but her voice is not actually heard. This subtle replacement of her voice with an off-screen sound borrowed from another film completes the significance of the *mise en abyme*: she should be scared of Humbert.

15Very early in the novel, Quilty had indeed been introduced as an artist famous enough to be in the *Who's Who in the Limelight*. Some excerpts from the book, placed at the end of chapter 8, offer another text-within-the-text:

Pym, Roland. Born in Lundy, Mass., 1922. Received stage training at Elsinore Playhouse, Derby, N.Y. Made debut in *Sunburst*. Among his many appearances are *Two Blocks from Here*, *The Girl in Green*, *Scrambled Husbands*, *The Strange Mushroom*, *Touch and Go*, *John Lovely*, *I Was Dreaming of You*.

Quilty, Clare, American dramatist. Born in Ocean City, N.J., 1911. Educated at Columbia University. Started on a commercial career but turned to playwriting. Author of *The Little Nymph*, *The Lady Who Loved Lightning* (in collaboration with Vivian Darkbloom), *Dark Age*, *The Strange Mushroom*, *Fatherly Love*, and others. His many plays for children are notable. *Little Nymph* (1940) traveled 14,000 miles and played 280 performances on the road during the winter before ending in New York. Hobbies: fast cars, photography, pets.

Quine, Dolores. Born in 1882, in Dayton, Ohio. Studied for stage at American Academy. First played in Ottawa in 1900. Made New York debut in 1904 in *Never Talk to Strangers*. Has disappeared since in [a list of some thirty plays follows].

How the look of my dear love's name even affixed to some old hag of an actress, still makes me rock with helpless pain! Perhaps, she might have been an actress too. Born 1935. Appeared (I notice the slip of my pen in the preceding paragraph, but please do not correct it, Clarence) in *The Murdered Playwright*. Quine the Swine. Guilty of killing Quilty. Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with! (*Lolita*, 31-32/32-33)

16To the careful rereader, this is the passage in which the name of Humbert's victim, along with the latter's nympholeptic trends (see the titles of his plays) are introduced to the reader for the first time (Quilty is not even mentioned in John Ray's Foreword). In addition, this passage dealing with the world of theater is a central one as far as one of the most crucial metatextual motifs is concerned, i.e. the motif of *games and play* in the novel. The word is used in all its meanings in the book: game (especially sexually connoted), theater performance, and pretence. Both Humbert and Lolita show they are good actors and know when and how to simulate interest or passion. Lolita improves her cheating with her drama lessons, as Humbert laments (*Lolita*, 229/261). He is a fairly gifted actor too: his impersonation of the passionate husband or crushed widower is extremely

convincing. In the film, he is so credible that the Farlows completely misunderstand the presence of the gun in the bathroom, and ironically tell him: “Try to think of your poor little Lolita all alone in the world. You must live for her sake.” Yet, being a playwright, Quilty is somehow the master of the *play* motif, as will be shown.

- 4 At the Enchanted Hunters Hotel, Humbert tells her: “And if I were you, my dear, I would not talk t (...)”
- 5 “Curiously enough, one cannot *read* a book: one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, (...)”

17This excerpt from the *Who's Who*, despite the realistic typographical presentation, states its own fake nature via the intertextual references (such as Roland Pym, recalling Poe's *The Narrative of Gordon A. Pym*), and, naturally, the many autotextual references (*The Little Nymph*, of course, or *The Lady Who Love Lightning*, recalling Humbert's mother's death). In this prospective *mise en abyme*, we find some the typical elements identified by Dallenbach that signal the *mise en abyme* (Dallenbach, 65): homonymy with the characters from the framing text, and use of textual elements from the text in which this excerpt from the *Who's Who* is embedded. Quite typically as well, those signs are clear enough to indicate the specular relation between the embedded fragment and the whole (Dallenbach, 28), but not too blatant either (Dallenbach, 85). The three entries from the *Who's Who* reproduced on the page actually correspond to the three main protagonists of the novel, even though Humbert's rival is not yet explicitly identified as such at this stage: we find Quilty, Lolita/Dolores, who is aptly cast in *Never Talk to Strangers*⁴, and Pym, who corresponds to Humbert, as he makes his debut in *Sunburst* (and indeed Lolita appears to him as she is sunbathing) and he played in *Scrambled Husbands* (an echo to his future role), and in *The Strange Mushroom*, a play by Quilty himself, with a title endowed with explicit sexual connotations. Another key-element in this text-within-the-text is the mention of Vivian Darkbloom, the anagrammatic presence of Vladimir Nabokov, reflected in the movie in an enigmatic dark lady who never talks. One should also note that Quilty's *Little Nymph* travelled 14,000 miles, which Humbert doubled in his own trip with Lolita (*Lolita*, 175/198): 27,000 miles. Quilty's murder is thus announced in this cryptic passage, but only for the careful rereader: remember Nabokov considered there is no such thing as a good reader, only a rereader⁵. The game of identification he offers his rereader not only has us participate in the construction of meaning: it more fundamentally exposes the polysemy of the literary text, and even engages the reader in the construction of this polysemy. This is a game constantly offered to the reader in *Lolita*, which culminates in the list of names Humbert finds to be significant in motel registers, and which the reader has to interpret, just like Humbert had to decode them. At the diegetic level, Humbert obliges his reader to go through the same frustrating experience as he did: interpreting the cryptic text left behind him by Quilty, and not being given the name of Lolita's abductor. On the level of the reader/author relationship, Nabokov invites us to marvel before the polysemic potential of

