Directed by Stanley Kubrick  
Screenplay by Vladimir Nabokov & Stanley Kubrick  
Based on the novel by Vladimir Nabokov  
Original Music by Nelson Riddle  
Cinematography by Oswald Morris

James Mason...Prof. Humbert Humbert  
Shelley Winters...Charlotte Haze  
Sue Lyon...Lolita  
Peter Sellers...Clare Quilty


VLADIMIR VLADIMIROVICH NABOKOV (Russian: Владимир Владимирович Набоков, (22 April 1899, Saint Petersburg — 2 July 1977, Montreux) “was a multilingual Russian novelist and short story writer. Nabokov wrote his first nine novels in Russian, then rose to international prominence as a master English prose stylist. He also made contributions to entomology and had an interest in chess problems. Nabokov’s Lolita (1955) is frequently cited as amongst his most important novels, and is his most widely known, exhibiting the love of intricate word play and descriptive detail that characterized all his works. The novel was ranked at #4 in the list of the Modern Library 100 Best Novels by the Modern Library. His memoir entitled Speak, Memory was listed #8 on the Modern Library nonfiction list” (Wikipedia). Some of his other novels are The Defense (1934, English trans 1964), Laughter in the Dark (1933, Eng. trans1938), Invitation to a Beheading (1936, Eng. Tr ans. 1959, The Gift (1938, Eng. Trans. 1963), The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (1941), Bend Sinister (1947), Pnin (1957), Pale Fire (1962), Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle (1966). He is also the author of several short story collections, 11 volumes of poetry, a 1923
translation of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland into Russian, and several translations of Russian classics into English, several volumes of criticism. Several volumes of autobiography, and a classic work on butterflies. Three volumes of Library of America are devoted to his novels and memoirs.


“He [Kubrick] has never made a bad picture. Each picture he

trumps the trump.”

from World Film Directors V, II. Ed. John Wakeman. The H.H. Wilson Co, NY 1988. entry by Adrian Turner

American director, producer, and scenarist, was born the Bronx, New York, the son of Jacques and Gertrude Kubrick. His father was a physician, the son of Polish and Romanian Jews. Kubrick attended the William Howard Taft High School. He was not a successful student but an ardent chess payer and photographer. His father, also a photographer, had bought him a 35mm still camera, and Kubrick’s first break came in April 1945 when a chance picture of a newsdealer on the day of Roosevelt’s death was bought by Look magazine. At the age of seventeen Kubrick was hired by Look as a staff photographer.

During his four years there, Kubrick received the higher education he wanted by enrolling as a nonmatriculating student at Columbia University. As Alexander Walker noted, “Dropping out of school made him into a lifelong student.” At the same time, Kubrick was attending screenings at the Museum of Modern Art: “I was aware that I didn’t know anything about ma...”

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entrapment as Cartier waits in his dressing room for the evening’s fight, along with his identical twin Vincent, a lawyer who acts as his manager. Richard Combs, reassessing the film in 1980, wrote that “the timelock structure of course anticipates—and in a way bests—The Killing: the deserted, early morning streets are as haunted as the similarly used locations in Killer’s Kiss. But the film’s most extraordinary visual trouvaille is also its most mundane. The glum-faced Cartier twins, waking in the same bed in the morning, walking to communion, sharing the anxieties and (reputedly) the physical pain of the fight....”

After seeing his first films released, Kubrick resigned from Look. He made a third short, The Seafarers (1953), about the Seafarers’ International Union, then embarked on his first feature, Fear and Desire (1953). Kubrick told Joseph Gelmis, “I was the camera operator and director and just about everything else. The film was shot in 35mm without a soundtrack. The dubbing was a big mistake on my part; the actual shooting cost was $9000, but because I didn’t know what I was doing with the soundtrack it cost me another $30,000. Fear and Desire played the art house circuits, and some of the reviews were amazingly good, but it’s not a film I remember with any pride, except for the fact it was finished.”

The script was written by Kubrick’s friend Howard Sackler (who later wrote The Great White Hope) and resumed the theme of “twins” or doubles already adumbrated in Day of the Fight. Two American soldiers, lost in some wilderness, confront two enemy soldiers who are, however, played by the same actors. The intellectual Lieutenant Corby (Kenneth Harp) symbolically destroys himself by killing his double; the more primitive Mae (Frank Silvera), drifting downstream on a raft, manages to struggle through to psychic wholeness.

In a letter to the film’s distributor, Joseph Burstyn, Kubrick described the film thus: “Its structure: allegorical. Its conception: poetic. A drama of ‘man’ lost in a hostile world, seeking his way to an understanding of himself and life around him. He is further imperiled on his odyssey by an unseen but deadly enemy that surrounds him; but an enemy who, upon scrutiny, seems to be almost shaped from the same mold. It will, probably, mean many things to different people, and it ought to.”

Kubrick might have been describing any one of his later films, especially 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) and The Shining, since the letter alludes to his fondness for ambiguity and metaphor, evoking the Kubrickian universe of entrapment and immortality: man does not progress but merely perpetuates ancient, instinctive evils....Fear and Desire was financed privately, as was Kubrick’s next feature, Killer’s Kiss (1955). Again, Kubrick was a virtual one-man crew and co-wrote the script with Sackler. The film was bought by United Artists, the most progressive Hollywood distributor of the 1950s....

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another genre movie, *The Killing* (1956), produced by Harris and distributed by United Artists. This time Kubrick had a viable budget of $320,000, which allowed him to hire Lucien Ballard as his cinematographer and a good cast of Hollywood actors. Kubrick’s wife served as art director, and the film was scored by Gerald Fried, who had supplied the music for Kubrick’s two earlier features as well. 

There was nothing unassuming about *Paths of Glory* (1957), adapted by Kubrick, Calder Willingham, and Jim Thompson from Humphrey Cobb’s novel of World War I. As an indictment of war, it has been compared both with Lewis Milestone’s *All’s Quiet on the Western Front* and Jean Renoir’s *La Grande Illusion*. It shows how a suicidal assault on an impregnable German position, the Ant Hill, is ordered by two ruthlessly ambitious French generals (Adolph Menjou and George Macready). The attack is a lethal fiasco, and three scapegoats are tried and executed to save the generals’ careers. The film was only financed by United Artists after Kirk Douglas agreed to star as Colonel Dax, the humanitarian field commander appointed to defend the scapegoats at their rigged court martial. He cannot save his men but does manage to ruin one of the generals. ...

