

**Lolita, Censorship, and Controversy: The Archival  
Remains of the Dispute Between Canon L. J. Collins and  
Stanley Kubrick**

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## ***Lolita* (1962), Censorship, and Controversy: The Archival Remains of the Dispute Between Canon L. J. Collins and Stanley Kubrick**

In 1958, the Harris-Kubrick Pictures Corporation, the independent production company of the filmmaking partners James B. Harris and Stanley Kubrick, acquired the filming rights to Vladimir Nabokov's 1955 novel *Lolita*. At the time, the book was banned in some countries due to its controversial subject matter: the story of a middle-aged professor's sexual obsession, domination, and abuse of a thirteen-year-old girl (Ladenson 2007: 188). It took Harris and Kubrick four years from acquiring the filming rights to releasing a film based on *Lolita*. The main resistance to the production and distribution of the film came not from regulatory censorship bodies in the United States (the Production Code Administration, PCA) and the UK (the British Board of Film Censors, BBFC), but rather from private religious and political organisations. *Lolita*'s subject matter, along with the film's sexual commodification of its young title role star, Sue Lyon—she had just turned fourteen when she was cast in the role—raised the ire of the United States's National Legion of Decency and the UK's Moral Law Defence Association and Christian Action.

The National Legion of Decency insisted upon at least 30 seconds of footage being cut from the final film to avoid it receiving a Legion C (C for condemned); the Legion eventually gave the film a separate classification that advised caution about the film's content, but this was only given following assurance the film would be advertised with the line that no one under 18 would be admitted. MGM had stipulated that it would not distribute the film unless approval had been received by the Legion (Anon. 1962a). Upon learning of Harris and Kubrick's plans to adapt *Lolita*, the Christian and conservative sections of British society protested the production with the aim of ensuring it was left unmade or unreleased. Moral reform campaigners believed Nabokov's novel—and by extension Harris and

Kubrick's film—was an indicator of moral degradation contributing to the decay of moral standards among teenagers and, worse, promoting and normalising sexual relations between adult men and underage children (Ladenson 2007: 218-219; Abrams 2016: 31-32). By early 1961, the chairman of Christian Action, Canon Lewis John Collins, was leading the organisation's campaign against *Lolita*, which included lobbying the BBFC to ban the film from being released. Collins was a radical political campaigner and used Christian Action as a pressure group on issues ranging from pacifism to Apartheid in South Africa. Collins's campaign was ultimately unsuccessful and *Lolita* was released with an X rating in the UK.

Research into the censorship of *Lolita* is extensive, focused largely on the ways in which Harris and Kubrick interacted with the PCA and the BBFC during the script-writing and pre-production stages of the project (Biltreyst 2015; Fenwick 2020). Scholarship to date has tended to emphasise the adaptation process and the sexual aspects of the story that were left out of the script, or revised in order for it to receive approval from the PCA and the BBFC (Corliss 1994; Duckett 2014). Research has shown how Harris and Kubrick shared a favourable relationship with the BBFC's John Trevelyan (Biltreyst 2015) and Martin Quigley, author of the Production Code (Fenwick 2020). These relationships were crucial throughout the writing of the script and the pre-production phase in order to secure the guaranteed release of the film. The pair were also closely supervised by the production company financing the project, Seven Arts, with its chief executive, Eliot Hyman, in constant dialogue with Harris and Kubrick to ensure they followed the recommendations of the PCA and the BBFC. *Lolita* was controversial and therefore a high-risk project. Even if approved for distribution by censorship bodies, it was always likely to receive an X rating because of its subject matter and the reception of the book in the late 1950s (Ladenson 2010: 196-197), when the book became an instrumental case study on literary censorship. As Ann Feeney has argued, Nabokov's novel is 'one of the most frequently mentioned works in discussions of

censorship' (1993: 67). Within Kubrick studies, arguments emphasise that it is Nabokov's book that is the source of the controversy surrounding Kubrick's film, not the film itself. The focus on adaptation and on interpreting and textually analysing the film against and within Kubrick's broader filmography leads to continual suggestions that *Lolita* the film is less sexually provocative than the book, that Kubrick was forced to compromise his artistic vision in order to have the script approved, and that the film was not controversial enough (Corliss 1994; Kolker 2017; Abrams 2018; Metlić 2019).

