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LOLITA AND LANA
IN THE AGE
OF INTERNET MEMES

INTRODUCTION

Despite persistent myths about the artist as genius, artists appropriate and adapt the works of other artists—be it by only picking up a detail from another artifact and reproducing, imitating, and modifying it in a new work of art. The pervasiveness of adaptation as a frequently translingual, transcultural, and transmedial process (see Hutcheon; Sanders; Stam) has been studied in light of evolutionary theory (see Bortolotti and Hutcheon), most prominently through the lens of evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins’s take on how “memes,” as the smallest meaning-carrying units of culture, replicate and gradually modify cultural minutiae (as first described in his 1976 monograph *The Selfish Gene*).

While scholars have not yet agreed on how to define a meme conclusively, it has become clear that replication entails both imitation and change. Thus, creative acts belie the very notions of fidelity or originality by, rather, reflecting long-term engagement with cultural material. In the digital age, the concept of the “Internet meme” expresses the idea that the production and reception of digitally transmitted memes together constitute a recognizable sub-group or new form of meme (see Börzsei; Shifman; Wiggins and Bowers). For the sake of parodying or conveying a specific ‘message,’ pre-existing images are imitated and changed; such images emerge as Internet memes once they spread widely and swiftly, in other words, when they go

“viral.” This metaphor is remarkable, as its usage—on the level of discourse—recalls the physical context of replication and distribution whence Dawkins derived the original meme concept.

Pointing to these characteristics, Wiggins and Bowers argue that the Internet meme should be regarded as “a genre, not a unit of cultural transmission” (1890).¹ If we thus regard them as artifacts, Internet memes imply the agency of creative minds (Shifman), as Dawkins himself acknowledged recently (Dawkins and Marshmallow Laser Feast). They can also be subdivided into different formats with distinctive qualities, primarily into “video memes” that go viral (for instance on platforms like YouTube) and “image macro memes [that] seem to possess greater endurance” (Wiggins and Bowers 1892, 1897) and that may be derived from movies, television, commercials, and the like. Furthermore, Wiggins and Bowers suggest three phases in meme distribution: first, artifacts reaching Internet users through social media channels are “*spreadable media*”; second, increased Internet user attention turns an artifact into “an *emergent meme*” (1896); third, “remix and imitation” as well as “rapid diffusion” (1896) result in the creation of a more stable and more broadly recognizable “meme” (1897). Shifman’s outlook as well as Wiggins and Bowers’s approach indicate that Internet memes offer ample opportunity to combine professionally produced content with work resulting from non-professional imitation and adaptation—and vice versa. The Internet meme thus represents a central example of what Jenkins characterizes as “convergence culture,” that is, the dissolution of boundaries between long-established media and new media, between amateur and professional cultural production, and between seemingly private exchanges and communication on a larger public scale.

Visual renderings of Nabokov’s *Lolita* have become part of cultural memory, particularly through the film adaptations by Stanley Kubrick (1962) and Adrian Lyne (1997). Furthermore, popular culture has been a breeding ground for *Lolita* adaptations (see Vickers; Durham). Singer-songwriter Lana Del Rey (b. Elizabeth Grant), “[t]he most commercially successful of the current crop of *Lolita*-inflected artists” (Bertram and Leving 16), has been alluding to Nabokov’s nymphet in her lyrics, music videos, and visual self-representation in public relations materials, the news media, and in social media accounts linked to her name. In accordance with Jenkins’s convergence concept, Del Rey synthesizes old and new media platforms to promote her work and

¹ In the same vein, Shifman writes: “Internet memes are defined here as units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process” (367). Wiggins and Bowers “differentiate between the memetic and the viral” (1891) in order to stress the difference between the genre features of the Internet meme as artifact and the characteristics of its distribution.

her persona in ways that seemingly allow access to the private person, but that first and foremost cement a coherent public image. This nexus between public and private, offline and online self-representation provides the point of departure for the central concern of this essay, that is, for fathoming the aesthetic strategies that Del Rey uses to integrate allusions to Nabokov and particularly to *Lolita* into the intertwined strands of media content with which she promotes her work and artistic personae.

This central concern raises a series of related questions. How does Del Rey navigate her professional/commercial presence as possibly distinct from her personal/private digital presence, and how do her strategies affect her reputation as promoting an “indie/DIY” ethics that implies closeness to the broadly shared online world of social media? How and in which contexts, and to which effect(s), does the singer-songwriter use either verbal references to Nabokov’s novel or allusions to “image macro memes” (Wiggins and Bowers) from the film adaptations by Stanley Kubrick (1962) and Adrian Lyne (1997)? Do any of her self-created images, be they stills or parts of music videos, fulfill Wiggins and Bowers’s Internet-meme criterion by having developed from “emergent memes” to “memes”? And, finally, how does Del Rey’s appropriation and adaptation of the *Lolita* persona—taken from Nabokov, Kubrick, and Lyne, and in verbal texts, stills, and moving images—shed light on the literary character’s overall current status as an Internet meme?