“In spite of the tremendous critical acclaim for *Paths of Glory,*” wrote Alexander Walker, “Kubrick found his career stalemated by nonevents.” In Hollywood, Kubrick and Harris developed several projects, none of them realized. Then Kubrick was hired by Marlon Brando to direct a Western, *One-Eyed Jacks* (1961). The script was by the then unknown Sam Peckinpah but Kubrick insisted on rewriting it with Calder Willingham, who had worked on *Paths of Glory*. After six months Kubrick left the project, leaving Brando to direct himself.

Shortly afterward Kubrick was contacted by Kirk Douglas, who production of *Spartacus* (1960) had run into trouble. Accounts differ widely as to how much—and precisely which—footage was shot by the original director, Anthony Mann, who had been hired by Universal against the wishes of Douglas, the executive producer. Mann was fired from *Spartacus*, and at the age of thirty-one Kubrick found himself directing what was then the most expensive film ever made in America.

*Spartacus*, about the gladiator who led a slaves’ rebellion against Roman power in 73 B.C., fits uncomfortably into Kubrick’s *oeuvre*. His most committed admirers have little to say about the film, reflecting Kubrick’s own disavowals of it, such as the one he gave Michel Ciment: “I tried with limited success to make the film as real as possible but I was up against a pretty dumb script which was rarely faithful to what was known about Spartacus. If I ever needed convincing of the limits of persuasion a director can have on a film where someone else is the producer and he is merely the highest paid member of the crew, *Spartacus* provided proof to last a lifetime.”

Critics did praise the visual aspects of the film: Kubrick’s fluid handling of the Super-Technirama-70 format and his depiction of Roman cruelty. Thomas Allen Nelson writes “the epic panorama of battle and armies is well done and reflects Kubrick’s skill at showing what he has referred to as the ‘weird disparity’ between the aesthetics of warfare and its human consequences.” This “disparity” is a consistent theme of Kubrick’s: the surreal dummies in *Killer’s Kiss*; the human cutouts used for target practice in *The Killing*; the reduction of men to dying ants in *Paths of Glory*…

While *Spartacus* was in production, Kubrick and Harris were already at work on their next project, an adaptation by Vladimir Nabokov of his controversial 1955 novel Lolita, about a university professor who marries a widow because he is sexually obsessed by her barely adolescent daughter Lolita. Because of censorship problems and funds locked in Britain, Kubrick made the film in London, which has been his base ever since. 

Kubrick’s next three films, made with ever increasing deliberation and secrecy, comprise a trilogy on humanity in the technological age. It begins with Dr. Strangelove, or *How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1963), scripted by Kubrick, Terry Southern, and Peter George from the latter’s novel *Red Alert*. Originally conceived as a “serious treatment of the problem of accidental war,” like the novel, it modulated into satire when Kubrick found the theme too blackly absurd to be treated in any other way.

Nuclear catastrophe is unleashed by Air Force General Jack D. Ripper, who believes that his sexual impotence is due to a Communist conspiracy to pollute “his precious bodily fluids.” Despite the efforts of a decent but ineffectual President to placate the Russians, despite all the technical fail-safe procedures and mechanisms, lunacy triumphs and Major “King” Kong (Slim Pickens) gleefully rides his great phallic bomb to the apocalypse. Slim Pickens, Sterling Hayden as the impotent Ripper, George C. Scott as the virile Pentagon hawk Turgidson: they are all mad, and the maddest of all is Dr. Strangelove himself, a former Nazi scientist now employed by the Pentagon, a paraplegic with dark glasses and a mechanical arm constantly snapping into uncontrollable Sieg Heils. He is marvelously realized by Peter Sellers, who also plays a clipped RAF group captain and the President of the United States. …

[The other films in the trilogy about humanity in a technological age were *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *A Clockwork Orange* (1971).]

In the Dawn of Man, the opening sequence of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), an apeman discovers that the bone he has learned to use as a tool can also kill, in a shot that, as Walker wrote, “vividly crystallizes Kubrick’s view of man as a risen ape, rather than Rousseau’s sentimental characterization of him as a fallen angel.” The apeman tosses his killing bone exultantly into the sky, and we follow its four million-year trajectory until, in one of the most famous match cuts in cinema, is becomes a spaceship of the twenty-first century. This vehicle is carrying scientists to the moon to investigate a strange slab of black stone discovered there—one that closely resembles the monolith which had presided over the apeman’s military breakthrough.

The third section of 2001 begins aboard another spaceship, *Discovery*, commanded by Dr. David Bowman (Keir Dullea). The only member of the *Discovery*’s crew who shows any real human quirksiness is the computer HAL9000, who alone knows the true purpose of their mission. HAL becomes increasingly rebellious and power-hungry and eventually “terminates” the entire crew apart from Bowman, who manages to dismantle the machine’s deranged intelligence.

Bowman discovers that the real purpose of the mission is to identify the extraterrestrial origin and purpose of the mysterious monolith. Traveling alone in a small pod into deep space, he is drawn to follow a similar monolith through a disorienting galaxy of dazzling special effects. It leads him to an elegant suite of rooms furnished like an earth dwelling of the eighteenth century. Bowman ages and dies, but is reborn as a “Star Child,” ready to journey back to earth to lead a further evolutionary phase. Michel Ciment called the film’s final shot “perhaps the only really peaceful image created by an artist more at ease in nightmare.”
2001 was based on a short story, “The Sentinel,” by the scientisit and science-fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke, who labored with Kubrick through many versions of the script. If Dr. Strangelove used what Michel Ciment called “verbal delirium” to demonstrate the improbability of language, 2001 makes the same point with scarcely any dialogue at all, barring the exchange of banalities. During four years of preparation and production, much of the time taken up with the still unrivaled special effects, the film became, in Kubrick’s words, “a nonverbal experience.” As such it bewildered many reviewers who might have accommodated a nonlinear narrative from a Resnais or a Bergman, but not from MGM, nor in Cinerama. Many found the film too long and too slow. For once, however, incomprehending and condescending reviews did not deter audiences. 2001 became a slow but steady money-earner, and the pace quickened in the early 1970s when the film with its sustained bombardment of visual stimuli established itself as the ultimate drug-trip movie. By 1976 this “$10,500,000 underground film” had grossed $90 million. The critics went back for another look and several, including Joseph Gelmis and Andrew Sarris, had the grace to revise their opinions.