This chapter intercedes in this debate by focusing on the Christian Action campaign led by Canon Collins to pressure the BBFC into banning the film. The chapter makes use of archival sources, mainly correspondence from Collins to Kubrick and the BBFC located in the Lambeth Palace Archives and the Stanley Kubrick Archive, which have to date been overlooked. Rather than focusing on the film itself and the adaptation process, the chapter instead focuses on the arguments being put forward by Collins and the means by which he suggested Harris and Kubrick were purposely cultivating a controversial reaction as part of the film's publicity campaign. What the archival remains of this dispute indicate is how Collins was not responding to the content of the film (he had, after all, not seen the film), but rather to the way in which the film was being framed by Harris and Kubrick in publicity material. Far from being less sexually explicit or provocative than Nabokov's novel, Harris and Kubrick's *Lolita* exploited and sexually commodified the film's main actor, Sue Lyon, through press releases, photo shoots, and interviews (Fenwick 2020: 113-115). This in turn incensed religious and political organisations like Christian Action, leading to a discourse focused on wider issues of moral decay, teenage delinquency, and sexual depravity. This chapter lays out a selection of the archival remains of the dispute, contextualising the letters with reference to wider discussions and references in the UK media in the 1950s and 1960s. In doing so, the chapter considers whether Christian Action was focused on trying to ban just

one film—*Lolita*—or whether it was more concerned about challenging the BBFC’s X rating. By surveying the letters, the chapter examines how Christian Action wanted the BBFC to recognise that the X rating was not adequate in protecting against potentially problematic representations of a paedophilic relationship and the exploitation of a child star, and to acknowledge that a film like *Lolita* risked normalising abusive sexual relationships between adults and minors.

## **Context**

Before setting out the archival evidence, it is necessary to consider three key contexts: 1) the brief history and controversy surrounding Nabokov’s book; 2) the production history of Harris and Kubrick’s *Lolita*; and 3) the history and motivations of Christian Action and Canon L. J. Collins. Doing so will provide a greater understanding as to the argument that took place between Collins and Kubrick in late 1961, prior to the release of the film in the UK in September 1962.

Both Nabokov’s book and Harris and Kubrick’s film adaptation is the story of a paedophile. The central character, Humbert Humbert, has a sexual obsession and desire for pre-pubescent girls under the age of fourteen. The age of consent in most states at the time of the novel’s setting – the mid-1950s – was 16 years of age, except in Georgia, where the age of consent remained at 14 years of age until 1995 (Anon 1995: D4). To engage in sexual activity with a child under 16, as Humbert does, was therefore statutory rape. Humbert describes his predilection for ‘nymphets’ – girls between the age of nine and fourteen that ‘betwitched’ men ‘many times older than they’ (Nabokov 1955: 10). Humbert confesses that he is ‘consumed by a hell furnace of localized lust for every passing nymphet’ (11). Nabokov originally struggled to find a publisher for the book. Four US publishers had rejected the manuscript in 1954, with Nabokov speculating that none of them had read the book to the end

(Phillips 2016: 233). He eventually resorted to Olympia Press, a Paris based publisher with a reputation for ‘stark pornography with no literary pretensions – books with titles like *White Thighs*, *The Sexual Life of Robinson Crusoe*, and *The Chariots of Flesh*’ (Millinship 1962: 8). (Though, it must be noted that Olympia also published the work of renowned authors, such as Samuel Beckett, William S. Burroughs, Henry Miller, Pauline Réage).

*Lolita*’s association with Olympia further contributed to its pornographic (or, at the very least, erotic) reputation. Given that Olympia exclusively published in English, despite being based in Paris, it regularly received complaints from the British government (8). *Lolita* was published in 1955 and exported to countries around the world, including the United States, without censorship. But the UK government ordered the confiscation of copies of the novel being imported into the country. Following pressure from the British Home Office, the French government prohibited the book from being sold in English in 1956 (Cranston 1957: 5). Yet, at the same time, the book was to be translated into French and published in Paris. As the critic Maurice Cranston noted, this created an absurd paradox in which, “‘*Lolita*’ can be imported into the United States, but not exported from France; it cannot be sold in English in France, but it will soon be sold in French in France’ (1957: 5). As the book’s notoriety grew, so did publisher interest. Nabokov eventually found a US publisher, GP Putnam’s Sons, and the first mainstream print became an instant bestseller, selling 100,000 copies in the first three weeks of its release (Biltreyst 2015: 142). Still, even once the book was published in the UK, there were many groups opposed to it. A number of Conservative Party MPs were determined to prohibit the sale of publications such as *Lolita* and ‘others of a like nature’, which they believed had a ‘harmful effect on the morals and outlook of the younger generation, especially in view of the cheap prices at which they sell’ (Anon 1961a: 2).

