Fabula / Les Colloques
Circulations entre les arts. Interroger l'intersémioticité

Poetics of hybridity: *Lolita, an Imagined Opera*, a creation by composer Joshua Fineberg, scenographer Jim Clayburgh, choreographer Johanne Saunier, and video artist Kurt d'Haeseleer

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I would like to express my most grateful thanks to Joshua Fineberg, who not only replied most kindly to my solicitations about his work, but invited me to a conference he gave to composition PhD students at New York University, gave me access to the rehearsals, and answered all my questions. I would also like to thank Jim Clayburgh, Johanne Saulnier and Kurt d'Haeseleer for graciously accepting to answer my questions and for their acceptance of my presence at the rehearsals.

The "imagined opera" analyzed in this article[1] being an adaptation of Nabokov's notorious novel Lolita, it seems important to recall one important fact about Vladimir Nabokov himself—namely, that the trilingual author of the best-selling 1955 novel was a synaesthete.[2] Nabokov indeed experienced the world through conjoined senses: in his autobiography Speak, Memory, he described what he called his "colored hearing",[3] or how letters (in their sounds, not in their shape) had a precise color tinge for him.[4] To put it differently, in Nabokov's experience of his

1 This paper expands material from a formerly-published article (and corrects some facts given in the latter): "Nabokov's Poerotics of Dancing: From Word to Movement". In *Kaleidoscopic Nabokov*. Eds. M. Manolescu & L. Delage-Toriel. Paris, M. Houdiard, 2009. 57-71.

2 Synaesthesia is a perceptual condition of the brain, which results in that individuals with synaesthesia perceive elements of their environment through "joined sensations" (the literal meaning of synaesthesia). It is thus a neurologically-based phenomenon in which stimulation of one sensory or cognitive pathway leads to automatic, involuntary experiences in a second sensory or cognitive pathway. Various forms of senses association exist; for example a voice or music will not only be heard, but also seen (perception of shapes or colors as the subject hears), tasted (tastes in the subject's mouth are perceived) or felt as a physical touch. As Richard E. Cytowic and David M. Eagleman explain and demonstrate in their book on synaesthesia, "synesthetic perception results from a heritable overinteraction between different areas of the brain" Cytowic Richard E. & David M. Eagleman. *Wednesday Is Indigo Blue: Discovering the Brain of Synaesthesia*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2009, p.11.

3 Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited. In Novels and Memoirs 1941-1951: The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Bend Sinister, Speak, Memory, ed. Brian Boyd. New York,Library of America, 1996. Chap. II, 381-382. See also: "I also have this rather freakish gift of seeing letters in color. It's called color hearing" Nabokov, Strong Opinions. New York, McGraw Hill, 1973, 17.

4 Technically speaking, Nabokov associated *morphemes* to colors, not letters *stricto sensu*. The Painter Joan Holabird published a book in 2005 a book entitled *Vladimir Nabokov: Alphabet in Color*, which displays her images of these letters in the color shade described by Nabokov. Jean Holabird, *Vladimir Nabokov: Alphabet in Color.* Berkeley, CA, Gingko Press, 2005.

surroundings, and in his aesthetics, visual perception could not be isolated from the other senses. As Barthes explained, vision does call forth other senses:

> Comme lieu de signifiance, le regard provoque une synesthésie, une indivision des sens (physiologiques), qui mettent leurs impressions en commun, de telle sorte qu'on puisse attribuer à l'un, poétiquement, ce qui arrive à l'autre (« Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfant ») : tous les sens peuvent donc « regarder », et inversement, le regard peut sentir, écouter, tâter, etc.[5]

It is not clear whether Roland Barthes was a synaesthete himself, but his quoting Baudelaire's "Correspondances" is a very apt reflection of Nabokov's own condition.[6]

In Nabokov's fiction, the interplay of gazing and desire is expressed in highly poetic prose, which Maurice Couturier calls "poerotic writing"[7]. It is especially illustrated in the depictions of the desired body in movement, which largely rely on intersemiotic borrowings to the fields of painting, music, ballet, and more popular forms of art/ activities.[8] Hybridity is indeed a key-term for Nabokov, a Russian poet turned into an American novelist, a man who was both an artist and a scientist specializing in Lepidoptera, i.e. butterflies the epitome of metamorphosis.

To Nabokov's poerotic hybrid prose, composer Joshua Fineberg,[9] with artists Johanne Saunier, Jim Clayburgh[10] and Kurt d'Haeseleer,[11] responded with Lolita, An Imagined Opera, which is a multimedia or intermedial[12] work of art. This work is multimedia is in its literal sense, and is, as such, synaesthetic, for it mixes literature, music (both instrumental and electronic), drama, ballet, and video art, thus aptly appealing to various senses of the spectator. The original idea for the creation is Joshua Fineberg's, who explained that he had been thinking about adapting Lolita for quite a long time, initially envisioning it as "a ballet where everyone was mute except the narrator"[13]. However, it is only when he began teaching at Harvard in

5 Roland Barthes, « Droit dans les yeux », in *L'obvie et l'obtus*, Paris, Seuil, « Points », 1992, p.280.

6 On the importance of synaesthesia in Nabokov's creative process, consult Don Barton Johnson's analyses. Don Barton Johnson, "Synaesthesia, Polychromatism, and Nabokov", in *Russian Literature Triquarterly* 3 (1972), 378-397.

7 Maurice Couturier, *Nabokov ou la tyrannie de l'auteur,* Paris, Seuil, 1993, p.309.

8 See Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, Raguet-Bouvart, "Looking at Harlequins: Nabokov, the World of Art and the Ballets Russes", in *Nabokov's World. Volume 2: Reading Nabokov*, éds. Jane Grayson, Arnold McMillin & Priscilla Meyer. New York,Palgrave, 2002, p. 73-95. Ou: Christine Raguet-Bouvart. "European Art: A Framing Device?" In *Nabokov at the Limits: Redrawing the Critical Boundaries*, ed. L. Zunshine, New York, Garland, 1999, p.186-196.

9 Joshua Fineberg was born in 1969; he is a contemporary composer who taught composition at Harvard University and now teaches at Boston University, but he also conducted extended research at the IRCAM in Paris.

10 Jim Clayburgh and Johanne Saunier created the JoJi Inc. company in 1998. For the 2009 American creation, the Argento Ensemble, conducted by Michel Galante, played the music J. Fineberg composed. The Ensemble Fa, conducted by Dominique My, played in the 2008 Marseille première.

11 Kurt d'Haeseleer is a Belgian video artist and produces (interactive) installations. Besides making his own performances, d'Haeseleer regularly works as a video designer in theatre, dance and opera. Since 2010 Kurt d'Haeseleer has been the artistic director of de WERKTANK, a small-scale production house for media art in Bierbeek.

