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**"Oculate Paradise": Colour Saturation in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*  
in the Context of its Cinematographic Adaptations**

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From the beginning, critical reception has placed *Lolita* under the sign of immoderation, most obviously because it focuses on the emotional and libidinous excesses of a pedophile. The novel's prose style has also been characterised by some as overwrought: when it came out in the 1950s, Kingsley Amis derided Nabokov's diction as mannered in a way that was characteristic of foreign practitioners of English. Amis's reaction is of course typical of the Little Englandist approach of the Movement writers who held sway in that period of British literary history. Nabokov's stylistic flourishes, coupled to what Ernest Hemingway would have called his over-use of "ten-dollar words" (Hotchner, p. 34), were also out of tune with the emerging tone of American literature, guided as it was, and often still is, by the spirit of *scaz*-like simplicity, a style pioneered by authors such as J. D. Salinger, which Nabokov's novel would have adhered to had it been narrated by its teenage eponymous character. Despite his rivalrous condescension towards William Faulkner, Nabokov's style was closer in spirit to that particular dying line of style in American letters.

The eminent Nabokov specialist Lara Delage-Toriel has recently remarked that "Nabokov's art has too often been treated as a kind of rococo wedding cake, decked with delicate sugar flowers and sexy little girls—fantastically ornamental, indeed, yet hardly artistic, in the noblest sense". While it is true that criticism in the middle decades of the twentieth century sometimes tended to be neoclassical in its stylistic expectations, the remark does overstate the case a little in a contemporary

context in which there is strong consensual admiration for Nabokov. In any case, I hope Lara Delage-Toriel will forgive me for treating Nabokov's masterpiece as an 'immoderately' coloured rococo wedding cake yet again, as I will be adding one important qualification to that description.

Although Nabokov's stylistic ornateness is a feature of most of his other novels, *Lolita* has a particular justification for it since its narrator, Humbert Humbert, is a French literature professor with a taste for Decadent literature: in fact, his style is often so precious and polysyllabic that it regularly bursts into French and Latin. If Horace had written his *Ars Poetica* today, he might well have discussed Nabokov under the rubric of what he called *purpureus pannus*, or 'purple prose'. Although this critical term is usually used in a somewhat negative way, it does seem appropriate to Nabokov's lavishly figurative prose, its rhythmic alliterative passages and its heavily wrought and coloured language. As well as this, purple is one of the colours recurrently mentioned by the narrator.

Although Nabokov's style has gained wide acceptance among critics, by today's Anglophone literary standards, many would find the novel somewhat over-written. This is something which Kingsley Amis disliked about Nabokov and his literary influence on his son Martin Amis: a "terrible compulsive vividness in his style ... that constant demonstrating of his command of English" (*The Guardian*). Nabokov's precursor Edgar Allan Poe elaborated poetic compositions that were also deemed too ornate. Mark Twain (the first purveyor of *scat* in America) found him entirely unreadable, and Poe's "Ulalume" was particularly berated by his contemporaries for its over-decorative language.

While *Lolita* is deeply indebted to Poe's more straightforward "Annabel Leigh", Stanley Kubrick's version of *Lolita* included a passage in which Humbert reads "Ulalume" to Lolita, thus placing the film under the sign of Decadent immoderation. Likewise, by today's standards of Russian, Nabokov's translation of his own work back into his native tongue was criticized by a number of Russian critics as old-fashioned and decorative.

In the context of this tendency towards immoderation, it comes as no great surprise to learn that Nabokov was a synaesthete who had the faculty of coloured

hearing. He also claimed to perceive letters in specific colours. While this phenomenon was no doubt attested, it also fitted his somewhat aristocratic and dandified vision of himself. Nabokov's coloured mind also links him to Rimbaud's immoderately coloured vision, as expressed in the poem "Voyelles", and to such Victorian poems as George Meredith's "Hymn to Colour" and Oscar Wilde's "Symphony in Yellow" composed in pure celebration of paint-inspired language.