A combination of the novel’s scandalous reputation (John Gordon, editor of the *Sunday Express*, described it as ‘the filthiest book I have ever read. Sheer unrestrained

pornography' [Gordon 1956: 6]) and high praise from fellow authors (Graham Greene called it one of the best books of 1955 in a review in the *Sunday Times* [Phillips 2016: 233]) meant that there was considerable interest in optioning the book for a film adaptation. Producer James B. Harris acquired the filming rights to *Lolita* for \$150,000 and subsequently secured financing from Seven Arts (after many other major US studios had turned the project down, including MGM and United Artists [Fenwick 2020: 108-109]). Seven Arts, to mitigate the financial risk of the project, brought in a script consultant, Martin Quigley, who recommended changes to the script and dialogue (112-113). Quigley was one of the co-authors of the Hollywood Production Code introduced in 1930 as a set of guidelines as to what was, and more importantly what was not, acceptable for on screen representation in the United States. Quigley suggested edits to any controversial dialogue or material in the script. Similarly, Harris and Kubrick worked closely with John Trevelyan in the UK, secretary of the BBFC. Biltereyst argues that Trevelyan's initial objections to the script were more about the fact that it, 'differed from the novel by combining humour and bad taste' (Biltereyst 2015: 144). As Daniel Biltereyst has argued, the BBFC was more interested in what he describes as 'pre-production consultation' rather than post-production censorship (144); it was about providing a 'constructive form of censorship' (144). Indeed, Trevelyan argued that Kubrick would make a responsible film given his perceived level of artistry. Trevelyan said that his own initial reservations were informed by the 'sensational publicity' of the book, claiming that 'the most responsible film will suffer from a backlash of this' (Trevelyan quoted in Biltereyst 2015: 148).

Harris and Kubrick's film is even more problematic and disturbing than Nabokov's novel for the way it treats the story of Humbert. Harris and Kubrick turn one man's dark sexual obsession into a convivial and blackly humorous tale in which the audience is encouraged to laugh at Humbert's relationship with Lolita, as well as her exploitation by

other powerful men in the film, such as the character Clare Quilty played by Peter Sellers. The producers claimed they changed the age of the Lolita character to around fourteen or fifteen, but this is of no real consequence. After all, the story is still the same: a middle-aged man's illegal sexual activity with a minor.

To overcome many of the censorship issues they might have faced, Harris and Kubrick resorted to sexual innuendo in place of actually portraying on screen sex. The sexual innuendo throughout hints at the continued abuse of Lolita by men in the world she inhabits ('She [Lolita] is having a cavity filled by Uncle Ivor,' says Quilty at one point), while there are instances in which the sexual relationship between Humbert and Lolita is made quite clear (the simulation, off screen, of oral sex). In contrast to how some academics have suggested, and continue to suggest, that the film is not sexually explicit and tones down the sexual content of the novel, or worse blame Lolita for the sexual advances of adult men (Abrams 2018: 76; Abrams 2021: 285; McEntee 2021: 193), or how Kubrick himself suggested that he was compelled to make significant compromises ('Had I realised how severe the limitations were going to be [...] I probably wouldn't have made the film' [Kubrick quoted in Zimmerman 1972: 32]), both the content and style of *Lolita* are highly problematic and sexually explicit.

The film is further problematized due to recent allegations that have resurfaced of a purported sexual relationship between Harris and Sue Lyon at the time of the film's production and release (Weinman 2020). Archival evidence in the form of correspondence clearly indicates that there was an exploitative production culture on *Lolita* in which Lyon was manipulated and controlled by powerful men. This included Harris and Kubrick who were responsible for contractual discussions about Lyon that treated her as a sexual commodity to be used by Hollywood as quickly as possible before she grew out of her 'Lolita image' (Fenwick 2021: 12-13; Ritzenhoff 2021: 170-172). Lyon's image and career were



tightly controlled by Harris and Kubrick. Yet, Lyon herself stated publicly that, ‘My destruction as a person dates from that movie. *Lolita* exposed me to temptations no girl of that age should undergo’ (Macdonald 1996).

Clearly *Lolita*, both the book and film, generated excitement and condemnation, and demonstrated the gap in society and popular culture between liberal Hollywood producers like Harris and Kubrick (liberal in the sense of wanting to push against censorious bodies and regulation and to represent transgressive relationships and taboo topics on screen) and the morally conservative religious pressure groups determined to suppress both the book and prevent any film adaptation. One such group was Christian Action.

Christian Action was an inter-church organisation founded in 1946 by Canon Collins. It was an organisation of laymen ‘founded to further Christian beliefs and to encourage its members to take personal responsibility as Christians in the social and political life of the country’ (Anon 1953a: 2). Collins wanted to, in his words, ‘root out intolerance’ from national life (Anon 1953b: 10) and to ‘make the church more responsive to social issues’ (Herbstein 2004: 6); he intended to use Christian Action to achieve these aims. Collins was the Canon of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London from 1948 until 1981. He was a politically active individual, a Labour Party member, and involved in a number of movements in the UK, from the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), the campaign to abolish capital punishment, and the establishment of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement (Anon n.d.). He was a radical priest, politically progressive, and a Christian Socialist.