Following an introduction to Del Rey’s early career and artistic self-characterization, this essay will first discuss Del Rey’s songs and music videos, and subsequently her social media presence. We will argue that Del Rey’s playful adaptations of previously famous *Lolita* images in her artistic works and in her online self-depiction confirm two central tenets of Wiggins and Bowers’s approach to the meme as a genre: Del Rey’s reiterations of *Lolita* images linked to movie versions of Nabokov’s novel indicate the longevity of “image macro memes”; at the same time, such images serve as the basis of “emerging memes” that are designed to develop into full-fledged, robust Internet memes of Lana Del Rey as a contemporary *Lolita* of her own design.

AUTHENTICITY AND ALLUSION

Numerous critics and journalists ascribe the origin of Del Rey’s commercial career to her home-made music video entitled “Video Games,” which she first posted on YouTube on 29 June

2011 and which immediately went viral.² At the same time, and in contradistinction to the popularity of her DIY or so-called ‘indie’ music video style, the singer has also been the target of polemics about her personae and œuvre lacking ‘authenticity’—a buzzword vaguely applied to her as a person, to her songs, and to the way she handles her media presence. These evaluative claims recall media discourse on hip-hop artists. Hip-hop artists have been consistently reprehended about a lack of authenticity, with such admonishments being based on normative and thus restrictive notions such as ‘if your biography and heritage do not link you to a specific race and socioeconomic background, your artistic work is fake’; and, ‘we read your lyrics and music videos as ethnographic and autobiographical rather than as artistic representations and constructs.’³ The authenticity debate about Del Rey reflects comparable normative assumptions and judgments. Del Rey has been attacked for ostensible discrepancies between who she ‘really’ is (here in appropriately Nabokovian quotation marks) and whom she portrays artistically. Issues in this epistemologically fraught debate are her—presumably—cosmetically enhanced looks (as if other artists performed without previous styling or other appearance-changing measures), her role-playing in songs and videos (as if performance excluded assuming personae), and her ostensible attempts to erase online traces of her ‘former’ and ‘original’ self as Elizabeth/Lizzy Grant with her new Lana Del Rey persona by re-purchasing the rights to recordings she made before establishing her nom de plume.⁴ At the same time, this controversy, which simply links her artistic practice to those of other popular music stars from David Bowie and Madonna to Freddie Mercury and Lady Gaga, may well be a central factor behind her artistic and popular success. The controversy landed her an interview in *GQ* about a month after she was catapulted into far-flung online fame.⁵

² See Amanda Dobbins, “Meet Lana Del Rey, the New Singer Music Bloggers Love to Hate,” *The Vulture* 21 Sept. 2011. <http://www.vulture.com/2011/09/lanadelrey.html>; and Catherine Vigier, “The Meaning of Lana Del Rey: Pop culture, post-feminism and the choices facing young women today,” *Zeteo: The Journal of Interdisciplinary Writing*, Fall 2012, 2. <http://zeteojournal.com/2012/11/15/the-meaning-of-lana-del-rey>.

³ See Nassim Balestrini, “Strategic Visuals in Hip-Hop Life Writing,” *Popular Music and Society* 38.2 (2015): 224–42.

⁴ John Calvert asks her about these attacks in “Original Sin: An Interview with Lana Del Rey,” *The Quietus* October 4, 2011. <http://thequietus.com/articles/07106-lana-del-rey-interview>. Comments on this interview point out that she has been sharply criticized by Internet voices in the United States, but not in the United Kingdom. Also see Paul Harris, “Lana Del Rey: The Strange Story of the Star Who Rewrote Her Past,” *The Guardian* January 21, 2012. <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/jan/21/lanadelrey-pop>; Sasha Frer-Jones, “Screen Shot: Lana Del Rey’s fixed image,” *The New Yorker* February 6, 2012, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/02/06/screen-shot>.

⁵ Sean Fennessey, “Ice Breaker: Lana Del Rey,” *GQ* October 6, 2011. <http://www.gq.com/story/lanadelrey-interview-video-games>. *GQ* subsequently declared her “woman of the year” (Jonathan Heaf, “Woman of the year: Lana Del Rey,” *GQ* October 1, 2012, <http://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/men-of-the-year/home/winners-2012/woman->

Early on in the debate about artistic ‘credibility,’ Del Rey stressed the allusive basis of her persona by self-describing “as ‘Lolita got lost in the ’hood’”⁶ and “gangster Nancy Sinatra”⁷—phrases that have been reiterated around the Internet ever since. While allusions to Lolita in popular music tend to depict Nabokov’s protagonist as willfully slutty rather than sexually victimized,⁸ Nitsuh Abebe credits Del Rey with a more thoughtful response to the actual novel rather than to “some kind of porn-derived mincing.”⁹ According to Abebe’s interpretation, Del Rey’s act of displaying Nabokov’s name on her right arm can be read as emblematic of the singer’s desire to appropriate and adapt elements found in the works and in the reception history of her favorite writers, Vladimir Nabokov and Walt Whitman, whose last names are tattooed on her right arm (see Figure 1).¹⁰



Figure 1: Del Rey’s tattoo on her right forearm (source: lanadelreyfan.com)

In contrast to those who have interpreted Del Rey’s female personae as inordinate celebrations of women’s lack of power (because she depicts characters that sado-masochistically

of-the-year-lana-del-rey). In accordance with the prominence of the Internet in her career-related image, Heaf argues that “[s]he’s beauty, Instagrammed” (n.p.).

