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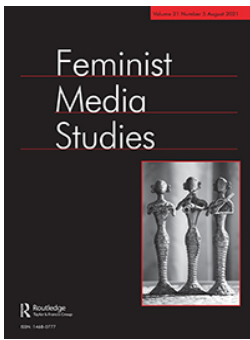
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The exploitation of Sue Lyon: *Lolita* (1962), archival research, and questions for film history

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the overlooked history of Sue Lyon and her experiences as a child film star. Lyon was fourteen years old when she was cast in the role of Dolores Haze in *Lolita* (1962) by James B. Harris and Stanley Kubrick. The article considers how critical feminist archival methods can be used to analyse documents in the Stanley Kubrick Archive (SKA) to uncover the conditions of production in which Lyon found herself. In the few instances that Lyon spoke out in the later stages of her life, she cited her involvement in *Lolita* as having had a detrimental impact on her mental health. More recently, there have been allegations of a sexual relationship between the film's producer—Harris—and Lyon during the production. The article considers the ways in which a critical feminist approach to the use of the SKA can be used to uncover the experiences of Lyon during the film's production and can reframe understanding of the conditions of production in Hollywood that led to the sexualisation and exploitation of a child star.

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Introduction

Sue Lyon was fourteen years old when she was cast in the title role of the film *Lolita* (1962). The film's producers subsequently thrust Lyon into the media spotlight and she became, momentarily, one of the leading child stars of the 1960s. *Lolita*, adapted from Vladimir Nabokov's 1955 novel of the same name, was produced by James B. Harris, directed by Stanley Kubrick, and the screenplay co-written by Harris and Kubrick. The film depicts an abusive relationship between a middle-aged university professor, Humbert Humbert, and a pre-pubescent child aged twelve, Dolores Haze, nicknamed Lolita.

This article considers how Lyon's voice largely remains absent from studies of *Lolita* and from film history and the ways in which it can be recovered through archival research in the Stanley Kubrick Archive (SKA). Very little is known about Lyon's experiences as a child star and there is limited archival evidence available. What is certain is that Lyon's career in the film industry had involved her being exploited and marketed as the epitome of male sexual fantasy. Lyon made a rare public comment in 1996 in which she directly ascribed her long-standing mental health problems and drug addiction to *Lolita*: "My destruction as a person dates from that movie. *Lolita* exposed me to temptations no girl of

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that age should undergo. I defy any pretty girl who is rocketed to stardom at 14 in a sex nymphet role to stay on a level path thereafter" (Marianne Macdonald 1996). While Lyon does not state exactly why *Lolita* ruined her life, it is likely, given her use of the phrase "temptations", that she was referring to the way in which she had been sexualised as a child star by the film's producers.

Harris and Kubrick signed Lyon to an exclusive multi-picture contract in partnership with Seven Arts in 1960. They then orchestrated a marketing campaign that purposely exploited and sexualised her for cinema audiences, resulting in one of the most prevalent and enduring images of a child as an object of male sexual desire in twentieth century culture: Lyon, as Lolita, her eyes gazing over heart-shaped glasses, wearing a bikini, and sucking a lollipop. The image was part of a photoshoot by photographer Bert Stern who, following direction from Harris and Kubrick, turned Lyon from a fourteen-year-old girl into the "perfect nymphet" (Peter Bunzel 1962). The photoshoot and the wider media image orchestrated by Harris and Kubrick played into a demonisation of Lyon as a "teenage temptress", turning her into the guilty figure in the film's story and thereby absolving the stepfather of her abuse.

The producer's sexualisation of Lyon during a press tour for *Lolita* insinuated that she was engaged in a relationship with Harris. Lyon was asked by the American movie columnist Louella Parsons whether Harris had proposed to her in 1962. Lyon denied that he had (Guadalupe Loaeza 1999, 5). It was suggested in *The Washington Post* that Lyon had "bowled over her producer, James B. Harris. Her age is 16, according to her studio, and he's an old man of 33. She prefers the company of mature men, and James may be just her cup of tea" (Dorothy Kilgallen 1962, C11). Harris was even reported to be following Lyon around the country: "James Harris, who has been [Lyon's] most ardent suitor since the 'Lolita' days, still has hopes of recapturing her affections, and is talking of renting a house in Mexico while Sue is in Puerto Vallarta for "Night of the Iguana". So Jimmy and Sue may write their own thrilling chapter" (Dorothy Kilgallen 1963, C9). And in an interview in 2020 with journalist Sarah Weinman, Lyon's childhood friend, Michelle Phillips (of the band the Mamas and the Papas), alleged that Harris had had a sexual relationship with Lyon. Phillips claims that Lyon revealed to her that she was sleeping with Harris when she was 14 years old. Harris has refused to comment on or deny the allegations (Sarah Weinman 2020).

