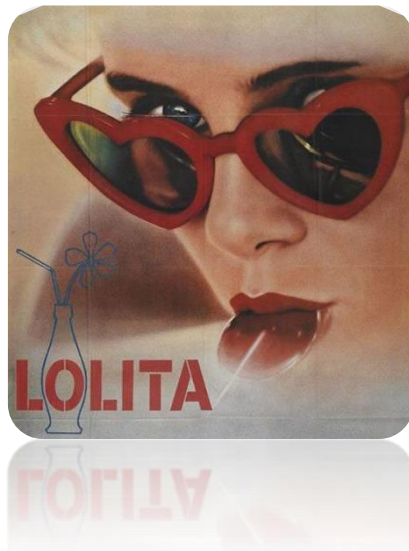




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The Male Gaze in Film Adaptations of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Chapter One	3
1.1. Looking as the primary sexual aim. The gaze and the image.....	3
1.2. Different types of representation. Scopophilia and voyeurism in cinema.	10
1.3. Woman as the subject. Obsolescence and new meanings.....	14
3. Chapter Two.....	17
2.1. Humbert Humbert, the writer and the director	17
2.2. Image as sight. The male gaze in the film adaptations	23
2.3. Publicity and Hollywood: the perpetuation of the male gaze	29
4. Conclusion.....	35
5. Works Cited.....	37

1. Introduction

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* is a novel full of dualities that provoke different interpretations from the reader. The first noticeable duality is that of the narrator: Humbert Humbert, a teacher of literature, narrates a first-person memoir about his obsession with the twelve-year-old Dolly Haze, "Lolita". There is a split between the Humbert who experiences the events in the novel, and the Humbert who narrates these events and analyses their significance. But there are also two other points of view to this narration: that of the author, Vladimir Nabokov, who could be infusing his views and intentions into his creation, and the one of the reader, who chooses how to interpret a narrative that blurs the line between the real and the imaginary. Nonetheless, in all these perspectives, there is a passive element that constitutes the centre of the story: Lolita. Lolita becomes the object of desire of the narrator, and the reader sees her through his eyes. What results from the narration is not the "real" Lolita, but Humbert's representation of her based on the assumptions that he makes about Lolita's "advances".

Maintaining the representation of the woman as the object through which the man can live out his obsessions, cinema has been crucial in reflecting and playing with this image of the woman as the passive "other". Cinema controls visual pleasure, which happens to be encoded by the dominant discourse of patriarchal order. If the novel has multiple points of view from which Lolita is being observed, in the film adaptations even more perspectives need to be taken into account. The director selects the sign that is being shown on the screen, and the camera surpasses the boundaries of time and space, creating an illusion shared between the male character in the story and the spectator. The conception of the character of Lolita, through the actresses who portray her, is constantly being shaped and reshaped, and so is the image of their bodies.

Humbert is a writer: he knows how powerful words are and how they can perpetuate an idea, but he constantly alludes to cinema as the perfect medium to leave an everlasting imprint of his perception of little children ("nymphets"). However, Humbert fails to maintain control of the narrative because he becomes enchanted by his idealisation of Lolita. Lolita is aware of the male gaze and she internalises the visual

desires of the narrator and the viewer and the erotic codes that she finds in publicity and that serve to structure cinema. The gaze thus grants power to the man, but it is external to him. Humbert does not realise that Clare Quilty, the playwright, and his antagonist, has already turned Lolita into the object of his gaze. The object of vision, the sight, is constantly being reinterpreted throughout, but the gaze is established as hegemonic.

In this project, I am going to analyse two cinematographic adaptations of *Lolita*: Stanley Kubrick's (1962) and Adrian Lyne's (1997), through the lenses of the male gaze's projecting desires onto the female's body. Throughout the project I will explain the concept of sight and the subjectivity and split of images of men and women as described by Berger et al. in *Ways of Seeing* (1972): the woman has been portrayed in European painting, advertisements, and film as the object of the male artist. This difference in images between women and men is not something biological, but it is a set of values in which the "ideal" spectator is the man and the woman is there to attract his attention and arouse visual pleasure. I will focus on the spread of this set of values through film form, and for that the main approach that I will be using is the one detailed in Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), in which she draws on psychoanalysis and its perpetuation of the phallogentric system to explain how it has structured mainstream film form on the basis of scopophilia (the pleasure in looking and being looked at) and voyeurism. Mulvey relies on psychoanalysis as a political tool to explain the power relationships behind the gaze, whose conventions function as the subconscious. Humbert makes use of what Freud defines as the preliminary sexual aims: touching and looking, towards the attainment of the *sexual object*. The man is the active element in the pursuit of pleasure, while the woman is the passive object. Mulvey also draws from Lacan's theory of the *mirror stage* to explain the experience of the voyeuristic spectator in the recognition of his ideal ego. It is in this stage that the illusion shared between the male character and the spectator is created.

As perspectives are constantly evolving, I will also comment on criticisms of Mulvey's theory of the gaze and her own revision of the feminist film theory of the 1970s. This summarises the intention of the project: by analysing the male gaze, the artificiality of its mechanisms is acknowledged. Just as Humbert's illusion is disrupted when he is no longer capable to maintain a fixed conception of Lolita, the male gaze in the film adaptations is deconstructed by explaining its workings.

2. Chapter One

1.1. Looking as the primary sexual aim. The gaze and the image.

The way in which we see establishes the way we perceive ourselves, and others, in the world. We try to put into words what we see, but the knowledge that we intend to verbalise never quite corresponds to the sight. Seeing is an active process in which we choose what we look at. In that process, we decide how the object towards which we are directing our attention is related to what we know. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger, Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Michael Dibb and Richard Hollis (1972) devote a series of essays to explain the power of seeing, and how it is applied to women and different forms of representation. They describe the concept of image in the following way:

An image is a sight which has been recreated or reproduced. It is an appearance, or a set of appearances, which has been detached from the place and time in which it first made its appearance and preserved –for a few moments or a few centuries. Every image embodies a way of seeing. (Berger et al., 1972: 10)

If every image embodies a way of seeing, and each individual has a specific way of seeing an image, then the image is constantly subjected to different views and conceptions. In the active process that is seeing, the object that we look at is continuously being shaped and reshaped according to the conventions that the viewer has in mind.

Now, taking into account that every image is subjected to conventions, and applying this to two different images: that of woman and that of man, we must establish a difference between the expectations surrounding both genders. In a patriarchal society that splits the agency (or lack of agency) of women and men, Berger et al. highlight the differences in these conventions:

A man's presence is dependent upon the promise of power which he embodies (...) The promised power may be moral, physical, temperamental, economic, social, sexual – but its object is always exterior to man (...). [The] pretence is always towards a power which he exercises on others. / By contrast, a woman's presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her (...) To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. (Berger et al., 1972: 45-46)

Because a woman's presence is crucial both to herself and to the world surrounding her image, she is aware of the gaze. She looks at herself knowing that she is being looked at. She must take care of how she appears to other people, i.e. to men, because that is going to determine the way she is treated. In the active process of seeing, the one acting is the man, and the one appearing is the woman: "The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight" (Berger et al., 1972: 47).

Following these conventions, the male gaze is established as hegemonic in our society. But to understand how the male gaze exerts its influence, we must first acknowledge these power relationships between men and women in the patriarchal order. This hierarchical system, in which the phallus is positioned at the centre and the woman relegated to the position of the object, is explained and sustained in one of the theoretical approaches that I am going to be using: psychoanalysis¹. Freud (1905) introduces two technical concepts: the *sexual object*, towards whom the subject directs its sexual attraction, and the *sexual aim*, the act towards which the instinct tends. There are a number of "deviations" in an individual's sexual behaviour that come precisely from the interaction between these concepts. In the engagement subject-sexual object, an action is being performed in order to reach the sexual aim. The subject is therefore the *active* element, and the object is the *passive* one.

In psychoanalysis, this distinction between active and passive is directly applied to the terms 'masculine' and 'feminine'. The masculine is necessarily active, as it is the man's pursue of pleasure and the recognition of his sexuality once he leaves the first sexual object: his mother.²

From that time on (*puberty*), this contrast has a more decisive influence than any other upon the shaping of human life. It is true that the masculine and feminine dispositions are already easily recognizable in childhood. The development of the inhibitions of sexuality (shame, disgust, pity, etc.) takes place in little girls earlier and in the face of less resistance than in boys; the tendency to sexual repression seems in general to be greater; and, where the component instincts of sexuality appear, they prefer the passive form. (Freud, 1905: 1553) (my italics)

¹ Psychoanalysis is crucial in Mulvey's analysis of the male gaze in cinema because, like dreams, which are structured by the subconscious, film form relies on society's patriarchal conceptions.

