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What Makes Barry Run?

BY ANDREW SARRIS

Stanley Kubrick's **"BARRY LYNDON"** is clearly the most expensive meditation on melancholy ever financed by a Hollywood studio. From the opening strains of Georg Freidrich Handel's Sarabande through Leonard Rosenman's well integrated meld of melodies from Schubert, Bach, Vivaldi, Mozart, Paisiello, Frederick the Great, and Irish folk music to the closing strains of Georg Friedrich Handel's Sarabande, every frame in the film is a fresco of sadness. Three hours and 11 million dollars worth of downer extracted from an obscure Victorian novel amuses one with its sheer audacity in the face of today's frightened film industry. Whether or not "Barry Lyndon" is "Kubrick's grandest gamble," Kubrick certainly marches to the sound of a different drummer.

Actually, I was rather pleasantly surprised by "Barry Lyndon" because I had heard mostly bad things about it. Also, I have been charged by people I respect with having a blind spot with respect to Kubrick's work, and it is true that I literally cannot see or feel him most of the time. He is too odd and eccentric for my taste as he seems to work far above the surface of his unconscious. His stylization therefore strikes me as a form of emotional evasion. How can you like Ophuls and not like Kubrick, I am asked. I suppose it is a question of my preferring my pessimism sweet rather than sour, which is why I choose Ophuls over Kubrick, Hawks over Huston, Hitchcock over Welles, and Lubitsch over Stroheim. But with "Barry

'Thackeray's "Barry Lyndon" serves only as a pretext for the projection of Kubrick's utter despair.'



"Kubrick has started a race in which he's the only runner."

Lyndon" I feel that I am at last getting a fix on Kubrick's career as it blazes in a brilliant sunset.

From the beginning "Barry Lyndon" seemed like a peculiar project for Kubrick. At first the hush-hush publicity suggested that

Kubrick was scared of someone stealing a march on a new trend he was establishing for the industry. But what new trend? Richard Lester had already done Dumas to a fare-thee-well, and yet swashbuckling as a subject had not exactly

broken box-office records. Besides, Kubrick had never set trends in the past with such projects as "Lolita," "Dr. Strangelove," "2001," and "Clockwork Orange." Nymphets, nuclear ninnies, astronauts, and futuristic hooligans have popped up here and there, but not in any great profusion. Hence, for the past dozen years Kubrick has set the pace in a race in which he was virtually the only runner. It is as if he were closing all the escape hatches in the cinema with a grim, gloomy humor. Neither escapist nor scapegoatish in his approach, he seems to be telling us that Past and Future, Here and There, I and Thou, are all equally arid domains of the doomed ego. There is thus only one genre in Kubrick's oeuvre, and that springs from the time-warped womb.

Penguin has come out with a special film-oriented edition of "Barry Lyndon" with a curiously uninformed introduction by J. P. Donleavy, who seems never to have read any of Thackeray's novels, and who neglects to tell us even when "Barry Lyndon" was published. Oh, for some pedantic drudgery in these matters! Still, no one I know had even heard of "Barry Lyndon," much less read it, before Kubrick's project was announced. For some reason I read Thackeray's "Vanity Fair," "Pendennis," and "Henry Esmond" when I was in high school, and then found that Thackeray was out of style ever after. George Orwell, who wrote, very extensively and very appreciatively about Thackeray, never to my

knowledge mentioned "Barry Lyndon." It is therefore not a question of how "faithful" Kubrick has been to the novel, but of what the strange choice of this particular project can tell us about Kubrick. In a sense, Kubrick can virtually conceal his own personal obsessions in Thackeray's largely obscure literary persona.