⁶ Rosie Swash, “One to Watch: Lana Del Rey,” *The Guardian*, 4 Sept. 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/sep/04/one-to-watch-lana-del-rey>

⁷ See Harris, “Lana Del Rey: The Strange Story.”

⁸ See Nassim W. Balestrini, “Popular Culture,” *Nabokov in Context*, ed. David Bethea and Siggy Frank, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming.

⁹ Nitsuh Abebe, “The Imagination of Lana Del Rey,” *The Pitchfork* September 20, 2011, <http://pitchfork.com/features/why-we-fight/8679-the-imagination-of-lana-del-rey>. Also see Isabella Dann, “Lana Del Rey and the Enduring Love for Lolita,” *The Mancunion* February 14, 2012, accessed March 17, 2013.

¹⁰ As the subtitle of his brief article indicates, Marc Hogan agrees with Abebe’s assessment in “Lana Del Rey Plays a ‘Hood Lolita in ‘Off to the Races’: She Alludes to the Actual Vladimir Nabokov Novel,” *Spin*, December 20, 2011. <http://www.spin.com/2011/12/lana-del-rey-plays-hood-lolita-races>.

subject themselves to violent men),¹¹ Abebe implicitly applauds Del Rey's references to Lolita: these references, Abebe claims, do not respond to the Lolita-as-harlot cliché which prevails outside the novel but rather appropriate Nabokov's text, which clearly avoids this perspective (see Balestrini, *Vladimir Nabokovs Erzählwerk*). Thus, the singer's artistic alter egos do not necessarily condone their own suffering, but rather imply that their experience may create erotic pleasure in listeners and viewers.

Outside print and online journalism, Lana Del Rey's fans have demonstrated awareness of allusions to textual details of Nabokov's novel in her song lyrics and, on top of that, of clips of the film versions by Stanley Kubrick and Adrian Lyne interspersed in her music videos. For instance, a six-minute YouTube video entitled "Lolita references in Lana Del Rey's songs and music videos" presents a compendium of verbal and visual references. This video has, however, only been viewed 24,087 times (as of 12 December 2015)—which is negligible when compared to the over 98 million views of her first viral YouTube contribution, the above-mentioned "Video Games." This fan-produced comment on Lana Del Rey's *Lolita* allusions nevertheless demonstrates the need to examine the singer-songwriter's strategies more closely: how does she weave textual references to the novel into her work? How does she incorporate visual memes borrowed from the film adaptations and their paratextual materials (such as film posters) into her music videos? And, finally, does her self-depiction in social media as a contemporary Lolita-figure cohere with the use of Nabokov's nymphet in her lyrics and music videos?

SONG LYRICS

The Nabokov references in Del Rey's lyrics range from Lolita-like speakers who relate personal experiences similar to those of Nabokov's title character to unmistakable references to her name as well as quotations from the novel. Often, references to the novel are combined with evocations of film culture in general or of filmic *Lolita* adaptations.

Among the comparatively indirect references, "Put Me in a Movie" evokes Clare Quilty's use of child actors in pornographic films (in lines like "Come on, you know you like little girls / You can be my daddy"); the song "Big Bad Wolf," with its fairy-tale title, may allude to Lolita's

¹¹ See Vigier 4–5; Paul Rice, "Lana Del Rey's feminist problem," *Slant Magazine* February 8, 2012, <http://www.slantmagazine.com/house/article/lanadelreys-feminist-problem>.

repeated attempts to get away from Humbert Humbert and rather join Quilty (see “Escaping in your cherry red car”); “Butterflies Pt. 2” merges Humbert Humbert and Nabokov by creating an analogy between butterflies and nymphets that are not studied scientifically by a Nabokovian lepidopterist but are rather mistreated by a Humbert Humbert–like seducer (“He thinks that little girls / Are butterflies and cuts their wings. // Sicko, psycho, sicko, / But he’s my beau. / Puts them on a rollercoaster, / Lures them in with Coca-Cola! // Boy, you’ve been / Catchin’ butterflies”; “I puts on ‘Lola’ by The Kinks, / And he dances round”). In this example, the lyrics imply that the Lolita-like speaker is making a desperate attempt to see something positive in her dysfunctional relationship with a sexual predator, born of an unfulfilled need of emotional attachment to another human being.¹² The song title “1949” may be a reference to the year of Humbert Humbert’s second extended road trip with Lolita (“Daddy dearest, you know, / How I like to take trips”);¹³ the song also alludes to how Humbert Humbert cradles Lolita in his arms and takes her to her bedroom (“Carry me up them stairs,”),¹⁴ to her bobby socks (“Put my white socks on”),¹⁵ and to her chaotic bedroom (“the mess upstairs”).¹⁶

Recognizing the Nabokov allusion in “Off to the Races” also requires knowledge of the novel, but the reference is more direct as the lyrics quote from the opening lines of the novel (“Light of my life, fire of my loins”), subsequently changing them into “Light of his life, fire of his loins” and into “Light of your life, fire of your loins.” The extremely self-deprecating depiction of the song’s speaker focuses on sinfulness, hedonism, and alcohol, and on her fascination with the world of Hollywood movies. In the lyrics, the desire for stardom evolves into depicting Lolita as Humbert Humbert’s prostitute or mistress: “I’m your little scarlet, starlet, singin’ in the garden”; “I’m your little harlot, starlet.”¹⁷ Similarly, this image of the title character as a seductress prevails in “Lolita”: “Could be kissing my fruit punch lips in the bright sunshine”—a description which evokes the foregrounding of lipstick in Lyne’s *Lolita* film as emblematic of underage Lolita’s partially willing—albeit nevertheless not legally consensual—

¹² See Nabokov, “Lolita” 133, 141, et passim. For a discussion of Lolita’s isolation, see Bordo 141–42, 145.

