Discussion Questions for Women in Film-Cleveland Gathering, 
Wednesday, February 19, 2014:

Focal Film: *Lolita* (1962; U.K./U.S.; Screenplay by Vladimir Nabokov, based on his 1955 novel of the same name (although the screenplay was heavily rewritten by director Kubrick and producer James B. Harris); Cinematography by Oswald Morris; Directed by Stanley Kubrick)

A note about the author’s own extensive travels and experiences as American emigre and professor: Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) was born in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1899. Born into an aristocratic family, he was relieved of his personal fortune in 1917 by the Bolsheviks. Emigrating to London with his family in 1919, he studied at Trinity College, Cambridge. The family moved on to Berlin in 1920, where Nabokov married. Fleeing the Nazis in 1937, they moved to Paris, then to New York in 1940. He joined the faculty at Wellesley College in 1941, and became an American citizen in 1945. From 1950 to 1959, Nabokov taught at Cornell University in upstate New York. After *Lolita* provided him financial independence, he and his wife moved to Le Havre in 1959 and then Switzerland in 1961, where he remained.

In *Lolita*, the principal characters are:
* Humbert Humbert, a “poet/criminal,” a literature professor with pedophilic inclinations and a specific obsession with Lolita (played by James Mason)
* Dolores “Lolita” Haze, a pubescent girl who is drawn into a sexual relationship with Humbert (played by Sue Lyon)
* Charlotte Haze-Humbert, Lolita’s mother, Humbert’s landlady and then wife (played by Shelley Winters)
* Clare Quilty, enigmatic playwright and media celebrity, Humbert’s rival for Lolita’s affections (played by Peter Sellers)
* Vivian Darkbloom, Quilty’s constant escort—a very small role, but interestingly the name is an anagram of “Vladimir Nabokov” (played by Marianne Stone)

The 1955 novel *Lolita* has been adapted to film twice—the 1962 Kubrick film that we are discussing, and a 1997 version by Adrian Lyne. This 1962 film adaptation of *Lolita* has been much-scrutinized, as has the unique novel upon which it was based. In total, the cultural importance of the Lolita character has been substantial. The enduring popularity of the novel and its film adaptations has, over time, given rise to theoretic discussions of cultural impacts. Azar Nafisi’s memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, details the clandestine activities of an all-female book discussion group in 1990s Iran, which finds Lolita a touchstone for discussions of gender and power. Graham Vickers’ 2008 book, *Chasing Lolita: How Popular Culture Corrupted Nabokov’s Little Girl All Over Again*, traces the “bizarre and kitschy nature of the Lolita legacy.” And, media effects scholar M. Gigi Durham’s 2008 critical analysis of mass media trends identifies the “Lolita Effect,” a process by which media content works to undermine girls’ self-confidence, condones female objectification, and tacitly fosters sex crimes.

The book is frequently the focus of college-level literature courses, as demonstrated via a 2008 edited volume by Zoran Kuzmanovich and Galya Diment, *Approaches to Teaching Nabokov’s Lolita*. This compilation makes clear the wide variety of lenses through which the Lolita narrative may be viewed: Cultural archetypes, ethics, feminism (misogyny), Russian culture, post-romanticism, politics, humor, and
even the study of Lepidoptera (the order of insects that includes moths and butterflies, a particular avocation of Vladimir Nabokov). *Lolita* is difficult to synopsize. As Graham Vickers has said about the book, “most attempts to summarize it make it sound melodramatic or even absurd.” Scholar Greg Jenkins points to its “labyrinthine complexity” and its status as an “‘involuted’ work, full of elaborate tricks that simultaneously mock and expand the traditional notion of fiction.”

1. The novel is written in the first person, from Humbert Humbert’s point of view. While the film follows his character almost exclusively, it is not as clearly from his point of view. While there are intermittent voiceovers by the Humbert character, this occurs in only five of the 35 scenes in the film (Mario Falsetto). And, there are shots that reveal to the audience information that Humbert does not possess. Whose point of view is in fact presented by the film overall?

2. And, from where do Humbert’s voiceover comments arise? They are not all entries in his journal, and he is not relating his story to a detective or reporter. Most are direct address to the audience. What perspective is being revealed with the film’s voiceovers?

3. This film is one of Shelley Winters’ iconic performances. As Charlotte Haze, Winters exudes a pitiable naivete. As Humbert’s voiceover indicates, he envisions her as a “trustful, clumsy seal.” And, the character’s death follows a fantasy of his murder of her by Humbert. What is the true nature of the Charlotte character, and what functions does the character serve?