Collins believed vehemently in his mission of Christianity and of social morality and took direct action in spreading those values. But there was a contradiction between Collins’s progressive politics and his dedication to the Church, which took a strongly conservative approach to sex, marriage, and relationships. Collins’s sermons in the 1950s and 1960s often focused on his belief in the moral decay of youth in the UK. For instance, Collins took aim at

young people in a sermon on 14 September 1959 following race riots in Nottingham and London; Collins criticised what he saw as the ‘growth of violence among the young’ (Anon 1959a: 2). Similarly, in a sermon given on 21 July 1963, Collins referred to modern British youth as ‘disillusioned rebels’ and said that, ‘Christians and the Churches must condemn licence and selfishness in sexual behaviour’ (Anon 1963: 2). **What** Collins’s activities and background reveal is an individual who believed in political action motivated by his deep Christian beliefs.

### **Archival Traces**

Utilising correspondence from between 1959 and 1962, now housed in the Lambeth Palace Archives and the Stanley Kubrick Archive, the aim is to analyse the discourse that took place in this period between Collins, Kubrick, and Trevelyan. The correspondence, which consists only of a handful of letters, indicates how the arguments stemmed not from the content of the film, but instead from the material representation of a sexual relationship between an adult and a minor. I have annotated the extracts to provide further context, to consider the language being used, and to place the letters within a wider argument about the problematic nature of *Lolita*.

#### *Canon Collins to Stanley Kubrick, March 1, 1961*

The first letter from Collins to Kubrick came toward the end of *Lolita*’s production in March 1961. Collins was unaware that *Lolita* was actually in the process of being shot. He immediately launches into his line of attack against the film, a position that he would stick to throughout the course of his letters to Kubrick over the next two months:

We understand that you are to produce a film based on the book *Lolita*. We believe that any such film must have deleterious effects upon our society, particularly in the light of the publicity already given to the book *Lolita*, and therefore ought not to be made. We must presume that you see the project in a different light, and I would be grateful, therefore, if you would kindly tell us what are the grounds which you believe justify you in making it. (Collins 1961a)

Collins was inviting Kubrick to partake in discourse about the plot of Nabokov's book and the process of adaptation. Of particular concern to Collins was the ongoing publicity the book was receiving, something we know that excited Harris and Kubrick (Fenwick 2020: 110), but which Collins considered dangerous. However, in this letter, he refrains from expounding on just what the 'deleterious effects' are to which he refers, instead wanting Kubrick to first respond and to justify his approach.

*Canon Collins to Stanley Kubrick, March 15, 1961*

Collins followed up his initial letter to Kubrick in response to a news report about *Lolita* in the *Sunday Pictorial*. Kubrick had not yet responded to Collins, but Collins was clearly disturbed by what he had read in the newspaper, as well as coming to realise that the film was in the advanced stages of production:

I have read a report in the 'Sunday Pictorial' this week which suggests that the filming of *Lolita* is already in hand. I think the Pictorial's pictures and comments are such as to arouse considerable misgivings throughout the country. I would be glad of a reply to my letter. We would not wish to launch upon any protest without first trying

to discover what are the reasons which you seem to think justify the making of this film. (Collins 1961b)

The news piece to which Collins was referring was published under the headline ‘Startling Scenes from “Lolita” Film: Seedy, Shocking, Sensational – Lolita in Action!’ (1961). The three-page spread contained six production stills that had been released by the film’s producers, mainly focusing on Sue Lyon. Repeatedly, the piece describes Lyon using sexualised language. Though only a short profile piece, the three-page *Sunday Pictorial* spread was designed to elicit shock and controversy and focused on the sexual relationship between an adult and a minor and the appropriateness of this. As the news story stated, ““Lolita” is an unpleasant story about a middle-aged man’s obsession for a twelve-year-old girl [...] With all the world of tender and innocent adolescence to draw on-WHY DID THEY HAVE TO MAKE “LOLITA?””.