For example, the back-cover copy for the Penguin "Barry Lyndon" seeks to exploit the swashbuckling image of the advance advertising for the movie: "Barry Lyndon wasn't a coward—'Dare and the world always yields.' Barry had a way with ladies—'It was her estate I made love to, as for herself it would be a reflection on my tastes as a man of fashion to own that I liked her.' Barry Lyndon knew his place—I was the favorite of Empress Catherine of Russia; the confidential agent of Frederick of Prussia; it was I won the battle of Hochkirchen . . ." But then Barry Lyndon was an accomplished rogue—a liar, a gambler, a libertine. Nevertheless the tallest, handsomest gentleman in Europe tells a roistering good tale . . ."

Despite the promotional prose, "Barry Lyndon" is not treated by Kubrick as "Tom Jones" material. Quite the contrary. Kubrick plays against Thackeray's rollicking roguery with every receding zoom of the Zeiss lens. Even the style of the narration is drastically altered. Hence, whereas Thackeray's "Barry Lyndon" is narrated, except for a brief epilogue, by Barry Lyndon himself in an ironically self-damning manner, Kubrick's "Barry Lyndon" is narrated off-screen in the dry-as-dust inflections of Michael Hordern with the awesome authority of a Victorian author behind them. Having seen the movie before reading the book, I assumed that the third-person narration was Thackeray's idea as well as Kubrick's. Not a bit of it. Thus, Thackeray's mock-modest:

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"It would require a greater philosopher and historian than I am to explain the causes of the famous Seven Years' War in which Europe was engaged;" is translated by Kubrick into the third person as: "It would require a great philosopher and historian to explain the causes of the famous Seven Years' War." Because of the pacifist-absurdist testaments of "Paths of Glory" and "Dr. Strangelove," Kubrick's more devoted admirers have seized on the dramatically pointless battle sequences in "Barry Lyndon" as further proof of the director's antimilitarism. But the real war in "Barry Lyndon" begins on the battlefields of marriage, parenthood, social climbing, and personal finance. In this emphasis on domestic strife, Kubrick is eminently faithful to Thackeray.

As Orwell writes, "Thackeray's two main themes are snobbishness and extravagance, but he is at his best when he handles them in the comic vein, because—unlike Dickens, for instance—he has very little social insight and not even a very clear moral code . . . To live in a house which is too big for you, to engage servants whom you cannot pay, to ruin yourself by giving pretentious dinner parties with hired footmen, to bilk your tradesmen, to overdraw your banking account, to live permanently in the clutches of money-lenders—this is almost the norm of human behavior. It is taken for granted that anyone who is not halfway to being a saint will ape the aristocracy if possible. The desire for expensive clothes, gilded marriages, and hordes of liveried servants is assumed to be a natural instinct, like the desire for food and drink. And the people Thackeray is best able to describe are those who are living the fashionable life upon no income whatever."

Orwell was writing mainly about "Vanity Fair," but he might just as well have been describing the saga of Barry Lyndon. The trouble with Thackeray's characters is that their constant squabbling over money degrades and demeans them. Kubrick mutes much of the squabbling with the morbid solemnity of his framing and musical accompaniment, but the plot is obsessed with money troubles nonetheless. Barry cannot marry his beloved Nora because he has no money. He joins the British Army because he has no money. He seeks patrons in order to obtain money, and he gambles and steals in the process. Most of his duels are fought in order to collect gambling debts. Finally, he marries for money, and then squanders his wife's estate in order to curry favor with the Court for a peerage and financial security for himself and his son.

Curiously, the movie of "Barry Lyndon" is more of an objet d'art than the book itself. As novels go, "Barry Lyndon" is a messy conglomeration of satiric sketches on snobs and spendthrifts. In the absence of moral perspective and social analysis Thackeray's characters degenerate into caricatures from a very sordid soap opera. Like many writers today, Thackeray was more a journalist than a novelist with the result that his powers of observation far surpassed his powers of formal creation. For example, Kubrick's screenplay barely suggests the de-

gree to which Thackeray delights in debunking Frederick the Great, the JFK of the late 18th century, complete with spies and sneaks lurking behind the cultural adornment of Voltaire, Frederick's Robert Frost. Similarly, the corrupt Court of George III is described with more detailed ridiculousness by Thackeray than by Kubrick, and an entire chapter on the ruinous extravagance of life in Dublin is omitted from the movie. It is not simply a matter of cinematic selection, but of differing moods as well, for whereas Thackeray's novel teems with life, Kubrick's film tilts with death.

