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Adapting tone from novel to film: Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and its film adaptation by Stanley Kubrick

Keywords: film adaptation, tone, *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov, Stanley Kubrick

Słowa kluczowe: adaptacja filmowa, ton, *Lolita*, Władimir Nabokow, Stanley Kubrick

The following study deals with *Lolita*, a novel by Vladimir Nabokov, and its film adaptation of the same title by Stanley Kubrick, released in 1962.¹ The concern of this article will be the element to which both Nabokov and Kubrick pay considerable attention, namely the tone. To clarify the term “tone” we will use a definition from *A Dictionary of Literary and Thematic Terms* by Edward Quinn: “the attitude toward the subject expressed in a work”.² Since the definition is broad enough, it will also be applied with reference to the film. The terminology concerning the adaptation follows Brian McFarlane’s *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*.³ For the sake of this analysis, the elements contributing to the tone of Nabokov’s work will not be examined extensively, as only elements comparable to the film adaptation will be looked upon in detail.

¹ This adaptation is the first one, the second being the film by Adrian Lyne from 1997. Owing to the fact that the two adaptations are utterly different and aim to convey different aspects of the novel, the study will not compare the two works.

² E. Quinn, “Tone”, [entry in:] *A Dictionary of Literary and Thematic Terms*, 2nd ed., New York 2006, pp. 421–422.

³ B. McFarlane, *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*, Oxford 2006.

To understand fully the importance of the tone in Nabokov's work, it is necessary to evoke the historical background of the publication of the novel. Completed in 1954, it was a highly controversial book on account of its theme. Many publishers rejected the book finding the subject too hot to handle and it was published in the USA only in 1958. When Kubrick's film was released in 1962, the book was still attracting a lot of criticism. The film adaptation was even more of a challenge under restrictions of the film industry's censor and of the National Legion of Decency, which was supposed to rate the acceptability of films for Catholic constituency. Both works required some strategies to convey the subject of the protagonist being possessed by sexual perversity. The tone plays here an essential role, it makes the serious and debatable topic more easily accessible. Combined with the elaborate techniques used to conjure up the tone, it draws the receiver's attention to the form and smuggles a difficult topic at the same time.

What is particularly interesting is that the screenplay for the film was written by Nabokov himself. However, Kubrick used only about 20% of the 400-page long version.⁴ Thus, there is no proof of whether it was the author's deliberate choice or rather Kubrick's vision. The director's work, among many, leaves out the history of Annabel, which allegedly motivates Humbert Humbert's (the protagonist and the narrator of the novel) obsession with little girls, whom he calls nymphets. There is also not much left from the long journey of Humbert and Lolita across the United States. Sexual allusions are very often conveyed via humorous bits, which of course are by no means comparable to Nabokov's descriptions of the perverse "affair" between Humbert and his 12-year-old stepdaughter. The omission of so many important issues was heavily criticized and the film was thought to oversimplify Nabokov's fiction. Only in 1994 in her work *I Lost It at the Movies* Pauline Kael has emphasized that it is the "black slapstick" inherent in the story that makes the work valuable and calls it "the first new American comedy since those great days in the forties".⁵ And indeed, the tone of the film makes it deeply humoristic, however, combined with the serious subject, it forms more of a black comedy. Although calling Nabokov's *Lolita* a black comedy would not reflect the essence of the novel, it is justifiable to enumerate some elements of humour which set the tone of the novel. Humoristic tone is set by word plays, comprising many double entendres and dirty jokes. There are several examples of satiric elements in the work. Most of all, the novel is full of parody evoked by imitating genres and style of works of other authors. There is even self-parody in the novel which mocks its own style. These elements are also present in Kubrick's film.

⁴ G.D. Phillips, "Lolita", [entry in:] *The Encyclopedia of Stanley Kubrick*, New York 2002, p. 213.

⁵ P. Kael, *I Lost It at the Movies*, London 1966, p. 186.