Kubrick’s visual achievements in 2001 were matched by his use of existing music—“The Blue Danube to accompany the voyage to the moon, pass ages from Khachaturian and Ligeti and, above all of course, Richard Strauss’ Also Sprach Zarathustra for the “evolutionary” sequences. The soundtrack itself became a best-selling LP. Critics have continued to debate the film’s more potent riddles, like the monoliths which are present in all of its four symphonic movements, nudging men on to the next stage of evolution, and the provenance of the suite of period rooms at the end. Kubrick himself, in a Playboy interview (September 1968) said that he had tried to create a visual experience, one that bypasses verbalized pigeon-holing and directly penetrates the subconscious with an emotional and philosophic content….just as music does….You’re free to speculate as you wish about the philosophical and allegorical meaning.”

The significance of 2001 goes beyond its own achievements as a film. It confirmed the temporary shift of power from the studios to the directors; it demonstrated how formally flexible the commercial film might be; and it showed how audiences could discover a film for themselves, in spite of reviewers. Some regard it as the most significant Hollywood breakthrough since Citizen Kane in 1941, and Kubrick has been compared with Orson Welles (who in 1964 remarked that “amongst the younger generation Kubrick is a giant”). Like The Graduate (1967), Bonnie and Clyde (1967) and Easy Rider (1969), the film owed its success primarily to the youth market, indicating a major shift in audience patterns.

Kubrick’s plans for an ambitious film about Napoleon fell victim to the cutbacks of the late 1960s. Instead he turned to a novel that had greatly excited him, Anthony Burgess’ A Clockwork Orange, and wrote his own adaptation….The debate about the film centered not so much on the question of free will as on Kubrick’s presentation of violence. His personal style is here at its most extreme with wide-angled photography and incongruous music—synthesized Beethoven, Rossini’s “The Thieving Magpie and Gene Kelly’s “Singin’ in the Rain” to accompany Alex’s night of rape and murder….Walker argued that the film “never sets out to explore the moral issue of violence; this had been a misleading belief that has caused the film to be branded as ‘conscienceless’ by critics who fail to see where Kubrick’s first principal lies, namely, with the moral issue of eradicating free will.”

Barry Lyndon (1975), Kubrick’s only real commercial failure, was regarded by many critics as a deliberate retreat from controversy and as an alternative to his long-desired Napoleon project…. Another three years elapsed before Kubrick announced his next project. It was The Shining, based on a modern horror novel by Stephen King. Kubrick had become so reclusive that he decided to recreate the novel’s setting, a Rocky Mountain resort hotel called the Overlook, at Elstree Studios near London. Shooting on his magnificent Xanadu-like set (and in America for the exteriors) took a year, editing another, and then The Shining opened in America to poor reviews and erratic business….

Kubrick’s latest film, being edited as this article was written, is Full Metal Jacket (1987?), based on a ferociously violent Vietnam novel The Short Timers by Gustav Hasford. Seven years separate it from The Shining. Instead of filming in Southeast Asia, Kubrick chose to work in Britain, using as locations a derelict part of London’s dockland and, according to rumor, the grounds of his own country estate....

Kubrick lives very quietly and privately in rural England, avoiding personal publicity….He directs his own advertising campaigns, coordinates release patterns, and personally checks every first-run print and foreign-language version of each of his films. Since he also writes or coauthors his scripts, and in recent years has been his own producer, he retains a degree of control over his work that is almost unequalled for a Hollywood director. As Philip French wrote, “there’s something about his pictures that has enabled him to combine the budgets of a DeMille with the quirky individuality of a Buñuel...

Ciment called him “one of the most demanding, most original and most visionary filmmakers of our time.”


G: In your own case, Lolita was set in America, and yet you shot it on an English sound stage. Couldn’t that film have been shot in this way [modern location scene with limited funds and a limited crew], with just a handful of people on location?
K: Yes, it could certainly have been shot on location, although you’d still have needed more than a handful of people to do it.

G: Would you have done it that way if you were making the film now?

K: I would have done it at the time if the money to film had been available in America. But as it turned out the only funds I could raise for the film had to be spent in England. There’s been such a revolution in Hollywood’s treatment of sex over just the past few years that it’s easy to forget that when I became interested in Lolita a lot of people felt that such a film couldn’t be made—or at least couldn’t be shown. As it turned out, we didn’t have any problems, but there was a lot of fear and trembling. And filming in England we obviously had no choice but to rely mainly on studio shooting.

G: In ...Lolita, you were frustrated in your efforts to make the movie as erotic as the novel, and there was some criticism that the girl was too old to play the nymphet of the novel.

K: She was actually just the right age. Lolita was twelve and a half in the book; Sue Lyon was thirteen. I think some people had a mental picture of a nine-year-old. I would fault myself in one area of the film, however; because of all the pressure over the Production Code and the Catholic Legion of Decency at the time, I believe I didn’t sufficiently dramatize the erotic aspect of Humbert’s relationship with Lolita, and because his sexual obsession was only barely hinted at, many people guessed too quickly that Humbert was in love with Lolita. Whereas in the novel this comes as a discovery at the end, when she is no longer a nymphet but a dowdy, pregnant suburban housewife; and it’s this encounter, and his sudden realization of his love, that is one of the most poignant elements of the story. If I could do the film over again, I would have stressed the erotic component of the relationship with the same weight Nabokov did. But that is the only major area where I believe the film is susceptible to valid criticism.

G: At what point did you decide to structure the film so that Humbert is telling the story to the man he’s going to shoot?

K: I discussed this approach with Nabokov at the very outset, and he liked it. One of the basic problems with the book, and with the film even in its modified form, is that the main narrative interest boils down to the question “Will Humbert get Lolita into bed?” And you find in the book that, despite the brilliant writing, the second half has a drop in narrative interest after he does. We wanted to avoid this problem in the film, and Nabokov and I agreed that if we had Humbert shoot Quilty without explanation at the beginning, then throughout the film the audience would wonder what Quilty was up to. Of course, you obviously sacrifice a great ending by opening with Quilty’s murder, but I felt it served a worthwhile purpose.

G: Starting with Lolita, you’ve been making all your films abroad? Why?

K: Circumstances have just dictated it that way. As I explained earlier, it was necessary to make Lolita in England for financial reasons and to mitigate censorship problems, and in the case of Dr. Strangelove, Peter Sellers was in the process of getting a divorce and could not leave England for an extended period, so it was necessary to film there. By the time I decided to do 2001 I had gotten so acclimated to working in England that it would have been pointless to tear up roots and move everything to America.


With the collapse in the 1950s of Hollywood as the center of world filmmaking, many of America’s independent filmmakers moved to Europe, where they could make films more economically, and therefore more easily obtain financial backing. Kubrick settled in England to make Lolita (1962) because M-G-M had funds frozen there. He has remained in England and made all of his subsequent films there.