words. Similarly, when Kubrick uses the Frankenstein shots, he trusts the spectator with the significance of such a choice, and has the audience find out for themselves that images can have more than one interpretation.

18After killing Quilty, Humbert expresses his relief in theatrical terms: “This, I said to myself, was the end of the ingenious play staged for me by Quilty” (*Lolita*, 305/348), which is maybe *The Strange Mushroom*. Act I of that play is certainly when Quilty meets Lolita and Humbert in the Enchanted Hunters hotel, which is the very title of the play written by Quilty and in which Lolita is cast as the leading nymph. Let us now turn to the function of this play-within-the-play in both novel and film.

III The Enchanted Hunters

19*The Enchanted Hunters* joke played by Quilty on Humbert is yet another element that can give the reader the upper hand over the narrator—if one sees the pattern, of course. Indeed, when Humbert notices the parallel between the hotel’s name and the play’s title, he unfortunately and simply assumes the coincidence of names to be due to mere chance (*Lolita*, 200/227). Lolita, on the other hand, realizes the significance of the play’s title. Thanks to Quilty’s creation, the place where her sexual enslavement to Humbert began becomes her gateway to liberty:

“Can you remember,” she said, “what was the name of that hotel, *you* know [nose puckered], come on, you know—with those white columns and the marble swan in the lobby? Oh, you know [noisy exhalation of breath]—the hotel where you raped me. Okay, skip it. I mean, was it [almost in a whisper] *The Enchanted Hunters*? Oh, it was? [musingly] Was it?”—and with a yelp of amorous vernal laughter she slapped the glossy bole and tore uphill [...]. (*Lolita*, 202/229)

20Humbert’s suspicion is momentarily aroused when the drama teacher, whom they meet when they leave Beardsley, tells him: “What a *shame* it was to *tear* Dolly away from the play—you should have *heard* the author *raving* about her after that rehearsal—” (*Lolita*, 208/237). But clever Lolita dismisses his doubts by making him believe twice that Clare Quilty is an old woman, a “Clare Something” (*Lolita*, 209/237), and that Vivian Darkbloom, the other writer, is a male (*Lolita*, 221/252). Vivian Darkbloom is, as recalled earlier, an anagram of Vladimir Nabokov. The writer’s cameo appearance in the guise of the co-author of the play which will save Lolita from Humbert’s grip is thus significant. It also has a strong metatextual dimension. In fact, Nabokov used this trick many times in his novels, under different names composed from his own, such as Adam Von Librikov or Vivian Bloodmark. In the screenplay he wrote for the film, he had even prepared a Hitchcock-like cameo appearance, as Lolita and Humbert ask their way to “a nut with a net”, Vladimir Nabokov himself, hunting butterflies among flowers (*Screenplay*, 127-128).

21 *Lolita* thus contains a very Elizabethan play-within-the-play (the adjective “Elizabethan” aptly appears two sentences before Humbert announces the title of Quilty’s play). Or rather, it almost contains it, because the reference is indeed a *trompe-l’œil*: the play is never played, because Lolita leaves Beardsley before the première. Yet, the reader is given a summary of its plot:

Being much occupied at the time with my own literary labors, I did not bother to read the complete text of *The Enchanted Hunters*, the playlet in which Dolores Haze was assigned the part of a farmer’s daughter who imagines herself to be a woodland witch, or Diana, or something, and who, having got hold of a book on hypnotism, plunges a number of lost hunters into various entertaining trances before falling in her turn under the spell of a vagabond poet (Mona Dahl). That much I gleaned from bits of crumpled and poorly typed script that Lo sowed all over the house. [...]