12 The point of part III of this paper is to define whether this work is intermedial or multimedia.

2000 that he laid the first bases for what he calls "an opera, but one that occurs completely within the mind of the narrator" (Fineberg Artsake). He completed the composition of the music in 2006, and Part One was performed as an oratorio at the Miller Theater (Columbia University) in May 2006. Moreover, since Joshua Fineberg extensively and intensively worked on the Lolita project in collaboration with the renowned electronic music researchers of the IRCAM in Paris,[14] the production of the final multimedia work was actually a joint commission from the GMEM[15] in Marseille and the IRCAM itself. Lolita, un opéra imaginaire, premiered in Marseille, France in 2008,[16] and was created in its English version in the US in 2009 in Montclair, New Jersey.[17]

In the following presentation and analysis of this work, three points will be developed: the first point will discuss in detail how the circulation of the narrative stance of the original novel operates through the adaptation process; the second briefly evokes how critics and spectators reacted; the third point examines the ways in which the various semiotic codes interact and circulate in this unique piece, so as to say whether it can be considered an intermedial work or not.

Transferring the narrative stance from the novel to the imagined opera

Being an adaptation, Lolita, An Imagined Opera already has an interesting status in terms of interartistic relations, since it is a "palimpsestuous" work[18]. Fineberg worked on this project with three artists (located in Belgium) who create contemporary ballets together, scenographer Jim Clayburgh, choreographer Johanne Saunier, and video artist Kurt d'Haeseleer. The team work naturally explains the hybrid, multimedia nature of the final performance, and its partly digital nature.

13 Argento Ensemble, "Lolita: Argento Concert Preview, Apr. 3, 4 & 5, '09, Montclair, NJ", 7 October 2012. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QuJ8SkhlGDM>

14 IRCAM (*Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique*), in Paris. Joshua Fineberg especially worked with Charles Bascou and Olivier Pasquet.

15 GMEM (*Groupe de Musique Expérimentale de Marseille*) project, part of the French National Center for Musical Creation (*Centre National de Création Musicale*): <http://www.gmem.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1&Itemid=26>. "Joshua Fineberg Lolita". GMEM website. 7 October 2012. <http://www.gmem.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=87&Itemid=88>

16 Première during the Festival "*Les Musiques*" at the *Friche La Belle de mai – La Cartonnerie*, on April 17, 2008, Marseille (France).

17 Peaks Performances Program, performed on April 3, 4 and 5, 2009, at the Alexander Kasser Theater, Montclair State University, NJ (USA).

18 Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation,* New York, Routledge, 2006, p.6.

One should note that the term "imagined opera" or "imaginary opera" (both expressions have been used by the creators, in both public documents and work papers) was coined for this adaptation, because it is a unique type of work mixing various semiotic codes. An "imagined opera" was the term finally chosen for the American première, but for the French creation, the word "imaginary" appeared on the programs and posters.[19] The hesitation between the two adjectives is interesting and quite revealing of the adaptation process. Indeed, from the very start, Fineberg wanted to immerse the spectators into the mind of Humbert Humbert, "to put the public inside the mind of a mad man" (Fineberg, Argento), so as to reproduce the homodiegetic narration used in the novel. This why the opera had to be "imaginary" from the start: the point of the novel Lolita is that the nymphet-heroine is Humbert's "fanciful creation [...] having no will, no consciousness — indeed, no life of her own" (Nabokov Lolita, 62), and not the actual 12-year-old schoolgirl the narrator meets. In his interview with Bernard Pivot in 1975, Nabokov insisted on that point:

> Lolita n'est pas une jeune fille perverse, c'est une pauvre enfant que l'on débauche, et dont les sens ne s'éveillent jamais sous les caresses de l'immonde Monsieur Humbert. [...] En réalité, je le répète, Lolita est une fillette de douze ans, tandis que Humbert est un homme mûr. Et c'est l'abîme entre son âge et celui de la fillette qui produit ce vide, le vertige, la séduction, l'attrait d'un danger mortel. En second lieu, c'est l'imagination du triste satyre qui fait une créature magique de cette petite écolière américaine, aussi banale et normale dans son genre que le poète manqué Humbert est dans le sien. En dehors du regard maniaque de Monsieur Humbert, il n'y a pas de nymphette. Lolita la nymphette n'existe qu'à travers la hantise qui détruit Humbert. Et voici un aspect essentiel d'un livre singulier qui a été faussé par une popularité factice.[20]

It is therefore quite relevant that the final term chosen by the artists was "imagined", rather than "imaginary". If "imaginary" points to the fictional nature of the story, the word "imagined" underlines further the fact that the story takes place within a deranged mind, that of a madman with a seductive and persuasive "fancy prose style" (Nabokov Lolita, 9).

In fact, both the stage design and the music of Lolita An Imagined Opera aim at transferring the narrative situation in the book; but it is clear that this aim is due to Joshua Fineberg's particularly sensitive reading of Nabokov's novel, and his thorough understanding of the book's subtleties and complexities. By reading the libretto,[21] the Nabokov scholar can only but be struck by its very impressive quality:

19 In his interview with Cécile Gilly on the French public radio France Culture in 2008, Joshua Fineberg explained that he used the term "imaginary opera" because there is no term for this type of multimedia work in which no one actually sings, and in the interview broadcast on the internet, he also talks about "musical theater" (Argento).

20 Quote from Nabokov's interview by Bernard Pivot, *Les Grands Entretiens de Bernard Pivot, Vladimir Nabokov,* DVD. Gallimard/ INA.27:42 to 31:54, my emphasis.

the passages Joshua Fineberg selected for his opera are very carefully chosen and rearranged, and contain all the key-passages from the novel. It took Joshua Fineberg a long time to come up with the libretto, and it is not surprising at all, as it must have been a very difficult task. At the conference Mr. Fineberg gave at New York University to PhD composition students, before talking about the music he created for this adaptation, the composer began his lecture by explaining the sort of novel Lolita is:

> Lolita is a very strange book. It's not quite the book people think it is. There is this story between an old man and a young girl; it's also a meditation on language, on writing fiction, a study in mental pathology and madness; it is about rendering art in fiction. It is an extremely referential work. Words are not there just for their surface meaning.

He illustrated his point by analyzing the final sentences of the novel, and explained that when he reduced the 300-page book to 11 pages, it was necessary to make a large structural analysis. He added that he immediately knew he "wanted the spectator to be immersed: it had to be a performance with no intermission, nor anything programmed with it, and a high level of attention: hence the piece had to be between 65 and 80 minutes". The duration was the starting point, and he worked backwards from there.[22] Fineberg's intention was, from the very start, to be able to "place the audience in the deeply uncomfortable situation of feeling simultaneously attracted to and revolted by this most seductive monster" (Fineberg Artsake).