*Stanley Kubrick to Canon Collins, March 23, 1961*

Kubrick’s first response to Collins aimed to shift the blame away from himself and the film to the media instead, arguing that what Collins found shocking was not the film (which he had not seen) but the media reaction, what Kubrick calls an ‘air of sensationalism’. Kubrick suggests that the controversy and sensationalism surrounding the film, along with the publicity, is something that was out of his hands and that he had nothing to do with:

I appreciate your concern about the making of “LOLITA” into a film, because of the sensational publicity which has been attached to the novel. Knowing the sincerity of your intentions, I can only register a certain degree of surprise at your willingness to pre-judge a motion picture (which, by the way, has already been filmed) before you

see it. The air of sensationalism which has surrounded “LOLITA” from the beginning has been completely beyond our control, and we have done everything possible to avoid it and to detach ourselves from its implications. Wouldn’t you say that it gives some cause for thought on your part, when you consider the calibre and reputation of the people involved in the picture, notably James Mason, Peter Sellers, and Shelley Winters.

What Kubrick does not mention is the number of actors, of a calibre and reputation akin to – if not surpassing – those mentioned above, who turned down the project because they believed it to be pornographic. This included Kirk Douglas, Laurence Olivier, and David Niven (Fenwick 2020: 109). Kubrick then emphasises his own reputation:

I hesitate to add (but your letter enforces me to), that a quick look at the films I have made in the past, might also imply a certain dedication to filmmaking, rather than to the exploitation of “unwholesome” subjects. I must say, that I do not think you will find the motion picture in any way deleterious to the morals of any segment of society. By the way, the photographs you referred to in the “Sunday Pictorial”, were stolen from the Laboratory and mis-captioned and, as a result, gave a completely distorted impression. (Kubrick 1961a)

Kubrick’s response to Collins, and ultimately his justification for filming *Lolita*, centred on the issue of reputation. Kubrick referred to his own esteem within the film industry and his own track record as a director as evidence that he did not pursue films about ‘unwholesome’ subjects. However, he was conveniently overlooking many aspects of his films, each of

which up to that point contained at least one murder, often brutal scenes of violence against women, and regularly caused controversy.

As for Kubrick's claim that he would never exploit the controversy surrounding Nabokov's novel, this was far from the truth. The use of controversy to promote a film was a tactic to which Kubrick was not adverse. Indeed, he previously encouraged the exploitation of the controversial reaction to *Paths of Glory* in Europe. The film had not been released in France and had been withdrawn from exhibition in several other European countries due to its perceived negative representation of the French military. However, Kubrick attempted to encourage a French distributor to release *Paths of Glory* and to take full advantage of its controversial reputation, as he urged in a letter in 1958: 'The controversy over [*Paths of Glory*] would undoubtedly cause front page headlines and public demonstrations. At the risk of sounding cynical, one could hardly hope for a better kind of movie publicity and promotion' (Kubrick 1958).

Harris and Kubrick exploited the controversy of *Lolita* in a similar way, from directly attaching Nabokov's name to the project (and thereby the pre-existing history of the novel's pornographic reputation), to playing up the book's disrepute in poster taglines such as, 'How did they ever make a movie of Lolita?' (a line that appears almost verbatim in the *Sunday Pictorial* news article). They also later emphasised in publicity material the X rating that the film received in the UK, playing up the fact that Lyon herself, while able to attend film premier functions, was not legally able to watch the film. The promotional campaign for the film, that began during pre-production, was carefully orchestrated by Harris and Kubrick, who cultivated what they termed the 'Lolita-image', which was entirely based around Lyon. They tightly controlled access to her and published photographs and press releases that purposely sexualised the young actor. For example, they hired photographer Bert Stern in 1960 to take a series of iconic images of Lyon. As Karen Ritzenhoff argues, 'Stern created a

visual vocabulary of teenage female sensuality in which *Lolita* is predominantly engaging with the viewer behind the camera, satisfying voyeuristic pleasure, that is echoed in Kubrick's films. Stern's promotional photography, therefore, was more representative of male power than female empowerment' (2021: 172). Harris was particularly close to the creation of the 'Lolita-image', in the process transforming Lyon into the embodiment of a sexualised teenager and encouraging the world's media to describe her in graphic, sexualised language as he accompanied her on a press tour around the world. The 'Lolita-image' depended on turning Lyon into a sexualised commodity, a young teenage girl that audiences and critics alike were encouraged to fantasise about. In short, the publicity campaign amounted to turning Lyon into the dangerous symbol of a sexualised, permissive society that Collins and others feared. She embodied the air of sensationalism that surrounded *Lolita*.