In the decades since its release, *Lolita* has repeatedly been discussed from an auteur-centric perspective within Kubrick's wider filmography. It is a film that has been praised as a great work of literary adaptation (Richard Corliss 1994; Elisa Pezzotta 2015), as a film displaying the "detached beauty of his [Kubrick's] cinematic craft" (James Naremore 2007, 116), of being a film that demonstrated Kubrick's maturity as a film director (Thomas Nelson 2000), a film that contains deeper autobiographical metaphors (Nathan Abrams 2015; Nathan Abrams 2016), and a film that is downplayed as being less provocative and sexually explicit than Nabokov's novel (Robert Kolker 2017; Dijana Metlić 2019). Some academics have even attempted to shift the blame for the sexual relationship from Humbert to Lolita (Nathan Abrams 2018, 76; Joy McEntee 2021, 193). But what is missing from these studies is the voice of Lyon and of the way in which she experienced the production of *Lolita*. She is absent, silent, and silenced.

The issue of silence is particularly important in studies of child stars who, in later life, left the public stage. Lyon rarely gave any press interviews from the 1970s onwards after she chose to leave the film industry and pursue an alternative career path.¹ Those

interviews she gave as a child star, when she was contracted to the Harris-Kubrick Pictures Corporation, were persistently controlled by powerful men (such as Harris and Kubrick). Since the opening of the SKA, Lyon's voice has been curated by a range of vested interests. Take the example of the official travelling Stanley Kubrick exhibition, which presents objects selected from the SKA. Lyon's presence in the exhibition is one that has been selected to absolve Kubrick of any involvement in her exploitation and overlooks the 1996 interview in which she said *Lolita* ruined her life. The exhibition features a letter that Lyon sent to Kubrick in 1994, in which she writes that she is "very, very happy" and that "the only reason I had any success was because of you. And I was grateful for that at that time."² The selective presence of this letter indicates the way Kubrick's own public reputation and legacy is being shaped by the Kubrick estate utilising the SKA. But an alternative exhibition exists within the SKA, one that can present a counter narrative and restore the marginalised, overlooked, and forgotten experiences of women like Lyon. It is a counter history that can reframe scholarly understanding and perspectives of *Lolita*, Harris, Kubrick, and reintroduce the experience of Lyon into film history.

This article intervenes at a time when the abuses and exploitation of women in the entertainment industries has become a central issue in the post #MeToo era. This is of particular concern with Stanley Kubrick, a director noted, yet rarely held account, for his problematic representations of, and interactions with, women. A misogynistic tendency runs through Kubrick's work, what Karen Ritzenhoff calls "a deep-rooted ambiguity to women" (Karen Ritzenhoff 2021, 171). Ritzenhoff highlights how there is an academic avoidance of the inconvenient and problematic, misogynistic, homophobic, and even racist representations in Kubrick's films. And there has been virtually no discussion whatsoever of the exploitative conditions of production for women on Kubrick's films. Yet, recent research has demonstrated how Kubrick approached the casting of women on films like *A Clockwork Orange* in a highly exploitative fashion (James Fenwick 2021, James Fenwick forthcoming).

Academic literature in the small but growing field of Kubrick Studies largely chooses to overlook the histories and experiences of women (and other marginalised groups, including people of colour), amounting to what Stefania Marghita calls "auteur apologism" (Stefania Marghita 2018). In discussing the male film and TV auteur, Marghita argues that, despite the wider contexts of the #MeToo movement, "genius artists" continue to be absolved of amoral, abusive, and even criminal behaviour, with their behaviour instead excused as being a "cultural condition" of the eras in which they lived and worked (491–492). But in the post-#MeToo era, Marghita argues that is important to confront these abuses and exploitative practices, stating "scholars must incorporate individual and systemic abuses as part of the histories of auteurist works" (Stefania Marghita 2018, 493).

A key part of the work that Marghita calls for must also involve focusing on the experiences of children in the film industry, particularly female child stars like Lyon who have been excluded from film history. At present, there is a gap in understanding the experiences and abuses of child stars, with a scholarly focus on the representation and performance of children on screen (Karen Lury 2010) and on the psychological dynamics of childhood and stardom (Jane O'Connor 2009). Yet, in the wider field of celebrity studies, there has been a turn towards considering what Sean Holmes describes as "the material conditions of labour in Hollywood" (Thomas Nelson 2000, 97). This involves examining archival evidence to understand the everyday realities of how stars worked, interacted,