Adapting the point of view

The primary difficulty in conveying Nabokov's tone lies in the point of view, which sets the tone and which is hardly adaptable. The whole book is narrated by Humbert, who is one of the characters in the story as well. The events presented through first-person unreliable narration which uses understatements and suggestions can be easily taken for the narrator's figments of imagination. As Piotr Kletowski claims, Nabokov's novel operates on associations and suggestions,⁶ which make the story unique and impossible to present faithfully beyond the medium of literature. Unlike the novel, *Lolita* the film operates on concrete events, actors, and *mise-en-scène*, which makes it impossible to imagine a different reality than the one with which the viewers are presented. Kubrick rejects Humbert's point of view and uses external focalization, to use a literary term. Kubrick shows the viewer a more objective point of view, using voice-overs from time to time. They are mostly informative (telling us the place and time), but they also cite Humbert's diary, which gives the audience a chance to familiarize with Humbert's obsession. The film elaborates greatly the character of Clare Quilty, whose comments also contribute to the narration. There is some narration from the camera too, most importantly at the end: an epilogue showing how Humbert died (this part is at the beginning of the novel signed by a fictional John Ray).

This considerable change in presenting the story could presuppose an adaptation failure from the beginning but one should not forget that the film medium also gives many opportunities to make up for the things that do not seem to be adaptable. In the course of analysis, both transfers and proper adaptations will be mentioned, the latter heavily criticized in Kubrick's film, and how they affect the tone of a work in comparison with the tone in Nabokov's novel. The analysis of the tone of the adaptation will comprise three main elements which set the tone in the novel: narrator's language, satire and parody inherent in the work, and will look in detail at how they are presented in Kubrick's film.

Firstly, what makes Nabokov's text ironic, is the contrast between who the narrator is and what he is trying to convey. In other words, the contrast between the way the narrator treats the subject and the subject itself. The events in the novel are presented by an erudite scholar, a lecturer in French literature. What the reader can assume is that he is a man of manners, though degenerated by his own obsession with little girls. The irony or even bitter cynicism helps him in talking about the subject which destructs him and his stepdaughter. Nevertheless, his obsession reduces him to a man driven by his sexual desires, ruthless and disgusting in his actions. The narrator is very self-conscious as well. "If you want to make a movie out of my book, have one of these faces gently melt into my own, while I look",⁷

⁶ P. Kletowski, *Filmowa odyseja Stanleya Kubricka*, Kraków 2006, p. 321.

⁷ V. Nabokov, *Lolita*, London 1992, p. 236.

is one of his comments reminding the reader that what he is reading is only fiction. Moreover, at the beginning he announces: “You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style”,⁸ keeping himself and his narration distanced. Kubrick also attempts to draw attention to the medium, using black and white shots on purpose, which draws attention to the details, like the language used in dialogues, and conveys Humbert’s style of narration in the film.

The self-conscious narrator in the book plays with the readers and offers many games and puns requiring the reader to be active. He uses plenty of wordplays, especially in the names of the characters and the names of the places. Only the narrator’s pseudonym is very meaningful, reminiscent of the French word *ombre* (shadow) and Spanish *hombre* (man). Some look for an analogy between Humbert’s pseudonym and Edgar Allan Poe’s character William Wilson (suggesting the double consciousness of the narrator), or Humphrey Chimpden from Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* distorted many a time and changed into St. Hubert, Humpty Dumpty, or Humbert in the novel. The name of one of the characters is Vivian Darkbloom, the anagram of Vladimir Nabokov. Finally, many places are used consciously like: Lake Climax (where Lolita’s camp takes place and her sexual experience begins), Camp Q (which we can associate with Quilty, who was interested in Lolita as well) or St. Algebra (humoristic name for Lolita’s school). Their conscious use puts narrator’s reliability into question, and by reminding the reader that all is only fiction, sets a lighter tone in the novel. Some of these names are directly transferred to the film like Vivian Darkbloom, or combined, like Camp Climax. Although there are not as many of them as in the book (which could make the viewer ignore them) they are clearly exposed (Vivian accompanies Quilty almost in every scene, there is a huge sign “Camp Climax” when Humbert enters the camp’s premises). There is also another nuance — Kubrick makes the portrait of the late Mr. Haze look very similar to young Nabokov, which conveys the play with the audience taken from the novel.