¹³ Disco-ball Mind mistakenly claims that 1949 refers to their first road trip. Actually, the first stretch of traveling begins in 1947; the second road trip commences in 1949 after the end of school year (see <http://www.d-e-zimmer.de/LolitaUSA/LoChrono.htm>).

¹⁴ See Nabokov, “Lolita” 194.

¹⁵ See, for instance, Nabokov, “Lolita” 35, 55.

¹⁶ See Nabokov, “Lolita” 62, 64.

¹⁷ In the poem that Humbert Humbert composes after Lolita’s escape, he refers to her lips being “scarlet” and her profession being that of a “starlet” (Nabokov, “Lolita” 240).

participation in sex with Humbert Humbert.¹⁸ More obvious references to one of the central visual memes linked to Kubrick's film, namely multiple images of Sue Lyon wearing heart-shaped sunglasses, occur in the lyrics of "Diet Mountain Dew" ("You're no good for me"; "Baby, put on heart-shaped sunglasses / 'Cause we going to take a ride") and "Every Man Has His Wish" ("he loves my heart-shaped sunglasses").

Del Rey's *Lolita* allusions occur in songs recorded and released between 2008 and 2012. The title of her 2014 album, *Ultraviolence*, may hint at Humbert Humbert's description of Lolita as his "ultraviolet darling" (Nabokov, "Lolita" 208) in his mock apology after having treated her violently. While Del Rey's lyrics continue to address abuse, violence, and sex, more readily recognizable references to Nabokov's novel and the film adaptations give way to a more general treatment of these themes.

MUSIC VIDEOS

Del Rey's aesthetic representations of *Lolita* allusions in her music videos cover a range of possibilities: some works unambiguously reference Kubrick and Lyne's film adaptations; others do not rely on widely known pre-existing visuals (both film clips and "image macro memes" according to Wiggins and Bowers's definition) but rather emphasize an "emerging" Lolita "meme" (Wiggins and Bowers). This "emerging meme" centers on a persona that coheres with the visual features of Del Rey's "Lolita lost in the 'hood" image. Easily identifiable textual allusions thus recede in favor of tapping into the larger cultural imaginary connected with Lolita and of stressing Del Rey's artistic persona.

The fast-paced collage in the music video "Lolita" melds clips from the *Lolita* movies and from Walt Disney's *Fantasia* (1940) with sequences of the singer's performance, sporting a Lolita-esque outfit and a seductively disheveled hairstyle. The *Fantasia* sections mollify the effect of the sexually violent moments depicted in the snippets selected from Lyne's film. The filmic Lolita characters preceding Del Rey's Lolita are literally silenced and reduced to visual memes, as the film soundtracks become inaudible. Instead, the music video's Lolita/Lana superimposes her vocal beckoning to "be my baby tonight" and her bragging of "I know what the

¹⁸ In a scene during which Humbert Humbert senses that Lolita may have betrayed him, he mentions that "[s]he had not washed; yet her mouth was freshly though smudgily painted" (Nabokov, "Lolita" 201), so that the narrator's emotional mixture of disgust and seductiveness becomes obvious.

boys want” onto pre-existing film scenes that imply abusive sexual relationships.¹⁹ The excerpts from the animated film *Fantasia* do not allow access to the music of Ludwig van Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony, which, in the original film, sonically underscores the pastoralism of Disney’s visuals: while this segment of *Fantasia* depicts a Bacchanal, it denies the orgiastic associations of such an event in Greek mythology and transforms excess into genteel courtship among unclad, yet modestly breastless female centauroids and their male suitors. In contrast to the pastoral images in *Fantasia*, the excerpts from the *Lolita* films propose that the protagonist of Del Rey’s video may have a more realistic sense of sex between adolescent girls and adult men.

In fact, the overall impression in the music video is that the protagonist appears to find her ostensible sexual prowess more alluring than fear-inspiring.²⁰ Her outer appearance, her body language (particularly the subtle jerking of her torso), and her possibly vocoded, somewhat cartoonish voice (which moves within a higher range of pitches than in her best-known songs) suggest such an interpretation. In “Lolita,” the persona played by the singer evokes a teenager rather than a pre-teen adolescent. Other Del Rey music videos feature *Lolita* characters whose adulthood is stressed visually through full-length shots of the singer.²¹ In the majority of Del Rey’s music videos that allude to Nabokov’s novel, *Lolita* becomes an emblematic figure in the depiction of violent heterosexual relationships, but not a representation of an abused child.

Del Rey’s music video “Off to the Races,” which does not contain clips from *Lolita*-based films or related visual materials, exemplifies the thematic focus on violence and death in the visual components, while the lyrics clearly allude to the opening sentence of Nabokov’s novel as discussed in the previous section. The first half of the music video consists of a two-and-a-half-minute sequence of film segments showing women mercilessly shooting men and vice versa. Having set such a relentlessly brutal tone by displaying a seemingly endless series of killing

¹⁹ Both DIY music videos of “Diet Mountain Dew” prominently feature the heart-shaped glasses inspired by the movie poster and publicity shots of Sue Lyon for promoting Kubrick’s film. Other than that, the videos offer glimpses of celebrities, old movies, home video taken, for instance, at a fun fair, as well as images of vintage cars and Barbie dolls.