and were treated in Hollywood. Such an approach is highly applicable to the study of child stars. As Jane O'Connor 2011 has argued, the child as commodity became a key feature of the Hollywood star system by the 1930s and 1940s, with children traded for the financial gain of powerful producers. Heather Addison's work on child stars shows how they would be "denied" control over their own work and wealth (Heather Addison 2015, 1267), while Sheila Whiteley talks of the historic exploitation of the "erotic potential" of child stars, particularly when framed via an "adult performance" (Sheila Whiteley 2003, 1). However, there is still a substantial scholarly gap in utilising archival research to understand the conditions of production for child stars. This article aims to address that gap by adopting a critical feminist approach to the use of the SKA. I question how the SKA can be approached to uncover the material, cultural and social conditions of production in which Lyon found herself. I will primarily focus on analysing letters sent between Harris and Kubrick—some of the few archival items in which Lyon can be located—to consider the ways in which they exploited her for production and marketing purposes.

Critical feminist interventions in film history have focused on the hidden histories of women and the sources that can be used to reconnect with their experiences of the past (Vicky Ball, Pat Kirkham and Laraine Porter 2020). Questions of how film archives are constructed, and the apparent lack of women's voices within them, have come to dominate critical feminist archival methods. Scholars such as Melanie Bell and Vicky Ball 2013, Catherine Martin 2018, Lisa Stead 2019, and Frances Galt 2020 consider issues of archival silence and how women can be located in archives, suggesting that scholars must read against the archival grain. This involves analysing archival documents in a way that was not intended by those that created them, in the process attempting to excavate the voice, experience, or agency of a marginalised figure or group. Women's Film History acknowledges the contested nature of archives and the way in which they have been used to construct a history of film and media that privileges powerful men. The field has taken a range of methodological approaches—archival history, archival cataloguing, interviews and oral history, statistical analysis—and perspectives—trade unions, below the line workers, women directors and producers, women and stardom—to understand issues of gender inequality, silences in the history of film and television, the centrality of women in production processes, the reconstitution of the lived experiences of women in variety of roles, and the systemic structures of exploitation in the film and television industries.

By blending critical feminist archival methods with the hybrid field of Childhood and Celebrity Studies (Jane O'Connor 2017), the article questions how the archive of a dominant male auteur, Kubrick, can be reframed and understood as a site that can reconnect with Lyon's past. I use the SKA to consider the ways in which women child stars like Lyon were exploited, how male producers were culpable in this process, and how it impacts on the construction of film history.

Sue Lyon in the Stanley Kubrick Archive

The SKA, located at the University of the Arts London (UAL), is an extensive collection, measuring over 800 linear metres in archival shelving. It covers a period from the 1940s through to the late 2000s and is broken into nineteen categories: one for each of the thirteen films Kubrick directed, along with additional categories such as General Papers

and Personal Materials. The material consists of production documents, business reports, correspondence, creative material, books, props, and much more besides. I have been using the SKA for over ten years. In that time, I have spent many hours searching for Lyon amongst a range of documents and archival ephemera. However, Lyon's presence within the SKA is minimal, with very few items in which she has any active voice or presence. The primary place to locate Lyon is in the *Lolita* production files (SK/10). Within these files Lyon is talked about by other people in correspondence, named in documents such as progress reports, budgets, and contracts, controlled by other people, and even reduced to a contractual statistic in negotiations between Kubrick, Harris, and the production company Seven Arts. There is even moving-image archival footage of Lyon: a twenty-one-minute screen test (SK/10/2/1). But the black and white footage has no audio reel, once again leaving Lyon voiceless. Rarely, if ever, does Lyon have any agency in the material remains of *Lolita* in what amounts to an historical silencing.

It is vital that scholars fundamentally reframe thinking about what the SKA actually is and represents. Lisa Stead (2019) argues that greater archival reflexivity is required by film historians to consider not only the archive as source but also as subject. It is necessary to ask whether the SKA is by, for, and about Stanley Kubrick (as it has largely been branded and as much of the archival catalogue often frames it) or is something much more complex. When reams of paperwork across many of the SKA's boxes do not even mention Kubrick and were not even created by him but by a myriad of administrators, secretaries, and other labourers, then what is meant by it being "the Stanley Kubrick Archive"? The very existence of the SKA and its continued administration and preservation is the result of the work not of Stanley Kubrick, but of often hidden, marginalised, or overlooked labourers, both historic (secretaries such as Margaret Adams) and continuing (by archivists like Georgina Orgill at the UAL). The SKA is primarily used by Kubrick scholars wanting to locate archival documents to further the narrative of their dominant subject: Kubrick. But the danger of continuing to utilise the SKA in an uncritical way, one that centres it as being by and about Kubrick, is that it will marginalise and even erase from history the labour, work, and voice of those other labourers and figures like Lyon. The SKA contains many gaps, absences, and silences, by which I mean the lack of direct material evidence of a particular worker's agency, voice, lived experience, and labour. Antoinette Burton suggests that the absence of women in the archive can be ascribed to the fact that dominant male figures in history have side-lined women. While women may have been part of large-scale events or grand narratives, the lack of archival evidence led to women not being secured "in the sightlines of history" (Antoinette Burton 2010, vii). Certainly, Kubrick always made sure that he received credit and authorial agency, even when it was not deserved, thereby side-lining the work and agency of others (James Fenwick 2020, 168–169).