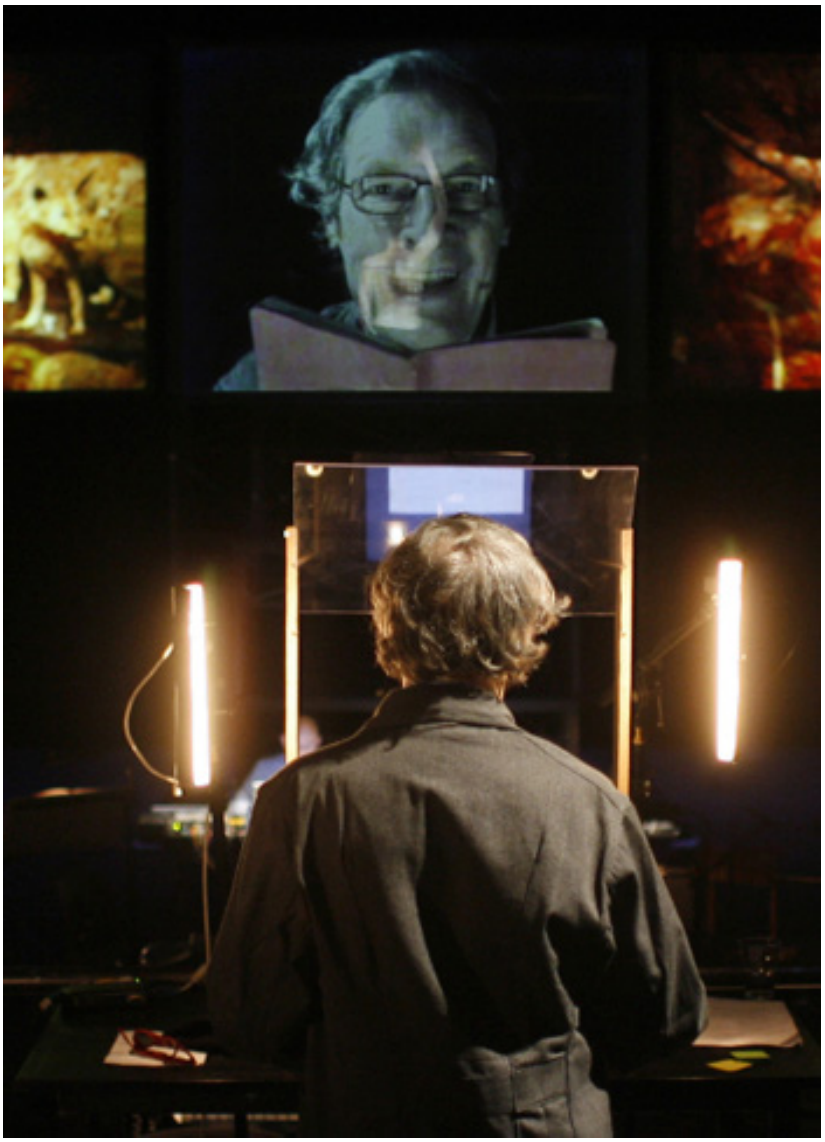
Now, calling this type of work an "opera" required indeed for such an adjective as "imaginary" or "imagined" to be attached to the term, since there is no singer on stage for this piece. This unusual feature for an opera is probably the reason why one critic said of the piece that it "is less an opera in any conventional sense than a multimedia monodrama"[23]. Instead of singers on stage, this "imagined opera" has an actor playing Humbert Humbert, sitting amidst the audience, with a flat-screen monitor in front of him and three cameras around him. The actor does not sing but reads the libretto from a prompter, while other excerpts from the novel are broadcast, delivered by electronic female voices that are created by the computer-generated transformation of Humbert's voice into song. Therefore, all of the voices heard in the piece stem from that of the actor who portrays Humbert, thanks to a complex electronic device. At the same time, a live video of the actor is projected onto a huge screen in front of two female dancers, whose bodies are seen only in

21 The libretto was approved by the Nabokov estate, and Dmitri Nabokov in particular. I would like to thank Joshua Fineberg again for kindly giving me a copy of his libretto. The libretto is also downloadable from the GMEM website : "Joshua Fineberg Lolita". GMEM website. 7 October 2012. <http://www.gmem.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=87&Itemid=88>

22 The final production is 70-minutes long.

23 Steve Smith, "Humbert Humbert (Conjuring Nymphet)", 7 April 2009, 7 October 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/08/arts/music/08loli.html>

the revealing light of the actor's face: consequently, the spectators are "watching Humbert's face in close-up, the musicians plugging away at conflicting tones, two dancers silhouetting the titular nymphet literally inside Humbert's head"[24]. The central screen has two larger screens placed at its right and left sides, which present various video images echoing what Humbert says, or showing visual ripples of motifs from the novel.[25]



Kurt d'Haeseleer

During the performance, while the actor is talking, the spectator is literally taken into a vortex of ghostly voices resounding around the hall in a variety of vocal timbres (specific speakers are placed around the spectators so that they are

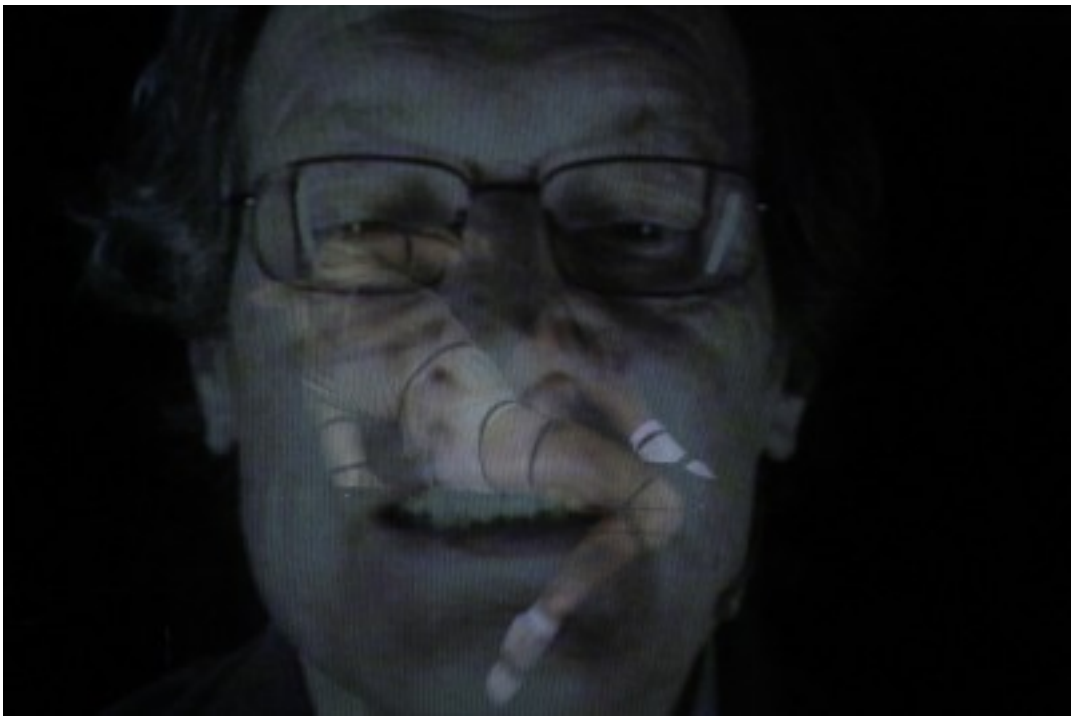
24 David Clarke, "In the Mind of Humbert", 9 April 2009, 7 October 2012. <http://www.peakperfs.org/insite/?p=622>

