

A mature film about sexual obsession

Review of *Lolita*, directed by Adrian Lyne

Richard Phillips
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Lolita, Adrian Lyne's adaptation of Vladimir Nabokov's celebrated 1954 novel, is a mature film about a complex psychological subject. Notwithstanding some minor weaknesses, this is a sensitive and humane film--a tragic story about paedophilia and sexual obsession, interwoven with moments of comedy and intense beauty.

Lyne's *Lolita*, which opened in Australian cinemas on April 8, is a qualitative advance over previous films made by this London-born director. Lyne, who has worked in the United States since the early 1980s, clearly has some talent. Unfortunately his skills have been wasted on sensational, sexually explicit and generally cynical films. Of the six feature films he has directed--*Foxes* (1980), *Flashdance* (1983), *Nine 1/2 Weeks* (1986), *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *Jacob's Ladder* (1990) and *Indecent Proposal* (1993)--most have centred on explosive sexual encounters between stockbrokers, millionaires or upper middle class types. Lyne has been more preoccupied with skin tones and other physical details than with revealing what these encounters say about society and the human psyche. *Lolita* is a refreshing change and a sign that there may be more artistic substance to this director.

The film tells the story, in flashback form, of Humbert Humbert, a middle-aged British professor of French literature who has come to the United States to take up a college lecturing position. Behind Humbert's urbane exterior is a deep psychological scar--the memory of his teenage romance with Annabel Leigh, a relationship that ended a year later when typhus suddenly took the young girl's life. Humbert is so devastated by her death that part of him, even as he matures, remains adolescent with Annabel Leigh permanently frozen in his consciousness as his idealised woman.

This unrequited obsession comes to the surface when he arrives in the small New England town of Ramsdale, two and half decades later in 1947, and takes up lodging with a widow, Charlotte Haze, and her 12-year-old daughter, Lolita. Humbert is so transfixed by Lolita that he courts and marries Charlotte Haze just to be near the beautiful and

flirtatious young girl.

As the days and weeks pass Humbert draws Lolita closer to him while scheming how he can disentangle himself from Charlotte Haze. The opportunity arises when Charlotte, after a furious argument with Humbert, flees the house and is run down and killed by a passing motorist. Humbert, unmoved by Charlotte's death, retrieves Lolita from a school summer camp and takes her on a motoring trip across the US. So begins her seduction and their sexual affair.

To ensure the relationship remains a secret, the couple are constantly on the move passing through expensive old-world guest houses, tawdry motels and cheap hotels. As they cross late 1940s America--a panorama of gas stations, empty deserts and stark industrial wastelands--Humbert loses his grip over Lolita and reality itself. He is possessive, jealous and often violent, his academic exterior and subdued European demeanour at odds with Lolita's childish spontaneity, brashness and developing sexual sophistication.

After a brief and problematic stay at Beardsley College, Humbert's lecturing post, the troubled couple resume their journey across the US. Humbert soon begins to suspect that they are being followed by the police or something more dangerous--another male seeking Lolita's affection. After Lolita disappears, apparently with another man, Humbert becomes completely unhinged and vows to find her and seek revenge on the man who has taken her from him.

Lyne has been able to elicit strong performances from Jeremy Irons, as Humbert, and the 15-year-old Dominique Swain, as Lolita. Swain is extraordinary, capturing the optimism and spontaneity of a precocious teenage girl, her life and childhood cruelly shattered by the secret and destructive relationship with Humbert. Irons displays an emotional range and flexibility not seen in previous film roles, subtly shifting from the calculating to the vulnerable, from the cruel to the hopeless romantic. He portrays a man obsessively jealous and paranoid, yet capable of intense remorse and subtle understated humour.

In the first film version of *Lolita*, released in 1962 and directed by Stanley Kubrick, Lolita's mother, Charlotte Haze

(Shelley Winters) and the depraved Clare Quilty, brilliantly played by Peter Sellers, have extensive roles. In Lyne's version these characters--Melanie Griffith and Frank Langella--have only limited parts. Griffith therefore seems only able to present the comic side of Charlotte Haze, and although Langella is dark enough as Quilty the final bloody altercation between Humbert and Quilty is melodramatic and one of the weaker moments in the film.

Despite Lyne's propensity for the atmospheric visual cliché--a tendency noticeable in his portrayal of Humbert's childhood romance--Lolita's seduction and other encounters are not sensationalised but portrayed with sensitivity and skill. Irons' voice-over readings of Nabokov's prose, Ennio Morricone's understated musical score, and first class cinematography in New England, North Carolina, Louisiana, West Texas and New Mexico, combine to form some of the film's more lyrical moments.

Lolita has been plagued by almost as much controversy as the Nabokov novel when it first appeared almost 45 years ago in Paris. The book, although acclaimed by many as one of the great novels of century, was banned for a short period in France, at the request of the British authorities, and in several other countries including Australia. It was not published in the US until 1958 and was outlawed in Australia until 1964.

Lyne's film, first screened in Europe two years ago and shown in 19 countries since, has been denounced by Christian fundamentalists and other rightwing elements internationally. In 1997, Britain's tabloid press attacked *Lolita* in lurid tones and American studios refused to distribute the film. Its first US showings were on the Showtime cable channel in August 1998.

In Australia, Trish Draper, a federal government MP leading a campaign to ban the film claimed, before she had even viewed the movie, that it encouraged paedophilia. This is patently false. Like any serious work of art, *Lolita* unapologetically focuses our attention on an aspect of the society we currently inhabit. The film does not advocate paedophilia--it simply recognises its existence with a rich and all-sided portrayal of Humbert Humbert's sexually-obsessive behaviour and its tragic impact on Lolita.

To claim that films or any other art form acknowledging the existence of paedophilia, incest, murder or rape condone or promote such anti-social behaviour is ignorant in the extreme and raises other serious questions. If *Lolita* should be banned under the bogus banner of preventing paedophilia why stop there? Why not ban Shakespeare or ancient Greek tragedy where incest, rape and other acts of violence abound?

Jeremy Irons, who recently visited Australia to promote another film, made the following comments about the *Lolita*

controversy: "Paedophilia is a ghastly problem but it would be much worse if we couldn't make films about it, to air and exorcise these issues in the safety of the cinema.

"People in governments and bureaucracies often like things to be black and white, intelligent audiences know life is grey. That's why I think it is desperately important that this film, and others like it, be seen and continue to be made because they allow us to be adult, discerning, moralistic people who can see a story, be shocked, appalled, excited, moved by it and make up our own minds.

"The whole subject should be discussed sensibly, rationally, morally, kindly and generously without the tabloid headlining, opinion-making rubbish that is spewed out by moralists and politicians who want to jump on a bandwagon."

This is entirely correct. In fact, a rational and scientifically-informed discussion on sexually obsessive behaviour and other social issues, is something that the Christian fundamentalists and other right-wing elements fear most of all. Their agenda, which represents a serious political attack on artistic freedom and other democratic rights, can only be advanced in an atmosphere of ignorance, confusion and subjective hysteria.

Lyne's *Lolita*, like the Nabokov novel, is not a documentary, nor does it offer any solution to Humbert's problems or how to repair the psychological damage inflicted on Lolita. This is not the task of film directors or novelists. Their work, and that of all serious artists, is to present an honest and artistically convincing picture of reality--life as it is, and life as it should be. In heightening our sensitivity to this and other real contradictions artists provide us with a richer understanding of the world and help to cultivate the foundations on which humanity can understand and therefore overcome great social problems.



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