Even a cursory perusal of Nabokov's novels will reveal how deeply plunged in tempering colour they all are. In Nabokov's *The Defense*, the protagonist's father is unable to finish writing a novel because he gets lost in the contemplation of colour; while *Lolita* is too plot-and-character-driven to lose itself entirely in such abstraction, it frequently resorts to 'purple passages' that are invariably flooded in coloured details. His first novel written in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, makes such ubiquitous reference to the colour blue that it reminds one at times of the German expressionist films that used filters and coloured lights. In their book, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Painting*, Gerard de Vries and Donald Johnson argue that violet is the prevalent colour of that novel but there are arguably more objects tinted with blue. Here are but a few examples: "blue plush" (p. 10), "a blue-gray army-cloak" (p. 13); as a child, the narrator observes his brother Sebastian as he paints and tries "to dab the bluest cake in the box" (p. 16) as a symbolic way of catching his brother's attention, and later on his very essence. He also sits down "on a blue bench" (p. 19) and when he is attempting to shed some light on his brother's enigmatic life, he delves into his letters whose notepaper "was egg-shell blue with a dark-blue rim" (p. 38). He holds them looking at the light "on the blue carpet" (ibid.). One of the characters he interviews somewhat surrealistically "stroked a soft blue cat with celadon eyes" (p. 47). There are also an array of other characters with "a blue scarf" (p. 71), a "blue-gray figure" (p. 74), "a blue mackintosh" (p. 87). There are "dark blue dragonflies" (p. 138), "a turquoise-blue sky" (p. 139). These colours culminate in the emotional climax of the novel in a train swathed in "the violet-blue night-lamp [...] reflected in the black glass" (p. 192) and "a glow of blue light at my elbow" (p. 203). De Vries and Johnson remark that "in Nabokov's chromatic order, blue is the colour of immortality" but in this novel it is also the colour of melancholy and nostalgia; its

immoderate presence stands in for the almost complete absence of the narrator's brother (the novel is in fact a veiled autobiographical elegy for the death of Nabokov's homosexual brother in a Nazi concentration camp).

*Lolita* may seem lacunary in its monologic point of view as it offers limited insight into how Lolita herself perceives events; as well as this, we are hardly ever privy to the exact words that she uses because of the narrator's recourse to a third person narration and reported speech. This narratorial 'lacuna', which is in fact acknowledged by the narrator, has been filled by the Italian writer Pia Pera's controversial rewriting of *Lolita* from the point of view of the teenage girl in her novel *Lo's Diary*. In many other respects, however, *Lolita* is marked by immoderation: its most obvious signs of textual "excess" being its proliferating intertextual allusions, its onion-like exfoliating structure, its ever-present wordplay, its many-named characters. The general extravagance of its tone is in keeping with the postmodern tendency towards the immoderate. Another noticeably immoderate feature of the novel is its somewhat plethoric use of colour adjectives.

De Vries and Johnson explore some of the references to painting in *Lolita* (most notably the novel's link with the Decadent English artist Aubrey Beardsley) and Julian Connolly has explored the use of black and white in *Lolita*, but there has been no fuller study of the novel's inordinately elaborate use of colouring.

Let me first begin by pointing out a few instances of colouring that seem initially to be inspired by Baudelairean synaesthetic effects but are also at least in part motivated by Nabokov's naturally occurring cognitive synaesthesia. A particularly striking example of this is evidenced in Lolita's "blue sulks and rosy mirth" (p. 145); this chromatic complementarity is reused later on when Humbert talks of Lolita's precursor Annabel Lee and the "sapphire occasion and rosy contingency of my Riviera romance" (p. 165). The cold colour / warm colour opposition functions as a happier version of the black / white complementarity identified by Julian Connolly in his article.

While colour can be employed in characterisation techniques, most notably as an adjunct to sartorial symbolism, it is generally not employed quite as much, even by practitioners of high realism. Taking two Victorian novels at random, for instance

*Middlemarch* and *Jude the Obscure*, the reader will notice that the focal characters are lengthily introduced at the outset of both novels with little physical description and no mention whatsoever of colour. By contrast, there is scarcely a page of *Lolita* that does not have a few references to colour. In the first half of the novel, Humbert even seems to feed on the young girl's colour: "on her brown shoulder, a raised purple-pink swelling (the work of some gnat) which I eased of its beautiful transparent poison between my long thumbnails and then sucked till I was gorged on her spicy blood" (pp. 153-4). Later, on first meeting Lolita's husband, he even more unappealingly, and just as vampirically, expresses a compulsion "to squeeze out the black-heads on the wings of his perspiring nose with my long agate claws" (p. 272). Humbert even describes his own vomiting in terms of colour: "a torrent of browns and greens that I had never remembered eating" (p. 236). He can even be said to drive through colour itself as he takes his victim through the State of Colorado (p. 231).