4. The death of Shelley Winters’ character in *Lolita* is just one in a series of highly memorable screen deaths by Ms. Winters--One fan site lists 24 movie deaths between 1974 and 1995. These include her roles as Myrtle Wilson in the 1949 version of *The Great Gatsby*, Mrs. Van Daan in *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959), and Ma Barker in *Bloody Mama* (1970). She was strangled by Ronald Colman (*A Double Life*, 1947), burned to death in a fire set by Mark Lester (*Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?*, 1971), and hacked to death with a saber by Stella Stevens (*The Mad Room*, 1969). Further, several of her screen demises were water-related—e.g., killed via drowning by Montgomery Clift in *A Place in the Sun* (1951), stabbed to death and then submersed in her car by Robert Mitchum in *Night of the Hunter* (1955), hit by a car during a rainstorm in *Lolita* (1962), and dying by heart attack after a heroic underwater swim in *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972). Upon her 2006 passing at age 85, one film reviewer, citing these particular screen deaths, called her the “Queen of the Watery Demise.” Is there something about Shelley Winters’ screen persona that makes her acceptable as a recurring female victim?

5. Sue Lyon, as Lolita, is a bit older than the original character in the book (Ms. Lyon was 15 during filming, Lolita in the book is 12). Ms. Lyon was reportedly cast partly because of her more mature physical appearance, which would allay the concerns of film censors. According to James Mason, Sue Lyon memorized her lines so conscientiously, that her delivery was stilted—thus, Mason and Kubrick worked with Lyon to improvise lines, which was successful in producing a more fluid, age-appropriate delivery. What does Sue Lyon bring to the film that is unique or compelling? (FYI: Ms. Lyon has gone on to have a fairly difficult private life, retiring from acting in her early 30s, with at least four marriages (including one to a Colorado convict), and reportedly diagnosed with bipolar disorder. She has said about her famous role Lolita: “I feel sorry for her. She’s neurotic and pathetic, and she is only interested in herself.”)
6. In sum, how might you describe the female characters in the film as archetypes? (And don’t forget the small roles of Vivian Darkbloom, Jean Farlow, Mona Farlow, the nurse, and the piano teacher.)

7. Further, what are the male/female power differentials indicated in the story? For example, the opening credit sequence (i.e., the toenail painting) shows a certain subservience of Humbert to Lolita. Does this carry through the narrative of the film?

8. The director of this film, Stanley Kubrick, was one of the 20th century’s most celebrated yet mysterious directors. His films are regarded to be of uniformly high quality, although not always appreciated by the authors of his source material (e.g., note Stephen King’s famous distaste for Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980)). Kubrick, born in the Bronx, moved to England to make *Lolita* due both to censorial constraints and funding contingencies, and stayed there, making all of his subsequent films there. His films are noted for their impressive cinematography and other visual techniques, and for their extreme attention to detail. From what you know of Kubrick and his other films (e.g., *Spartacus* (1960), *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *A Clockwork Orange* (1971)), how does *Lolita* fit?

9. In an interview in 1960, Stanley Kubrick said, “I was instantly attracted to the book because of the sense of life that it conveyed, the truthfulness of it, and the inherent drama of the situation seemed completely winning. I’ve always been amused at the cries of pornography on the part of various film columnists and people of that ilk, because, to me, Lolita seemed a very sad and tender love story. I believe that Lionel Trilling, in an article he wrote about the book, said that it was the first great [contemporary] love story. He remarked that in great love stories of the past, the lovers—by their love and through their love—totally estranged themselves from society and created a sense of shock in the people around them. And because of the slackening moral and spiritual values in the 20th century, in no love story until Lolita has that occurred.” Is *Lolita* a love story, in your opinion?

10. To many, this film is a comedy. As film critic Pauline Kael wrote, “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.” And, scholar Norman Kagan writes that Kubrick uses “three main comic techniques: Inappropriate (and often ironic) responses, light social satire, and the comedy of sexual obsession and confusion.” The novel *Lolita* has been dubbed “tragicomic.” What types of humor do you find in the film *Lolita*?

11. Unlike the novel, the film is presented in a structure similar to film noir—we begin at the end, and with a death, and the rest of the narrative is presented as flashback to bring us to the already-revealed conclusion. How does this structural strategy work to engage us?