*Canon Collins to Stanley Kubrick, March 27 and 28, 1961*

Collins followed up Kubrick's response with two letters of his own in which he escalated his line of attack against the film. In his first letter, he requested that Kubrick reconsider releasing the film:

I note that the picture of *Lolita* has already been made, and that you feel that it will not be in any way deleterious to the morals of any segment of society. My concern is nevertheless that the subject matter of the novel is not suitable to film. I have no doubt that the actors concerned, as well as yourself, would give the best possible consideration to the production of an artistic film and would have no wish to produce anything which would harm public morals. The fact remains that the book has sensational publicity and the showing of the film would, in my opinion, inevitably incur the risk of being seen by people suffering from the same perversion as is the

subject of the book, and might, therefore, do great harm, perhaps even leading to rape or murder, which would otherwise not have occurred. I would therefore beg you to give further consideration in the matter, before you seek to get it released. (Collins 1961c)

Collins, for the first time, inferred that Kubrick's film could potentially incite real-life sexual violence, without any evidence to back up this claim. Collins also disputed the filmmaking reputation of Kubrick, arguing that it did not matter about the artistic calibre of those involved because of the very fact that the story remained that of a sexual relationship between an adult and a child. The following day, Collins sent Kubrick another letter that confirmed Christian Action was to officially lodge a case against *Lolita* with the BBFC:

I have decided that we must present to the Board of Film Censors what we believe to be the case against the film *Lolita* being given any kind of certificate for showing in Britain. The case we wish to present is not against the particular version of the film *Lolita* which you have produced – if it were, it would of course, be necessary for us to see the film before objecting to it. Our contention is that any film version of this book, unless it departs so radically from the book as to be unrecognisable, must be a provocation of the kind that might lead to rape and even murder.

Collins **seems** to be suggesting that Kubrick's defence that he was a respectable artist did not provide him with the right to adapt the book into a film. Indeed, Collins **seems** to hint at a greater responsibility to prevent such material from being adapted into films. He then outlines the basic plot structure of *Lolita* and how he believes no filmmaker could deviate from this story.



Lolita, which I have read with care, is a cleverly written novel about an ugly sex perversion. It is a story of a man possessed by an insatiable desire for physical sex experience with pre-adolescent girls. He marries his landlady, a widow with a daughter aged 12, expressly to possess the daughter. When his wife is killed in an accident, he takes the little girl as his mistress, moves around with her from place so as to avoid arrest, and, in the end, kills the man who is responsible, he believes, for releasing her from his clutches. You will not, I believe, dispute that this is a fair outline of the book. As to the film version, I understand that the part of the male pervert is played by a middle-aged actor, and that of Lolita by a girl actress. It would seem evident, therefore, that the film version does not seek to disguise the book's essential characteristics, and indeed your letter does not suggest that it does. (Collins 1961d)

Collins made it clear that, no matter what justification Kubrick provided, Christian Action would object to any film adaptation due to the essential storyline of the novel. Collins also focused on the material and social realities of the production, in particular the age of Sue Lyon, seeing the film as exploiting and sexualising a young female actor. It was this latter point that Collins proceeded to expand upon:

We shall submit to the British Board of Film Censors that it would be irresponsible to regard this as just another erotic film to which an X certificate can be given. Of course, children and adolescents must be protected against corrupting influences. But our point in regard to "Lolita" is that it might attract men who have this particular sex obsession and also those in whom there is a potential obsession and in whom their

latest desires might be stirred into criminal action. In the interval between my first writing to you and your reply, Arthur Albert Jones appeared at the Old Bailey and was sentenced to fourteen years' imprisonment for the rape of a girl guide. Jones' victim Barbara sat beside the Old Bailey judge telling the story of her night of terror at the hands of one such pervert as is described in *Lolita*. This case was only the most recent of many which have horrified the public in recent years, some of which have ended in murder. That is why we shall fight against the showing of this film in Britain. (Collins 1961d)

Collins and Christian Action wanted the BBFC to enact a permanent ban of any film based on *Lolita*. Collins argued that both the novel and any film adapted from it risked normalising dangerous sexual behaviour. Collins believed that the X rating was inadequate. Preventing children from seeing the film would be pointless if adult men were still permitted to view it, while the film itself would be far from entertainment and instead a depiction of a predatory paedophile. Collins outlined his key approach to the case against *Lolita*: the idea that it could provoke rape and murder. This included the case of Arthur Albert Jones, who was sentenced in March 1961 for the rape of an eleven-year-old girl. Jones, who possessed a history of abusive behaviour, was later discovered to have also murdered a twelve-year-old girl, Brenda Nash, and was given a life sentence in June 1961 (Anon. 1961 b: 5). Psychiatrists determined that Jones was motivated by a persistent need for incestuous sexual gratification and of excitement at young girls in Girl Guides' uniform. Collins directly linked the Jones case to *Lolita*, stating that Jones's crimes were as described in *Lolita*. Collins was in part responding to a climate of sensationalism in which a number of books (D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* [1932]) and films (e.g., *The Chapman Report* [George Cukor 1962]) at that time were deemed to be morally reprehensible and contributing to a sexually deviant