25 For more images of the organization of the stage, consult the website of Joji.inc, the company created by Johanne Saunier and Jim Clayburgh: http://www.jojiinc.org/en/prod_lolita_pics.htm

engulfed in these voices). Fineberg chose to create electronically all the characters' voices through Humbert's so as to illustrate the concept that Nabokov's book is less a multi-character narrative than a first-person memoir, in which everyone who appears is modulated through the narrator's voice. As David Cote puts it,

If the experience of reading the 1955 novel is like being immersed in the twisted mind of a brilliant pedophile, then the new "imagined opera" based on the book is a clever three-dimensional extension of that same phenomenon.[26]

To parallel the musical structure, Jim Clayburgh, the stage director chose to project a live video of the actor speaking on the central flat screen in the background. Hence the idea of a homodiegetic narrator is perfectly pictured: the audience sees what Humbert sees and hears; it is the product of Humbert's narrative and imagination that we see on stage, as snatches of the bodies of the dancers are seen through the light and colors of his floating projected face, as if we stared into his disturbed mind. Steve Smith, who reviewed the show for the New York Times, described that "the complex staging, brilliantly executed, pulled you deep inside Humbert's increasingly manic obsession"[27].



Patrick Gherdoussi, Joji Inc.

Through this projection, Humbert the character is virtualized: he loses substance just like any fictional creature, echoing all the many metafictional hints to be found

26 David Cote, "Humbert Humbert on Trial", 1 April 2009, 7 October 2012. <http://histriomastix.typepad.com/weblog/2009/04/lo-lee-ta.html >

27 Smith, *Op.cit.*

in the novel: "Imagine me. I shall not exist if you do not imagine me" (Nabokov Lolita, 129). Just as Humbert never lets the reader forget it is a book he or she is reading, the adaptation never lets the spectator forget it is a performance he or she is experiencing; on stage, the audience can see the musicians, the video and electronic music technicians at work behind their screens, and all the cables going from their computer over and down the stage. No "suspension of disbelief" is sought; there is no illusion of a fourth wall.

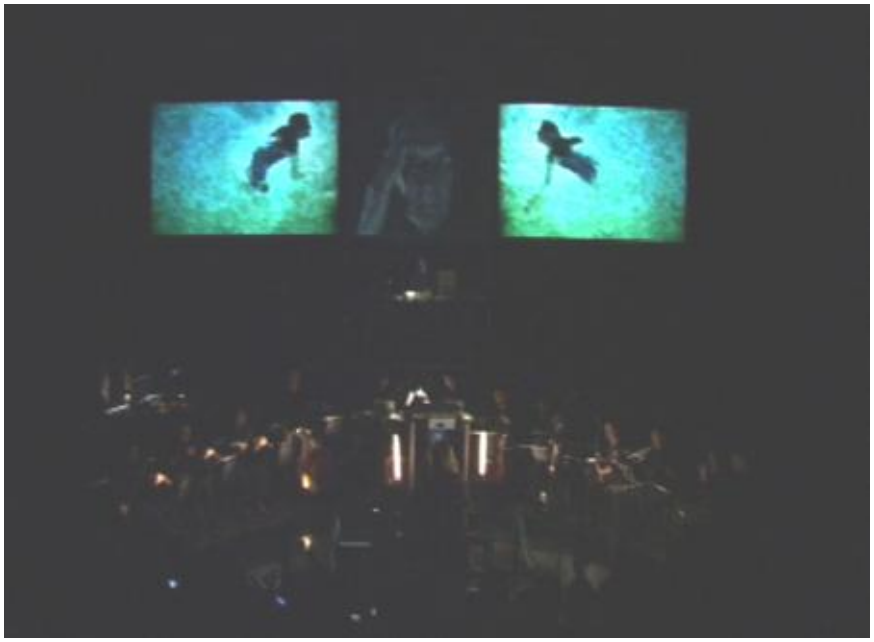
In the same vein, the production team decided not to impersonate Lolita in a particular dancer. Since the nymphet is a creation of Humbert's perturbed mind, only representations of Humbert's fantasies are staged by the dancers. Joshua Fineberg explained that laser people would have been too expensive, so the choreographer decided to clothe the two dancers in black body suits, so that they could bare the body part they wished, and then show it in the light of Humbert's face. The spectator thus perceives forearms, legs, white-socked feet, white-pantied buttocks, knees, in jerking, or luscious movements. The metonymic device reflects the very nature of the depictions of Lolita in the novel: her body is never described completely, as it eludes Humbert's descriptive grasp. Later in the performance, the dancers put on jeans, fake-looking blond wigs, and the famous heart-shaped sunglasses (a direct echo to Kubrick's film poster), in order to enhance the artificiality of the female figures. As Fineberg explained during his NYU lecture, these accessories underscore the fact that "they are puppets in Humbert's hands, and not people".

The stage design echoes various elements from the novel. One can recall that Nabokov's first glimpse of Lolita was a story about an ape that had drawn the bars of its own cage (Nabokov Lolita, 311). The theme of imprisonment is reflected in the two spaces where Humbert and the dancers are set: as explained above, Humbert is among the spectators, turning to them and addressing them as "members of the jury", or turning his back on them and thus placing the audience in the same perspective as his own to look at the staging of his mind. The interesting fact is that Humbert is inside a square of black metal, which he never leaves. When the audience enters the theater, the actor is already there, waiting, as if in a witness box, for his jury. Echoing this cage or witness box is the space above the technicians and behind the screen where Humbert's face is projected: the dancers show their body parts in this other square, enclosed space, which can be seen as a reflection of both the homodiegetic structure of the novel, and of the narrator imprisoned in his fantasies.

Likewise, the video art images created by Kurt d'Haeseleer and displayed on the large screens flanking the central screen visually recall key motifs from the novel: a nymphet floating within entangled branches, monotonous highways, an arctic

landscape, the lonely motel rooms where he rapes Lolita every night, white suburban fences, fluorescent lights. It is important to underline the anchoring function of these images: since only fragments from the novel are delivered by the actor (and are sometimes drowned in the surrounding music), these images are there to conjure up the setting of the story; they complement the spoken words. Moreover, since they are designated as artificial renderings, these digital images also produce a de-realization effect, which is part and parcel of the narrative structure:

> It makes perfect sense, in the opera, that Humbert's consciousness is not represented in any traditional form of stagecraft (live actors playing out scenes in realistic sets) but through video projections, snatches of reality filtered through digital technology. Our antihero is surrounded in his cell by shadows of his past, his memories, and the projections of his erotic desires.[28]



Kurt d'Haeseleer

Indeed, digital art, and video art in particular, draws on the tradition of optical devices such as the camera obscura, and enhance the imaginary nature of creation:

> Beaucoup des dispositifs imaginés pour les installations video paraissent prolonger les boîtes et jeux optiques des siècles antérieurs. L'illusionnisme est de mise, qui nous entraîne dans des univers imaginaires.[29]