² Freud is still very relevant in current theories for being the creator of the core concepts: id, ego and the super-ego, all related to the perception of oneself. Freud also defined the Oedipus complex: a stage when the child sees himself in the mother and identifies through her. This is directly tied to the spectator in cinema and his active role in the process of objectification of the woman.

Puberty brings for boys an increase in their libido, while for girls it comes with repression, by which their sexuality is affected. The woman takes part in a symbolic representation in which she becomes the castrated entity that is envious of the phallus and that cannot transcend her position. Her only way to fulfil her ambition to possess a penis is to turn her child into the signifier of her desire. This specific placement of the woman in a symbolic system is another way to subject her into a repressive state: she becomes tied to the male both physically and in terms of language. In Laura Mulvey's (1975) words:

Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which the man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning. (Mulvey, 1975: 1)

This symbolic representation and process of identification is explained by Lacan, who situates the Oedipus complex at a specific threshold of the child's maturation: what he defined as the *mirror stage*. Mulvey relies on the idea of the mirror stage to explain the experience of the voyeuristic spectator. In this stage, children recognise themselves in the mirror, thus they see their body as a whole: it ceases to be a fantasy of just unconnected body parts. The mirror stage is unstable because it relies on narcissism, so it must be "filled in", through imagination. The process of identification causes anxiety because it brings up two questions regarding the mother's privation of the phallic object and the child's detachment from the identification with the object. The imagination is what structures the "fantasy construction" in which the individual sees his perfect self, to which he will want to return. It is not until the individual develops imagination and the ego that he identifies himself from the external view of a symbolic other (Dor, 1998: 93-110).

In mainstream film, the erotic encodes this language of the dominant phallogocentric order that is already socially established. Its conventions are structured by the organisation of the ways of seeing and looking at the object that has become silent. Thus, the unconscious of societal ideas is what establishes film form. In the attainment of pleasure, cinema is the ultimate source for the voyeuristic spectator. It encompasses what in psychoanalysis are considered as the intermediate relations to the sexual object, before the final sexual aim is reached. These activities, such as touching and looking at the object, intensify the necessary excitation of the subject.

The focus of attention of the gaze inflected upon the sexual object extends to its whole body: “It is only in the rarest instances that the psychical valuation that is set on the sexual object, as being the goal of the sexual instinct, stops short at its genitals” (Freud, 1905: 1477). The power of the subject becomes weakened only when the gaze turns towards the psychological sphere. By concentrating on the mental achievements of the object, the subject immerses in the ideals of the former. This opposition between the physical and the psychological is crucial in terms of agency. In the collection of essays entitled *My Body*, the model, actress and writer Emily Ratajkowski (2021) states that her career requires the commercialisation of her body. In a sense, she is the one choosing to sell the image of her body, and therefore she is an active element in the process. However, she is aware that women that want to success in other fields, such as politics, should be self-aware of their bodies so that men go beyond their gaze and can, or rather want, to know about their opinions. The gaze is so ingrained in society, and particularly in these industries, that women are not only dispossessed of the agency of their bodies by the gaze of the subject, but also by themselves.

The degree of agency that the woman could have in this process is distorted in mainstream film to favour the wishes of the spectator. Cinema is a representation system in which visual pleasure is skilfully manipulated.³ It exposes formal beauty, while playing on the obsessions of the spectator. The woman is styled according to the visual desires of the viewer and the series of erotic codes that structure cinema: “Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire” (Mulvey, 1975: 10-11). However, this spectacle of the attributes of the woman disturbs the normal flow of the narrative, interrupting the action in order to show us different images of the female body. She must therefore be integrated into the diegesis of the narrative. This is when the woman’s passiveness in this process is noticeable again, because her function relies only on what she provokes in the male character (with whom the spectator can identify): on what she represents to him. She is not a source of meaning in the story, but she is necessary for the male character to develop. The woman’s display is an essential part of the spectacle of cinema. In this

³ Images are openly shown on the screen, but cinema creates an illusion where the spectator is able to project his emotions in the intimacy of his voyeuristic desire.

sense, what matters is how the male character sees the woman, and how she makes him feel: she is bound to her position as object but she is also needed by the subject to constitute his ego. In the process of introducing the image of women into the narrative, we find two divisions in her function as object:

Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen. (Mulvey, 1975: 11-12)

In film, the gaze of both the spectator and the male character can collide so the break in the diegesis disappears at the moment of appreciation of the female body. The male character performs an active role, since it is he who decides the succession of events in the film fantasy. He becomes the “bearer of the look of the spectator” (Mulvey, 1975: 12), transferring his perceptions beyond the screen. The male character, as opposed to the woman, is not a passive element in this process. He is not the object of desire, but the means to make this exchange of looks work. The gazes match each other, so the conflict between the two looks disappears and the gaze is transformed into a single one, and the diegesis of the narrative is not interrupted either. The character in the story is the one articulating the look and controlling the events, so the spectator has to internalise the male character’s characteristics to maintain his power. The representation of this character on the screen has to be realistic, so the limits of the fictitious world seem plausible and the illusion is not broken. This is where film’s techniques, which constantly play with visual pleasure, are put into practice:

Here the function of film is to reproduce as accurately as possible the so-called natural conditions of human perception. Camera technology (as exemplified by deep focus in particular) and camera movements (determined by the action of the protagonist), combined with invisible editing (demanded by realism), all tend to blur the limits of screen space. (Mulvey, 1975: 13-14)

The use of different camera angles and movements and the subsequent editing become crucial to maintaining the credibility of the images and perceptions of the protagonist, while at the same time giving him the ability to modify the space in which the action takes place. We realise, thus, that the fictitious world of the film has to be realistic since the camera makes possible the multiplicity of space and time. Through the camera, the individual is able to travel through different spaces and times.

John Berger et al. (1972), explain the differences in the use of images and the perceptions surrounding them in paintings, photographs, and films. They also delve into how the camera breaks with the contradiction of what is known as “Renaissance perspective”, where the spectator, considered as an omniscient entity that is present everywhere, always holds the central point of view. They argue that every image is subjective, and in the process of representing an image, the creator chooses what he wants to portray from what he is seeing, thus completely changing the object that is being represented. The object of representation becomes devoid of its initial meaning to be substituted by the creator’s conception of a new meaning. At the same time, the image represented is also subjected to the different interpretations of several spectators. In this sense, someone’s appreciation of that particular image will also depend on that person’s way of seeing. This is a constant process of interpretation and reinterpretation of the represented object, and thus a form of appropriation:

Every image embodies a way of seeing. Even a photograph. For photographs are not, as is often assumed, a mechanical record. Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights. This is true even in the most casual family snapshot. The photographer’s way of seeing is reflected in the choice of subject. The painter’s way of seeing is reconstituted by the marks he makes on the canvas or paper. Yet, although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing. (Berger et al., 1972: 10)

Images are dependent on perceptions: they are not tied to a specific time in history, as perspectives on images can constantly change and evolve, but they are not timeless either. People position themselves in the context of a particular image, relating both its past and its present, making connections and establishing similarities. This is precisely why it is so important to maintain the diegesis in film in order to preserve the credibility of the fictional world in which the spectator is immersed.

However, when images are turned into works of art, a number of assumptions are attached to them. The spectator that becomes openly aware of the previous context of the creation of the image gains a knowledge of the past that is particularly linked to assumptions regarding art:

Yet when an image is presented as a work of art, the way people look at it is affected by a whole of learnt assumptions about art. Assumptions concerning:

Beauty/ Truth/ Genius/ Civilization/ Form/ Status/ Taste, etc.

Many of these assumptions no longer accord with the world as it is. (Berger et al., 1972: 11)

When we see an image, we position ourselves in it. A relation is established between ourselves looking at the present image and the past when it was created. But when a work of art is analysed regarding assumptions, a “cultural mystification” of the past is created (Berger et al., 1972: 11). In this case, what the image provokes, our appreciation of its human nature, is deconstructed to give way to the analysis in-depth of the work of art. The emotions that may arise in the viewer of the painting are put into words, and therefore these same emotions become just a meticulous appreciation of the work of art. The human experience of the painting is transferred to the description of the composition, and both factors converge to give the painting the status of a work of art: a made object. This process of awareness of the artificiality of the creation is exactly what I consider that Mulvey was suggesting when she used psychoanalytic theory for her analysis of the gaze. That is: if we expose the process underlying the gaze, we would be disposing it of its power. The spectator would become aware of the artificiality of the world presented, and the visual pleasure would be replaced by the realisation of the act of gazing. However, when it comes to cinema and its innovations, this process becomes far more difficult. The invention of the camera proves outstanding in the sense that it can escape the constraints of time and space, projecting images from different places and different perspectives. Furthermore, because it does not rely on words, but mainly on images, it is complicated to explain the intricacies behind its process: you cannot simply define its composition.