12. Kubrick “purposefully encouraged Sellers to go too far” in his ad libbing (Roger Lewis’ *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers*). This resulted in a Clare Quilty character that was much expanded in scope when compared to the novel. Indeed, the entire Dr. Zempf sequence was manufactured for the film (it’s not in the novel); the German-accented appearance by Sellers presages his performance as Dr. Strangelove two years later. Sellers morphs to create a changeling-type character that enhances the labyrinthine
“involution” of the story (Jerold Abrams). How, do you think, do Peter Sellers’ various “masquerades” in the film either support or detract from the narrative?

13. The book’s characterization of Lolita is of a child, a “grubby, chestnut-haired 12-year-old,” who is neither overtly seductive nor provocative. As writer Graham Vickers notes, “Lolita’s sex appeal would have been elusive to all but a pedophile with a very specific shopping list of expectations.” The film version gives us an unequivocally tantalizing 15-year-old Sue Lyon. Your thoughts on this difference?

14. In the book, Humbert refers to Lolita repeatedly as a “nymphet” (one of many in his experience). In the movie, this term is applied to the girl only once. In the book, Humbert describes a nymphet as that particular portion of the female population between the ages of 9 and 14 that “is not human, buy nymphic (that is, demoniac).” What is your read of the term “nymphet,” and the differences in use by book and film?

15. Quite simply, is the Lolita story (book and/or film) an erotic narrative? Nabokov himself said his book was not “lewd,” noting that only the first 13 chapters (out of 69) contain erotic content. He characterized erotic texts as containing a “rising succession of erotic scenes,” a pattern which Lolita does not follow. What are your thoughts on the status of the book and movie as erotic?

16. Comparing the novel and the 1962 film, scholar Greg Jenkins notes that Kubrick said, “In the film, the fact that Humbert’s sexual obsession could not be portrayed [tends] to imply from the start that he is in love with [Lolita].” Jenkins concludes: “But along with the eroticism went much of the original’s warped and pulsing energy, its joltingly singular view of life. In an excess of adaptive caution, Kubrick succeeded in domesticating Nabokov’s exotic animal, but only by removing its fangs and claws; a great novel was turned into merely a good film.” How do you feel about this set of statements?

17. Consider also the misery of Lolita—in the book, there are many clues to her suffering (e.g., when told of her mother’s death, she truly is inconsolable). In the book, these clues are glossed over by Humbert’s self-absorbed narration. In the movie, the element that scrubs away Lolita’s misery is not Humbert’s voice, but the film’s overall tone of dark comedy. Your thoughts?

18. The novel gives the reader a palpable reason for Humbert’s fascination with prepubescent girls—his interrupted love affair at age 14 with a young girl who died suddenly, Annabel Leigh (a clear reference to Poe’s poem “Annabel Lee”). In the novel, Humbert perceives Lolita to be the reincarnation of Annabel. The film does not give any reason for Humbert’s obsession with young girls in general or Lolita in particular. What conclusions might the spectator make?

19. In the book Lolita, Humbert also presents a series of notable examples of sexual relationships between older men and very young girls—e.g., Dante and the child Beatrice, Petrarch and Laureen, Edgar Allan Poe and the 13-year-old cousin he married, Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s short story “A Gentle Creature,” Charles Dodgson (aka Lewis Carroll) and 11-year-old Alice Liddell, Charlie Chaplin and his second wife, 16-year-old Lillita Grey. Authors (e.g., Graham Vickers; Julian Connolly) offer many additional possible precursors to Nabokov’s Lolita character in literature, film, and real life. Vickers also traces the many derivations of the Lolita persona in the years following the book and the 1962 film. With regard to the latter, he raises the
possibility that the existence of the Lolita character has somehow contributed to a legitimization of pedophilia. Is this plausible?

20. The book is decidedly Nabokov’s examination of America in the mid-20th century. The film, having dropped most of Humbert and Lolita’s year-long cross-country journey, is less so. What, do you think, does the film indicate about 1962 America?

21. Stanley Kubrick is known for his use of music to evoke emotions and direct the attention of the audience. Consider the use of music in the film Lolita. The film was scored by Nelson Riddle, a popular bandleader best known for his orchestrations for Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole. As has been the case with most films, Riddle has created various themes to cue us to characters and situations. The youthful Lolita theme “Lolita Ya Ya,” called a “vapid and catchy instrumental” by one critic, became extremely popular after the film’s release. This theme clearly makes the story contemporary to the early 1960s (the novel was set in the 1940s). Is this theme a parody of pop music at the time? If not, what purpose(s) does it serve?

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Archive of Women in Film-Cleveland discussion questions: http://academic.csuohio.edu/kneuendorf/womeninfilm

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