28 Cote, *Op. cit*.

29 Florence de Mèredieu, Arts et nouvelles technologies, Paris, Larousse, 2003, p.59.

Since Humbert does not allow any other voice but his own in the story, Fineberg thought, from the start, that dancing, enhanced by video art, was the ideal means for those characters to find their way through Humbert's words, what he calls his "shared solipsism".[30] Consequently, in this adaptation, the very narrative structure of the novel is transposed onto the dramatic and musical material. Fineberg worked with the IRCAM electronics researchers[31] for three years to create the semi-automatic system for speech to chant conversion that enabled to create voices from the actor's own voice. Thanks to this technique, called 'envelope processing', the actor's words are transformed into different female singing voices, so that all the voices heard in the performance come from Humbert's, just like in the homodiegetic narrative:

> All these 'sung' voices are the result of computer transformations of the narrator's spoken voice. To transform the narrator's 'real' voice into this exalted song, a specially developed computer program separates his speech into two components: a source the sound as if the computer could directly capture the uncolored vocalizations made by the narrator's glottis and a filter that reproduces the effect of his body (vocal cavity and sinuses, etc.). This allows the narrator's actual voice to be twisted and pulled into various new lines while retaining much of its original color. It can then be 'sung' through a hybrid, imaginary body calculated by the computer that contains some parts of the narrator himself and some parts from anything else he might imagine. We recorded many of the same phrases sung by singers of different genders and ages to create material for these hybrids. With these 'filters' from other bodies our Humbert tries to sing through the bodies he imagines, though he can never completely eliminate the solipsistic sound of his own voice. These voices are not intended to sound like the voices of 'real' singers. However, they should not sound like electronic transformations either. They are meant to evoke the unreality and strangeness of a fantasy, the sound of voices in our heads. (Fineberg Artsake)

This technique of voice conversion is a particular challenge in music because it is meant to create sonic objects that seem both real and impossible simultaneously. As Fineberg explains, if they sound artificial, the sense of impossibility disappears. Without this fragile balance, the double layer Fineberg aimed at would not be possible: indeed Humbert's convincing rhetoric is undermined by the dark music, and the disturbing female young voices.

What music does is it allows a sort of emotional communication, it allows one to cause somebody's guts to clench up, and that gives one the power to really do something very much like what Nabokov was doing in the novel. It allows to put one

30 France Culture interview by Cécile Gilly, *Miniatures*, April 14, 2008.

31 The research team headed by Axel Roebel worked on that project. Mr. Roebel, along with Olivier Pasquet and Charles Bascou were especially involved in the project.

thing on the surface and completely undermine it, so that you can have a man talking about how beautiful and idyllic something is, and you can create an environment where one can't possibly think of it as beautiful. (Fineberg Argento)

The piece starts with music only, and opens with electronic sounds played by the pianist on a device holding all the electronic elements. In fact, just as Nabokov's name is on the cover of the book, the opera opens with computer-modified versions of the writer's voice: Fineberg took the vowel sounds of Nabokov reading the poem Humbert writes after Lolita disappears (Nabokov Lolita, 255-257) during an interview,[32] processed those sounds through various devices, tweaked them into massive C sounds scores that no longer sound like voices, nor like instruments, creating a very eerie feeling. To the NYU students, Fineberg explained how he wanted the vowels to become part of the musical language, in order to state, from the opening, the ambiguity between music and text which is at the core of this "imagined opera". Knowing that Joshua Fineberg is considered to belong to the second generation of composers influenced by spectral music,[33] one cannot but perceive, even though the sound technique and the key are different, a striking affinity in effect between the opening chord of Lolita and the opening chord of Gérard Grisey's Partiels, which, according to Joshua Fineberg himself, is cited by many second and third generation spectral composers as the piece having triggered their interest in spectral music.[34]

The opera is structured in three parts. The first one, about 12 minutes-long, is meant to create the persona of Humbert, his childhood, his obsession, following the parody of a crime confessional that the novel stages. Musically, it is like any opening of an opera: it provides a laying-out of the themes and the musical material. To quote Joshua Fineberg, it is like "introducing the laws of physics so that later on you perceive when those laws are transgressed". After an interlude about the sanatorium and arctic episodes, comes what the composer terms "the big work", namely Humbert creating his fantasy, his nymphet. Musically, while the "sung" voices heard around the audience were voices of teenagers or more undetermined voices during the first part, at that point the music from the instruments becomes darker and darker, and the computer-generated voices are more and more child-like, to create a sense of vulnerability. As shown before, Fineberg clearly had the intention of undermining Humbert's discourse with his music, so as to make obvious how "horrid and sick" Humbert's deeds are. After this emotional climax ("you see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go" Nabokov Lolita, 142, end of part I),

32 One can listen to Nabokov reading his poem on the following webpage: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4846479>

33 Joshua Fineberg was even the editor of two volumes of *Contemporary Music Review* dedicated to spectral music.

34 Fineberg 2000, *Op. cit.* 117.

a long and heavy silence weighs over the audience. The fact that the spectator is surrounded by those child voices superimposed onto the actor's voice is very powerful, very "unsettling", as the composer puts it and means it. The last part illustrates how Humbert is unable to maintain the fantasy he created, and it weaves together key-episodes, such as the last meeting with Lolita, and the killing of Quilty, superimposed through the play between computer voices and the actor's words. However, it is quite difficult for someone who does not know the story to really follow the plot at that point, despite the performance notes given to the audience, which identify the characters.

The performance notes are interesting to study as well, and indicate how the artists' team thought out all the aspects of this imagined opera, for these notes aim at transferring the function of the paratext in Nabokov's work (the fictitious Foreword by John Ray, Jr., which contains many essential clues to the novel). Below is the transcription of the performance notes:

> Humbert Humbert now finds himself presenting his defense, his side of the story, through a video deposition given while confined for driving on the wrong side of the road—among other things including, but not limited to, murder.

The text for this performance has been taken (extracted) verbatim from Humbert Humbert's prison notes as annotated by the Poling Prize winning author John Ray 3rd, court clerk and amateur psychotherapist. Mr. Ray has since become modestly famous for his oeuvre "Do the Senses Make Sense?" wherein certain morbid states and perversions are discussed. Save for the correction of obvious solecisms and a careful suppression of certain tenacious details, this work is presented in its authorized shortened version so as to focus on some of its main elements: the wayward child, the egotistic mother, the panting maniac.

Mr. Ray notes that "Lolita" should make all of us—parents, social workers, educators —apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation to a safer world.

For those not familiar with the original text:

> Annabel Leigh 1911-1923
> First love, dead from typhus in Corfu.
>
> Monique XXX dates unknown
> Hooker—presumed dead
>
> Valeria Maximovitch
> Née Zborovski 1911-1945
> First wife of Humbert (1935-1939)
> Divorced, remarried, now dead.

> Charlotte Haze 1917-1947
> Allegedly killed while crossing a street without looking both ways.
>
> Mrs. Robert Schiller
> Née Dolores Haze 1935-1952
> AKA Lo, Lola, Lolita, died in childbed giving birth to a baby girl on Christmas Day, just outside of Gray Star, a settlement in the remotest northwest.
>
> Mona Doll 1935-??
> Schoolmate of Dolores, left the U.S. to study in Paris (France?) and never seen again
>
> Claire Quilty 1911-1952
> Well known, but little respected, bi-sexual playwright—subject of a soon to be published unauthorized biography by Vivian Darkbloom entitled "My Cue."
>
> Humbert Humbert 1911-1952
> Dead from a heart attack while in detention shortly after giving this deposition.