The convention of perspective, which is unique to European art and which was first established in the early Renaissance, centres everything on the eye of the beholder. It is like a beam from a lighthouse – only instead of light travelling outwards, appearances travel in. The conventions called those appearances *reality*. Perspective makes the single eye the centre of the visible world (...) The visible world is arranged for the spectator as the universe was once thought to be arranged for God. (...) According to the convention of perspective there is no visual reciprocity. There is no need for God to situate himself in relation to others: he is himself the situation. (italics by Berger et al.) (Berger et al., 1972: 16)

There is a problem with the idea of perspective: that the images that represent reality are addressed to a spectator that functions as God (supposedly present everywhere), but spectators can only be at one place at a time.

The camera makes obvious this contradiction because it is capable of disseminating different images, making clear that the experience of the visual is tied to time passing. What the spectator sees is linked to his specific situation in time and space, and the same happens with different spectators. The camera can surpass these limits, but in the end, the spectator is going to see what the camera allows him to see: “The camera –and more importantly the movie camera– demonstrated that there was no centre” (Berger et al., 1972: 18). This notion of the centre that cannot hold can be therefore applied to paintings as well. As I have mentioned before, in paintings it is possible to deprive the image of its present context to evoke a mystification of the past which is connected to assumptions. It is more difficult to avoid the stillness of a painting and consider it as “timeless”. However, the invention of the camera introduced this possibility of breaking with a single perspective. In Cubist paintings, for example, the visible is no longer linked to a single eye, but the variety of views from which the object depicted can be seen is made obvious by the artist. This variety of views is also given more scope as regards the place where the painting is located:

The invention of the camera also changed the way in which men saw paintings painted long before the camera was invented. Originally paintings were an integral part of the building for which they were designed (...) The uniqueness of every painting was once part of the place where it resided (...) But it could never be seen in two places at the same time. (Berger et al., 1972: 19)

With the use of the camera, when a painting is shown on a television screen, the painting enters a new realm: that of each spectator’s house. The painting is put into various, multiple contexts, and its meaning changes from one place to another. Cinema makes an effective use of images, exploiting their power to the maximum and endowing the objects with so many meanings that their original essence disappears altogether to leave space for the interpretation of the viewers. The object of the gaze is the passive element of the equation. The gaze is always active.

1.2. Different types of representation. Scopophilia and voyeurism in cinema.

So far I have established the power relationships between men and women and how they are crucial when representing images in all kinds of media. Men act –they impose their gaze upon the female body– and women survey themselves while they are being

looked at. In the process of identification and deconstruction of the male gaze, in this case in cinema, it is important to recognise its mechanism and split it into all its parts and variants. To be able to do this, we must go back to concepts that are deeply rooted in our society and that are the basis for these representations, such as *nudity* and *nakedness*.

In *Ways of Seeing*, the concepts of the nude and the naked are explained starting from the tradition of European oil painting, where the woman –more precisely, the woman’s body– is the principal object of focus. This category is described as the nude, and it has proven effective to maintain the judgment of women as sights. In all the examples provided in the book, from representations of Adam and Eve to contemporary advertisements, the woman is aware that she is being surveyed by a spectator, presumably male: she tends to look directly at him. Thus, she does not own her naked body, but the spectator has control over it. She acknowledges her situation and she attracts the attention of the viewer. The nude is described in the following way:

To be nude is to be seen by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude. (The sight of it as an object stimulates the use of it as an object.) Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display (Berger et al., 1972: 54)

We encounter the term object once again to demonstrate that in the process of seeing the woman is disposed of her own personality to become a mere object for the spectator: “In the average European oil painting of the nude the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man” (Berger et al., 1972: 54). The woman is naked not for her own pleasure, but to flatter the spectator.

In contrast, it is difficult to create a still representation of sexual nakedness, because lived sexual experience is a process: it cannot be isolated in one single moment. If a painter or a photographer wants to represent a naked body, they would need to offer a full perspective of their own experience in the painting/photograph. A distinction between lover and voyeur has to be established, so the representation is subjective and personal, not general. In any case, in the European tradition, what is normally conceived to be behind the painting’s intention is the man –the artist; the owner of the object– and what is being represented is not the woman, but the man’s conception of her body. These unequal power relationships that structure the basis of conceptions and

assumptions are still very present, in daily life and representations by the media. The relevance and advances of the camera greatly facilitate this process, being these values further spread.

In *My Body*, Ratajkowski discusses these issues from her perspective as a model. Throughout her account, we see the previously mentioned internalisation of the woman as both surveyor and surveyed. She turns herself into a male spectator in order to judge her own body and other women's bodies. Ratajkowski argues that, when she was younger, she believed that she was exercising a degree of power in choosing to objectify and sexualise her own body for her career. She decided to expose herself before others told her to do it. However, while it is true that she has been rewarded economically and that her name has been recognised, she has felt objectified in her position as a "sex symbol":

I've capitalized on my body within the confines of a cis-hetero, capitalist, patriarchal world, one in which beauty and sex appeal are valued solely through the satisfaction of the male gaze. Whatever influence and status I've gained were only granted to be because I appealed to men." (Ratajkowski, 2021: 5)

Thus, the true agency that Ratajkowski has gained does not rely on the capitalization of her body, but on the writing of these processes that structure our society. By exposing the contradictions of patriarchy and the mechanisms behind it from her own experience, she is destabilising the gaze. As the critic that describes the painting's composition, the fictitious world created for the male spectator collapses. Ratajkowski talks about the many mirrors from which she can see herself. The image of the mirror brings into question the pictorial representations in the European tradition that show a woman holding a mirror, either seeing her image reflected or watching directly at the spectator. Artists pretend to simulate the vanity of women, when in reality the true vanity is that of the artist that portrays the beauty of the female body just for his own pleasure.

Cinema acts as a mirror that serves to perpetuate the representation of the woman based on patriarchal conceptions. It is the ideal medium to create an illusion in which visual desire, and therefore the gaze, is at the core of its powers. Mulvey describes two types of look that take place in film form in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". The first look is scopophilia, already introduced in psychoanalytic theory. This look relies on visual pleasure itself: the one who bears the gaze enjoys viewing the object of desire. Cinema creates an illusion that separates the spectator from

reality, so he can place the focus of his look in a private world, and locate his desires onto the performer. A painting can be located in someone's apartment to watch it from a private sphere. In cinema, that becomes easier –you do not need to buy the painting in order to enjoy it privately–. The contrast of the lights and the darkroom when you watch a film in the theatre further encourages this privacy. The second look is that of the spectator that combines his perception with that of the character in the story with whom he feels identified. In this second classification, the viewer exercises a greater degree of power over the object of desire: the woman, first sexualised for the audience, becomes the object of desire of the protagonist. When the woman becomes the lover of the protagonist, the viewer instantly possesses her too. This relates to the concepts of the naked and the nude. The camera portrays a generalised nude of the woman: the image is aimed at a voyeur, not at a lover. This former look is a narcissistic development of the scopophilic fantasy: it focuses on the anthropomorphic aspects of the narrative. The spectator does not only see the object of desire, but he recognises himself in the fictitious world. There is pleasure in the looking, but there is also self-awareness in this look. In psychoanalysis, the first look is part of the sexual intention towards the attainment of a sexual object, while the second one is part of the construction of an ideal ego; a process of identification with the perfected image on the screen.