Other elements of games with the audience used by Kubrick are double entendres and jokes. Through these means the director tries to transmit wild sexuality presented in the novel and lewd comments present in Humbert’s narration. As it has been mentioned before, Kubrick faced several constraints in conveying these parts as well as difficulties provoked by medium specificity. Nevertheless, the director gives the viewer some hints of Humbert’s obsession by means of humoristic tone. When Humbert sees Lolita for the first time and Charlotte Haze (Lolita’s mother) asks what was the decisive factor for him to rent a room in their house, he answers: “I think it was your cherry pies!”⁹ referring to Mrs Haze’s baking, as well as to his appetite for her daughter. In Charlotte’s speech one can observe double entendres too. For instance, when she is talking to Quilty about

⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

⁹ S. Kubrick, *Lolita*, 00:18:00.

Lolita at the school party: “Wednesday she’s going to have a cavity filled by your Uncle Ivor”,¹⁰ which announces Lolita’s soon loss of innocence. When it comes to Charlotte, Humbert uses dirty jokes, like the one when she says: “You do arouse the pagan in me. Hum, you just touch me and I go as limp as a noodle,” and Humbert answers: “Yes, I know the feeling”.¹¹ The use of humour implies sexual meaning and helps Kubrick to convey an irreverent tone towards Mrs Haze, accompanied with the verbose commentaries in the novel. The effect is amplified by the cuts used in the film. The irreverence towards Charlotte’s death is intensified by means of the clash between one scene ended by the words of a doctor: “I’m afraid she’s dead”,¹² and the next scene showing Humbert relaxing, drink in hand in the bath. Sexual associations are also strengthened when Lolita says that Humbert has stopped caring for her and reproaches him: “You haven’t even kissed me yet, have you?”.¹³ The next shoot shows the car going faster and strikes the viewer with the loud noise of the engine. The viewer has just been told who is the motor of Humbert’s actions.

Shades of satire

Although in the essay “On the book entitled *Lolita*” (included in the Everyman’s Library edition of the novel) Nabokov denies the relevance of satire in his work, one can safely assume that he at least uses satiric tone in *Lolita*. It is also observable in Kubrick’s adaptation. In the novel, during his journey across USA, Humbert describes American motels, tourist attractions, as well as the whole consumption culture, full of colourful magazines (Charlotte reads *Your Home is You*, even Humbert thumbs through *Know Your Own Daughter*) and advertisements. Lolita is depicted as “the ideal consumer”:

She believed, with a kind of celestial trust, any advertisement or advice that appeared in Movie Love or Screen Land — Starasil Starves Pimples, or “You better watch out if you’re wearing your shirttails outside your jeans, gals, because Jill says you shouldn’t.” If a roadside sign said: Visit Our Gift Shop — we had to visit it, had to buy its Indian curios, dolls, copper jewelry, cactus candy. The words “novelties and souvenirs” simply entranced her by their trochaic lilt. If some café sign proclaimed Icecold Drinks, she was automatically stirred, although all drinks everywhere were ice-cold. She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster.¹⁴

Although this consumption is not pronounced in the film, the audience can see it smuggled in the characterisation of Lolita. Sue Lyon is almost all the time

¹⁰ Ibid., 00:26:04.

¹¹ Ibid., 00:50:15.

¹² Ibid., 01:03:54.

¹³ Ibid., 01:10:19.

¹⁴ V. Nabokov, op. cit., p. 156.

presented with a bottle of coke, she either eats chips ostentatiously, or chews chewing gum.