I understand that finally, in utter disgust at his cocksureness, barefooted Dolores was to lead check-trousered Mona to the paternal farm behind the Perilous Forest to prove to the braggart she was not a poet’s fancy, but a rustic, down-to-brown-earth lass—and a last-minute kiss was to enforce the play’s profound message, namely, that mirage and reality merge in love. (*Lolita*, 200-201/227-228)

22 Even though Humbert scornfully describes the play as “a pretty dismal kind of fancy work, with echoes from Lenormand and Maeterlinck” (*Lolita*, 201/228), it actually does provide a *mise-en-abyme* of the whole story, with Lolita as Diana, Humbert as the enchanted hunter, and Quilty as the “vagabond poet” who in turn casts a spell on her. Indeed, Humbert wishes that for him too “mirage and reality merge[d] in love”. Moreover, resonant echoes are to be found between the imagery used in the summary from the preceding quote and the many metaphors relating Humbert to an enchanted hunter in the episode set at the hotel named like the play.

23 In the film, the play does take place, and thus truly makes of it a play-within-the-play producing a metatheatrical effect, which is fairly current in Kubrick’s films, as Michel Ciment noted (Ciment, 78). Yet, Kubrick playfully used the title Miss Pratt mistakenly presents as the title of the school play (*Lolita*, 196/222), which is a chiasmic reversal of the actual title, *The Hunted Enchanters*. In Kubrick’s film, Humbert does not notice the similitude: it is for the spectator to perceive the parallel, underscored by the two shots in which the names can be read. The parallel and reversal are encoded visually: repetition and difference can be seen through the choice of two night shots showing the building from outside, with lit windows; the name and title are written in the same font, but one is white on black and the other black on white; the angle is changed, but we see similar cars and white posts in the foreground. The chiasmic reversal in the name, and those subtle visual elements indicate the coming change in Lolita’s fate: the end

of the life she began with Humbert at the Enchanted Hunters hotel is near.

24In the film, it is quite revealing to note that the play-within-the-play scene is never shot from the perspective of the audience. Instead, the spectator is placed on stage, in the back, *just like some actor*, and the camera follows Lolita on stage, as if it were part of the show. The retro-prospective *mise-en-abyme* perfectly works here. Retrospectively, the title of the play echoes the previous episode at the hotel, where Quilty had been musing on Humbert's "lovely little tall girl". Prospectively, the forthcoming departure of Lolita with the playwright is indicated in the only glance they exchange during the whole film (just before Lolita enters the stage), and in the last words of Lolita in the school play, "to the dark kingdom, away, away", since Quilty has been repeatedly associated to dark colors and dark lighting throughout the film.

25Even if *The Enchanted Hunters* play is not staged in the novel, the reader does find a play-within-the-play on the way. It is the play that Humbert and Lolita attend in Wace:

I really could not tell you the plot of the play we saw. [...] The only detail that pleased me was a garland of seven little graces, more or less immobile, prettily painted, bare-limbed—seven bemused pubescent girls in colored gauze that had been recruited locally (judging by the partisan flurry here and there among the audience) and were supposed to represent a living rainbow, which lingered throughout the last act, and rather teasingly faded behind a series of multiplied veils. I remember thinking that this idea of children-colors had been lifted by authors Clare Quilty and Vivian Darkbloom from a passage in James Joyce, and that two of the colors were quite exasperatingly lovely—Orange who kept fidgeting all the time, and Emerald who, when her eyes got used to the pitch-black pit where we all heavily sat, suddenly smiled at her mother or her protector. (*Lolita*, 220-221/250-251)

- 6 Rainbows form a complex submotif, usually associated with Humbert's lust. At the Enchanted Hunters [\(...\)](#)

26Unsurprisingly, the author of such a ravishing rainbow of nymphets⁶, among whom only Lolita, Humbert's "ultraviolet darling" (*Lolita*, 221/251) could find her place, is Humbert's nympholeptic "brother", Clare Quilty. In fact, this play is probably entitled, as confirmed by Nabokov, *The Lady who Loved Lightning*. As Humbert notes a few lines later, this scene is a reference to the "rainbow girls" in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, a novel that Nabokov did not admire at all (see Appel's note p. 413-414). Besides, this scene is in fact a double intertextual allusion, as it also echoes Act III, scene 1 of *L'Oiseau bleu*, by Maurice Maeterlinck, whom Humbert had seen as one influence in *The Enchanted Hunters* (see above):

Tyltyl ouvre la porte toute grande. Aussitôt les Etoiles sous la forme de

belles jeunes filles voilées de leurs versicolores, s'échappent de leur prison, se répandent dans la salle et forment sur les marches et autour des colonnes de gracieuses rondes baignées d'une sorte de lumineuse pénombre. (Maeterlinck, 301)

27The play-within-the-play is thus paired with a double intertextual reference: Nabokov's self-reflexive devices thus offer here and even more complex *mise-en-abyme* to decode. The interesting aspect here from a metatextual point of view, is that the plot of this play-within-the-play is not explained in any manner: Humbert only gives the reader this garland of colors personified by nymphets, who incarnate the iridization of the white color. This could be interpreted as an emblem of the way Nabokov's text works: by first offering an enigma, a blank in signification, to the reader, he constrains us to look through the iridescences of polysemy in order to reach further layers of significance, towards the ultraviolets of his prismatic writing.