Each is associated with a look: that of the spectator in direct scopophilic fantasy and that of the spectator fascinated with the image of his like set in an illusion of natural space, and through him gaining control and possession of the woman within the diegesis. (Mulvey, 1975: 14)

In cinema, these two looks can coexist in the fantasy of the fictional world. However, the woman poses yet another problem for the diegesis of the narrative, as she is, in psychoanalytic terms, the castrated entity who lacks the phallus and who originally signifies the difference between the sexes: “Thus the woman, as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified” (Mulvey, 1975: 15). At this stage, Mulvey suggests two ways of escape from this original threat, which are structured by the principles of the two looks that I have previously explained. One of the ways out of this problem would be fetishistic scopophilia, by which the physical beauty of the object becomes the element of satisfaction itself. The uneasiness caused by the lack of the phallus is surpassed by “the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself

into a fetish” (Mulvey, 1975: 15). The other venue to overcome this threat is voyeurism. Voyeurism seeks to identify the danger (if analysed, it loses its power), or else the trauma is “counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment, or saving of the guilty object” (p. 15). The voyeuristic look is well introduced in the narrative because it follows principles that require an action and a story. Something needs to happen, both in the action and to the object of desire, and this usually happens in a linear time, from beginning to end. On the other hand, the fetishistic scopophilia, since it is focused on beauty itself, does not need to comply with linear time. These strategies can also be combined so the male character shares his perspective with the spectator while he becomes fascinated with the image that is the main focus of the film. Since the gaze is shared between the character and the audience, this poses a certain degree of uneasiness in the viewer, who is forced to embrace the emotions and behaviours of the protagonist.

1.3. Woman as the subject. Obsolescence and new meanings

Mulvey’s essay has become crucial in what is called “gaze theory”, which has expanded its influence beyond feminist film critiques to film and cultural theory. Through gaze theory, power relations between predominant groups and those considered as the “other” can be analysed. As Manlove (2007) says: “‘Gaze theory’ has also made its way into literary and cultural studies, queer theory, postcolonial studies, Holocaust studies, black/whiteness studies, and critical race theory” (Manlove, 2007: 84). However, many of these approaches lack insight into the theories of Freud and Lacan, precisely the ones that Mulvey uses to support her analysis. Manlove recognises the influence of the gaze in society and film, but he challenges its strict association with a single gender. The gaze, structured by patriarchal codes already inherent in society, seems to oppress all those immersed in the system of representation of cinema.

Within ten years, many feminist film critics variously sought to question and/or redefine Mulvey's focus on three issues: gender positions in the gaze, heterosexuality of the gaze, and seeing the gaze as exclusively (male) pleasure in voyeurism. (Manlove, 2007: 85)

Many critics analyse Mulvey’s approach taking the feminine spectatorship in mainstream cinema as the starting point. In this sense, it is argued that it is possible for women to bear the gaze, something that in Mulvey’s essay is limited to the man. The

other two critiques of “Visual Pleasure” rely not on the individual, but on the aim of pleasure in the gaze: 1) The gaze is not reserved to heterosexual men but is also something gay men can take part in. In the same manner, it is important to account for a lesbian spectator, who can also conduct the gaze towards the object of desire:

In 1983, Steven Neale argued that the manner in which Mulvey describes the passive, feminine sense of "to-be looked-at-ness" can also be applied to images of masculinity, both with regard to heterosexual female and gay identifications. (Manlove, 2007: 86)

2) Mulvey devoted too much of her analysis to voyeurism, the fetish, and pleasure: “Gertrud Koch argued for a phenomenological theory of the gaze (because the focus on pleasure invites reliance on psychoanalytic methods)” (Manlove, 2007: 86). Mulvey uses psychoanalysis in order to deconstruct the effects of the gaze, but it is said that this theory does not match well with film studies. Psychoanalysis does not account for women, because its focus is on the phallus. The perspective and agency of women in the gaze are thus overlooked:

In 1978, Stephen Heath argued that psychoanalysis failed to account for the complexities of sexual difference because it is defined in relation to the phallus (or its lack), which is ahistorical. Focusing on the issue of lack resulting from difference, in 1981 Susan Lurie argued that the image of the castrated woman that Mulvey borrowed from Lacan is a patriarchal rather than physical “construction” (Manlove, 2007: 87)

Mulvey is right in stating that the pleasure produced by one person gazing at another can be used for power, and she effectively describes how this is developed in cinema using the politics of gender. However, from the critics’ perspective, she fails to recognise the spectrum in which the subject/object relationship can be reversed and distorted: the moment when the woman is able to exert her agency. Although psychoanalysis proves useful to identify the primary power relations established by the visual drive behind them, it cannot serve to include the perspective of women. To recognise this is a crucial point to analyse the gaze from its origin and its effects, without considering a single gender, or even removing its prior associations with the concept of gender as such.

In fact, to analyse the gaze from the primary assumptions that are behind it is to analyse it from the gender that we attach to it. And when we try to describe what gender means in this whole process of seeing, we go back to the power relationships that lie under every system of representation. “Gender”, “man”, “woman”, “masculinity”, “femininity”, “heterosexual”, “homosexual”, “bisexual”...All of these terms are words

that we use to identify categories, and these categories are socially constructed too: “[G]ender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency (...); rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time –an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler, 1988: 519). We find terms to explain what we see. However, these words come after, and not before, the sight: “Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak” (Berget et al., 1972: 7). We try to state our knowledge of the world in words, but that explanation never fully matches the sight. That is precisely why images are affected by our personal beliefs and experiences. The real issue is that as long as the concepts regarding gender and sex exist, the split between the woman and the man, and all the connotations attached to both genders, is going to be there. Power relations operate in image representation because we are part of a society that has these relations at its very basis.

In feminist theory, representation is used with the opposite effect that I have discussed: it is the means to position women as a political subject, and therefore it gives the woman influence and voice within society. Representation also plays an important role in the identification and deconstruction of the assumptions that surround women.

For feminist theory, the development of a language that fully or adequately represents women has seemed necessary to foster the political visibility of women. This has seemed obviously important considering the pervasive cultural condition in which women’s lives were either misrepresented or not represented at all. (Butler, 2002: 4)

By positioning the woman as the subject in this system of political representation in order to liberate her, we are also acknowledging that the subject is the final element for representation. This use of the subject is dangerous because if the woman is displaced from that position in the discourse –in any kind of discourse– she goes back to her function as the object.

Butler refers to Foucault and his explanation of the mechanisms behind power discourses that regulate every aspect of society⁴. These systems of power create the very idea of the subject, and thus they can shape it according to different principles: principles that are always negative. In this sense, by encouraging the very notion of the subject and its representation, we are perpetuating these power discourses. The category

⁴ Foucault points out that juridical systems of power produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent. Juridical notions of power appear to regulate political life in purely negative terms –that is, through the limitation, prohibition, regulation, control, and even “protection” of individuals related to that political structure through the contingent and retractable operation of choice. (Butler, 2002: 4).

of “woman”, which in feminist theory ought to be the subject, is created and shaped by these discourses.

Revisiting her own theory, Mulvey acknowledges that “as feminist film theory has moved forward to engage with and benefit from ideas associated with the politics of race and queer theory, 1970s film feminism was left looking somewhat white and heterosexual” (Mulvey, 2015: 18). However, she also explains that this theory is not attached to a linear time, and precisely feminism should challenge the strict configurations of time and rebel against them: “Precisely in its obsolescence, feminist film theory of the 1970s might still re-emerge in a new context and for unexpected uses” (Mulvey, 2015: 19). The object of study in the feminist film theory of the 70s is thus related to its sociopolitical context, but it can be reintegrated and changed in the present.

The possibility to change the context of a certain theory and its connotations is intrinsically related to Berger et al.’s description of the sight and its representation, whose meaning is constantly being reshaped by the viewer. People position themselves in the context of a particular image, relating both its past and its present, making connections, and establishing similarities. Cinema creates an illusion in which the spectator immerses himself. The perpetuation of this illusion is necessary to preserve the credibility of the fictional world in which the viewer projects all the desires and assumptions into the object that is being displayed on the screen. Therefore, patriarchy and uniformity have to be challenged by using the very same objects that represented them in the past. By recognising the techniques used by cinema to perpetuate the male gaze, we are deconstructing it and dispossessing it of its power. We are going to see how these strategies work in *Lolita* and its cinematographic adaptations, and how they can be identified and challenged.

3. Chapter Two

2.1. Humbert Humbert, the writer and the director

As part of the process of seeing, in which different conceptions are applied to the sight, *Lolita* can be analysed in terms of its duality of representation. This duality lays the

foundations for the shaping and reshaping of the object of visual pleasure according to conventions. The novel is divided into two parts, corresponding with the two opposing views that the narrator, Humbert Humbert, infuses upon the twelve-year-old Dolly Haze, “Lolita”. The first part of the novel serves to showcase and mystify Lolita as a “nymphet” who seduces Humbert through her unearthly features. The second part is the downfall of Lolita from her idealised position:

I was not ready quite prepared for her fits of disorganized boredom, intense and vehement gripping, her spawling, droopy, dopey-eyed style, and what is called goofing off –a kind of diffused clowning which she thought was tough in a boyish hoodlum way. Mentally, I found her to be a disgustingly conventional girl. (Nabokov, 1995: 148)

These divisions in turn pave the way to approach Lolita from two different points of view: that of the seductress and that of the abused, helpless child. In any case, the reader is immersed in a constant dichotomy caused by the sympathy and the repulsion towards the narrator, who is both the creator and the victim of his own illusion.