Nonetheless he considers himself an American director, for it was not until the fourth film he directed in England, A Clockwork Orange, that he used a British setting and a predominantly British cast. In this respect Kubrick can be sharply contrasted with Joseph Losey, another American-born director who migrated to England. Losey’s films, such as The Servant and The Go-Between, have become so thoroughly British in concept and character that one can easily forget that they were made by a director who hails from Wisconsin.

Kubrick engaged Nabokov to write the screenplay of Lolita. Kubrick vividly recalls his consternation when he received Nabokov’s first draft and discovered that it would run for several hours if all of its four hundred pages were filmed as they stood. The novelist then prepared a shorter version, of which he speculates that Kubrick finally used about twenty per cent.

When Nabokov finally saw Lolita at a private screening, he later declared that he found that Kubrick was “a great director, and that his Lolita was a first-rate film with magnificent actors,” even though much of his version of the script had gone unused. Alfred Appel of Northwestern University, who has had several interviews with Nabokov, told me that the novelist has never had anything but good comments to make about Kubrick’s film of his book, largely because after the writer had spent six months working on the scenario himself he came to realize vividly how difficult adapting a novel to the screen really is. Indeed, the novelist has said that “Infinite fidelity may be the author’s ideal but can prove a producer’s ruin.”

In Lolita, Peter Sellers plays Clare Quilty, a television personality who is the rival of middle-aged Humbert Humbert (James Mason) for the affections of twelve-year-old Dolores Haze (Sue Lyon), known to her friends as Lolita. Because, at the time that Kubrick made Lolita, the freedom of the screen had not advanced to the point it has reached now, he had to be more subtle
and indirect than Vladimir Nabokov had been in his novel about suggesting the sexual obsession of an older man for a nymphet.

"I wasn’t able to give any weight at all to the erotic aspect of Humbert’s relationship with Lolita in the film," says Kubrick, "and because I could only hint at the true nature of his attraction to Lolita, it was assumed too quickly by filmgoers that Humbert was in love with her," as opposed to being merely attracted to her sexually. "In the novel this comes as a discovery at the end, when Lolita is no longer a nymphet but a pregnant housewife; and it’s this encounter, and the sudden realization of his love for her, that is one of the most poignant elements of the story."

Even in the film as it stands, Kubrick has managed to suggest something of the erotic quality of Humbert’s relationship with Lolita from the very beginning. The first image of the film, seen behind the credits, is Humbert’s hand reaching across the wide screen to caress Lolita’s foot as he begins to paint her toenails, thus indicating the subservient nature of his infatuation for Lolita.

In order to avoid giving the plot too serious a treatment, Kubrick decided to emphasize the black comedy inherent in the story. Pauline Kael writes, “The surprise of Lolita is how enjoyable it is; it’s the first new American comedy since those great days in the forties when Preston Sturges recreated comedy with verbal slapstick. Lolita is black slapstick and at times it’s so far out that you gasp as you laugh.” Kubrick strikes this note of black comedy at the outset in the prologue that follows the credits.

Humbert Humbert threatens Clare Quilty with a gun as the latter stumbles about among the cluttered rooms of his grotesque mansion, not taking too seriously Humbert’s threats to kill him, until it is too late. Quilty seeks refuge behind a painting that is propped up against a piece of furniture, and we watch the painting become filled wit bullet holes as Humbert empties his gun into it. As the plot unfolds in flashback, we discover that Humbert shot Quilty, not just because Quilty had lured Lolita away from him, but because, after he had done so, Quilty merely used her for a while and then coldly discarded her.

In the difficult role of Humbert, James Mason gives a perfect portrayal of a man who has been victimized by his own obsession, but who strives nevertheless to maintain an air of surface propriety in his relationship with Lolita. There is, for example, the look of consternation that steals across his face when Lolita’s dowdy mother (Shelley Winters), whom Humbert only married to be near Lolita, tells him that she has packed her daughter off to a summer camp so that they can be alone. Peter Sellers is equally good as Clare Quilty, especially in the scenes in which Quilty dons a variety of disguises in his efforts to badger Humbert by a succession of ruses into giving up Lolita. Because of Seller’s brilliant flair for impersonation, these scenes are among the best in the film.

For those who appreciate the black comedy of Lolita, it is hard not to see that it was just a short step from that film to Kubrick’s masterpiece in that genre, Dr. Strangelove, or: How I Learned to stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1964), the first of Kubrick’s science-fiction trilogy.

Delores. Lady of Pain.
Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita, the story of a European paedophile’s obsession with a pre-pubescent American girl (or, as the paedophile puts it, the story of an ‘enchanted traveler’ who finds himself ‘in the possession and thralldom of a nymphet) was first published in the United States in 1958 by G. P. Putnam’s Sons, and has since become such a canonical work that the controversy surrounding its original appearance may be difficult to appreciate. Kingsley Amis, the author of Lucky Jim and other celebrated comic novels about sex, wrote in the British journal The Spectator that Nabokov’s book was ‘thoroughly bad in both senses: bad as a work of art, that is, and morally bad’. Lolita was denounced in the British parliament, banned in the UK, banned twice in France (where it had originally been published by the Olympia Press, a purveyor of what Billy Wilder once described as the sort of book you can read with one hand) and attacked as ‘repulsive’ and ‘disgusting’ by Orville Prescott in The New York Times. Before G.P. Putnam’s took a chance with the novel, most American publishers had rejected it outright. Simon & Schuster reportedly turned it down because Mrs. Schuster refused to have her name on ‘that dirty book’. Even James Laughlin of New Directions, a press that specialised in avant-garde literature, refused to publish it. (Laughlin claimed it might reflect badly on Nabokov’s wife and son.) But Lolita had important defenders among the most distinguished literary figures of the day. Upon its original European publication, Graham Greene selected it as one of the best books of the year. When it appeared in the US, Lionel Trilling praised it as a story about romantic love, not about the mere sex he associated with another recent book, the best-selling Kinsey report. So intense were the public reactions for and against the book that it became a blockbuster success, selling 3 million hardback copies of it first US edition, remaining number one on the best-seller list for fifty-six weeks and quickly being translated into fifteen languages. At the height of the craze, unauthorised Lolita dolls were being sold as toys in Italy.
Nabokov was surprised by his good fortune. As he later boasted, he had dared to write about one of at least three themes that were virtually taboo in American publishing, the other two being ‘a Negro-White marriage which is a complete and glorious success resulting in lots of children and grandchildren’ and ‘the total atheist who lives a happy and useful life, and died in his sleep at the age of 106’. His book even attracted the interest of Hollywood, where it fell into the hands of Stanley Kubrick, a director well-suited to bring it to the screen. Nabokov and Kubrick had a number of traits in common, including an intense aestheticism, a love of chess and a taste for dark humour. when Kubrick and James Harris read the novel just prior to its publication, they immediately acquired the film rights and began the struggle to create a script that would satisfy the censors.
In 1958, Geoffrey Shurlock of the Production Code Administration sent Warner Bros., the studio that expressed interest in financing the picture, a memo summarising an apparently satisfactory discussion he had held with Harris and Kubrick. According to Shurlock, they had suggested having Humbert Humbert and Lolita Haze marry one another in ‘some state luke Kentucky or Tennessee’, so that the film would involve ‘humor arising from the problems of a mature man married to a gum-chewing teenager’. They also assured Shurlock that they wanted to prevent ‘any objectionable sex flavor’ and thereby prevent ‘another Baby Doll uproot. Shurlock was referring to Elia Kazan’s 1956 film, adapted from a Tennessee Williams story, which told the story of a triangle between a middle-aged southerner, his child bride and his business rival; the picture starred the young Carroll Baker as a thumb-sucking adolescent who liked to sleep in a baby’s crib. It had earned a much-publicised condemnation from the Legion of Decency, but suggested a way of transforming Nabokov’s outrageous plot into something ‘legal’. (A similar suggestion had already been offered by Humbert Humbert in the novel, who argues in his defence that ‘in some of the United States’, a tradition is preserved of allowing a girl to marry at twelve.)

