

In the Eye of the Beholder

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The uproar and hyperbole that accompanied the pre-release of Adrian Lyne's recent filmic adaptation of *Lolita* came, in the light of recent similar media-propelled moral panics, as no real surprise. Determined to maintain its tradition of sanctimonious over-reaction, last April the *Daily Mail* ran the front page headline 'Lolita actor sparks child sex storm', with 'Jeremy Irons in child abuse storm' writ large across page seven inside.¹ The intended ambiguity of both headlines is representative of the chronically confused and often hypocritical attitudes of commentators on both public and private depictions of children. In the light of this the following is intended not only as a brief study of *Lolita*, both Nabokov's and Adrian Lyne's, but as an attempt to sort through and make sense of some of the tangled threads of fact, fiction and biased opinion that gather around many representations of children today.²

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* concerns the unusual relationship between thirty-something Humbert Humbert and twelve year old Dolores Haze. Driven by memories of a passionate but unconsummated adolescent relationship with a girl named Annabel, Humbert pursues the ghost of his first love until twenty five years later he finds Lolita, who to Humbert's inflamed senses is the embodiment of the 'certain initial girl-child' with whom he was smitten as a boy. His infatuation gradually turns to obsession, but at the age of fourteen Lolita deserts him for a pathological deviant and pornographer named Quilty, who in due course she also leaves. The two are briefly re-united after three years when Humbert finds Lolita married, heavily pregnant and adamantly un-interested in him and his protestations of love. Humbert tracks down and kills Quilty then dies of heart failure in prison, and Lolita, having produced a still-born daughter, dies in childbirth.

Though it is the sexual relationship between Humbert and Lolita that seems to receive the most attention across the media spectrum, Nabokov's novel is not primarily concerned with the notion of old men and little girls, though many would like to think it is, as simplistic interpretations are often easier to digest than those that are more complex. Instead there is within the book an implicit subtext that can only be grasped from an engagement with the novel in its entirety. Ultimately the underlying theme of *Lolita* is not that of the relationship, sexual or otherwise, between a grown man and a child, but is concerned with that of the reader and the level of his or her sympathy with what occurs between the book's two main protagonists. *Lolita* is about how to swathe a story of child abuse in dazzling and brilliant packaging to make it acceptable, even agreeable. It is about the often difficult balance between art and morality; a

challenge to the reader to form an allegiance with a problematic point of view and to adopt a moral position based not on whether child abuse is acceptable, (for we all know that it can never be so), but upon whether art is a sufficient excuse for writing a story about a man who is imprisoned ultimately for murder and not for his immoral activities with a young girl. We as readers must weigh the pleasure we get from *Lolita*, and our belief that it is a 'great novel', against the knowledge that, despite the 'fancy prose style', it tells the story of a grown man's physical and emotional obsession with a child.

Where Adrian Lyne's *Lolita* fails is, despite what the press have had to say, in his use of a young actress who does not appear taboo enough to duplicate the dynamic of the book: because Dominique Swain, fifteen when making the film, appears not as a pubescent girl but as an averagely sexy teenager Nabokov's point is lost. In some respects Lyne's *Lolita* is successful in its evocation of the tragedy of a relationship that is doomed from the start, and one leaves the film almost wishing that the two could live happily ever after, but this effectively destabilises the fragile balance achieved in the book between the sympathy elicited by the tragic figure of Humbert and the moral unease of the reader at the notion of an adult male physically possessing a twelve year old girl.

In effectively censoring *Lolita* in this way Lyne has in fact been unfaithful to the novel, and has relied heavily on the notorious character of the book, and the predictable wrinkling of the public's nose at any whiff of problematic sexual scandal, in order to inject the troublesome element of sensationalism that the film lacks. One should not be surprised, though, at Lyne's reluctance to use a child in his film, as he as well as anyone else must be aware just how difficult it would be for an audience to witness some of the scenes in *Lolita* played by an authentically young actress.

Depictions of the body, and particularly the bodies of children, present a dilemma for both artists and commentators, and often photographers who work with children, like Jock Sturges, Sally Mann, Graham Ovenden or Ron Oliver, are discussed almost entirely in terms of the works' uncertain legal status and the fact that the images may be open to classification by some as pornographic, not due to their intrinsic visual content, but to a woefully, (and perhaps inevitably), inadequate set of categorical laws that may vary from country to country or from state to state.

However, what defines the status of images, or what enables them to produce meanings, is not necessarily their formal denotative qualities, but the connotative meanings and messages that are constructed by the nature of the field through which they are realised or consumed. An image such as Robert

Mapplethorpe's *Rosie* may not be dissimilar to images that may be found within a small number of the Internet's pornographic news-groups but is not in itself pornographic. *Rosie* the image was described by moralists in 1996, shortly before it was withdrawn on the advice of the police from the Hayward Gallery's Robert Mapplethorpe retrospective,³ not only as 'child pornography' but as 'utterly horrific'. This however does a disservice not only to *Rosie* the child, in describing her image in this way, but to Mapplethorpe the photographer, as although he would have been aware that the image was certainly striking, not least in the intensity of the child's

gaze, *Rosie* is, in the context of the rest of his oeuvre, a moderate and compassionate depiction of humanity.