society. Indeed, letters written to *The Observer* in 1959 about Nabokov's book suggested that it **would lead** to a breakdown of moral standards in the country. One letter proclaimed that the publication of *Lolita* **would lead** to an increase in 'auto-erotic fantasies of a perverted kind'; the author of the letter believed that *Lolita*'s supposed encouragement of masturbation would be detrimental not only to the individual, but also to wider society, 'by impairing [human] emotional capacity for entering fully into normal human relationships' (Anon. 1959b: 11). Another letter argued that *Lolita* would encourage the normalisation of paedophilia and make sexual abuse of children acceptable within society. Collins contributed to this discourse, linking *Lolita* to deviant sexual behaviour, child abuse, and violent crime by releasing to the press a list of over twenty cases of rape involving young girls. The aim was to link in the public's mind the story of *Lolita* to actual crimes and to stress the weak barrier of moral convention that Collins was trying to defend.

*Stanley Kubrick to Canon Collins, May 6, 1961; John Trevelyan to Stanley Kubrick, May 11, 1961*

Christian Action submitted a case against *Lolita* to the BBFC in early May 1961. The case included the correspondence between Kubrick and Collins, alongside press cuttings. Collins gave Kubrick the opportunity to respond, explaining that he intended to make the case public. Kubrick's response once again focused on the fact that Collins was prejudging *Lolita* without having seen it and was privately attempting to unduly influence the BBFC:

I would not think it unfair to say that even by the most objective interpretation of your own words, your opinion as to the possible effects of the motion picture, "Lolita", is based entirely upon presumption and not upon evidence. I would therefore hope that upon re-examination of the facts at hand, you might come to the conclusion that your

announced intention to attempt to prejudice the British Board of Film Censors before the film is even submitted to them is not only an extremely unfair action but one which seems to hinge upon a rather paradoxical moral principal. I sincerely regret that you and your council have found it necessary to devote so much of your worthwhile time to something which in the end I am certain you will find completely unobjectionable. (Kubrick 1961b)

Most likely unbeknown to Collins, Kubrick possessed a pre-existing relationship with the BBFC that ensured *Lolita* would be released without any cuts. This meant that, upon receiving Christian Action's case, Trevelyan immediately wrote to Kubrick:

I am now sending you privately a copy of the document sent to me by Canon Collins. As I have told you, anything of this kind will not prejudice the Board in its discussions. Canon Collins will be informing the press. If there are any developments I will let you know. (Trevelyan 1961)

This letter suggests that Collins' campaign was futile and that the BBFC had already sided with Harris and Kubrick.

*Canon Collins to Stanley Kubrick, May 9, 1961*

The final letter from Collins contained in the archives has a focus on the urgent imperative to convince the BBFC to prevent *Lolita*'s release. By this point, Collins and Kubrick had already reached entrenched positions. The only indication of any kind of compromise was Collins' request to Kubrick to provide a copy of *Lolita* for a private screening of the film for the Council of Christian Action. This, however, was a highly unlikely situation, given that it

would provide Christian Action with the evidence it needed to back up its claims that the film should be prevented from release:

Believing as we do in the possibility, or even probability, of the film version of *LOLITA* having the ill effects to which I have referred previously, it would be both foolish and immoral on our part to await factual evidence (which, in any case, would be extremely difficult to establish with any degree of certainty) before making our protest. It is our hope, therefore that the Board of Film Censors, will not grant it a licence. There would be little point in our waiting to present our case against any film version of *LOLITA* until the licence had been granted and the picture released for showing to the public. In your reply you do not respond to the suggestion of the Council of Christian Action that, should you think any good purpose would be served by our doing so, we would be willing to see a private showing of the film. It would seem to me, therefore, that any “re-examination of the facts at hand” would not justify us in staying our purpose of asking the Board of Film Censors not to grant a licence of any sort. (Collins 1961e)

Resisting Christian Action’s efforts to ban *Lolita*, the BBFC ultimately gave the film an X rating in September 1961, but this only served to further motivate Christian Action. The organisation partnered with the Moral Law Defence Association to mobilise supporters in a national boycott. The groups requested that local authorities ignore the BBFC’s classification of *Lolita* to form their own judgment (Anon. 1962b: 3). However, Collins and Christian Action’s campaign proved counter intuitive by further contributing to the ‘air of sensationalism’ surrounding the film. Kubrick seized the opportunity to criticise Collins’s actions in the press, calling his campaign ‘dangerous and silly’ and calling Collins ‘incredibly

presumptuous' due to not having seen the film (Anon. 1961c 12). Kubrick turned Collins's campaign back on himself, declaring him—not the film—to be dangerous to society and to free speech, telling the press that, 'it is surely undesirable that unofficial organizations, who have no knowledge of a film, should attempt to put pressure on official censorial bodies' (12). According to Kubrick, it wasn't *Lolita* or filmmakers like himself that were a threat to the moral standards of society, but rather Collins and Christian Action in their attempts to suppress films like *Lolita*.