Indeed his love of colour seems to be inseparable from his sexual inclination: his colour-saturated consciousness is part and parcel of his besotted attraction for what he decadently calls "the fruit vert" (p. 40). He often seems to be as much of a chromophile as a pedophile. Watching a school play, he reduces the children acting in it to the colours they are wearing: "Orange who kept fidgeting all the time, and Emerald, who, when her eyes got used to the pitch-black pit where we all heavily sat, suddenly smiled at her mother or her protector" (p. 219). At the end of the novel, colour even momentarily takes on a life of its own in Humbert's personifying mind: "there are colours and shades that seem to enjoy themselves in good company" (p. 306).

Although, paradoxically, in the material world things have far more colour than even hyperrealist fiction writers convey, Nabokov's lavish colouring epithets make one want to describe his prose as 'oneiric coloured realism'. His use of colour seems to answer an almost hyperrealist imperative that goes beyond the necessities of fictional realism.<sup>1</sup> It even seems to outstrip the effects sought by the Symbolist writers that had such a strong impact on Nabokov's poetry and fiction, especially in its early Russian phase. As he observes himself,

There exist novelists and poets, and ecclesiastic writers, who deliberately use color terms, or numbers, in a strictly symbolic sense. The type of writer I am, half-painter, half naturalist, finds the use of symbols hateful because it substitutes a dead general idea for a live specific impression... When the intellect limits itself to the general notion, or primitive notion, of a certain color it deprives the senses of its shades. In different languages different colors were used in a general sense before shades were introduced... For me the shades, or rather colors, of, say, a fox, a ruby, a carrot, a pink rose, a dark cherry, a flushed cheek, are as different as blue is from green or the royal purple of blood (Fr. "Pourpre") from the English sense of violet blue (Appel, p. 364).

It is the contention of this paper that despite what he adduces in his interview with Alfred Appel, Nabokov has recourse to colouring in a manner that is often more than simply naturalistic and painterly. His regular recourse to Renaissance colour emblematics in *Lolita*, his playful references to Darwin's analysis of "cryptic coloration", as well as the palpable influence of poetic and perceptual synaesthesia on his writing offer evidence of this.

Although Nabokov's coloured realism is often naturalistic as he says, which in the synecdochic world of fiction seems somewhat hypernaturalistic, he does resort to some of the rules of colour symbolism established by Renaissance painters. Again, an interesting case in point is his use of the colour blue, one of the prevalent colours in this novel's chromaesthetic coding too. While the colour is frequently used merely to beautify or to express the narrator's aesthetic appreciation of the landscape—examples such as "More mountains; bluish beauties never attainable" (p. 154), "dun grading into blue, blue into dream", "a hazy blue view" (p. 155) abound—, the colour begins to take a decidedly strange and dream allegorical turn as the novel reaches its tragic turning point for the protagonist. The blue sedan which Humbert drives begins to acquire symbolic connotations when he notices that a man, whom he does not know is the dramatist Clare Quilty, is following them in a red convertible. The cool blueness of Humbert's car begins to pale in comparison with his pursuer's warm-coloured vehicle: Quilty's automobile redness symbolises his greater attraction

for Lolita. As in the theory of Renaissance colour emblematics, 'cold' colours like blue tend to recede into the background and warm colours tend to dominate the foreground. Nabokov foregrounds this warm, sexual colouring explicitly also by calling Quilty's car "that glossy red beast" and contrasting it with his own "humble blue car" (p. 217). One of the many flat, minor characters in the novel appears at this point and is also called Red because he is "a red-haired fellow" (p. 232). In fact Humbert's younger rivals tend to be coloured in red, a metonymic device Humbert uses to simultaneously diminish their stature and acknowledge their chromatic threat: "There was, for instance Red Sweater who one day, the day we had the first snow – saw her home" (p. 185). In painterly terms, Lolita is also characterized by the colour red, a chromatic feature which links her to Quilty's red convertible. At the beginning of the novel, we see her holding an "Eden-red apple" (p. 57); just before Humbert loses her, she is described in her "Aztec Red bathing briefs and bra" by a "turquoise blue swimming pool" (p. 235) the water of which quite obviously symbolizes Humbert's longing. This is in fact the exact tint used to describe a car sporting the same hue: "In a street of Wace I had glimpsed the Aztec Red convertible, or its identical twin" (p. 225). The fact that in the Elphinstone hospital in which Humbert loses Lolita it is "Dr Blue" (p. 238) who diagnoses her tends to confer a particular sense of loss and destitution on the colour blue, especially when it is juxtaposed with red.