Similarly, the way in which an archive is created, and the material that is chosen to be preserved, further obscures marginalised groups and individuals (Jenna Ashton 2017). The SKA, for example, was donated to the UAL on the condition that it would further the legacy of Stanley Kubrick, immediately privileging Kubrick and marginalising the array of other labourers—creative, technical, administrative—contained within the archive. But it is possible to utilise archival documents such as progress reports, continuity sheets, invoices, receipts, notes, and other archival ephemera to understand and extract meaning about the lives of media labourers on those films associated with Kubrick.

When looking to archives as a means of uncovering the history of alternative voices, marginalised groups, and hidden histories, the archival researcher must be mindful of narrative containment, what Elizabeth Gagen, with reference to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 1988, describes as how:

historical analysis can profitably seek to understand the contextual discourse that sought to construct, contain, and often silence, historically marginalized subjects. In doing so, we are better equipped to understand the nature of historical mediation, i.e. why certain renditions of history appear as they do, and why and how certain groups are absent, quiet, or silenced (Elizabeth Gagen 2001, 54).

Gagen recognises that archives cannot fully recount or capture a lived experience. Instead, an archive provides “points of access” to discuss a subject’s contribution (or lack of contribution) to an event or experience (55). Archives can also show how marginalised groups and figures have been silenced (Evelyn Araluen Corr 2018). In particular, Monica Dall’asta and Jane Gaines (2015) argue that the lived experiences of women cannot be fully reclaimed through the archive. Instead, archival sources—whether letters, archival ephemera, moving images—can only “evoke” moments of experience. Archival documents are “displaced in time” and therefore must always be viewed within this context. As Dall’asta and Gaines argue, “we can conceive of them as ‘documents,’ yet only on the condition that we do not charge them with the ability (so longed for by historicists) to return us to their original place and to show us past events ‘as they really happened.’ Events cannot be replayed or accessed by retellings” (2015, 17–18). As such, the material traces of a research subject in the archive must be seen as presenting just one of many potential historical narratives, rather than a complete picture.

A linear history of Lyon’s experiences on *Lolita* cannot be excavated from the SKA, even though there are material remains of her labour (in progress reports, for example). There are multiple points of access within the SKA that, although not the direct voice of Lyon, leave traces of her presence and the conditions of production in which she found herself. Letters of correspondence, for example, contain the textual presence of Lyon via mentions of her name. By reading against the grain of such archival documents, it is possible to make Lyon visible, what Galt describes as “searching for women’s experiences through their absence” (Frances Galt 2020, 168). By focusing on letters of correspondence, some of the few archival items in which Lyon is discussed in detail, can reveal the candid and most private thoughts of the producers with which she was working. Of course, the likelihood is that people like Harris and Kubrick never intended for this material to be consumed and interpreted in such a framework. Therefore, when reading the material in this way, one must be mindful of the private nature of letter writing. But the archival researcher can ascertain, through analysis of letters, the tone in which Lyon was discussed and the contexts in which she was being placed. It can also reframe understanding of Harris and Kubrick’s role in the treatment, both personal and business, of Lyon. Reading the letters transforms them from the producers of *Lolita*—from the artists they are frequently framed as in Kubrick Studies—to Hollywood gatekeepers and exploiters.

What follows are a series of extracts from correspondence in the SKA from between 1960 and 1963 that contain references to Lyon. The correspondence was generated by Harris and Kubrick and involved disputes over the contractual ownership of Lyon between Harris-Kubrick Pictures and Seven Arts. The extracts are often part of letters dealing with

wider issues, particularly as they were written during a period in which Harris and Kubrick were in the process of dissolving their production company. The sample is from my research into the letters category (SK/10/8/1-7) of the *Lolita* files in the SKA.³ The category is split into six folders, which contain letters from between 1959 and 1966. The selected letters represent the clear instances in which Lyon was being discussed, but from which her own voice is absent. I have annotated the extracts to provide further context and elucidation, including on the use of language.

Archival traces

The first five letters concern publicity and exploitation. By the latter I mean the practice of promoting a film through its key assets: actors, merchandise, soundtrack. The focus of the producers was on not only promoting *Lolita* but exploiting Lyon's image through the promotional efforts. The aim of Harris and Kubrick was to maximise the box office potential of the film, the future box office potential of Lyon, and to further their own reputations as filmmakers.