## **Conclusion**

*Lolita*'s X rating was largely pre-ordained due to the fact that Harris and Kubrick had been involved in negotiations about censorship with the BBFC since the script stage. Kubrick even encouraged self-censorship and the removal of shots that he thought might encounter trouble with censors. For Collins, the key problem was not whether there was any representation or even suggestion of sex on screen, but rather in the fact that Harris and Kubrick decided to adapt a story about a paedophile. Christian Action's objections with the BBFC centred on the inadequacy of the X rating to prevent such films from being seen and the potential harm it could have in normalising deviant sexual behaviour. Harris and Kubrick welcomed the controversy that surrounded the production, and even encouraged it, despite the protestations by Kubrick to Collins that he would never do such a thing. As such, Harris and Kubrick more than likely welcomed the attention that Collins's campaign brought *Lolita*, particularly following the private reassurance from Trevelyan that it would have no bearing on the rating decision.

What also arises out of the study of these letters is the question of artistic reputation and how Kubrick himself possessed the self-belief (even at this early stage of his career) that he was a great artist and that in of itself was justification to allow him to adapt whatever he

wanted and to resist any attempts at censorship or external control. This confidence in his own directorial image and reputation was undoubtedly bolstered by the critical and commercial success of *Spartacus* (1960), which garnered him with new levels of power in the film industry. Arguably, the attitude adopted by Kubrick in his letters to Collins also hints towards the power dynamics of the film industry and the way white, male auteurs were treated as artists. Even Trevelyan admitted to backing down over the censorship of *Lolita* because of his own attitudes toward Kubrick as an artist. These letters, and this case study, can therefore provide further insights into the myth of the auteur and the way in which filmmakers like Kubrick felt empowered to do as they wish within the industry.

While the letters between Collins and Kubrick are limited to a particular time period, the discourse they contain has continued since then, reflecting the ongoing controversial nature of *Lolita* and its story of a paedophile, and of the impact and legacy of the ‘Lolita image’ that Harris and Kubrick created – a pervasive image of teenage sexuality that has influenced fashion, photography, culture, and even pornography throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Fenwick, forthcoming). Adrian Lyne’s 1997 adaptation of *Lolita* encountered a variety of controversies, including initially being rejected for release by major distributors in the United States and Australia, as well as being labelled ‘an apologia for the apparent sexual abuse of children’ (Delingpole 1998: F6). The ‘Lolita image’ has also been targeted by prominent figures following the #MeToo movement. Natalie Portman stated that she was regularly framed as a ‘Lolita’ figure as a child and had feared being harassed or assaulted by men in the entertainment industries (and beyond) as a result (Fenwick, forthcoming). The convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein was reported to have even nicknamed his private jet the ‘Lolita Express’ (Eklund 2019).

With this in mind, the discussions to date of the history of *Lolita*’s X rating in the UK, and its difficulties with other censorious bodies around the world, typically overlook the

material, social, and cultural conditions of the film's production. It is something which Collins himself briefly touched upon, when objecting to the casting of Sue Lyon. Her exploitation by the film's producers, the creation of the 'Lolita-image', the control Harris and Kubrick yielded over her career, and the impact it had on her subsequent life are all indicators of how, in many ways, *Lolita* is an allegory of its own production. Rather than focusing on the liberalising forces of censorship that prevailed and allowed *Lolita* to be produced and exhibited, or on adaptation and fidelity, film historians should now look towards archival and empirical evidence of the film's material, social, and cultural conditions of production that clearly highlight the problematic production, promotion, and working relations on the film. Archival research can reframe textual analysis of the film and show how misplaced Collins and Christian Action were: the fears they had over the sexualisation of society ignored the exploitation taking place on the film's set. For *Lolita* is not only a film about the sexual relationship between an adult male and a minor, but a film that is the material evidence of the power structures of the film industry. While the BBFC and John Trevelyan may have excused *Lolita* in the name of art (and its producers, Harris and Kubrick, as artists), film history must reframe the debate and take account of how male 'auteur apologism' marginalises and suppresses the voice, narrative, and agency of people like Lyon (Marghitu 2018; Fenwick 2021).



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### Abbreviations:

CLJCP = Canon L. J. Collins Papers, Lambeth Palace Archives, London.

SKA= Stanley Kubrick Archive, University of the Arts London.

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