Conclusion

28To conclude, one could compare the final frame of the movie with the last paragraph of the book, as they both provide retrospective *mises en abyme* of the whole work. Indeed, the final caption of the film offers a subtle *mise en abyme* of the love triangle in an intersemiotic manner. Contrary to Nabokov in his screenplay, Kubrick did not incorporate John Ray Jr.'s voice in his adaptation, but he included his words in the last frame, which explains that Humbert died of a heart attack in his prison cell. The film's last caption is worthy of note for its intersemiotic aspect: the film image associates writing (mentioning Humbert's fate) and painting (a portrait of a young lady, a sort of double of Lolita, with the corpse of Quilty concealed behind it) in an effective cluster of the three protagonists, all presented in a fitting manner. Humbert's name is indeed *written*, recalling his status as writer of his confessions; the young lady/Lolita is *seen*, just as she is constantly observed in the novel; and Quilty's presence is *guessed* from the bullet hole in the canvas, just as his shadow is perceived in the interstices of Humbert's narrative in the book. Similarly, the last sentences of the novel offer a *mise en abyme*:

And do not pity C. Q. One had to choose between him 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. (*Lolita*, 309/352)

29This passage cryptically states Quilty's presence through his initials (C.Q.), re-states Humbert's presence as *the* describer of Lolita's beauty, and allows her to "live in the minds of later generations" (*Lolita*, 309/352), via his *written* account of

her. In addition, Kubrick's conclusive intersemiotic caption responds to Humbert's convoking of the fine arts in the last two sentences of the novel.

30 These two final *mises en abyme* somehow illustrate Dallenbach's observation: the device of interior duplication converts time into space, and enlarges our power to comprehend the work (Dallenbach, 78). Humbert's final appeal to the immortality of art, and Kubrick's final caption condensing the film's story in an unmoving image do perform this conversion and place an intersemiotic *mise en abyme* to conclude their narrative, as if it were a goodbye wink at the reader/spectator.

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Notes

[1](#) See Clark, Fraysse, Olsen or Stark in the bibliography.

[2](#) “I wonder what my academic publishers would say if I were to quote in my textbook Ronsard’s “*la vermeillette fente*” or Remy Belleau’s “*un petit mont feutré de mousse délicate, tracé sur le milieu d’un fillet escarlatte*” and so forth.” (*Lolita*, 47/51).

[3](#) Humbert mentions the “corpuscles of Krause” (*Lolita*, 60/66), a “gonadal glow” (*Lolita*, 134/152), or “glans mauve” (*Lolita*, 107/120).

[4](#) At the Enchanted Hunters Hotel, Humbert tells her: “And if I were you, my dear, I would not talk to strangers” (*Lolita*, 138/156). And in the last paragraph of the novel, he uses a series of imperative forms, among which “Do not talk to strangers” (*Lolita*, 309/352)

[5](#) “Curiously enough, one cannot *read* a book: one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader” (*Lectures on Literature*, 3).

[6](#) Rainbows form a complex submotif, usually associated with Humbert’s lust. At the Enchanted Hunters hotel, as his desire for Lolita is stronger than ever, he describes his throbbing passion in iridescent terms: “In and out of my heart flowed my rainbow blood” (*Lolita*, 126/142). Later on, the rainbow is associated with the dark side of his lust via an oxymoron and the conjunction of rainbow and mud: “*Somber* Yellowstone Park and its colored hot springs, baby geysers, *rainbows* of bubbling *mud*—symbols of my passion” (*Lolita*, 158/178, my emphasis). Quilty is also associated to the motif, and not only through the play Humbert and Lolita see in Wace: for his pursuing car he “turned to other makes and passed through a pale dull rainbow of paint shades” (*Lolita*, 227/258). In the names he invents for himself in the motel registers, Quilty draws a parallel between himself and Rimbaud/Rainbow and Maurice Maeterlinck again, thanks to a transcription of the writers’ names into different languages (playing on a distortion of the signifier via pronunciation) and thanks to a chiasmic collusion of their works, “Le Bateau ivre” et *L’Oiseau bleu*: “Arthur Rainbow”—plainly the travestied author of *Le Bateau Bleu* let me laugh a little too, gentlemen—and “Morris Schmetterling,” of *L’Oiseau Ivre* fame (touch, reader!)” (*Lolita*, 250/285).

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