The ambiguous nature of the narrator makes it easy to analyse this story by exposing the perpetuation of the male gaze throughout the novel and subsequently in the film adaptations. Humbert is essentially a paedophile who hides his impulses through the visual power that he exerts upon little girls:

I knew exactly what I wanted to do, and how to do it, without impinging on a child’s chastity; after all, I had had some experience in my life of pederosis; had visually possessed dappled nymphets in parks; had wedged my wary and bestial way into the hottest, most crowded corner of a city bus full of straphanging school children. (Nabokov, 1995: 55-56)

Throughout his life, he has been possessing nymphets visually, but when he feels that he has the opportunity to get closer to Lolita, physical touch comes into play too. Thus Humbert Humbert approaches Lolita, the sexual object, by exerting what Freud described as preliminary sexual aims: touching and looking, until the sexual aim (i.e. sex; the rape of the child) is attained. In this process of attainment of pleasure, the man is already positioned as the active element in the dichotomy of representation of men and women:

[The] pretence is always towards a power which he exercises on others. / By contrast, a woman’s presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her (...). To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men”. (Berger et al., 1972: 45-46)

Humbert is a character that is worth studying from various perspectives, as different behavioural patterns related to our object of study converge in himself. First, his impulses can be described in psychoanalytic terms. A character who can be analysed in these terms already shows the patriarchal values on which representation systems are based. Humbert's sexual object is a child, and that of course differs from the normal sexual object of an adult: "On the other hand, cases in which sexually immature persons (children) are chosen as sexual objects are instantly judged as sporadic aberrations" (Freud, 1905: 1475). Freud establishes that this can be due to the necessity to fulfil an urgent need when the subject "cannot at the moment get possession of any more appropriate object" (Freud, 1905: 1475). Humbert's first love, Annabel Leigh, dies of typhus at the age of thirteen. In the Afterword to the novel, Craig Raine points out: "[T]he affair is never consummated and Humbert is condemned to spend the rest of his life in a state of sexual aporia, until he achieves the postponed climax with Lolita" (Nabokov, 1995: 325). But Freud also establishes a connection that depends on the background of the subject:

Experience shows that disturbances of the sexual instinct among the insane do not differ from those that occur among the healthy and in whole races or occupations. Thus the sexual abuse of children is found with uncanny frequency among school teachers and child attendants, simply because they have the best opportunity for it. (Freud, 1905: 1475)

Humbert's instinct becomes exclusive, as he can only find pleasure when the sexual object is a child, and because he is also a teacher, his environment constitutes an incentive for the perpetuation of his tendencies. As Freud states, the insane cannot be distinguished from others, since they behave normally in the social sphere. Precisely the reason why the reader can feel sympathy for Humbert is that they have access to all his thoughts. Humbert justifies himself, and the story of a paedophile suddenly becomes a story of love and suffering. He does not only manipulate Lolita through his gaze, but he also manipulates the reader with his words.

Humbert has tried not only to seduce Dolly Haze, but to seduce his reader too. And sometimes, the seduction has worked. Many of the original reviewers and commentators on the novel displayed palpable sympathy for Humbert, and they often expressed views of Dolly that are in close accord with Humbert's own representations (or misrepresentations) of their relationship. (Connolly, 2009: 31)

Humbert is always the active element in his own narration: his own created illusion that the reader shares with him. Lolita is thus bound "by a symbolic order in which the man

can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command” (Mulvey, 1975: 2). A conception is imposed upon the mysterious figure of Lolita, whose feelings the reader can only access through hints in the narration. She embodies the patriarchal values that serve to signify the male, and thus she allows him to create meaning. As Berger et al. explains, in the representation system “the surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female” (Berger et al., 1972: 47). The woman is aware of the gaze, and she becomes the object of visual pleasure.

Because of the inherent duality in the novel between desire and “reality”, Humbert can be deemed an unreliable narrator. However, when Humbert makes errors in his narration, he acknowledges them. The rest of the time, he is very exact and meticulous in his descriptions:

[Humbert] misses nothing, be it a solemn pool of alien urine with a soggy, tawny cigarette butt disintegrating in it – or his own duality, compounded of adoration and disgust, fused into one genuine whole, until the final separation. (Nabokov, 1995: 322)

Humbert is not lying, he is himself enchanted by his idealised conception of Lolita. It is not until Lolita explains everything to him when he realises that he has corrupted the child and his two-fold nature becomes one self: the paedophile. Thus, the assumptions that the reader makes around Lolita do not correspond to the “real” Lolita. These assumptions are infused by Humbert’s perception of the girl. The active elements in the process of representation of the child, the narrator and the reader, share a common view (that provided by the narration) that is also split to give way to different opinions: “Yet, although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our way of seeing” (Berger et al., 1972: 10). As in the examples of the photographer and the painter, Humbert Humbert, as a writer, selects a “sight from an infinity of other possible sights, and “his way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject” (Berger et al., 1972: 10). Lolita is just one among many other nymphets, but she is the unique nymphet that attracts the gaze, until she is devoid of her status as the idealised object of desire.

Humbert positions himself as the male protagonist of his own story. As a writer, he tries to portray Lolita in order to “fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets” (Nabokov, 1995: 134). He wants to reflect the uniqueness of Lolita in his work, so that the only possible conception of the child is his own. He becomes the “bearer of the look

of the spectator” (Mulvey, 1975: 12), sharing his perceptions beyond the screen. However, he fails in his attempt to maintain the gaze. Within the narrative, he is unaware that he is being controlled by Clare Quilty: his gaze is shared with him. When the story is adapted to the screen, the spectator shares with Humbert what he believes is a realistic portrayal of Lolita. However, when Humbert loses the control of the narrative, the gaze directed towards Lolita is fragmented. His intention to become an artist that portrays the perfect image of a nymphet is contra productive because the image undergoes the same process of identification as that of a work of art. Thus, the spectator becomes aware of the context of creation of the image and the assumptions attached to it. The spectator no longer shares his views with Humbert, because he notices the artificiality of the creation. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the gaze is not perpetuated throughout the rest of the film. As Berger et al. stated, there is a problem with the convention of perspective, unique to European art, which “centres everything on the eye of the beholder” (Berger et al., 1972: 16), and that is that spectators cannot be at one place at a time. The camera makes it obvious that it is possible to surpass the limits of time and space and break with the boundaries of a single perspective. That is why the gaze switches multiple times from Humbert to Quilty and the spectator. Perspectives surrounding the girl also vary depending on the interpretation that the director makes of the story and on how the camera is used. The sexualisation of Lolita is prevalent, but the power of the male gaze is not stable because it is not something that is embodied by the man: it is external to him.

In the Foreword to “Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male,” the novel is framed as a medical document, written by the fictional psychologist John Ray Jr., Ph.D. He informs us of the death of the criminal when he was in prison, but he also provides the reader with documents that serve to prove the “real” story behind these characters, which is not the one told by Humbert. In this sort of fictional scientific document we find a warning: the style of writing can influence the way we think, making us believe that a story is “true” and “realistic”. And that is precisely what Humbert achieves through his narration. The reader must bear in mind that every piece of writing comes from the selection of information by an individual. In cinema, that subjectivity becomes even more powerful, because its conventions make it possible to create an illusion that is completely shared with the viewer. In fact, Humbert remarks

throughout his confession that if he was filming Lolita rather than writing about her, he could possess Lolita forever:

Humbert sees himself as a director, camera, and leading man. The novel's consistent invocation of filmic metaphors to describe Lolita invites us to read her as a literary version of Hollywood's child star. (Power, 1999: 102)

Humbert sees himself as an artist and as the perfect lover. He needs to control Lolita's image, but he is also concerned about the way in which Lolita sees him. His gaze goes against him because he becomes enchanted with the image that he has constructed around himself and Lolita. The child, as the object of desire, becomes necessary to perpetuate the gaze and the power that it concedes to the male characters and the male audience:

Lolita is at once a chance for the male narrator (and author and director as well) to redeem and make immortal their own stardom, and the recognition that this stardom will always entail failure since it depends on making into a star a girl who will outgrow those features which made her capable of being a star in the first place. (Power, 1999: 103)

The child is sexualised, but a child that grows into a woman cannot maintain those same features that turned her into the object of representation. This relates again to the process of turning an image into a work of art. What the images provokes gives way to an interpretation in-depth of the features of the image: its human nature is deconstructed and its characteristics are directly linked to common assumptions regarding art. This in turn relates to the concepts of the nude and the naked in European painting. In both cases, the object is the woman, and the artist is presumed to be a male. But there is a difference between these concepts: "Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display" (Berger et al., 1972: 54). Contrary to what Humbert thinks, it is difficult to create a still representation of sexual nakedness, because lived sexual experience is a process. He fails to represent a male-female relationship to objectify Lolita and idealise both the child and the view that he has of himself around her. He is a voyeur, not a lover. What we have is a display of a generalised object of visual pleasure.