In 1959, Harris and Kubrick approached Nabokov through his agent, Irving ‘Swifty’ Lazar, about the possibility of having the novelist himself write a screenplay for the film. Their initial discussions proved unsuccessful, in part because they were still convinced that, to get Lolita past the censors, they would have to convert it into a story about a middle-aged man who secretly marries a teenager. When Nabokov declined the invitation, Kubrick assigned the project to Calder Willingham, who drafted a script that Kubrick rejected. Meanwhile, Nabokov travelled to Europe, where he began to have second thoughts about the screenplay. By this time, Harris-Kubrick had given up on the deal with Warner and formed a new arrangement with Seven Arts in England, where, if they used a mostly British cast and crew, they could enjoy tax advantages and a certain distance from Hollywood’s usual way of doing business. When Kubrick wired Nabokov, pleading that he reconsider and showing more willingness to battle the censors, Nabokov accepted the assignment.

By the summer of 1960, Nabokov completed a 400-page script, sacrificing nothing and even adding a few scenes he had omitted from the novel. As a result of an agreement he made with Kubrick, he was allowed to publish a shortened version of this screenplay in 1974, long after the movie had played in theatres. According to Richard Corliss’s excellent BFI monograph on the film, the published version of Nabokov’s script is much revised from the original and may even contain ideas from Kubrick; nevertheless, Corliss estimates that its running time would have been approximately four hours, whereas Kubrick’s more radically shortened movie, paced in a characteristically slow style, runs 152 minutes. The published script has the same flashback structure as the film, but not the elaborate opening dialogue between Humbert Humbert and Clare Quilty; it preserves the form of the novel by giving us two narrators—Dr John Ray, a quack psychologist who lectures to the audience, and Humbert, who is seen writing his memoirs in prison—and it gives us Humbert’s full history leading up to his meeting with Dolores/Dolly/Lo/ Lolita Haze—the death of his mother, his childhood sexual experience with Annabel, his ludicrous marriage and divorce in Paris. His growing obsession with young girls, his theory of Nymphets (delivered in the form of a crazed lecture on the ‘divine’ Edgar Allan Poe to a woman’s literary club in America), his brief incarceration in an asylum and his arrival in Ramsdale to work as a French tutor for young Virginia McCoo. All the major incidents of the novel are dramatised, including Humbert’s abortive attempt to murder Charlotte Haze while swimming in Our Glass Lake and his extended journey across America with the captive Lolita. At one point Nabokov even writes a cameo appearance for himself, in the role of a lepidopterist whom Humbert asks for directions.

The Nabokov screenplay is not only lengthy but also in some ways formally adventurous, making use of Fellini-esque dream images and other deliberately anti-realistic effects. When Humbert’s mother is struck by lightning, ‘Her graceful specter floats up above the black cliffs holding a parasol and blowing kisses to her husband and child.’ When Dr John Ray narrates the story of Humbert’s first marriage, he sounds like a bystander watching a movie he can’t control: ‘I think the cab driver ought to have turned left here. Oh, well, he can take the next cross street.’ And when Humbert reads aloud from Charlotte’s letter confessing her love, he appears before us in a variety of guises: ‘In one SHOT, he is dressed as a gowned professor, in another as a routine Hamlet, in a third, as a dilapidated Poe.’ Nabokov also does very little to bowdlerize the sex in the novel. When Humbert and Lolita sleep overnight at the Enchanted Hunters Hotel (inhabited by a Mr Swoon, a Dr Love and a Bliss family), Lolita leans seductively over his recumbent figure (we can see only his twitching big toe) and proposes that they experiment with ‘a game lots of kids play nowadays’:

**HUMBERT:** (faintly) I never played that game.

**LOLITA:** Like me to show you?

**HUMBERT:** If it’s not too dangerous. If it’s not too difficult. If it’s not too—Ah, mon Dieu!

Dismayed by the length of the script (James Harris quipped, ‘You couldn’t make it. You couldn’t lift it.’), Kubrick and Harris effusively compliment the author and, with Kubrick’s assistance, Harris quietly set about doing much of the cutting, rewriting and coping with censors both in Britain and America. In December 1960, after several months of revision, Kubrick submitted the revised script to John Trevelyan, OBE, secretary of the British Board of Film Censors, who argued that the subject matter was unsuitable for comic treatment. ‘We can see the possibility of an acceptable film on this book,’ Trevelyan wrote, ‘if it had the mode of Greek Tragedy.’ Trevelyan was particularly upset by ‘the juxtaposition of lavatory noises and sexual situations’ and by the double-entendre dialogue, as in a speech by a frantic schoolteacher named ‘Miss Pratt’: ‘And just yesterday, she wrote a most obscene four-letter word which our Doctor Cutler tells me is low-Mexican for urinal with her lipstick on some health pamphlets!’