The colour grey is similarly applied as a linking device. Although Lolita is frequently characterized by colours such as red, pink and brown, her eyes are repeatedly described as grey, with her "grey furry question mark of a look" (p. 190) and "clouded-glass grey" (p. 202). The cars Quilty adopts towards the end are also grey, representing his decision to blend in, to camouflage his pursuit. At the end of the novel, he is also described as "grey-faced" (p. 293). This chromatic link between Lolita and Quilty is complicated, however, by Humbert's decision to hang up a grey sweater "on a branch, in a speechless glade" (p. 265) as he is about to drive towards his murder victim's house. This enigmatic gesture, which remains unexplained, is a chromatic emblem of his mood: the grey sweater acts as a kind of flag representing

the colour of Lolita's eyes as well as her abductor's chosen colour. It signals Humbert's decision to enter the chromatic fray, so to speak.

The camouflage grey adopted by Quilty is in keeping with the strongly Darwinian terms Humbert refers to when describing his rival's advances. Quilty's initial red cars stand for his parading sexuality, which seems close to the chromatic dances performed by various birds of paradise and other animals in their mating rituals. Like George Meredith before him in *The Egoist* (a novel written in the wake of Darwin's theories), Nabokov depicts sexual selection in these coloured Darwinian terms. He also describes Quilty's variety of assorted grey cars as a "cryptochromism" (p. 226), a notion Darwin also calls "cryptic coloration",<sup>2</sup> the adaptive mechanism in some animals that has allowed them to become more inconspicuous, and therefore fitter hunters or safer quarry. Quilty's coloured metamorphoses become so clever that he even goes as far as to exchange his earlier multiplying cars for a car that is the exact same as Humbert Humbert's: "The grey mist behind us had deepened and concentrated into the compactness of a Dominion Blue sedan" (p. 226). The word 'dominion' adds an extra sense of sexual domination to Quilty's new strategy, a concomitant sense of disempowerment for Humbert that is brought home to the narrator by the flat tyre that brings his car to a grotesquely awkward halt. As we move towards the final confrontation scene, Quilty and Humbert grow increasingly alike, linked as they are by the colour grey and by their now identical blue sedan. During the murder scene, Humbert remarks that Quilty also has a "purple bathrobe, very like one I had" (p. 293). Colour is not the only linking phenomenon between them, but it contributes no mean part to the *doppelgänger* effect, accentuating Humbert's replacement anxiety, as well as suggesting that Quilty is his darker, red-thirsty double (who is in the end less dark than Humbert since it is Humbert who commits murder).

Black is a colour that appears with increasing frequency towards the end of the novel, thus signifying in a very traditional way the narrator's feeling of impending doom and pervasive moral and psychological darkness: Lolita is taken away by Quilty in a somewhat funerary and depriving "black Caddy Lack" (p. 244) which Humbert describes as "a rush of roaring black time drowning with its



whipping wind the cry of lone disaster" (p. 252). Humbert's gun is repeatedly referred to as being black and it oozes the imperfect black oil (p. 293) he has misguidedly added as a lubricant. He is himself dressed in black, and when he meets Lolita again she makes him sit in "a black rocker" (p. 273). During the murder scene, Quilty also sits down at the piano and plays "rich black music" (p. 301). As he leaves the crime scene, Humbert sees two girls "both wearing black" (p. 303), the sombre underside of the coloured sets of twin children Humbert describes in the early parts of the novel. Fittingly for a synaesthete like Nabokov, the novel offers chromatic closure as well as other resolving devices: the increasing references to black in the last chapters perform the death of colour, or at least the reduction of colour to a single dominant one that is far more expressionistic than naturalistic.

While I have bemoaned Stanley Kubrick's use of black and white in his film of *Lolita* in a recent article, it could be said that Kubrick's adherence to Metro Goldwyn Mayer's signature high-key lighting is still an appropriate rendering of the prevalence of grey, black and white in Nabokov's novel. Although the novel has a film noir atmosphere, Kubrick preferred to keep the film's general chromatic tonality on less dramatically dark ground. The overall effect has been defined as «creamy» (Corliss, p. 65) but could equally be called 'various shades of grey'.