December 21 1960

James B. Harris to Vera Nabokov

[...] We are making an effort to introduce Sue Lyon to the world, but only through photographs, the shooting of which are completely controlled by Stanley and myself. We are also trying to create the "Lolita image" about the girl and this would immediately be destroyed by interviews which would reveal her as being completely opposite in real life to the character.

Harris admits to how he and Kubrick were controlling Lyon by refusing media access to her that would allow her a voice. As such, Lyon spent most of her time in the company of the film's producers. Harris wanted to craft an image that silenced Lyon and allowed her only to speak in public as Lolita. A key aim of this approach was to turn Lyon into a star. As the next letters indicate, central to this plan was securing an Academy Award nomination for Lyon.

December 31 1962

Stanley Kubrick to James B. Harris

A much more important thing is to flog Ed Feldman and make sure that they are doing a first-rate job on the Academy Awards. I got a letter from him indicating in a vague way that they were going to do something, but also indicating that Sue Lyon was only to get a "token effort". I think this is a disastrous mistake, both because I think she can win something and also because it would be very harmful to her career. If you don't get any satisfaction from Ed on this point, it might be worth talking to Elliott because despite whatever differences we have with him, we share a common interest in wanting Sue to become as big as possible.

January 8 1963

Stanley Kubrick to James B. Harris

How is Sue? Have we found any interesting projects for her? How does it look on the Academy Awards? Do you think we have a chance? Are you getting any satisfaction from MGM or Seven Arts (Ed Feldman)?

January 16 1963

Stanley Kubrick to James B. Harris

[. . .] What's happening with the Academy Awards and why isn't Sue Lyon being pushed like hell?

Kubrick was clearly anxious that an Academy Award campaign be devised that maximised the star potential of Lyon. Harris agreed with Kubrick, acknowledging the impact such an award could have on their own careers.

January 22 1963

James B. Harris to Stanley Kubrick

[. . .] Regarding the Academy Awards, you know as well as I do that this is a popularity contest and that we will never be popular in this regard. I have pressed to do as much advertising as possible, not because I think we can win anything, but because it has an institutional effect which will indirectly benefit us and the same goes for Sue. [. . .] Unfortunately, Sue has never been mentioned on anybody's yearly wrap-up list, which should indicate that no one is even thinking about her.

By the early 1960s, film producers and studios were initiating ever more aggressive, long-range public relations campaigns to win Academy Awards. Harris and Kubrick's discussions therefore must be read in this context. Actors and producers issued multiple adverts in the run up to the annual Academy Awards and employed public relations firms to lobby Academy members. The explicit attempts to persuade Academy members to vote for a particular actor or film led the Academy to issue a statement decrying the forceful public relations strategies being adopted (Emmanuel Levy 1987, 299–300). Harris and Kubrick, in attempting to push a campaign involving Lyon, were not unique, but rather symptomatic of a wider trend in Hollywood.

The next letter extracts focus on Lyon's future career and potential films in which she could appear following the release of *Lolita*. Harris seems to have had the most influence and control over Lyon at this time, with Kubrick repeatedly requesting updates from him. By this point—late 1962 and early 1963—Harris and Kubrick were in the process of dissolving the Harris-Kubrick Pictures Corporation, with their discussions focused on the way they could amicably break up the company. This led to heated debates about assets and who owned what. In their correspondence, Lyon is reduced to a contractual object over which the pair were in dispute.

November 12 1962

Stanley Kubrick to James B. Harris

Have we worked out a new procedure with Seven Arts whereby they pay Sue directly?

November 16 1962

James B. Harris to Stanley Kubrick

[. . .] Yes, we have worked out a new procedure on Seven Arts regarding payments to Sue Lyon. We have opened a new account called "The Harris-Kubrick Pictures Corp. – Sue Lyon Account", wherein I countersign checks together with an accounting firm they have appointed.

November 19 1962

Stanley Kubrick to James B. Harris

[. . .] Is there any indication yet what Seven Arts wants to put Sue in as her first picture?

March 14 1963

James B. Harris to Stanley Kubrick

[. . .] Sue's possibilities for "Lilith" depend mostly on Bob Rossen, as I did all I could several months ago when I talked to him. Anything further at this point would be embarrassing for our side.

Bob Rossen was an American screenwriter and Harris and Kubrick were exploring the possibility of Lyon appearing in his final film, *Lilith* (1964), alongside Warren Beatty. Harris also wanted to use Lyon in his own first effort as a director, something Kubrick supported. It was a planned adaptation of Charles Perry's novel *Portrait of a Young Man Drowning* (1962), in which Harris wanted Lyon to play the role of a teenager that is raped. He co-wrote the screenplay, titled *I Want My Mother*, with Tom Ryan and it was announced in the trade press in early 1963 that Lyon would appear in the film.