Humbert's romantic failure occurs when he can't fix the magic of nymphets or keep up with it. Just as Lolita loses her power to dazzle, Humbert loses his power to direct. His reinterpretation of the art of nymphetry is again being reinterpreted by someone else, leaving Humbert in the dust, much like the pathetic antique furniture of Charlotte's house. (Power, 1999: 111)

Lolita's body is possessed by Humbert, but dispossessed when the illusion that he has created disappears. His conception of Lolita is fragmented and subjected to multiple

points of view. Cinema makes an effective use of images, giving the object different meanings so the original is reshaped and leaves space for the interpretation of the viewers.

2.2. Image as sight. The male gaze in the film adaptations

In film, the sight becomes visual. If in the novel the reader was able to perceive Lolita through Humbert's linguistic command, the conventions of mainstream cinema make it possible for the spectator to project his emotions in the intimacy of his voyeuristic desire: "Although the film is really being shown, is there to be seen, conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world" (Mulvey, 1975: 7). Lolita's body: in this case, the body of the actress that impersonates her, is displayed on the screen, and the conception that the male protagonist has of her is shared with the spectator. "Thus the woman, as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified" (Mulvey, 1975: 15). Humbert imagines cinema as the perfect medium in his desire to create the ideal portrayal of the nymphet. For him, cinema constitutes the final solution to perpetuate his own image of Lolita, because words are not enough: "When in love, the sight of the beloved has a completeness which no words and no embrace can match" (Berger et al., 1972: 8). Humbert knows that cinematographic techniques are powerful, but he has no access to them, thus he seems to forget that no matter how hard he tries to leave an imprint of the nymphet, the object is going to change according to who is looking at it. The camera is subjective: it chooses what image it captures on screen, but it also opens the possibility for the image to be seen from different points of view. Not only Humbert's perception of Lolita changes when she grows up, but also Lolita's image has already been appropriated by Humbert's antagonist, Clare Quilty, by the director and the camera, and by the spectator.

The film adaptations of Lolita show how the image of the girl in the book has been reinterpreted. Nabokov himself was offered the chance to write the script for Stanley Kubrick's (1962) film. However, most of that script was discarded for being extensive and difficult to bring to the big screen. Nabokov, worried about the audience's

perception of his work, wanted to make sure that the adaptation kept the original meaning of the story. In the introduction to the published version of his screenplay, he stated his approach to cinema:

By nature I am no dramatist; I am not even a hack scenarist; but if I had given as much of myself to the stage or the screen as I have to the kind of writing which serves a triumphant life sentence between the covers of a book, I would have advocated and applied a system of total tyranny, directing the play or the picture myself, choosing settings and costumes, terrorizing the actors, mingling with them in the bit part of guest, or ghost, prompting them, and, in a word, pervading the entire show with the will and art of one individual—for there is nothing in the world that I loathe more than group activity. (Nabokov, 1974)

Nabokov and Humbert resemble each other in their attempt to use cinema as the means to control the visual representation of their art and their image of Lolita. However, while Humbert's narrative is reinterpreted by Clare Quilty in his play *The Enchanted Hunters*, Nabokov's novel is also given new meanings in the cinematographic adaptations. Cinema creates an illusion that is shared with the viewer, but that illusion is momentary:

Since film works only as a fantasy, however, Humbert risks losing control over the definition of his art to a series of doubles with whom he competes, such as the playwright and pornographer Clare Quilty, who takes advantage of Humbert's initial foresight, using it as a stepping stone to the next limit and leaving Humbert in the dark. (Power, 1999: 104-105)

Adrian Lyne's (1997) film provides a seemingly faithful approach to Nabokov's *Lolita*. It introduces the lines from the novel, uttered by Jeremy Irons, who impersonates Humbert, in voice-over, and thus we have full access to his thoughts and feelings, something which goes to detriment of the inexistence of Lolita's thoughts. Similarly, we are introduced to the backstory of the character, to when his obsession with nymphets started. A comparison is established between Annabel, his childhood lover, and Lolita. However, Annabel is just a fragment in Humbert's mind, whereas he can perceive Lolita's body as a whole. Lolita is not a nymphet that he can gaze at from the distance, but she is the object that he can approach and control. As Mulvey puts it, "the conventions of mainstream film focus attention on the human form" (Mulvey, 1975: 7). As the sexual instinct described by Freud, which is directed to the body as a whole, cinema focuses on anthropomorphic elements to spread its values and make the illusion realistic. The comparison is established visually with Annabel's dreamy image at the very beginning of the film and with Lolita's first appearance in the *piazza* of the Haze's house. In the first encounter with Lolita, both Lyne and Kubrick use the eyeline match

technique to show the focus of Humbert's gaze, and thus this makes it possible for the audience to look at Annabel (in Lyne's film) and Lolita through Humbert's eyes. We encounter an idyllic picture of the girls, accompanied by the use of extra-diegetic music and the close-ups on the different parts of their bodies. The focus on the girls' feet is particularly significant: it constitutes the intermission of the woman's body in the narrative, but it does not interfere with the diegesis, because the object is turned into a fetish. The woman's body does not signify its original threat because it is fetishized: the lack of the phallus is surpassed by "the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish" (Mulvey, 1975: 15). But afterwards the image is also shared with the spectator through the voyeur's eyes.



Figure 2. Lyne uses the eyeline match technique to show the audience where Humbert's (Jeremy Irons) gaze is directed in Adrian Lyne's 1997 film Lolita (Pathé).



Figure 3. Humbert's gaze is shared with the spectator. Lolita (Dominique Swain) becomes the object of visual pleasure.

In the opening of Kubrick's adaptation, we find a close-up of Lolita's feet, foreshadowing a scene in the film when Humbert is painting the girl's nails and discussing her dates with boys. The shot introduces the fetish and it also gives the spectator a hint of the relationship between the characters. The presence of the hands

and therefore physical touch is equally important because it underlines the preliminary sexual aims, necessary for the excitation of the subject.



Figure 4. Kubrick opens the film by introducing the fetish: Lolita's (Sue Lyon) feet. The threat provoked by the castration complex is avoided by objectifying the girl's body in Stanley Kubrick's 1962 film Lolita (Seven Arts Pictures, Anya Productions, Transworld).

Throughout the film, women (Charlotte Haze, Jean Farlow, the piano teacher) seek Humbert's physical contact first by the touch of their hands, but Humbert only looks for that intimacy with Lolita. What the director does in this film is to put more women on display so Humbert's assumptions of Lolita's advances are subtly, not openly, identified. This, together with the use of humour, serves to mask the complete sexualisation of the child by sexualising other women instead. When Charlotte Haze is with Humbert, she is always trying to appeal to him, and in that process she constantly watches herself:

She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. (Berger et al., 1972: 46)

Kubrick's film exploits the character of Charlotte Haze by impinging upon her attempts to be perceived by Humbert as both pretty and intelligent (the mention of the Book Club and her interest in art), and later her desire to marry and become a good wife. She also tries to appeal to Clare Quilty. Precisely the fact that Quilty remembers Haze's daughter but not her is a mechanism that the film uses to foreshadow the similarities between Quilty and Humbert.