Both in the book and in the film, old Europe is opposed to modern and progressive America. In Kubrick's film, Charlotte wants to impress Humbert with old plumbing: "Well, we still have that good old-fashioned quaint plumbing. It should appeal to a European." The American morals seem to accept a more unconstrained conduct. Parents allow little children to attend "jam sessions" during the night with their school party partners. The school institution itself does not seem to teach children any school knowledge. Although Kubrick does not emphasize it that much, there is a trace of the school's attitude in the person of Professor Zempf (Quilty in disguise), who wants to make Humbert more liberal towards his daughter. In the novel, the satire on school is even more pronounced, such as in the following example, in which Mrs Pratt tells Humbert about the school rules: "We are not so much concerned, Mr. Humbird, with having our students become bookworms or be able to reel off all the capitals of Europe which nobody knows anyway, or learn by heart the dates of forgotten battles. What we are concerned with is the adjustment of the child to group life. This is why we stress the four D's: Dramatics, Dance, Debating and Dating".¹⁵ When she wants Humbert to be more liberal, Mrs Pratt has no scruples and tells him: "That's the old-fashioned European in you!".¹⁶ Clearly, satiric tone is present both in the novel and its film adaptation.

Parody of genres and literary works

The last element setting the tone treated in this study is the parody of genres, particular works, and even self-parody present both in the novel and in the film. The most obvious one in the book is parody of a literary diary. Nabokov involves the readers in the story, gives the impression that the narrator's journal was written in a hurry. As Alfred Appel notices, Humbert apologizes several times for his mistakes, for example: "I notice the slip of my pen in the preceding paragraph, but please do not correct it, Clarence",¹⁷ which makes the reader believe that Humbert is a reliable narrator. But in fact "all the worst propensities of the diarist are embodied in Humbert's rhetoric, parodying the First Person Singular's almost inevitable solipsism and most tendentious assumptions about Self, and the reader who is late in realizing this has had his own assumptions parodied".¹⁸ Thus, the form which the narrator uses is parodied. What comes next is the parody of its

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 187.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 187.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁸ A. Appel, "Lolita: The springboard of parody", *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 8, 1967, pp. 223–224.

whole content. The analysis here will focus only on the most striking (particularly in the book, which contains too many examples to enumerate in this work) examples of parody.

Firstly, the relationship between Humbert and Lolita can (from the narrator's account) be seen as courtly love,¹⁹ or, to be more specific, its French equivalent *fin'amor*, taking into consideration that the narrator is a lecturer in French literature. What distinguishes *fin'amor* from courtly love is that in the French tradition the woman is superior to man when it comes to her social status, and their relationship resembles the relationship between a vassal and his lord. Like in *fin'amor* Humbert rather falls in love with the "purely literary reality that she [Lolita] betokens"²⁰: "What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita — perhaps, more real than Lolita".²¹ Humbert also speaks about himself as "Humbert the Humble" which indicates his "servitude" (in the film the scene of painting Lolita's toenails). What the reader finds out next is that Humbert is a sexual pervert, who ends up paying his stepdaughter to have sex with him. In this way, not only does he show interest only in Lolita's carnal side, but also oppresses her and treats as a servant, which is not quite what he is trying to convey to the reader.

Another genre that is parodied is a *doppelgänger* story, reminiscent of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* or, as mentioned before, Poe's *William Wilson*. Another obsession of Humbert, Clare Quilty, who took Lolita away from him, shares many features with Humbert. He is also a pervert, is also interested in Lolita, what is more, he is a erudite, his inscriptions in motel guest books are the numerous proofs for that. Humbert tells the reader about Quilty: "his genre, his type of humor — at its best at least — the tone of his brain, had affinities with my own. He mimed and mocked me. His allusions were definitely highbrow. He was well-read. He knew French. He was versed in logodaedaly and logomancy. He was an amateur of sex lore". Humbert's double represents his own struggle to impose some self-criticism.²² The character of Quilty is presented quite differently in the film. His role is considerably developed as he is present throughout the story. Obviously, he might as well be Humbert's *alter ego*, of which we get the impression for example when Humbert plays "Roman ping-pong" with Quilty. In this scene their interaction can suggest that they are one person. However, this is not the only way the character of Quilty contributes to the story. Citizen Kane-like opening introduces the viewer into Quilty's house, where Humbert tries to kill him. The opening, the altered sequence of events, and the reverse shots indicate a detective story. However, later on, the film operates on the flashback, which, as Gilles Menegaldo suggests,

¹⁹ M. Glynn, "The word is not a shadow: The word is a thing — Nabokov as anti-symbolist", *European Journal of American Culture* 25, 2006, p. 23.