²⁰ As in the lines, “I make the boys fall like dominoes”; “I know what the boys want, I’m not gonna play”; “I want my cake and I want to eat it too”; “I don’t care what they say about me.”

²¹ An in-between case is Del Rey’s 2012 home-made video of “Put Me in a Movie” in which the protagonist performs in front of a home camera, as if to audition for a role or to prepare a video for YouTube or other online platforms. These sequences alternate with clips from what looks like a Chinese propaganda film or like a newsreel showing child performers and of large-cast performance in a stadium, and with clips parading powerful as well as ostensibly criminal men. In this video, the age difference between the performers and the showcased men resembles the discrepancy between Humbert Humbert and Dolores Haze. The large number of young girls may be meant to grotesquely amplify the number of nymphets Humbert Humbert would like to observe and possess.

sprees, the focus on sexual relationships in the second half of the music video remains infused with visual references to death in a social environment maligned by drugs, gambling, and violence. This section features a somewhat exoticized setting including individuals made up as skeletons on occasion of the Mexican “Day of the Dead” (Día de Muertos). This may be a reference to Nabokov’s Dolores Haze having been conceived in Mexico, as her mother claims in the novel;²² but even without such a subtext, this visual element contributes to the focus on death in the song and video. As the lyrics quote the opening line of Nabokov’s novel, it seems that the video’s visuals are meant to foreground the violence inherent in Humbert Humbert’s sexual abuse of Lolita. Also, the discrepancy between a decidedly pleasant musical style and extremely brutal visuals recalls the disconnect between Humbert Humbert’s erudite aesthetics and his continued violation of a child. As the narrator of *Lolita* writes shortly after the opening lines quoted in Del Rey’s lyrics: “You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style.”²³ In this sense, the visual foregrounding of physical violence to the accompaniment of an unobtrusive song reverse the perpetrator Humbert Humbert’s strategy of hiding his crime via his aesthetic prowess in Nabokov’s novel. Whereas the reader may miss the brutality of child abuse because s/he is dazzled by Humbert Humbert’s stylistic feats, the music video viewer experiences shocking images that belie the pleasantries of their soundtrack.

Del Rey’s music video “Ride” links up with her artistic persona of a woman (and definitely not of a child) involved in problematic relationships with considerably older men. “Ride” does not reference Nabokov’s novel or its film adaptations in immediately recognizable ways. Nevertheless, the words sung and spoken by the lyrical I and the visual appearance of the female lead may strike viewers as a possible version of a Lolita that did not die at age 17, but instead, as a young adult, finds herself caught in a maelstrom of sensual, turbulent relationships, risk-taking behavior, and a peripatetic lifestyle somewhere in the Great American West. The main character, clad in revealing cut-off shorts and a Western-style top with fringes but also heavily made-up and coiffed (see Figure 2), is seen sitting on a tire-swing located in an unsettled Western landscape (see Figure 3), on a road trip with a motorcycle gang, and being physically intimate with middle-aged men.

²² Nabokov, “Lolita” 53.

²³ Nabokov, “Lolita” 7.



Figure 2:
Lana Del Rey, single cover art “Ride.” Released September 25, 2012.



Figure 3:
Lana Del Rey. “Ride.”(0:20). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Py_-3di1yx0

The video’s mixture of hedonism, insanity, nostalgia, and despair culminates in the singer pointing a pistol at others and at herself, and philosophizing, in her closing monolog, about wanting to return to an earlier America that vaguely promised more freedom.

While Del Rey does not resemble Nabokov’s *Lolita* physically in “Ride,” the emphasis on sexual attractiveness coupled with a breathy voiceover eerily recalls the fact that, in Nabokov’s novel, the reader is mostly at the mercy of Humbert Humbert’s voice and must be particularly discerning to note other points of view.²⁴ Furthermore, the music video can also be read as evoking details from Lyne’s film, which relies heavily on Humbert Humbert’s voice-over narration. As Michael Da Silva has argued about how Lyne represents Humbert Humbert’s narrative voice, this technique creates a highly “subjective aesthetic” [which] resulted in an empathetic treatment of Humbert” that, at the same time, highlighted his insanity (n.p.). Framing

²⁴ See Pifer 311, 314.

the song in the music video, Del Rey gives her Lolita-esque lyrical I a voice, but the defiance that the voice expresses comes at the cost of nihilism and madness rather than self-assertion with an optimistic outlook on the future. In the closing voiceover of “Ride,” the protagonist declares that she “believe[s] in the country America used to be” and asks her addressees: “Are you in touch with all of your darkest fantasies? Have you created a life for yourself where you can experience them? I have. I am fucking crazy. But I am free.” This interpretation of Del Rey’s voiceover narration as inspired by Lyne’s film implies that “Ride” is not restricted to visual meme-ic material but that the subjective, husky, both attractive and self-deprecatory voice of an audiovisual artefact’s central character can constitute a meme in its own right, particularly when it occurs in combination with images that encourage making such a connection.