Lyne's version also includes Haze's need to attract Humbert's attention, but not Quilty's. The rivalry between mother and daughter is present in both films. This shows that the woman is a surveyor of herself and of other women too. Nevertheless, Lyne's adaptation does not focus so much on Haze or other women, but it provides an overly

sexualised portrayal of Lolita. The choice of Lolita's clothes in this adaptation and her display on-screen serve to justify Humbert in front of the viewer by highlighting Lolita's capacity and willingness for seduction. Once again the threat posed by the woman is avoided by voyeurism: the danger is identified and the trauma is "counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment, or saving of the guilty object" (Mulvey, 1975: 15). In this adaptation, we find a mixture of the naiveness of the child, but also Humbert's conception of her advances made a visual reality. The viewer can see Humbert not as a mere voyeur, but as a lover, even a victim, and that causes uneasiness.



Figure 5. The gaze is interchanged with the audience. The camera places the focus on Lolita's body and Humbert's face simultaneously in Adrian Lyne's 1997 film Lolita (Pathé).

Whereas in the novel Nabokov left room for Lolita's thoughts to be considered by the reader, in Lyne's adaptation the viewer counts only on Humbert's perspective until the very end when Lolita gives her account. That provokes a misconception surrounding the child, in which the viewer believes that she has agency. This poses a problem for feminist attempts to empower the woman by placing her as the subject of the narrative. This is related to Butler's approach: because we place power on the subject, feminist theories try to represent the woman as the subject; however, when the woman is displaced of her position as the subject, she is completely stripped of her agency. Even though it is true that Lolita is not a saint: that she kisses Humbert, knows the word "incest" before they have sexual intercourse, has already had sex with Charlie...that

does not turn her into the subject. She is still the object subjected to Humbert's active process of representation: the fact that she makes sexual advances only serves to perpetuate Humbert's and the viewer's conception of her. She is aware of the gaze and she embodies the expectations that surround the female body.

One crucial scene that differentiates the approach in both films is Lolita's farewell when she is leaving for the summer camp. Humbert is watching her through the window (the perfect symbol for a voyeur) and suddenly their eyes match. In Lyne's film, Lolita runs upstairs, the leitmotiv that signifies love throughout the film accompanying the scene, she jumps and holds Humbert and gives him a passionate kiss. In Kubrick's adaptation, Humbert and Lolita see each other, Lolita runs upstairs, but her pace is slower, and she gives a hug to Humbert. Kubrick portrays an image that is more paternal than romantic.



Figure 6. Lyne shows Lolita's advances towards Humbert. Lolita kisses Humbert before leaving for the summer camp in Adrian Lyne's 1997 film Lolita (Pathé).

In Kubrick's adaptation, humour goes to detriment of the erotic. Here we do not find so much intimacy between Lolita and Humbert. When they stop at the first hotel, the room service provides a cot for the room where they are staying. However, Humbert intends to sleep with Lolita. When he is approaching her, she wakes up and asks him if the cot is there and subsequently occupies the whole bed, Humbert being thus obliged to move to the cot, which collapses as soon as he is preparing to sleep. There is no invitation from the part of Lolita, nor a chance for Humbert to fulfil his fantasies. Nevertheless, we still find instances of eroticism in the film. The moment when Lolita suggests that they play a "game" that she has practiced with Charlie is shown. Lolita is flirty this time and the viewer can infer the sexual character of the game, but no further details are

given. In Lyne's adaptation, the low angle shot from Humbert's perspective looking up while Lolita kneels down makes an obvious reading of the scene.

2.3. Publicity and Hollywood: the perpetuation of the male gaze

The story of *Lolita* revolves around cinema and the glamour of Hollywood. Lolita is seen as the prototype of the movie star by the adults in her life. She is aware of the gaze and the societal expectations that come attached to it. In an attempt to reassure her potential and eventually feel relief in her situation, she becomes immersed in the publicity of her daily life. Publicity offers her the freedom of choice that otherwise she is not able to have, that is why she asks Humbert to buy her things constantly.

Within publicity, choices are offered between this cream and that cream, that car and this car, but publicity as a system only makes a single proposal. It proposes to us that we transform ourselves, our lives, by buying something more. (Berger et al., 1972: 131)

Publicity turns her into the ideal consumer and it favours her acceptance and embodiment of all prototypes that she sees in ads. As Humbert says: "She is to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and the object of every foul poster" (Nabokov, 1955: 148). She becomes the subject when she chooses what to buy, what to wear and how to behave, but that is only momentarily, because the more she looks like the girls in the ads, the more she becomes a replica of the ideal object represented in those advertisements. Publicity adds thus another layer to the system of representation that is structured according to the desires of a male audience. As in Ratajkowski's situation, she decides to commercialise her body, but within the confines of a patriarchal system.

Even Humbert himself becomes trapped by the promise that publicity, and particularly the world of Hollywood, offers. He sees the possibility of approaching Lolita because he thinks that he looks similar to an actor to whom Lolita is attracted: "Moreover, I am said to resemble some crooner or actor chap on whom Lo has a crush" (Nabokov, 1995: 43). From that time on, he has a chance to attract Lolita, and their interactions are described in cinematic terms.



Figure 7. Male stars in Lolita's posters in Stanley Kubrick's 1962 film Lolita (Seven Arts Pictures, Anya Productions, Transworld) and Adrian Lyne's 1997 film Lolita (Pathé). Kubrick introduces Clare Quilty's image.

In their "imitation of blood relationship," Humbert is aware that "all at once that [he] could kiss her throat or the wick of her mouth with perfect impunity" since Lolita would let him and "even close her eyes as Hollywood teaches" (Power, 1999: 109). He wants to become the movie star of his own story, but he fails to maintain his position as the ideal man:

Come and kiss your old man, I would say, and drop that moody nonsense. In former times, when I was still your dream male [the reader will notice what pains I took to speak Lo's tongue], you swooned to records of the number one throb-and-sob idol of your coevals [Lo: "Of my what? Speak English"]. That idol of your pals sounded, you thought, like friend Humbert. But now, I am just your old man, a dream dad protecting his dream daughter. (Nabokov, 1955: 149)

This failure to accept his self relates to the mirror stage described by Lacan. This is a narcissistic stage, previous to the formation of the ego, that is unstable and it has to be complemented by imagination. His idealisation of famous men portrayed by the media makes him identify with one of them. It is not until Lolita chooses Quilty instead of him, that he identifies himself as he is: the man who corrupted Lolita; her stepfather; a paedophile and a murderer. In his impossibility to form his ego, the spectator also fails to maintain the identification with Humbert.

Publicity is always about the future buyer. It offers him an image of himself made glamorous by the product or opportunity it is trying to sell. The image then makes him envious of himself as he might be. (Berger et al., 1972: 132)

If Kubrick's adaptation lacks many of the erotic aspects of the novel, it gives further insight into the power of publicity and its reciprocal influence in cinema. This adaptation provides the viewer with scenes and shots of Humbert and Lolita going to the cinema; Humbert being photographed by Charlotte Haze –a metaphor of the voyeur captured by the camera in the act of gazing–, and the many pictures of men and magazines that Lolita has in her room, together with the constant references to commercials and their catchy phrases. Lyne's film also makes references to publicity, but the focus that Kubrick places on it goes beyond. This becomes obvious by the degree of importance that Clare Quilty acquires in the film. Clare Quilty is the antagonist of Humbert, but he is also his double:

Quilty is Humbert, or Humbert's *doppelgänger*. The mannerisms and pretensions they share, as well as their common depravity, are too obvious to list. By killing Quilty, Humbert kills the dirty old man in himself, his grubbly reflection in the moral mirror. (Nabokov, 1995: 329)

For Lolita, Clare Quilty, the playwright that has debuted in Hollywood, becomes the new ideal of glamour. Quilty becomes interesting for Lolita because he is a star. She does not know him, but he holds glamour, and he can provide her with that glamour too. When she acts in Quilty's play, Humbert, without realising, has already lost her power over Lolita.



Figure 8. Quilty gazes at Lolita starring the main character of his own play. Then he takes a photograph of her. He is the director who possesses the object of desire. The woman also gazes at Lolita in an example of the woman as both surveyor and surveyed in Stanley Kubrick's 1962 film *Lolita* (Seven Arts Pictures, Anya Productions, Transworld).

He can still gaze at her, but the gaze is shared with Quilty. Lolita becomes Clare Quilty's object.