²⁰ M. Glynn, op. cit., p. 23.

²¹ V. Nabokov, op. cit., p. 65.

²² A. Appel, op. cit., p. 233.

together with the motifs of rivalry between mother and daughter, and the motif of an escaping “couple”, conjures up the atmosphere of film noir, in which Lolita would personify femme fatale.²³ That could be relevant were it not for setting the tone by Peter Seller’s (Quilty) soliloquy just at the beginning of the story, and all the rest of comic elements, which make the parody inherent in the film. For example, as Menegaldo notices, all the themes characteristic for melodrama are ridiculed. In case of *Lolita* there is the motif of a love triangle, here preposterously between Humbert, Lolita, and her mother. The motif of suicide is a source of fun in the film. For example, Charlotte’s friends think Humbert wants to kill himself after his wife’s death, whereas the audience can see him having a relaxing bath after her death. Later on, the protagonist accepts the funeral expenses from the man who ran Charlotte down. Finally, Charlotte’s love letter is by no means treated as a melodramatic confession. There are even parodies of the comedies in the film. The cot scene in the hotel is a perfect example of a slapstick comedy. The whole “affair” with Lolita in turn can refer to screwball comedies’ mismatched couples.

Some other elements of comic tone are the actors’ performances and parodies of particular works by other authors. Shelley Winters as Charlotte gives a splendid comic performance of desperate love-longing woman, the example of which can be the scene of the dinner for two, when she tries to seduce Humbert dancing cha-cha in a leopard-skin blouse and pushing him against the wall in search of some tenderness. It goes without saying that Peter Seller’s performance is the most powerful in creating the comic tone. In his soliloquy mentioned before, he presents himself as Spartacus (reference to Kubrick’s eponymous previous film), suggests to play “Roman ping-pong” and solve the problem like “two civilized senators”. Then he reads his death sentence (parody of T.S. Eliot’s *Ash Wednesday* transferred from the novel) with the famous western actor George “Gabby” Hayes’s accent and does not take the text seriously. He puts on boxing gloves like in early American fight pictures and says that he wants to die “like a champion”. When he is finally scared, he still tries to entertain Humbert playing Frédéric Chopin’s *Polonaise* op. 40, boasting that he wrote it the day before and offering to make up some lyrics together. Next, Seller’s performances as an alleged policeman and a German psychologist (again reference to Kubrick’s following film *Dr Strangelove...*) maintain a similarly comic tone. Thus, Kubrick in his own way adapts the references to other works (in Nabokov’s novel the most important among dozens of others: Fyodor Dostoevsky, Edgar Allan Poe, Prosper Mérimée, Gustave Flaubert), which have their part in constituting the value of Nabokov’s fiction.

Summing up, the self-conscious and self-parodying narration in *Lolita* by Nabokov plays with the reader and draws attention to the novel as a work of fiction. All the elements of parody of genres and particular works, together with

²³ G. Menegaldo, “L’hybridité Générique dans *Lolita* de Stanley Kubrick: Jeu et Subversion des Codes”, *Sillages critiques* 11, 2010, <http://sillagescritiques.revues.org/index1710.html> (accessed: 1.05.2017).

elements of satire, set a humorous tone in the novel. Although the novel seems impossible to adapt, Kubrick tries to adapt many elements to the cinema context. The director gives up many literary references and uses cinema references instead. He uses the language of film (such as montage, music, voice-over narration, shots, etc.) to convey the essence of the novel, which is a multi-layered play with the reader. This aim could not be achieved if the film had only followed the events of the story and not its tone.

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Adapting tone from novel to film: Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* and its film adaptation by Stanley Kubrick

Summary

The article deals with Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* and its film adaptation by Stanley Kubrick. The tone of the novel makes a simple transfer from novel to film impossible without losing characteristics of the novel. These consist of unreliable narration, wordplays, satire and numerous examples of parody. Kubrick suggests a range of devices to convey the tone of the novel.