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Review of Lolita

Michael Adams
City University of New York

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Lolita (Blu-ray)

(Warner Home Video, 5.31.2011)

The myth about *Lolita*, Stanley Kubrick's 1962 adaptation of the 1955 Vladimir Nabokov novel, is that it was made too soon, before mainstream films were allowed to be sexually explicit. Yet the novel, though called pornographic in the uptight Eisenhower era, is really all that explicit either. What matters is Nabokov's vision of America, embracing its distinctive blend of innocence and vulgarity, Humbert Humbert's slow realization that he truly loves Dolores Haze, his guilt over stealing her childhood, and the exhilarating style. While Kubrick cannot approximate Nabokov's style, he captures the writer's other intentions. The only glaring weakness of *Lolita* is the casting of Sue Lyon in the title role. Fifteen when the film was made, Lyon, who at times resembles both Ann-Margret and Elvis Presley, adequately captures her character's coquettishness but shows nothing below Lolita's surface. In contrast, Shelley Winters, as the ill-fated Charlotte Haze, lets the viewer see the soul beneath the gaudiness. Because Nabokov's Humbert is obsessed by girls who do not yet look like women, Lyon perpetuates the misreading of the novel as the tale of a dirty old man who likes girls mature before their time. James Mason, arguably the most underrated Hollywood actor ever, subtly reveals Humbert's conflicted nature, as when he gleefully reads Charlotte's confession of her love and his remorse when he sees the older Lolita. It is a great performance, as is that of Peter Sellers, as Clare Quilty, Humbert's antagonist. The major change Kubrick makes in his screenplay, written with producer James B. Harris, although Nabokov is credited as sole author, is the expansion of Quilty's role, the better to showcase Sellers' brilliance at accents, mimicry, and what seems to be improvisation. Kubrick's skill at directing actors and letting them run with their parts is often undervalued. *Lolita* is also the first film to reveal Kubrick's mature style: lengthy scenes, long takes, camera movement only when necessary. This languid approach is fitting here, keeping the comedy from tipping over into farce. Although best known for his use of color, cinematographer Oswald Morris was equally skilled at black and white. This Blu-ray displays his shimmering blacks perfectly. Morris' use of shadows, as when Humbert suffers a breakdown in a hospital corridor, is masterful. Perceived as a flawed interpretation of a masterpiece in 1962, *Lolita* has rightly seen its reputation grow to be considered one of Kubrick's best films and one of the few outstanding adaptations of a literary classic. Other than a theatrical trailer, there are no extras.—Michael Adams