One month later, James Harris sent the script to Martin Quigley, publisher of Motion Picture Daily and one of the original designers of the Hollywood PCA, having deleted most of Nabokov’s descriptive language or ‘interpretive material relating to characters and incidents’, which Quigley had previously found
‘highly objectionable’ and conducive of ‘a most distasteful odor’. Among various other concerns, Quigley insisted that the girl in the film be portrayed as not less than fifteen years old. Both he and Geoffrey Shurlock were specific about lines of dialogue they wanted removed, including ‘Because you took her at an age when lads play with erector sets’. Harris responded with a masterfully diplomatic letter addressing nearly all of the issues raised by Quigley and Shurlock. Much would be done, he assured them, in scenes such as the high school dance, to make Lolita look fifteen or older; the ‘erector set’ line would be removed; care would be taken to assure that the murder of Quilty would not look excessively brutal, and in the seduction scene at the Enchanted Hunters Hotel, ‘We will avoid any criticisms by having Lolita wear a heavy flannel, long-sleeved, high-necked, full-length nightgown and Humbert not only in pajamas, but bathrobe as well.’ These premises were kept. Lolita looks like a sophisticated senior at the high school dance. Quilty’s death is discreetly shielded from view by a Gainsborough-like painting and Lolita and Humbert are properly buttoned up when they share a bedroom in the hotel. Only the first half of the sentence about the erector set makes it into the film: in the midst of reading aloud from Humbert Humbert’s poetic denunciation of him, Clare Quilty comes to ‘Because you took her at an age when young lads’, and Humbert snatches the paper from his hand. ‘Why’s you take it away, Mister?’ Quilty asks in a country-hick voice. ‘It’s gittin kinda smutty there!’

The development of the script involved the jettisoning of nearly a third of the incidents in the novel and repeated concessions to the censors. After Shurlock and Quigley viewed the film in August 1961, they wanted to cut Charlotte Haze’s reference to a ‘limp noodle’, as well as numerous sounds of grunting from a closed bathroom door. Harris agreed to make the changes ‘so far as technical matters permit’. (The limp noodle remains; the toilet sounds are reduced to a few ambiguous murmurs when Humbert hides in the bathroom to write in his diary, and to a single loud flush when Charlotte exhibits the house to her prospective lodger: ‘We still have that good old-fashioned crank plumbing,’ she says. ‘Should appeal to a European.’) Despite these changes, the resulting film, distributed by MGM, belonged in company with several A-list pictures of the late 1950s and early 1960s that appeared slightly scandalous; it was given an ‘A’ or ‘adult’ Certificate by the MPAA, an ‘X’ by the British Board of Censors and it was initially condemned by the Legion of Decency, which relented only when ads for the film were captioned ‘For persons over eighteen only’. (J. Lee Thompson’s Cape Fear, starring Robert Mitchum as a sadistic ex-con who preys upon a pre-teen girl in tight shorts, was released in the same year as Lolita, but seems to have escaped age restrictions everywhere except in Berlin.) Nevertheless, on 24 March 1961, shortly before the picture opened, Variety reported that a British group calling itself ‘Christian Action’ was attempting to have Lolita banned because it might be ‘seen by people suffering from the same perversion...and might, therefore, do great harm, perhaps even leading to rape and murder, which would otherwise not have occurred.’

This was one occasion when the screenplay credit on the finished movie, which listed Nabokov as the sole writer, was an underestimation of Kubrick’s contribution, although the characteristically modest Harris had done a great deal of the work. When Nabokov attended the New York premiere in 1962, ‘as eager and innocent as the fans who peered into my car hoping to glimpse James Mason but finding only the placid profile of a stand-in for Hitchcock’, he saw that ‘only ragged odds and ends of my script had been used’. He praised many aspects of the film (his contract prevented him from speaking against it) and told The Paris Review in 1967 that he regarded Kubrick’s ‘borrowings’ sufficient to ‘justify my legal position as author of the script; for their part Kubrick and Harris must have been happy to obtain the cultural capital that Nabokov’s name bestowed upon the project. Even so, many critics were disappointed. Time said that Lolita was ‘the saddest and most important victim of his current reckless adaptation fad’ and Newsweek described it as a ‘negotiated settlement’ with the novel. Outside the US, both Sight and Sound and Cahiers de cinéma published negative reviews.

Subsequent commentators have typically compared the film unfavourably with the novel, not only because it leaves out a good deal of illicit sex, but also because its style is ‘illuministic’, lacking cinematic equivalents for Nabokov’s self-reflexivity, allusiveness, narrative complexity and Joycean word-play. The best examples of this argument can be found in Richard Corliss’s BFI monograph on Lolita and in Robert Stam’s Literature through Film: Realism, Magic and the Art of Adaptation. Stam is particularly good at pinpointing signs of what he calls the director’s ‘aesthetic failure of nerve’ and consequent incapacity to create a filmic equivalent to the novel’s self-flaunting artificiality’. On the other hand, as Stam point out, something can also be said for Kubrick’s relative self-effacement, which makes the film ‘more pleasurable on a second viewing. Lovers of the Nabokov novel can forget the literary qualities of the book to better appreciate the film’s specifically cinematic pleasures: its fine-tuned performances and subtle mise-en-scène. Surprisingly, the positive qualities Stam mentions were also admired upon the original release of the film by none other than Jean-Luc Godard , the least illusionistic of directors, who was pleased by the fact that Lolita was less cinematically ‘show-offy’ than Kubrick’s previous work. Godard had thought little of The Killing, but he praised Lolita as a ‘simple lucid film, precisely written, which reveals America and American sex...and proves Kubrick need not abandon the cinema’.

Kubrick and Harris had, in fact, deliberately set out to keep the film ‘simple’. Their aim was to create a respectable and largely straightforward production that would both perpetuate and, in some ways, parody the well-made Hollywood romantic comedy. Much was done to give the film a slick look and sound. Kubrick asked British photographer Oswald Morris to borrow from the US a set of lenses that MGM had used in the 1950s,
which gave the studio’s black-and-white imagery a glossy sheen (as one example of what these lenses did for the polished look of MGM film noir, see The People against O’Hara, directed by John Sturges in 1951). When Bernard Herrmann turned down an offer to compose the music (on the grounds that James Harris’s brother had written a theme song for the picture), Kubrick and Harris commissioned Nelson Riddle, the arranger of Frank Sinatra’s famous albums in the 1950s and 1960s, to compose a lush, romantic score. Kubrick favoured a conventional editing style (see, for example, the game of ‘Roman Ping Pong’ between Humbert and Quilty, which starts with an establishing shot and then ping-pongs from shot to reverse shot), and he confined his elaborate, Ophulsian tracking and craning effects to the early scenes in the Haze household, where the camera moves up and down the staircase, glides past walls à la The Killing and at one point (involving a masked cut) seems to travel down through the floor of an upstairs bedroom to the kitchen below. The resulting film eased the studio’s nervousness about the novel’s sensational subject matter and at the same time achieved a blend of sophistication and kitsch that captures some of Nabokov’s most important effects.