You are observed with interest but you do not observe with interest –if you do, you will become less enviable. In this respect the envied are like the bureaucrats; the more impersonal they are, the greater the illusion (for themselves and for others) of their power. (Power, 1999: 133)

Quilty's glamour is very much emphasised in both cinematographic adaptations. In Kubrick's adaptation, his mysteriousness and the impossibility to get to know him are made possible by showing the many impersonations that he does, to the point that Humbert never recognises him until Lolita tells him the truth. He is the famous playwright, the guest in The Enchanted Hunters hotel, the doctor that visits him, the "cop" that is following them in his car, and the stranger who calls him during the night. Quilty remains close to Humbert, but Humbert is never able to discern his true identity: "Quilty's gaze haunts Humbert while Humbert cannot see him, and when he does he misidentifies him" (Trubikhina, 2015: 166-167). In Lyne's adaptation, we find a different approach, but it also maintains Quilty's mystery. His unknown identity is made obvious by hiding his face on various occasions. Quilty talks to Humbert a few times, but the viewer knows that he is present among the shadows and the distorted image that accompany his figure.

Both films maintain an element that is crucial to the story: Quilty's play, *The Enchanted Hunters*, in which Lolita is the protagonist. The play is a dramatization of the relationship between Lolita and Humbert. It is a play of the story within the same story. In a way, it serves to expose, for a moment, how the gaze has worked throughout the whole narrative. In fact, in the Afterword to the novel, it is suggested that Humbert ends up becoming Quilty's pawn in his own narrative:

But there is further innuendo that Humbert is being written by Quilty. Nabokov's first nudge towards this complication occurs in the summary of Quilty's play (Chapter 13, Part Two): the six enchanted hunters are informed by the seventh, "a Young Poet", that they and everything else is his invention. As Humbert attempts to retrace his travels, clues from Quilty (clues from Cue) keep cropping up in motel registers, nearly all of them literary and ministering to Humbert's growing suspicion that he is not the author of his own fate but the subservient pawn of Quilty's narrative ebullience. (Nabokov, 1955: 329)

Whereas in Kubrick's film Quilty's mystery is unveiled from the beginning, showing him semi-naked and about to die at Humbert's hands in a scene that results in a farce, Lyne waits until the very end. Both narratives are circular. However, Kubrick reflects the outcome of Humbert and Quilty as losers, whereas Lyne provides a kind of redemption to Humbert: he drives alone, bloodied, with the gun and Lolita's safety pin

in his hands, lamenting his mistakes. In this version, he almost seems like a tragic hero: the tragic hero of a tragic “love story”.

Both Humbert and Quilty are “enchanted hunters” and this is also mirrored in multiple and dazzling ways: the narrative of “hunting enchanters” is, of course, written by Quilty, but, in fact, it is part of Humbert’s narrative, which, in its turn, is — eventually—Nabokov’s. (Trubikhina: 168-169)

But publicity does not only affect the men in the story, it goes beyond and adds another layer to the power of the gaze. Lolita is not only subjected to it, but she has to hold it. She is aware that she is being looked at, and she has to maintain that ideal of femininity and glamour. In her case, this is not possible, because her glamour depends on her age. When she grows up, she ceases to be the child star anymore. In Kubrick’s film, this is contrasted with another embodiment of the feminine ideal, that of the perfect wife. Charlotte Haze discusses with Humbert that it is “healthy for her to be jealous” because it shows that she loves him; that she is being a good wife. Haze is also affected by the power of mass media. She tries to be the perfect wife because that is what she has learned from ads. In Lyne’s film, there are also advertisements of marriage hung from the wall of Lolita’s room.

The media and celebrities and the subsequent sexualisation of the female body have a huge role in both the novel and the films. These images are the result of the male gaze and the societal conventions that are structured around it. Thus, they have an impact on women’s bodies. Women are both the surveyor and the surveyed and they are aware that their value in a patriarchal society comes from the sexualisation of their bodies.

By choosing to act in Quilty’s play and tricking Humbert to buy her what she wants, we could think that Lolita is exercising her agency. However, she is just perpetuating the image that she has embodied. Going back to Ratajkowski’s experience: “Whatever influence and status I’ve gained were only granted to me because I appealed to men.” (Ratajkowski, 2021: 5). Lolita appeals to the men in her life, and thus she has acquired the status of a star, of the unique nymphet among the others, but that status is lost when she does not appeal to men anymore. When she rejects Quilty’s proposal to act in pornographic films, she performs an active choice. However, her image has already been used by Quilty. Similarly, when Humbert sees her again, already married

and carrying a child, she loses the status of ideal femininity. Elizabeth Power highlights in her essay the following:

[S]tardom turns out not to give Humbert the power of having what Laura Mulvey calls “the male gaze” but instead marks that gaze as involving the loss of power (both of the film director and spectator): Humbert’s progressive loss of control over the child star of his sexual fantasies. (Power, 1999: 107)

If Humbert loses his power over the object of desire is because he internalises and becomes dependent upon his illusion of both himself and Lolita. The object of representation is external to the man, but a man’s presence is “dependent upon the promise of power which he embodies (...). If it is small or incredible, he is found to have little presence” (Berger et al., 1992: 45). Humbert becomes ultimately a loser because he embodies the conventions of the male star and becomes absorbed by his own representation of Lolita. The gaze, which was shared with the director and the audience, is lost when Humbert is not able to maintain the illusion anymore. However, this does not mean that the gaze has not been, and will continue to be, perpetuated throughout. Lyne’s film is an example of this. At the end of the film, another illusion is provided, created by Humbert when he is prepared to leave Lolita. He looks at Lolita saying goodbye, pregnant, with her old, greyish clothes, but suddenly the image changes and he is staring at the Lolita that he knows: the little girl with short clothes and red lips. The sexualised Lolita.



Figure 9. Humbert’s illusion when he sees Lolita for the last time in in Adrian Lyne’s 1997 film Lolita (Pathé).

Humbert tries so hard to fix the conventions that he projects upon Lolita, that those same conventions lose their power when they are accessed by the spectator. He believes that cinema is the best medium to share his gaze, but he loses control of it. The gaze is perpetuated, but not just through Humbert’s perspective.

4. Conclusion

Seeing is an active process in which we choose what we look at. In this process, we decide how the object towards which we are directing our attention is related to what we know. Humbert Humbert takes an active part in the process of representation of Lolita. His views are infused upon the child, and thus he exercises visual power on her. As a writer, he creates an illusion in which the reader shares his assumptions with him. In a patriarchal society that divides the images of men and women according to the conceptions that are attached to them, the man's presence depends on the power that he exercises on others, while the woman's presence is something that she has to internalise. The choices that publicity intends to provide Lolita are just another illusion: by commercialising her body, she is further emphasising the patriarchal conceptions surrounding her sexualised image.

Humbert is aware of the power that cinema has when it comes to the perpetuation of an image and the conventions that are tied to it. Laura Mulvey relies on psychoanalysis to explain this power because, as dreams rely on the subconscious, film form relies on society's patriarchal conceptions. Thus, Humbert tries to become the director and the male protagonist of his own story. When the novel is adapted to the screen, Humbert's conception of Lolita becomes visual. Film techniques provide a realistic representation of Lolita's body that functions on two levels: within the screen, as Humbert is able to possess Lolita, and for the visual pleasure of the spectator. The woman is displayed on the screen but that does not affect the diegesis of the narrative, because her image is either turned into a fetish, or the view of her body is shared between Humbert and the spectator. Lolita embodies the patriarchal values that serve to signify the man. Even if considered a seductress, she does not have the agency because she is not in control of the representation system in which she is encased.

But Humbert forgets that an image, when it becomes a sight, is subjected to different views and interpretations. Precisely the power of the camera relies on its capability to break with the convention of a single perspective. It goes beyond the limits of time and space, but it is subjected to the interpretations of the director and the spectators. Humbert's downfall occurs because he becomes enchanted by his illusion of himself and Lolita. He is so attracted to the power of cinema and the promise of the

glamour of Hollywood that he becomes a pawn in his own narration. Clare Quilty, his antagonist and his double, takes control of the narrative and exposes Humbert's illusion.

The gaze is destabilised when the gaps in the narrative are analysed by using the same conventions that structure it. As we have seen, the analysis in-depth of the composition of a work of art makes the viewer realise the assumptions regarding art that are attached to the image that is being represented, thus leaving the human experience aside. Humbert tries to establish a fixed image of Lolita, but cinema goes beyond the limits of time and space and makes possible the multiplicity of perspectives. The spectator notices the artificiality of Humbert's creation, but the gaze is still maintained either through Clare Quilty or the spectator himself. Thus, it is only by analysing *Lolita's* narrative and the techniques of its cinematographic adaptations that we can break the male agents' conventions infused upon the woman's body by exposing them as if they were the formal composition of a painting whose boundaries are not surpassed by the camera.

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