In Del Rey’s lyrics and music videos, obvious Lolita allusions give way to, on the one hand, addressing broader thematic motifs related to the novel as negotiating a sexually obsessed pedophile’s violation of a child and, on the other hand, to reiterating Del Rey’s artistic persona as an adult “Lolita lost in the ’hood.” Thus, seeing the female personae in her work as Lolita-like relies, to some extent, on knowledge of her previous artistic work, which provides fertile ground for producing “emerging memes” (according to Wiggins and Bowers’s definition).

SOCIAL MEDIA: LOLITA-INSPIRED SELFIES ON INSTAGRAM

Like other celebrities, and those desirous of joining their ranks, Del Rey and the public relations companies she works with post material on major social media platforms.²⁵ As users can delete their videos, tweets, and posts, an artist’s presence on social media sites can be carefully constructed and revised to yield a specific image. While Del Rey’s self-presentations on Tumblr, Facebook, Google+, and YouTube closely resemble one another and focus on promoting her song and music video releases, fans find different content on Twitter and Instagram. This observation is of interest when studying how Del Rey engages with memes in creating her artistic persona of Internet memes. First, with over five million followers each, these two social media accounts stand out as offering the possibility of spreading verbal and visual posts in a viral

²⁵ Lana Del Rey is a client of House of 27 (<http://www.houseof27.com/>), the “digital PR, social media and branding consultancy” that officiated the album releases of *Ultraviolence*, *The Paradise Edition* as well as the short film campaign for *Tropico*. *Honeymoon* was handled by Shore Fire Media (http://shorefire.com/client/ana-del-rey_). Currently, the public relations agency Purple (<http://purplepr.com/entertainment/ana-del-rey>) consults Del Rey regarding her website and her Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram presence.

manner. Second, Del Rey's Twitter presence includes content that expresses the importance the artist ascribes to alluding to American cultural memory in her work.²⁶ Third, the singer has posted images on Instagram that are not part of otherwise available promotional pictures, album covers, or music videos.²⁷ While, compared to other popular singers, Del Rey has posted a small number of selfies²⁸ and while the Lolitaes-que images are not abundant, they appear carefully designed, and they are recognized by some fans as being linked to Del Rey's self-depiction as a present-day Lolita figure. Thus, particularly subscribers' comments speak in favor of perceiving a memetic quality in the association between the singer and visual imaginaries of Nabokov's Lolita.

Of Del Rey's 206 pictures posted between May 2013 and December 2015, fifteen images are selfies. By keeping the number of selfies low, she can control the "spreadable media" (Wiggins and Bowers) which her fans might take up and establish as widely disseminated and recognized memes. Indeed, Del Rey joins their ranks because she, like her fans, creates her own "emergent memes" which figure "as part of a larger albeit idealized conversation where their contribution might be noticed and remixed further" (Wiggins and Bowers 1895). As "emergent memes" in this sense, Del Rey's curated selfies aid in constructing a carefully scripted, coherent online presence that is informed by two major images: Del Rey's self-description as "Lolita got lost in the 'hood" and as a "gangster Nancy Sinatra" (as referenced in the *Guardian* articles by Swash and Harris). The omnipresence of these two specific visual models suggests a certain ambition to transform the persona Lana Del Rey into a meme composed of the two conflicting images. Thus, the frequent repetition of similar poses, themes, and facial expressions in her social media content makes it plausible to analyze her selfies in particular as emergent memes.

In addition to a more restricted posting practice, Del Rey also does not post series of selfies. Her Instagram feed features hardly any two pictures from the same event or location. All

²⁶ For instance, her Twitter page features a quotation by Thomas Paine that addresses the discrepancy between a person's reputation and his/her 'real' self. Her second and third tweets respectively quote passages from Alan Ginsberg's 1955 poem "Howl" and from Martin Scorsese's 1990 film *Goodfellas*. See Lana Del Rey, Twitter, accessed Dec 21, 2015, <https://twitter.com/lanadelrey>; Lana Del Rey, Jun 6, 2009, Twitter, accessed Dec 21, 2015, <https://twitter.com/LanaDelRey/status/2060802679>; Lana Del Rey, Jun 6, 2009, Twitter, accessed Dec 21, 2015, <https://twitter.com/LanaDelRey/status/2060802679>.

²⁷ This is not to say that she does not use Instagram for promotional purposes as well. Like her other social media accounts, Instagram postings include magazine covers, stills from official photo shoots, and short clips from her music videos, as even a first glance at <https://www.instagram.com/lanadelrey/> reveals.