The plush but ironically inflected style is established immediately in the credit sequence (designed by the British firm of Chambers and Partners), which used elegant white lettering over the glowing image of a girl’s pointed, naked foot, held in the palm of a man’s manicured but slightly hairy hand. As the man gently places bits of cotton between the girl’s toes and begins painting her nails, Riddle’s orchestration of the ‘Lolita’ theme, featuring a plangent, yearning piano, floods the soundtrack like the score of an old-fashioned woman’s melodrama. The theme was written by Bob Harris and, at one point, it had a title and lyrics that would have pushed it more blatantly into the realm of satire, Kubrick and Harris commissioned the aging but still prolific Hollywood songsmith Sammy Cahn (who, when someone once asked him which came first, the words or the music, famously replied, ‘the cheque’) to pen...wisely omitted verses...

No doubt these schmaltzy lyrics were commissioned because the novel is deeply, even lovingly preoccupied with kitsch, or with what the Russians call poshlost, and it makes numerous jokes about American pop music...The style and tone of the film presented one kind of problem and the plot another. Like any movie adaptation of a novel, Lolita needed to condense or cut a good deal of its source material in order to conform to the length requirements of a feature film; at the same time, because this particular novel was well known and admired, there was a pressure to deliver something akin to what Nabokov’s readers expected to see. Fortunately, Nabokov’s plot contains three expected to see. Fortunately, Nabokov’s plot contains three expected to see. Fortunately, Nabokov’s plot contains three expected to see. Fortunately, Nabokov’s plot contains three expected to see. Fortunately, Nabokov’s plot contains three expected to see. Fortunately, Nabokov’s plot contains three expected to see. Fortunately, Nabokov’s plot contains three expected to see. Fortunately, Nabokov’s plot contains three expected to see. Fortunately, Nabokov’s plot contains three expected to see. Fortunately, Nabokov’s plot contains three expected to see. Fortunately, Nabokov’s plot contains three expected to see. Fortunately, Nabokov’s plot contains three expected to see. Fortunately, Nabokov’s plot contains three expected to see. Fortunately, Nabokov’s plot contains three

stole her. The film preserves this basic structure. The most serous loss is at the beginning. The opening scenes ‘hook’ us with a tunnel shot of a station wagon moving down a foggy road, a comically surreal murder in a Xanadu-like castle and a flashback to a plane arriving in New York; nevertheless, in deference to the censorship code, the film omits Humbert’s account of his childhood sex with Annabel and his life as a paedophile before his arrival in Ramsdale. Kubrick originally intended to show a montage of Humbert’s involvement with a series of nymphets but, under pressure from the censors, he cut these scenes, leaving the theme of paedophilia implicit and allowing at least some viewers to think of the film as a dark comedy about a middle-aged academic who is besotted with a teenager.

The other major cuts came from the second act of the novel, in which Humbert and Lolita take a couple of lengthy cross-country tours in the Haze automobile, aptly named ‘Melmoth’. The film elides most of this material, in the process eliminating sordid details of Humbert’s treatment of his child captive and sacrificing Nabokov’s panoramic view of America. Lolita might have been a trip to rival 2001 documenting a felon’s marathon westward trek through an array of motels and curio ships; but to do the job properly it would have needed at least an hour of screen time during which not much happens to advance the plot....

It seems to me that in many cases Kubrick’s decision to omit explicit sexual information and slightly re-eroticise the novel amount to a virtue rather than a failing. Because Nabokov’s medium was entirely words, he could render fleshly detail without creating the pornographic effect that photography almost inevitably produces. (This thesis can be tested by viewing Adrian Lyne’s soft-core 1997 adaptation of the novel, in which the nymphet is indistinguishable from a Victoria’s Secret model.) Even so, Nabokov had disappointed many of his Olympia Press readers by rendering his erotic scenes in a playful, elaborately literary style—a strategy quite different from the pornographic novel, in which, as he explained, sex should grow in intensity and perversity as the novel proceeds, and ‘Style, structure, and imagery should never distract the reader from his tepid lust. Kubrick and Harris understood this principle and saw no need to linger over Humbert’s voyeuristic appreciation of little girls. As Harris has said, ‘being explicit was never of any interest to us’, especially since virtually everyone who went to the movie already knew that the novel was about paedophilia; indeed, I suspect that some of the people who complained about the film’s unfaithfulness to the novel were merely disappointed that it wasn’t as sexy as they imagined it could be....

As might be expected, Harris and Kubrick spent a good deal of time and generated publicity in searching for the girl they cast as Lolita. Given the fact that Hollywood has been preoccupied with child-women since the days of Lillian Gish and Mary Pickford and that US visual culture and advertising since the 1950s has been increasingly devoted to images of sexy children...it might seem there would have been many candidates for the job. The novel, however, is quite explicit about matters that the nation preferred to deny or treat coyly, and any screen
incarnation of the title character required an actor of talent as well as charm. Kubrick and Harris passed over the brilliant Tuesday weld, who had played carnal teenagers in several movies of the 1950s but was approaching twenty at the time when Lolita went into production. With Nabokov’s approval, they selected Sue Lyon, a dyed blonde fourteen-year-old whose previous experience consisted of playing a few bit roles on television and winning the title of ‘Miss Smile’ from the Los Angeles County Dental Association. When the film began shooting, Lyon was just young enough to qualify as a nymphet under the terms set by the novel: ‘Between the age limits of nine and fourteen’. Her inexperience as an actor and the slightly artificial look of her hair and make-up, especially at the high-school dance and at the Enchanted Hunters Hotel, where the film bows to censorship by trying to make her look older, are in some ways beneficial, adding to what Humbert describes as ‘a mixture of tender, dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity’. ...Even when she is assisted by editing and other tricks, however, she has an extremely difficult role, requiring oscillations between bratty teenager and bemused temptress, provincial dope and cynical sophisticate, innocent victim and crafty manipulator—sometimes within the same sequence. She also has the problem of aging into a married and pregnant young woman by the end of the film. If she never fascinates the audience in the way she fascinates Humbert, she at least achieves sexy moments and tricky emotional transitions—an achievement that probably owes both to her native skill and to Kubrick’s coaching.