June 26 1963

Stanley Kubrick to James B. Harris

[. . .] What's happening with Sue? Have any new scripts been submitted to her and is there anything interesting that might be forthcoming after your film? Is Seven Arts still paying her her full salary and if they are, are they beginning to complain?

May 10 1963

James B. Harris to Stanley Kubrick

[. . .] I let Ray Stark read the script [*I Want My Mother*] since they actually had first call on Sue at that time. My thinking was that perhaps he would get the idea of trying to acquire the project for Seven Arts. This as you know would have been very helpful in eliminating our commitment. However, unfortunately, or fortunately, he merely returned the script saying he was surprised that after all the projects they had suggested for Sue, I would come up with "this type of role in this type of picture." I must interpret this as complete disinterest on his part. Again a natural reaction by someone trained in Hollywood. [. . .] If you could see the reaction from publicists, publicity people, photographers, photo services and anyone connected with the press, on the exploitable values of Rita and Sue, my first picture as a director, the subject matter and the possibilities of additional casting, you would know why I want to fight so hard to get this picture made.

Lyon was repeatedly cast, or touted to appear, in films in which she played characters abused by or in sexual relationships with adult men. From her first acting role in an episode of the anthology series *Letter to Lorretta* (NBC, 1953–1961) in 1959, in which she played the role of Laurie, a student that accuses a teacher of inappropriate sexual behaviour towards her, to films like *The Night of the Iguana* (1964), playing a teenager attempting to seduce a priest played by Richard Burton, Lyon's work as a teenager involved producers typecasting her in sexualised roles all similar to *Lolita*. It is in this

context that phrases such as “exploitable values” should be considered. Harris indicates a recognition of a wider public and media interest in the continuing sexual exploitation of Lyon and it is at the forefront of his own planned film project, *I Want My Mother*.

The final series of letter extracts concern Lyon as a contractual object and the way in which she was being controlled, negotiated, and monetised by men in Hollywood. The letters are lengthier and reveal an ongoing dispute between Seven Arts, Harris, and Kubrick over exactly how Lyon should be used in the coming years.

July 11 1963

James B. Harris to Stanley Kubrick

[. . .] Now I come to what I started to write to you about when I received your letter, and that is Sue Lyon – Seven Arts. After a discussion with Lou and Jack, which only took a few minutes, as we know this is a most advantageous deal for us, we agreed with Seven Arts to amend the Sue Lyon deal as follows:

In consideration of her co-starring with Richard Burton, Ava Gardner, and Deborah Kerr in *THE NIGHT OF THE IGUNA* to be directed by John Huston, they will take over her contract completely and we will be given the use of Sue for one picture a year for the remainder of her contract. We realize that under no circumstances could we ever use her for more than one picture a year anyway, and in this arrangement we only have to pay double her weekly salary for each week we use her, but have the right to either loan her out or use her ourselves and keep the entire amount of money that we get for her.

The language used by Harris indicates how, as a producer, he was heavily business oriented. However, his language also reduces Lyon to a monetary and contractual object to be negotiated, traded, and “used”. The discussion of Lyon as a contractual asset, with disturbing references to ownership of her, continues in the same letter.

Seven Arts blackmailed us by saying they would not put her in the picture unless the deal was amended. Since they have close to \$100,000.00 already invested, they would prefer to start fresh with a new girl they would prefer to own completely. This sounds a little peculiar but Ray Stark said that he would rather own 100% of someone like Tuesday Weld, or any newcomer which they could control, than build Sue up and have to deal with us on approvals and also split 50-50. [. . .] Our big advantage is that we know that there aren’t too many pictures left in her, unless she changes her attitude about her career, and in the new arrangements we do not have to concern ourselves with their recouping all the money they have invested. I do believe that playing in a picture with Richard Burton, particularly since her part is romantically connected with his, will push her close to the top of the female attractions. She might be worth \$100,000 when it is our turn to use her, and we don’t have to bother producing the picture which I am sure neither of us want to do.

Harris’s language shows him to be considering Lyon as a tradeable object, the value of which can be increased. However, he also acknowledges that Lyon is dispensable and replaceable, having a limited time span in which she can be of profitable use to businessmen like Kubrick and himself. The language also indicates the way in which Lyon was being framed by Harris: a sexualised, profitable object to be used and shared by a range of other powerful men in the industry. The letter concludes:

If for some reason the "IGUANA" deal falls thru, we revert back to the original deal which frankly means nothing is happening with Sue Lyon. I also personally like the idea of them taking over, which eliminates an awful lot of petty annoyances with career guidance, which as you know without a picture for her to do it a complete waste of time. So by next year if she is still in show-business, we can make some money in this direction.