What seemed to be overlooked or ignored by the majority of commentators at the time was that in order for an image such as *Rosie*, (or the family photographs of the newscaster Julia Somerville's seven year old child at bath time, held by a member of Boots processing staff to be obscene), to be seen as pornographic the viewer must project a pornographic sensibility onto it. So despite the fact that *Rosie* clearly has her childish genitals on view, they can only be seen as pornographic, (and by extension erotic), by an individual who has a predisposition to seeing them in that way, whether they be paedophiles or moral crusaders. To anyone of a rational sensibility *Rosie* is just a striking photograph of a little girl who happens not to be wearing any knickers.

Censoring images of children like this is, for a number of reasons, likely to do more damage in the long run than good. Firstly, in condemning all images of naked or semi-naked children to the status of child pornography one is not *preserving* the innocence of childhood but *removing* it, and casting all children in the role of potential tempters and tempresses; destined forever to be seen within the public's imagination not as young people on the path to maturity but as individuals forced to belong to the world of grown-up fantasies and neuroses before their time. Even a recent television advertisement for the Yellow Pages showed two new-born babies with their infant genitalia judiciously cast in digital shadows in order that they should not offend.

There is a danger, with the increasing attempts of some pressure groups to promote the belief that any depiction of youthful nudity is inherently unhealthy or bad, that one may no longer be able to see a naked child for what he or she is but instead become accustomed to seeing a body sexualised in adult terms; consequently, the childish body, both clothed and unclothed, is in danger of being fetishised and turned into a routine container of adult sexual values. In addition to and as an effect of this, in their desire to depict children as existing in some pre-Fall Edenic state the activities of some child care groups are, by insisting that they are non-sexual beings, actively denying children the right to their own, non-adult, sexuality; to the sexuality that is part and parcel of being human at any age.

Social constructions of puberty and adolescence will inevitably dictate the extent of the problems that are perceived to exist within the welfare and protection of children. When something arrives to disrupt the 'normal', 'healthy', received social stereotypes of how children should fit into the spaces set aside for them by society, as with the work of Jock Sturges, Ron Oliver or Sally Mann,⁴ it has tended to come under fierce attack from individuals or organisations who perceive it as a threat; not just to children but to the social order itself. But, as the welfare of children is, rightly, high on our moral agenda, it should not be surprising that there should be those who are prepared to question the role that children have within the culture, sexual or otherwise, of our society. Those who maintain that children have no role within sexual narratives are, I would suggest, not helping to solve the problem but in fact adding to it. In seeking to censor debate around aspects of the lives of children our attitudes and understandings of 'sensitive' subjects will remain stifled, and discourses that may prove to be of value will, because many find them unpalatable, remain unarticulated.

The objects and methods of censorship are dictated by the standards of the day, but as these standards are in a permanent process of evolution we can never be exactly sure what it is we are censoring and why. For



instance, Ron Oliver makes photographs of, by and large but not exclusively, young girls, often pictured with their mothers or fathers. The photographs are commissioned by the parents and a number have been published as a collection in *As Far as the Eye Can See*. However, in 1992 Oliver was arrested by the Obscene Publications Squad on charges of producing child pornography, and had much work confiscated which has yet to be returned. If we look at Oliver's *Threesome* it is hard to distinguish what it is that is either obscene or pornographic or should need censoring. There is a pregnant mother and a young daughter, both of whom are naked, and the tumescent bump of an unborn baby. The mother kisses the child and the child embraces the mother. The obvious relationships set up between the experienced mother, the young girl and the baby speak simply and eloquently of the human cycle of reproduction, nurturing and development. There seems nothing degrading or horrific about this image: on the contrary, it is a touching portrayal.

One possible explanation as to why we find images of the pubescent body so problematic could be located in our reluctance to be reminded of the loss of our own innocence, and the inevitable consequence that is our often difficult, 'grown-up', sexuality. If as a society we are suffering from a *fin de millénaire* weariness with the difficulties of being members of what appears to be an increasingly unstable community it is natural that we should develop, as an antidote to the more unpleasant aspects of everyday life, a desire to preserve what we perceive as, in the absence of religious certitudes, expressions of humanity untainted by the cynical and superficial aspects of the late Twentieth Century. Hence the value of the child in society as a signifier of our hopes for the future. A more faithful, and more honest, filmic adaptation of *Lolita* would have used a younger actress, a child who could actually convey the impression of youth intended by Nabokov, but in the current moral climate we should not be surprised that Adrian Lyne has acted as his own censor in order to avoid the hue and cry that would surely have greeted the appearance of a genuinely juvenile Lolita.

¹ The *Daily Mail*, Friday April 24 1988, p. 1 and 7

² There are so many themes that arise in connection with the main subject of this essay that inevitably in a relatively small space I can hope only to articulate a small proportion of them, so the reader must bear in mind that I am in no way presenting my feelings here as an open and shut case.

³ Of interest on this subject is Mark Sladens' 'School for Scandal', *Art Monthly*, no. 201 November 1996, pp. 12-14

⁴ Sally Mann is the exception as, while producing photographs that are both provocative in their depiction of unashamed nakedness and haunting in their beauty, she has so far not suffered at the hands of either moral zealots or the authorities, perhaps because the children she has photographed are her own and, as interviews and documentaries have shown, entirely undamaged by the process of photography.