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## CRITIC AT LARGE

# A Rake's Lack

## L.A. Times of Progress

12-19-75

BY CHARLES CHAMPLIN

Times Arts Editor

Stanley Kubrick's ("Barry Lyndon") is the motion picture equivalent of one of those very large, very heavy, very expensive, very elegant and very dull books that exist solely to be seen on coffee tables.

It is ravishingly beautiful and incredibly tedious in about equal doses, a succession of salon quality still photographs—as often as not very still indeed. The images variously recall the mist-softened landscapes of Turner and other English masters, the mellow, shadowy, candlelit interiors of the Dutch school, the brocaded gloss of the court painters, the earthy vigor (not often enough) of the early realists.

"Barry Lyndon" is said to have taken 300 shooting days, and the patient craftsmanship—precisely the right tree, field, vista, wall, trench, farmhouse, town house, castle, chateau, the thousands of extras in precisely the right period costumes, everything seen in precisely the right light of day or night—is discernible in every frame. It is only that it is not enough.

There are bursts of action—three duels, a sword fight, a bare knuckle prizefight, battle scenes, emotional outbursts. But even with it the pacing is unbearably, indulgently deliberate. The stares and the pauses are achingly long, the pattern (finally all too predictable) of a slow zooming back to reveal the full tableau is overmannered. It is as if everyone had run out of steam. You yearn for the simple, ribald vitality of "Tom Jones," which covered much the same ground quicker and more interestingly.

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Thackeray's first novel charted an 18th-century rake's progress from innocent Irish country lad, trembling with anguish when the sexy cousin he loves tries to seduce him, to the amoral gambler who cheats and marries his way into the aristocracy, though not to stay. Between them, Thackeray and Kubrick make sin look like joyless stuff.

Kubrick is at once the most zealous and monastic of present film-makers, living in reclusive independence from the larger world of the movies, setting himself each time a quite different kind of challenge and then meticulously solving it. This time the challenge was not only to evoke an earlier time, but to see the time as it saw itself, by candlelight. Fast lenses and fast film made it possible, and the scenes have a lovely golden glow. Yet a monkish, ascetic chill shrouds the work.

The star is Ryan O'Neal, a perplexing choice having nothing to do with the size of his acting talent but with his indelible image as a hip, contemporary American. His performance is dedicated, deeply solemn and mostly stolid (evidently by Kubrick's intention) although he conveys semblance of heartbreak at a crucial moment. He is just a long way from home and there is never any doubt of it. He has shown more flair and charm in other films.

Thackeray's torrent of words has slowed to a processional, although the large portions used as voice-over narrative are beautifully said by Michael Hordern, who preserves the mocking irony of Thackeray's view of the corruption of his hero by a corrupt world.

Lyndon's adventures commence when he loses the sexy cousin (Gay Hamilton) to a cowardly English officer (Leonard Rossiter) and, tricked, has to flee. He enlists (Godfrey Quigley is a kindly captain), deserts, becomes a reluctant Prussian soldier (Hardy Kruger is another kindly captain), teams up with a suave card shark (Patrick Magee) and wins the heart of a rich widow-to-be (Marisa Berenson).

Although he has responded to human kindness (as from the captains and a forlorn German farm wife, played by Diana Koerner), he has none for his wife or her rightly resentful son (Leon Vitali). Triumph turns sour and lack of virtue is its own lack of reward. It is, as always, a slow turn.

It is either terribly brave or catastrophic to have at the center of the picture a figure who never has our admiration and never wins our sympathy, although it seems clear that we are in the end intended to find him pitiable, a moral lesson hobbling into obscurity on crutches, his tough-minded mother (Marie Kean) at his side.

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If we aren't made to care and can't be swept along on the passionate tides, what is the object of the exercise, except to test Kubrick's persistence and his technical wizardry? As a sermon on the meanness and sinfulness of the world it is precedented, to say the least; as a pilgrim's progress it lacks the fervor of John Bunyan or the raucous bite of Hogarth's etchings.

Even the music, adapted by Leonard Rosenman from Bach, Handel and other contributors, sounds thin and repetitive.

There are some bright performances, including Murray Melvin as the lady's purse-lipped chaplain, Arthur O'Sullivan as a highwayman, Godfrey Quigley as almost the sole embodiment of human warmth in the story, along with Diana Koerner. Frank Middlemass is the lady's departing husband. Berenson, most excellently pretty, is principally asked to look morose and distracted, and does.

Decor is all and the production design by Ken Adam

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seems unanswerably the year's richest. The costumes are by Ulla-Britt Soderlund and Milena Canonero and are lavish. John Alcott is the credited cinematographer, Tony Lawson the editor. Some large-sized battle scenes are a sardonic commentary on the folly of war. The green-dappled hills of England and Ireland and the great houses of the past have never looked more like superb pictures in a book.

**But it is all glum, humorless and almost completely un-**

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## 'BARRY LYNDON'

A Warner Bros. Film. Written, produced and directed by Stanley Kubrick, from the novel by William Makepeace Thackeray. Photography John Alcott. Editor Tony Lawson. Production design Ken Adam. Costumes Ulla-Britt Soderlund, Milena Canonero. Music adapted by Leonard Rosenman. Art direction Roy Walker. Featuring Ryan O'Neal, Marisa Berenson, Patrick Magee, Hardy Kruger, Gay Hamilton, Marie Kean, Diana Koerner, Murray Melvin, Frank Middlemass, Andre Morell, Arthur O'Sullivan, Godfrey Quigley, Leonard Rossiter, Philip Stone, Leon Vitali, Michael Hordern, Steven Berkoff.

Running time: 3 hr. 4 min. plus intermission.

MPAA-rated: PG (some parental guidance advised).

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affecting in emotional terms—even when, as in a mawkish death-bed scene, it tries to be. All the heavy-breathing hype of that magazine cover cannot bring it alive or save it.

The monumental—a bit over 3 hours plus intermission—but monumentally disappointing "Barry Lyndon" opens tonight at the Cinerama Dome with a benefit for the American Diabetes Assn.