Beardsley is a small comfortable town in New England, USA, with a school for girls of the same name, reputed for the high moral standards it teaches. (Peak Performances)[35]

One should mention that, despite what the performance notes indicate, the first part of these notes (down to "safer world") is a playful editing of John Ray Jr.'s foreword, made by director Jim Clayburgh, while the list of characters and the note about Beardsley were elaborated by Joshua Fineberg, as shown by the libretto. This may account for the subtle incoherencies to be found in these notes: for instance, there were no video depositions in the 1960s, but one can appreciate how the pseudo-author of the performance notes positions himself as the rightful descendant of John Ray, John Ray 3rd. The double source of the notes way also explain why it was probably difficult for the spectators who did not know the novel to connect the characters in the list and the fragments of the novel read by the actor impersonating Humbert Humbert. For example, Valeria, Humbert's first wife, is never mentioned by her name in the libretto, but only hinted at through the following quotes (which only spectators who know the novel very well can trace

35 A few elements do not exactly correspond to the novel: Humbert birth year (1910); Lolita's married name (Mrs. *Richard* F. Schiller); Quilty's first name (Claire instead of Clare). The fact that Charlotte Haze is Humbert's second wife is not mentioned, and could have helped the spectators who are not familiar with the plot. It was also chosen to leave out the fact that Lolita dies in labor, giving birth to a *stillborn* girl, in a quite monstrous cluster of life and death. It is also difficult to know if the change of name of Mona Dahl for Mona Doll is an intended pun, but it does echo passages from the novel quite aptly: "Diana and who, having gotten hold of a book on hypnotism, plunges a number of lost hunters into various entertaining trances before falling in her turn under the spell of a vagabond poet (*Mona Dahl*). [...] The red-capped, uniformly attired hunters, went through a complete change of mind in Dolly's Dell" (Nabokov *Lolita*, 200-201). The following page numbers are taken from *The Annotated Lolita,* Ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. New York, Vintage International, 1991.

back to her): "The bleached curl revealed its melanic root; Moth holes in the plush of matrimonial comfort" (Fineberg Libretto, 3).

Some critics did recommend to potential spectators to read the novel before attending the show, for it could indeed be complicated to understand what the piece was about without prior knowledge of the book (Cote; Clarke); but as Fineberg himself stated, his focus was not on the plot itself, as most previous adaptations have done. His intention was to "give his audience unprecedented access to the mental state of the protagonist" (Boston University Website). In addition, the fact that the performance notes do not really help the spectators with decoding the story actually mirrors the way John Ray Jr.'s foreword functions in Nabokov's novel: when read for the first time, a lot of the clues scattered in it are bound to be unnoticed.

As Humbert Humbert, the production team chose an actor named François Beukelaers. He is a Belgian actor in his seventies, who does impersonate a very classy and scary Humbert, even though he is a lot older than the character in the novel. Fineberg also found the fact that the actor is a non-native speaker especially interesting, as Humbert is a foreigner too (and Lolita does not always understand him[36]). Yet one can regret that the actor was not better trained at reading Nabokov's poetic and complex sentences in English: the recurring mispronunciation did impair the understanding of the text at times,[37] especially when it was meant to be delivered fast. Joshua Fineberg explained that he hurried the actor on purpose—the text on the prompter dictates the pace of delivery—in order to recreate a typical feature of people with mental disorder, called 'forced speech'. It is indeed a brilliant idea, but on the nights of the performance it produced more grumbled incomprehensible words than the effect sought by the composer.

It is quite clear that Lolita, An Imagined Opera is the product of a very carefully thought-out adaptation process, and is characterized by the great attention given by both the director and the composer to the narrative structure of the novel. It makes sense that the interpretative choices made by the team of artists are reflected in the spectators' and critics' reactions to the performance.

36 "In former times, when I was still your dream male [the reader will notice what pains I took to speak Lo's tongue], you swooned to records of the number one throb-and-sob idol of your coevals [Lo: "Of my what? Speak English"]" (Nabokov *Lolita*, 149).

37 Reviewer David Cote found it even spoiled the pleasure of hearing Nabokov's text.

Critics' and spectators' reactions

Firstly, it clearly appears that the technical achievement displayed by Lolita is praised by most critics (Clarke, Smith, Cote, Lockwood)[38], and even by the spectators who reacted on the Peaks Performance forum. Resorting to digital techniques in art is a challenge for spectators, and in the case of this piece, which associates digital music treatment and digital visual devices, digital art is a key feature of its conception and performance:

> Interactif, conversationnel, participatif, collaboratif, le numérique bouleverse non seulement les rapports traditionnels entre l'auteur, l'œuvre et le spectateur, mais les mécanismes mêmes de la circulation de l'art, sa contribution à la culture. (Couchot & Hillaire 12)

It should be added that the adaptation process significantly modified the hierarchy the novel creates between the two diegetic levels of the story. The novel displays two diegetic levels: one is the level of Humbert's life at the time of narration, i.e. when he is in prison, awaiting his trial, and writing the story of his relationship with Lolita; the second level is that of the story he is telling, which is embedded in the first one, but referring to previous episodes of his life. In the book, the narrated story takes the upper hand in the mind of the reader, as the narrative is built up in such a way as to make one forget about the reconstructed nature of the story. In the "imagined opera", since the spectator constantly watches Humbert in his witness box, reading his story from the prompter, and since the setting of his story is only hinted at only through the video projections and suggested by the dancers, the spectator's immersion in the plot is not as smooth as in the novel. Henceforth the first diegetic level has the upper hand over the second one.

This shift of weight on one level of the diegesis corresponds to an essential aspect of the "imagined opera": in his adaptation, Fineberg deliberately chose to enhance the monstrous aspects of Humbert, so that the protagonist's rhetoric is constantly undermined by the music and the voices engulfing the audience in the darkened theater. From this point of view, one can see in this effect a confirmation of the function of reduction of ambiguity that sound has in cinema[39]. The immersion into Fineberg's music creates a quite claustrophobic experience (Smith, Clarke), that you cannot escape, unlike when reading a book: "Lolita is intense. It never lets go" (Clarke). As David Clarke put it: "I'm glad I had the opportunity to visit Humbert's consciousness for a night, even though it's a place I never want to visit again". The

38 Alan Lockwood, "Hearing the Imagined", 2 April 2009, 7 October 2012. <http://www.peakperfs.org/insite/?p=598#more-598>

39 Laurent Jullier, *Les sons au cinéma et à la télévision*. Paris, Armand Colin, 1985, p.132.

aim of the piece "to pull deep inside Humbert's increasingly manic obsession" (Smith) is thus brilliantly achieved.