²⁸ Between May 2013 and December 2015, Del Rey posted 206 pictures. In contrast, Lady Gaga's Instagram featured 1700 pictures between June 2012 and December 2015 (Lady Gaga, "TheCountess," Instagram, accessed Dec 21, 2015, <https://www.instagram.com/ladygaga/>).

in all, we never found more than three images from one day. Her selfies, thus, cannot easily be dismissed as the kind of self-promotion practiced by artists who freely post selfies as they go about their everyday lives. They rather gain in significance because they are carefully constructed and sparingly selected to suit her visual grammar and the central hallmarks of her artistic persona. Significantly, selfies that look less professional and less scripted and evoke a sense of spontaneity elicit more followers' responses. A black-and-white selfie showing Del Rey in a car, posted to Instagram on July 7, for example, generated 511k likes and 23.4k comments,²⁹ while the first promotion for "the first and title track" of her new album *Honeymoon*, posted seven days later,³⁰ has 388k likes and only 12k comments. Despite the popularity of clearly professional photographs, the numbers of likes and comments on pictures with which Del Rey seems to allow glimpses of her private and thus 'true' self demonstrates fans' preference for aesthetically inferior, supposedly more revealing images. Despite this aura of amateurish and thus private selfies, such non-contextualized and caption-less selfies hark back to Del Rey's Lolita-esque persona by alluding to "image macro memes" (Wiggins and Bowers) from film adaptations of Nabokov's novel and represent "emergent memes" (Wiggins and Bowers) of Del Rey's Lolita adaptation. The mostly black-and-white selfies of Del Rey seated in a parked car evoke Lolita on road trips with Humbert Humbert.³¹ The visual grammar of these photographs in terms of their overall composition and their iconography of representing a young woman suggest an allusion to moments in Lyne's movie adaptation.

The initial photograph in a set of five car selfies posted in 2015 (Figure 4³²), which represents one third of all selfies Del Rey posted in the years 2013 through 2015, forcefully alludes to a motif from the 1997 film. It is not only a color rather than a black-and-white picture of Del Rey in the driver's seat, but it also shows her with the signature braids Dominique Swain wears in her role as Lolita, albeit fastened with twenty-first-century mini-scrunchies.

²⁹ Lana Del Rey, Jul 7, 2015, Instagram, accessed Jan 9, 2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/448royIntY/?taken-by=lanadelrey>.

³⁰ Lana Del Rey, Jul 14, 2015, Instagram, accessed Jan 9, 2016, https://www.instagram.com/p/5H9O_zlnoD/?taken-by=lanadelrey.

³¹ At the same time, the car selfies recall the well-known photograph of Nabokov, composing his novel on index cards while seated in a car. This image was choreographed for *Life* in 1959. See Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), picture insert following p. 226.

³² Lana Del Rey, Jan 5, 2015, Instagram, accessed Dec 21, 2015, <https://www.instagram.com/p/xd6w-lnhw/>.

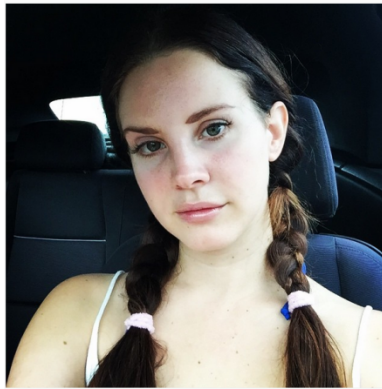


Figure 4: Del Rey's selfie, uploaded to Instagram January 5, 2015
(source : <https://www.instagram.com/p/xdb6w-lnhw/>)

The fact that Del Rey did not choose to post this particular picture in black and white, or with a color scheme reminiscent of the film, calls attention to the comparably subtle make-up that does not hide imperfections of the skin. This emphasizes her girlish appearance which in turn, coupled with the slightly tilted head and unsmiling but challenging stare into the camera, conjures up the scene in Lyne's movie when Lolita takes over the wheel (Lyne, *Lolita* 60:04). Similar to the act of rebellion in the movie, Del Rey's facial expression suggests defiance.³³

An uncharacteristically large number of her followers picked up on this particular Lolita reference.³⁴ Fans posted comments ranging from one word "lolita"³⁵ to "toda Lolita <...>"³⁶ to "ok this is LITERALLY LOLITA."³⁷ Significantly, this is Del Rey's only Instagram selfie that is neither black-and-white nor obviously color-corrected. Ironically, this DIY aesthetic (which does not gloss over facial imperfections, bags under the eyes, and a pale complexion) coexists with the selfie's detailed composition based on Lyne's film. This selfie purportedly reveals Del Rey's private self while implicitly rewarding those who recognize her play on Lyne's Lolita, especially since the selfie comes without a caption and, thus, without any explanation—presumably not

³³ A less direct, but still plausible allusion to Lyne's film is Del Rey's selfie taken in the side-view mirror while letting the wind ruffle her hair as the car window is rolled down (Lana Del Rey, June 23, 2015, Instagram, accessed Dec 21, 2015, <https://www.instagram.com/p/4QFcVglnsh/>). This selfie evokes Lyne's Lolita who repeatedly holds her head out of the passenger window (see, for example, at 40:40 or at 1:32:57).

³⁴ The number of likes on pictures posted to Del Rey's Instagram on average range from 250k to 450k. The average of comments on Instagram, however, is more complicated: it seems to be somewhere around 4k, although numbers are sometimes as low as 2k and rather often exceed 20k. The selfie in question, thus, is well over the average of both, having elicited 521k likes and 37.6k comments.

³⁵ As commented by gwlhrm.

³⁶ As commented by oiancarlos.

³⁷ As commented by jazzdelrey. Unfortunately, Instagram limits the number of comments that can be viewed; thus, it is impossible to get a complete overview of all comments involving the reference to Lolita.

because Del Rey wanted to leave her fans more room to create their own interpretations but because the visual semantics of the image are well understood within Del Rey's carefully scripted Instagram persona.