Harris dismisses the need to provide career guidance to Lyon, despite the fact she was at the time a young teenager that had been pushed into the media spotlight and made famous through her casting in *Lolita* by Harris and Kubrick. Harris instead acknowledges that, if Lyon is no longer of profitable value to him and Kubrick, there is no point in engaging with her future career options outside the film industry.

The final letter focuses on Lyon's new contractual arrangements put in place by the Harris-Kubrick Pictures Corporation and Seven Arts.

September 10 1963

James B. Harris to Stanley Kubrick

[. . .] Knowing that Sue Lyon may not be long for this business, it's important to get income from her services without having to concern ourselves with the recoupment of the monies invested in her so far. We never figured to use her for more than one picture a year anyway and under the old deal we had three draw backs:

1. A continually increasing per picture price starting at \$50,000
2. All income into the pot and no profits before recoupment and to date there is at least \$75,000 to \$100,000 invested.
3. We had no right to loan her out without their approval and a Harris Kubrick picture had to be produced by me or directed by you. In all honesty neither one of us can concern ourselves with making Sue Lyon pictures.

Under the new arrangements we can do with her anything we please, including loan outs and can keep 100% of the income. You know that after NIGHT OF THE IGUANA and probably OH DAD, POOR DAD her picture price could be as high as \$100,000. This means that if she works for the remainder of her contract, we can gross \$400,000 and net ourselves around \$350,000. If she quits the business our new arrangement is better since we're not concerned with recoupment and even if we get into one picture we have immediate income which we would never see under the old arrangement.

Repeatedly, Harris admits to Kubrick that neither one of them is creatively interested in producing films with Lyon. Why then bother contracting Lyon to their company and involve themselves so heavily in contractual negotiations to keep her? Harris indicates the motivation was purely financial. Harris-Kubrick Pictures Corporation was a company in debt and with outstanding loans that needed paying off (James Fenwick 2020, 75; 99). Viewed in these terms, Lyon was being used by the pair to pay off the company's financial commitments. The letter continues:

From a dollar and cents standpoint, which I'm sure is the key consideration, the new deal is without question a better business approach. From a standpoint of career guidance, who is to say what is better for Sue. We had given up approval on the first picture anyway and our type of operation seems to present enough problems of finding projects for ourselves. I frankly don't think I could have come up with a project that would be as good for her as NIGHT OF THE IGUANA. [. . .] Personally, if I were selfish, I could have taken the position that I enjoyed

being the guiding light in her career, and could have taken a great personal satisfaction in sitting on top of all approvals. But we were dealing with a human being and personal satisfaction must take second position. In all honesty I don't think I'm letting Sue down as if she ever decides she wants a career she will probably achieve it faster under the new deal.

Lyon's silence in the above letter and the role of Harris and Kubrick in contributing to that silence is clear when Harris asks, "who is to say what is better for Sue." He does not ask what Lyon herself wants. He even admits to harbouring a "selfish" desire to continue controlling Lyon and her career, while revealing a personal insight into his view of himself as a manager and producer when stating he wants to sit "on top" of approving Lyon's projects. Harris's attitude aligns with the arguments of Heather Addison (2015) and Jane O'Connor (2009) on the control exhibited by powerful adults over child stars in the film industry.

The tone of the final letter from Harris is also quite reflective about the experience of contractually owning Lyon. The letters reveal a process of letting her go: her contract with Harris-Kubrick Pictures was terminated and given over to Seven Arts, which itself eventually terminated the contract prematurely. The key consideration throughout these letters is not the welfare of Lyon—how could it be when Harris uses language such as "do with her as we please"—but money. The aim was to profit from Lyon as much as possible—"get income from her services," as Harris puts it—before the industry grew bored of her. Lyon was expendable in other words: a child star reduced to a sexual object and, in turn, treated as a commodity for the financial gain of producers in the industry.

Conclusion

Beyond these handful of letters, there is very little material trace of Lyon in the SKA. And given that she retreated from public life by the 1980s, and that she has no existing public archive of her own, there is very little else known about her. Whether material exists elsewhere, such as in a private family collection, is uncertain. The urgency in locating and analysing the archival presence of Lyon is therefore clear, particularly in the context of the wider problematic, yet dominating histories of male auteurs like Kubrick that threaten to erase the experiences and voice of creative labourers like Lyon.