The composer explained he was interested in confronting the contradiction at the core of the novel, but in fact the opera never really lets Humbert's rhetoric take hold of the audience and seduce the spectators as the novel does. Joshua Fineberg said it was a choice he made, which is indeed reflected in the music he composed for the piece, and also in the stress laid on the age-difference between the protagonists: the actor is in his seventies, and we hear the voices of very young children while we hear him describe his first sexual intercourse with Lolita. In the novel, the monstrous aspects of the relationship between Humbert and Lolita are more subtly woven into the fabric of Humbert's rhetoric, and were not always perceived by critics and readers alike. Quite fittingly, one of the opera critics, Cote, even acknowledged how his first reading of the novel had led him to completely identify with Humbert's plea and passion. The Peaks Performance forum also displays the infuriated reaction of a reader of Lolita who did not like the way Humbert was treated by the piece:

> You mentioned that Dimitri (sic) Nabokov was aware of your opera but hadn't viewed it… and you also joked that he felt his father would not be sure what to think of the work. I got news for you: Vladimir is rolling in his grave right now. Humbert was judged despite his monologue. While I appreciate the technical achievement of your Lolita, I am upset that Nabokov's masterpiece came off more as a sequel to the Silence of the Lambs. ("Toni", Peaks Performance Forum, my emphasis)[40]

Insisting on Humbert's brilliant prose and seductive argument is clearly not the angle chosen by the composer, and one must add that this type of "musical theater" (Fineberg, France Culture Interview) allows the layering of meanings in the novel to be transposed (contrary to film adaptations, for instance), and better perceived by the spectator. This "monster view" created by the undermining of discourse by music is even seen as a fault by Steve Smith:

> If there is a shortcoming to this "Lolita," it is in the remorselessness of Mr. Fineberg's instrumental writing, seemingly too preoccupied with undercutting Humbert's delusions to suggest sympathy or to illuminate the specifically American dimensions of Nabokov's novel. (Smith, my emphasis)

As Smith recalls in the very first lines of his review, Lolita is an exceptional novel because it is steeped in ambiguity, and because it tests its readers in their trust of the narrative voice:

40 Toni, "Comments to Hearing the Imagined", 5 April 2009, 7 October 2012, <http://www.peakperfs.org/insite/?p=598#comments>

> Part of the brilliance of Nabokov's "Lolita," that scandalous, disconcerting novel in which a middle-aged European man of culture takes pedophilic liberties with an adolescent American girl, resides in its manifold layers of ambiguity, its openness to interpretation. Is Humbert Humbert a suave, calculating seducer or a pretentious, delusional monster? (Smith)

David Cote also notes how the "imagined opera" does not offer a confusing view of Humbert: "It's dark, rattling music, not pretty or soothing, and indicates (quite unambiguously) that Humbert's mind is a dark, chaotic space".

It is fairly common to judge an adaptation by the only criterion of "faithfulness", loaded with moral connotations. Yet one could wonder, as Linda Hutcheon does, at the "(post-)Romantic valuing of the original creation and of the originating creative genius that is clearly one source of denigration of adapters and adaptation"[41], which is "actually a late addition to Western culture's long and happy history of borrowing and stealing or, more accurately, sharing stories".[42] She argues that the pleasure of adaptation derives from repetition with variation, or "repetition without replication"[43], and recalls that adaptation "always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation"[44]—which is precisely what is at stake in Fineberg's imagined opera. It is quite clear, from the reaction of the various critics, and from the perspective taken by the present paper, that "adaptation is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations (as adaptations) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation"[45]. As Hutcheon notes, "with adaptations, we seem to desire the repetition as much as the change"[46]: Fineberg's choice of transcoding Nabokov's novel into a multimedia opera is in itself an act of creation. Choosing a hybrid form to share a story under a different form reflects Nabokov's own hybridity, and provides an echo, some 100 years apart, to the Ballets Russes and the World of Art's ideal of a synthesis of the arts, which shaped Nabokov's aesthetics.[47]

41 Hutcheon, *Op. cit.,* p.4.

42 Ibid.

43 Hutcheon, *Op. cit.,* p.7.

44 Hutcheon, *Op. cit.,* p.8.

45 Ibid.

46 Hutcheon, *Op. cit.,* p.9.

47 Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, "Looking at Harlequins: Nabokov, the World of Art and the Ballets Russes", in *Nabokov's World. Volume 2: Reading Nabokov*, eds. Jane Grayson, Arnold McMillin & Priscilla Meyer, New York, Palgrave, 2002, p.73-95.

How semiotic codes circulate in the "imagined opera"

In 1928, the Ballets Russes premièred Ode in Paris, and used projected film as a backdrop, which played tricks on the dancers' bodies, especially since their leopards had been adorned with circles and lines of phosphorescent paint. The stage set of Lolita, though very original for an opera, should thus not be considered as a groundbreaking endeavor, for it does contain many elements recurrently used in past performances, and in contemporary art today, including various digital aspects. Even though it does not apply the digital model as thoroughly as 1965 Variations V (Merce Cunningham, John Cage and Nam June Paik for the images),[48] Lolita An Imagined Opera is to be inscribed in the digital art tradition, especially if one follows the definition given by Normand Marcy: "Digital art necessarily implies crossdisciplinary approaches and the appearance of a different language"[49]. Most theoreticians of digital art underscore that hybridity is one its paradigms[50]. The "imagined opera" under study thus fully belongs to this type of art, even though its "coefficient of digitalness" is not of 100%. A key feature of digital art is that it displaces the way signs are produced and accessed, for they are processed by a computer; such a treatment of signs entails a change in the relationship between the sign and its meaning:

> L'hypothèse d'un sens qui vient au signe par le support veut dire que le signe fait l'objet d'un traitement particulier (informatique). Ce n'est pas la représentation (mimesis) ou son absence (abstraction) qui compte, mais l'acte de fabrication, qui devient co-présent à la manipulation de la semiosis. (Cormerais 30-31)

This shift is reflected in the way Joshua Fineberg worked with the IRCAM researchers to come up with a digital technique to have all the sung voices stemming from Humbert's. What is obvious is that the artists who designed this piece explored "the new performance potential"[51] that digital art offers. Let us now examine in what way, and how it interacts with the more traditional semiotic codes at work.

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48 For that piece engineer Billy Klüver had designed a system of photoelectric cells and microphones that produced music by reacting to movement, sound and image.

49 Philippe Franck ed, *Corps numériques en scène,* Enghien les Bains, La lettre volée, 2007, p.18.

50 Edmond Couchot and Norbert Hillaire, *L'Art numérique: comment la technologie vient au monde de l'art*, Paris, Flammarion, 2003, p.10. Wands, Bruce, *L'art à l'ère du numérique*,Trad.Hélène Odon, London, Thames & Hudson, 2007, p.10. Sophie Gosselin & Franck Cormerais (eds), *Poétiqu(e)s du numérique*. Montpellier, L'Entretemps, 2008. Sophie Gosselin & Franck Cormerais, "Thèses pour une poétique du numérique." in *Poétiqu(e)s du numérique*, eds. Sophie Gosselin & Franck Cormerais, Montpellier, L'Entretemps, 2008, p.11-12.

51 Armando Menicacci, "An impalpable gap: digital technology and spatial change in the theatre", in *Corps numériques en scène,* ed. Philippe Franck, Enghien les Bains, La lettre volée, 2007, p.29.