By contrast, the colours in Adrian Lyne's filmic version of *Lolita* are highly saturated and frequently filmed in low-key lighting, thus offering chiaroscuro effects (a style which Nabokov evokes by punning on Clare Quilty's name after his death, calling him "Clare Obscure" [p. 304]) which are technically more difficult to achieve in coloured films than in black and white ones. Lyne employs contrastive lighting mostly in the second half of his film in order to create unease and a sense of suspense. His Quilty also generally appears in this kind of lighting so that he remains a figure of mystery. Similarly, the man wiping the windscreen with Humbert behind it at a petrol station is filmed in such dim lighting that we barely see that he has any features at all thus lending the scene a dark ominous film noir quality: this lighting technique makes the pink sponge the attendant is holding seem black, a nice symbolic touch since Lolita is associated with red and pink throughout the film and novel and she is about to black out of his life.

The opening credits of Lyne's film introduce the two chromatic strands of Nabokov's novel: saturated colouring and more muted smokey-grey tones. The vibrant colours in this film are sometimes so strong that they verge on the fluorescent: grass has an almost neon spaghetti quality to it, but it is appeasingly toned down by the misty greys above it.

While not entirely faithful to Nabokov's colour schemes, Lyne's costume symbolism is subtle: Humbert's costumes range from pale, usually beige and white in the beginning at Ramsdale, to discreetly darkening hues as the nastiness begins to loom in the background. After Charlotte's death, Humbert's clothes take a decidedly darker turn as they often do in film noir (Hitchcock's *Suspicion* is a good example), because he is wearing the clothes of fake mourning after Charlotte's death but these are also included to imply that he is never quite at ease with his deeds. His dark blue, almost black suit contrasts sharply with the pale yellow walls and murals of The Enchanted Hunters Hotel and with Quilty's bright yellow suit. Humbert's pyjamas are striped with a much lighter blue and there is an other-worldly blue light in his hotel room, acting as a magical lighter version of Humbert's dark blue-black suit. Cold and warm colours play off each other in the hotel as a replacement of Quilty's final chromatic car duel in the novel. In Lyne's film, Quilty's multiplying automobiles are reduced to a single smoke-filled grey Buick (indeed his constant immoderate smoking makes him seem a half-embodied emanation of the mist that frames the film).

Although Humbert's clothes lighten up during the subsequent road trip, they finally take a turn for the sombre in the murder scene just as in the novel, and the purple robe that covers Quilty in the novel is grey in Lyne's film, thus evoking one of his main chromatic attributes. His characteristic red and purple are given a particularly dramatic rendering when he begins to bleed profusely: these murderous tones are matched by the red, somewhat pointillistic, police lights behind Humbert's car as well as by Humbert's last reminiscences of Lolita's painted lips.

Chromatic over-determination is a feature of contemporary novels too. The writer A. S. Byatt recently remarked in a BBC interview that she has to know what colours her characters are wearing before she can make them come to life. In a more

surreal or abstract vein, the second novella of Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*, entitled *Ghosts*, centres on characters whose names are colours. In *Lolita*, Nabokov attributes this attention to colouring to Joyce's *Ulysses*, one of the few novels Nabokov unstintingly acclaimed in his interviews and referred to on a number of occasions in *Lolita*. It is true that Joyce's refashioning of Homeric epithets such as "the wine-dark sea" into "the snotgreen sea" in *Ulysses* is probably the most memorable Modernist chromatic extravagance, but there are other Modernist and Postmodernist writers who used colour in experimental ways. Virginia Woolf's early short story «Blue and Green» (*Monday or Tuesday*) provides some fascinating examples of linguistic colouring, and Samuel Beckett's play *Quad* is almost entirely based on the kinetic interaction of the coloured djellabas (white, yellow, blue and red) worn by the performers. As these, and many other, examples show, hyperrealist colouring, Symbolist, Surrealist and Abstract overdetermination of colour all concur to demonstrate how semiotic immoderation has been and still is to some extent one of the major wellsprings of Modern art.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Nabokov's scientific definition of reality illustrates his interest in hyperrealism: "Reality is a very subjective affair. I can only define it as a kind of gradual accumulation of information; and as specialization. If we take a lily, for instance, or any other kind of natural object, a lily is more real to a naturalist than it is to an ordinary person. But it is still more real to a botanist. And yet another stage of reality is reached with that botanist who is a specialist in lilies. You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and

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hence unquenchable, unattainable. You can know more and more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing: it's hopeless" (1992, pp. 10-11).

<sup>2</sup> Nabokov employs Darwinian language also in *Invitation to a Beheading*: "He was very thin, and now, as the light of the setting sun exaggerated the shadows of his ribs, the very structure of his rib cage seemed a triumph of cryptic coloration inasmuch as it expressed the barred nature of his surroundings, of his goal" (p. 65). For examples of Nabokov's opposition to Darwin see *Speak, Memory*.

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