Given Lyon's silence in film history, the archival traces that do remain are revealing. The letters cited in this article indicate that Lyon was persistently reduced to, and traded as, a sexualised commodity and business asset. The archival evidence also indicates how the treatment of Lyon was most likely representative of wider systemic structural behaviours in the American film industry: powerful men controlling the lives, careers, and wealth of child stars. Harris and Kubrick were involved in negotiations to control all decisions in Lyon's career. Harris even mentions discussions with Ray Stark at Seven Arts in which the latter wanted to "control" and "own completely" other female child stars, citing Tuesday Weld as an example. The letter extracts hint at an indifference toward Lyon by Harris, Kubrick, and other men. The letters are suggestive of networks of power, exploitation, and control in Hollywood. Harris and Kubrick negotiated with other powerful men in the industry for the use of Lyon. Of course, the letters are only one form of archival evidence and do not reveal the full experiences of Lyon, but the traces of her presence in the letters indicate how she was treated as an exploitable object to be used as quickly and cheaply as

possible before the wider industry and wider box office audience tired of her, and, presumably, before she became too old and outgrew the “Lolita image”. In short, the letters are indicative of the wider forces that contributed to Lyon’s own “destruction” as she later phrased it (Marianne Macdonald 1996).

The level of agency Lyon had in the process of her exploitation is debatable. Harris and Kubrick framed her as someone older than her years and as a young girl that possessed “far too much experience” (Peter Bunzel 1962). Kubrick himself described Lyon as “interesting to watch. [...] Even in the way she walked in for her interview, casually sat down, walked out. She was cool and non-giggly. She was enigmatic without being dull. She could keep people guessing about how much Lolita knew about life” (Mark Olsen 2019). This sexualisation of Lyon can be contextualised alongside other Hollywood child stars such as Judy Garland, Shirley Temple, and Tuesday Weld who were also reduced to overtly sexualised objects in film and media by male producers, in a process that Debra Merskin calls the “pornographication of the American girl” (Debra Merskin 2004, 121). Indeed, as Ara Osterweil has argued, Shirley Temple’s films and media image were guilty of enabling a paedophilic gaze, what she describes as the “obsessive looking at, eroticizing, and idealizing of the child body” (Ara Osterweil 2009, 2). The films and media image of child stars like Temple and Lyon are therefore complicit in a wider inappropriate approach to the control and exploitation of underage stars by (typically) powerful men who turned them into sex objects. In Lyon’s case, there is the added irony of the way in which her exploitation was allegorised by the film for which she is most famous. *Lolita* is the story of the abusive relationship between a twelve-year-old girl and a controlling and manipulative middle-aged professor. Lyon’s life is the story of a teenage girl controlled, manipulated, and destroyed by powerful older men and the American film industry.

This article could be used as a means of further reframing film history and the methods and approaches adopted when using the archives of problematic male auteurs. Archives like the SKA have been created, curated, and utilised to favour a narrative that centres Stanley Kubrick and marginalises and even erases a range of other figures that worked on his films. However, given the wider archival turn within film and media studies, and the increased prominence of archives within public consciousness (particularly in the case of the SKA through its use in the official travelling Stanley Kubrick exhibition) it is vital that academics are mindful of avoidance and erasure and employ critical approaches that engage with the gaps and absences in archives. By utilising critical feminist approaches to the archive, and focusing on the silences within film history, film and media scholars can begin to ascertain the ways in which films like *Lolita*, and producers and directors like Harris and Kubrick, need to be revised and recontextualised. Given the archival evidence available, Lyon’s own suggestion that the film damaged her life, and allegations made against Harris, there must be an impact on the interpretation of *Lolita* within Kubrick Studies, Film Studies, and beyond. I would argue that the film needs to be fully contextualised with reference to these points in all future discussions, interpretations, and histories. Failure to do so will only perpetuate the exploitation, and silencing, of Lyon and potentially even erase the problematic structures of patriarchal dominance, manipulation and control that are clearly central to understanding the film’s production, impact, and legacy and to understanding production cultures across the American film industry. This is exactly what Stefania Marghitu calls for in their work on auteur apologism. The SKA presents an

opportunity to complicate the dominant narrative of Kubrick as auteur. Instead, by adopting critical feminist approaches, archives like the SKA can be used to uncover the silenced voices of people like Lyon and, in the process, reframe understanding of the experience and material conditions of production in which child stars like Lyon, and other marginalised groups and workers, found themselves.

Notes

1. Lyon gave a rare interview in the 1980s, in which she discussed her experiences of *Lolita* available on YouTube. "Sue Lyon Interview." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NOLtXhPYxoM>. Accessed May 21, 2021.
2. Letter contained in *Stanley Kubrick: The Exhibition*, Design Museum, London, April-September 2019.
3. All of the letter extracts in this section are located in the Stanley Kubrick Archive, University of the Arts London, SK/10/8/1-7.

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