As Paul Ardenne analyzed, contemporary art is characterized by its impulse towards contamination, but this impulse does not entail confusion:

> Cette prodigalité de l'art contemporain n'est pas le signe d'une confusion totale, d'un éparpillement absurde ou désespéré des gestes, des valeurs ou des intentions. Elle est le résultat d'une inflexion poétique dorénavant décisive, privilégier la contamination.[52]

If one analyzes the modes of contamination that are at work in Lolita An Imagined Opera, one can see that because of the double-layered structure of the work, the various semiotic codes at play in the piece circulate according to a system that associates conflict/rupture and convergence/synchronization. The complex circulation of representation illustrates how elaborate the "imagined opera" is.

On the whole, one can say that drama, dance and the video images converge, while the music is in conflict with them. For example, while in part III Humbert describes the various motels he and Lolita stay at (Nabokov Lolita, 145-146), the images displayed on the screens are videos of highways, with their repetitive white pattern at the center of the image mirroring the duplicative stylistic devices from the literary text. While images flow by and the text resonates in the theater, the music undermines the text, this time neutering its parodic twists:[53]

… the would-be enticements of their repetitious names—all those Sunset Motels, U-Beam Cottages, Hillcrest Courts, Pineview Courts, Mountainview courts, Skyline Courts, Park Plaza Courts, Green Acres, Mac's Courts. (Fineberg, Libretto, 8)

> One should however distinguish between music from the instruments and the sung voices. If one uses the sound analysis developed by Michel Chion for cinema, it appears that the music from the instruments is extra-diegetic and serves as a commentary which undermines the actor's discourse, whereas the sung voices are diegetic, since they sing sentences from the libretto, and are performed through a digital treatment of Humbert's voice. One major difference between the overall prevailing of image over sound that Michel Chion observes in film and the relationship between sound and image in Lolita, is that sound does prevail in the "imagined opera" (which makes sense for an opera). This may also be due to a further undermining effect produced by Fineberg's score and libretto. Indeed, even though all the voices we hear are diegetic, they do not all converge with Humbert's version of the story, since the female and childish voices that sing fragments from the libretto work against Humbert's arguments. In the following excerpt, which weaves together two sentences from the novel, the sentences in

52 Paul Ardenne, Art, le present, Paris, Editions du Regard, 2009, p.31.

53 It is possible to watch a video of this passage on the following website: <http://www.bu.edu/research/spotlight/2008/arts/fineberg/index.shtml>. It is also possible to listen to the audio extract on the following webpage (click on the second excerpt): http://www.gmem.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=87&Itemid=88

italics are the ones sung by the voices, and the conflict between the two layers of text appears:

We rolled East.

and her sobs in the night — every night,

We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing.

every night — the moment I feigned sleep. (Fineberg, Libretto, 8)

These "impossible" hybrid voices who literally come from Humbert's own voice, so that one could have thought that, in that instance, the music would have converged with the actor's voice and the images, contradict Humbert: the sung melody, and especially the type of voices that are created (very child-like) distract the spectator's attention from the words to produce the upsetting effect sought by the composer. This is amplified by the fact that the computer-generated voices render the comprehension of the text quite difficult at many points in the performance.

In this complex system of rupture/synchronization, the pairings are not stable, and they shift. For instance, while the video images usually converge with Humbert's discourse, sometimes they do hint at the predatory nature of his attraction for Lolita: while he delves into an expert definition of the nymphet, the video images show a mermaid-like nymphet swimming in turquoise-blue pool water, while dark tentacles float over her.

Kurt d'Haeseleer

Conversely, sometimes the music accompanies and illustrates the text. For instance, when evoking his shooting Clare Quilty, Humbert's voice is accompanied by musical

chords that mimic bullets being fired. Consequently, it seems that the central notions of projection and doubles (which can be opposite doubles) that are the core of Nabokov's novel,[54] were chosen as the core modus operandi in the adaptation of the book into an "imagined opera". Indeed, in both novel and opera, projections can either converge or enter in conflict, according to a complex system of reversals that organize a subtle destabilization of signs.

Conclusion

Considering the degree of complexity in the relationship between the various semiotic codes, or media, at work in the imagined opera, one could contend that this type of work is more than simply multimedia, but rather is intermedial. Indeed according to Werner Wolf, intermediality is defined as "the participation of more than one medium of expression in the signification of a human artefact"[55], which is precisely what is at stake in this imagined opera. Moreover, intermediality involves an exploration of the distances between the different codes,[56] and as such, Lolita An Imagined Opera provides an interesting example of the ways in which the various medias involved can either synchronize or oppose one another. As was demonstrated earlier, the aesthetic choice made for the adaptation of Lolita is a fit one, for it allows to reflect the multi-layered quality of Nabokov's work. Jürgen E. Müller's also posits that in intermedial works,media are imbedded in intentional patterns and contexts of action; they are constructed on a dialogical and semiotic basis and they comprise several dimensions which inter-act in the process of semiosis, but which can be isolated for purpose of analysis.[57]

Such a dialogical dynamic within the relationship between the semiotic codes seems to be similar to the one observed in this opera, and can therefore confirm its intermedial status. The circulation of signs in this work thus follows the intermedial or intersemiotic logic.

The hybrid nature of this work, along with its technological developments, is particularly impressive in its ability to explore the various ranges of narration, fiction and signifiers. Thanks to its digital features, its intrinsic hybridity is foregrounded and reinforced:

54 René Alladaye, « Troubles doubles : Les Ruses de l'identité dans *Lolita* », in *Etudes Anglaises* 48 :4 (oct. – déc. 1995), p.478-488.

55 Werner Wolf, *The Musicalisation of Fiction. A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1999, p.1.

56 According to Hannah Higgins's founding analysis: "Rather than merely multiplying existing media categories, like multimedia (as in opera, which discretely combines theatre with music and dance) or mixed media (as in illustrated stories, presenting complementary images and words), intermedia actively probes the spaces between different media". Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience,* Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2002, p.97.

57 Jurgen Müller, "Intermediality and Media Historiography in the Digital Era", in *Film and Media Studies 2* (2010), 298.

> L'art numérique est transversal à l'ensemble des arts déjà constitués dont il continue à dissoudre les spécificités, les hybridant intimement entre eux, les redynamisant en les déplaçant. (Couchot & Hillaire 115)

The specific relationship that this creation develops with technology brings to mind another aspect which would have undoubtedly pleased Nabokov, since such an opening allows to go beyond the modern separation between art and science. As explained by Gosselin and Cormerais, research and experimentation have become part and parcel of the creative methods of this new type of poetics[58].

Intersemiotic or intermedial works foreground the creating act itself: they provide representations designated as representations, it is almost cliché to say so. But furthermore, one could argue that if Nabokov or the team around Joshua Fineberg favor including other arts, it is because they prefer opening the signifier to closing it. Nabokov's text is indeed striking in its refusal to close meaning, and with its delectation in the infinite possibilities of the signifier, be it literary or visual, musical, or dramatic.

58 Gosselin & Cormerais, *Op. cit.,* p.12.

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