Wiggins and Bowers argue that "[m]emes as artefacts possess both cultural and social attributes as they are produced, reproduced, and transformed to reconstitute the social system" (Wiggins and Bowers, 1891). Del Rey's first car selfie functions as a cultural reference and contains communicative characteristics: it overtly riffs on Lyne's film, thereby inviting discussion about Lana Del Rey's interpretation of the character's various impersonations. Followers who are aware of Lyne's adaptation can apply their cultural knowledge in an interpretive act that is part of a socially contextualized intersubjective and thus "shared experience," as described by Limor Shifman (367). As a result, Del Rey's seemingly candid car selfie qualifies as an "emergent meme" according to Wiggins and Bowers's definition, which, in this particular case, concretizes Del Rey's particular adaptation of a Lolita visualization.

Del Rey's imitation of visual representations of Nabokov's fictional character becomes less marked after the first car selfie, but these images retain features that allow perceiving them as interconnected. The selfie posted on 22 October 2015 (Figure 5), for example, shows her exaggeratedly overexposed face, emphasizing mostly her large eyes and her parted lips while hiding distinguishing features of her face that betray her actual age. As her skin cannot be discerned clearly and as the image stresses her sensually parted lips along with her eyes, these details, along with her stringy hair and visible barrettes, make her look quite childlike. Accordingly, one commentator remarks: "You look so young boo."³⁸ Using "boo," a term derived from the French word *beau* and denoting girl/boyfriend,³⁹ may imply the attractiveness of such infantilization through the photographic aesthetic. The mixture of youthfulness and sex appeal provides a subtext that links this selfie to the more obviously Lolita-related self-representations.

³⁸ Lana Del Rey, Instagram, accessed Dec 21, 2015, <https://www.instagram.com/p/9JkWWvFntp/>.

³⁹ See "boo." *The Urban Dictionary*. <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=boo>. Accessed on Jan 8, 2016.



Figure 5: Del Rey's selfie, uploaded to Instagram Oct 22, 2015
(source : <https://www.instagram.com/p/9JkWWvFntp/>)

Staring into the camera is common in selfies⁴⁰ but takes on another level of significance in the selfies that play with *Lolita* adaptations, as promotional photographs for both movies have Lolita directly face the camera.⁴¹ Significantly, in these “image macro memes” (Wiggins and Bowers), Lolita never smiles. Accordingly, Del Rey's reluctance to smile in her selfies underscores the *Lolita* reference.

The selfies discussed here fit Wiggins and Bowers's definition of “emergent memes,” in part because they are “altered spreadable media yet are not iterated and remixed further as separate contributions” (1897). The engagement with “visual macro memes” from Lyne's *Lolita* in her selfies qualifies these Instagram pictures as altered spreadable media. If we perceive the car selfies as interconnected, then we can read the entire set as an emergent meme that serves to confirm her self-pronounced artistic persona as an early-twenty-first-century, young-adult Lolita.

CONCLUSION

As the discussion of Del Rey's use of textual references to Nabokov in her lyrics and of “image macro memes” as well as clips from both film adaptations of Nabokov's novel for the

⁴⁰ John R. Suler's definition of the selfie after the success of the front camera asserts that generally individuals create selfies “simply by holding out their hands, to aim the camera at themselves, staring into the screen as if it were a mirror” (Suler, 208).

⁴¹ See, for example, the promotional photography by Bert Stern of Lyon as Lolita, the photographs almost exclusively show Lyon looking directly into the camera: Paige Sterling, “Photoshoot: Sue Lyon Photographed by Bert Stern,” Photoshoot: Sue Lyon Photographed by Bert Stern, July 28, 2012, accessed January 9, 2016. <http://iwasdreamingofthepast.blogspot.co.at/2012/07/sue-lyon-photographed-by-bert-stern.html>. *Esquire's* article with Bettina Rheims's photographs of Dominique Swain as Lolita, all of which have her stare directly and unsmilingly into the camera lens: Elizabeth Kaye, “Lolita Comes Again,” *Esquire*, February 1997, 50–55.

creation of her own emergent memes within both her music videos and in her selfies circulated through Instagram has shown, the singer-songwriter's works range from evocations of Nabokov's nymphet-child to visualizations of Lolita as a hypersexualized adult woman that exudes sadness, traumatic experiences, and a tendency towards problematic relationships, drug abuse, and violence. Del Rey's Lolita impersonations that do not play with looking like a girl of Lolita's age in the novel frequently reference Nabokov's fictional character through the compositional grammar of Kubrick and Lyne's films. As Internet memes are visual images (albeit often with a constantly changing verbal component), it is not surprising that images and scenes from the film adaptations of Nabokov's novel which have entered collective memory remain the basis for specific features found in visual representations of Lana Del Rey as a pop artist and of her lyrical personae. At the same time, the work of this singer-songwriter engages with non-visual memetic material such as quotations from the novel and Lyne's voiceover technique to an extent that makes her contemporary Lolita more than just an array of promotional images and selfies posted online. Del Rey's engagement with the cultural history of Lolita as a fictional character and as an emblem of, among other things, hypersexualized femininity confirms that Nabokov's Dolores Haze and Humbert Humbert's rendering of her as Lolita is firmly established as an Internet meme that occurs in numerous variants and that continues to spark controversies about the fictional character and her creative and ever-changing adaptations.

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