The casting of Clare Quilty was Kubrick’s most radical choice...Nabokov had designed the two ‘literati’ as mirror opposites. Humbert is a romantic and a masochist—a civilised, anachronistic, alienated European who is excited by the philistine Lolita and enslaved by his emotions to such a degree that he becomes a servant to his captive. He makes her sandwiches (‘loaded with mayonnaise, just the way you like it’), paints her toenails, buys her presents, does all the housework and ludicrously tries to supervise her education by taking her to museums and offering her a copy of Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Always out of his element, he never stops desiring his young charge, even when she grows older and gets pregnant, Quilty, on the other hand, is a cynic and a sadist—a writer of American television shows and Hollywood films (‘I got fifty-two successful scenarios to my credit’) who easily makes a conquest of Lolita. He whisks her off to his castle, tries to force her to act in pornographic ‘art’ movies, and then casually tosses her aside. The master of every situation, he enjoys humiliating Humbert and makes wisecracks even when he is being shot to death.

To play this evil twin, Kubrick chose impersonator Peter sellers, who had acted in numerous British comedy films, including The Ladykillers (1955) and I’m All Right, Jack (1959), but who was even better known in England for his wildly irreverent collaborations with Spike Milligan on BBC radio’s surreal The Goon Show. Kubrick and Sellers shared a bizarre comic sensibility and Kubrick especially admired Seller’s improvisatory skills, which had the effect of jazz musician riffing on a basic melody. Much of the dialogue Sellers speaks in the film was, in fact, scripted—his most important lines in the opening scene, for example, come straight form the novel—but Kubrick encouraged him to invent speeches and bits of business, sometimes as the camera was rolling. The film shifts into a slightly different mode whenever he appears, abandoning realistic illusion to create something rather like a vaudeville show or a specialty act....

Sellers’ American accent was reportedly based on Norman Granz, a celebrated Los Angeles jazz promoter, but Richard Corliss has noted that he actually sounds more like Lenny Bruce. I suspect that at times times he was also imitating Stanley Kubrick. After all, Claire Quilty is a film director of sorts—at any rate he’s a fellow who has experience in Hollywood and who wants to put Lolita in a movie....

If indeed the novel and the film are about love, they treat the theme ironically, as if playing a black-comic variation on Proust’s notion that love is never equal. All the intertwined passions in the story—Charlotte Haze’s desire for Humbert, Lolita’s for Quilty and Humbert’s for Lolita—are wildly inappropriate, destined to arrive at the moment when the lover will be rejected. Nowhere is this sense of ‘disparity’ and ‘incongruity’ more evident than in the penultimate scene, when all the signs of class, age and emotion are marshalled to indicate how much Humbert’s love for Lolita extends across a chasm of difference, transcending even sexual desire. Perhaps, as Lolita says, that’s just the ‘way things are’. Love begins as an erotic attraction for an out-of-reach or forbidden object, but is always in danger of becoming hopeless idealism, somehow both admirable and absurd.

To my knowledge, no one has ever claimed that the Harris-Kubrick adaptation of Lolita is as artistically impressive as Nabokov’s novel, nor has anyone offered a compelling reason why any film can or should exactly reproduce a literary text. But given the fact that Kubrick and Harris set out to evoke certain...
qualities they admired in one of the twentieth century’s most brilliant works of fiction, it seems worthwhile to conclude with a sort of balance-sheet of their successes and shortcomings. The film effectively conveys the blend of romantic masochism and social alienation that underlies not only Humbert’s obsession with Lolita but also some of the screen’s great love stories, including what seems to me a better film, Ophuls’s *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948). Its satire of philistine America is less complex than Nabokov’s, lacking his peculiar mixture of lofty amusement and affection; but it’s more pointed and relevant, less mingled with sentiment and moralising, than what we find in a superficially similar film like Sam Mendes’s *American Beauty* (2000), in which the leading male is treated as a kind of heroic rebel, free of criminal impulses. Unfortunately, however, Kubrick’s *Lolita* shies away from the darkest irony at the heart of the novel: the fact that Humbert is both an idealist and an abuser of children. As a result, we have too little indication of Humbert’s potential for violence or his occasional spasms of guilt, and almost no sense of why Lolita might prefer to be married to Dick Schiller. (In the novel, Humbert notes, ‘It had become gradually clear to my conventional Lolita during our singular and bestial cohabitation that even the most miserable of family lives was better than the parody of incest, which, in the long run, was the best I could offer the waif.”)

Another important aspect of the novel is missing or attenuated in the film. Nabokov’s ultimate subject is the transcendent value of art itself, which provides him with the only justification for writing the book and the only consolation for the folly, cruelty and mortality he observes. ‘I see nothing for the treatment of my misery,’ Humbert tells the readers of his confessions, ‘but the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art’. The novel informs us that Humbert died of heart failure in 1952 and that Lolita died not long afterwards while giving birth to her stillborn child. The film omits the last of these events and has no equivalent for the novel’s moving last lines, which might be read as the voice of Nabokov himself, speaking through Humbert: ‘I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secrets of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita. This final meditation not only creates one of the novels most poignant effects, but also gives force and substance to Nabokov’s gorgeous prose and self-reflexive literary gamesmanship. Lacking an equivalent degree of artistic virtuosity (and perhaps thinking such things would be too rarified for the movie audience), the film makes the art theme less explicit; in place of Humbert’s valedictory, it gives us bullet holes penetrating the ‘durable pigments’ of a painting. (A continuity error causes the painting to change places: in the opening of the film it sits at the bottom of the stairway and in the closing at the top.) The painting is nevertheless an appropriate image with which to conclude the film, because Kubrick is no less an aesthete than Nabokov. Here and in most of his subsequent work, the only recompense he offers his audience for pain and death is the somewhat detached beauty of his cinematic craft.

**COMING UP IN BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XIX:**

Oct 27 Carl Theodor Dreyer *Gertrud* 1964  
Nov 3 Eric Rohmer *Ma nuit chez Maud/My Night at Maude’s* 1969  
Nov 10 Andrei Tarkovsky *Solaris* 1972  
Nov 17 Arthur Penn *Night Moves* 1975  
Dec 1 Bela Tarr *Werckmeister harmoniáik/Werckmeister Harmonies* 2000  
Dec 8 Mike Leigh *Topsy-Turvy* 1999

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