Indeed, the film of "Barry Lyndon" is over, for all dramatic and psychological purposes,

Thackeray's narrative in that these particular elements constitute a revealing pattern of Kubrick's perennial concerns. First, the slightly humiliating scene in which Barry Lyndon is forced to plunge his hand down into Nora's décolletage is Kubrick's, not Thackeray's. The scene of the two British homosexual officers camping it up in the nude in a lake is also a Kubrickian invention, reminiscent of similar scenes in most of his movies, most notably in "2001" with the insidious effiteness of HAL. The final duel in which Barry Lyndon's stepson first throws up out of fear, and then shatters his stepfather's leg with a shot, after Lyndon has generously fired his bullet to the side, represents a

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almost as soon as it begins. It will all end badly: Of that we are sure. Kubrick's very precise framing of his protagonist encases him in a fatalistic aestheticism of fierce yearning and wistfulness. And the casting of Ryan O'Neal as Barry Lyndon insures that the audience will learn nothing edifying from his experiences. O'Neal's sullenly self-justifying narcissism as an actor makes Kubrick's Barry Lyndon completely opaque as a character. Time and again, we look to O'Neal's face for a clue to his thoughts and feelings, and see only the impassive gaze of a Malibu mask. Worse still, there is absolutely no humor in O'Neal. And when Marisa Berenson sidles into view with her mannequin's mournfulness, "Barry Lyndon" becomes as studiously posed as "Last Year at Marienbad."

All in all, Kubrick's admirers are somewhat justified in proclaiming his uncompromising artistry. We must remember that he has been an American living and working abroad for about a dozen years, and so it is only natural that "Barry Lyndon" should look and sound more like a European art-film than like an American fun-flick. Kubrick's flair for music and photography finds ample play in "Barry Lyndon," but his deficiencies in dramatic narrative are apparent as well. His familiar hostility to women is reflected in the clear-eyed, cadaverous candor with which he photographs Marisa Berenson, Gay Hamilton, and Diana Koerner as the ostensible objects of Barry Lyndon's affections. But his casting of the children in Lyndon's life is imaginative and impeccable. Even here, however, Ryan O'Neal is pitifully inadequate to the task of expressing grief at the death of his son, so ably played by a child actor named Philip Stone. Hence, at three hours "Barry Lyndon" has much of the turgidity of "Gone With the Wind" with none of the emotional sweep. I can't help wondering though if Margaret Mitchell had read "Barry Lyndon" when she wrote "Gone With the Wind." Not only are the deaths of the children in both books very similar, but Scarlett catches the tag-end of a conversation between Melanie and Ashley, in which Melanie observes that Mr. Dickens is more of a gentleman than Mr. Thackeray.

It is interesting to note the elements that Kubrick has added to

complete rewriting of Thackeray by Kubrick. In addition, many relationships are subtly altered from novel into film, some to the hero's advantage, and some to his disadvantage. Over all, Thackeray's Barry Lyndon is more cruel, more callous, and more calculating than Kubrick's, which does not necessarily mean that Kubrick is softer than Thackeray, but rather that Kubrick has simplified the novelistic intrigues in order to intensify the cinematic mood of implacable sorrow. Indeed, who else but Kubrick would bring us to the intermission with an on-screen display of Sir Charles Lyndon's coronary, which is to pave the way for our hero to marry Lady Lyndon? And who else but Kubrick would end a film with the ritual of checks being signed as the only vestiges of a ruined marriage. But again I must come back to the incessant influence of the music in our perception of what the film is really about. Even in "2001" with his brilliant dialectic between Richard Strauss and Johann Strauss, Kubrick has not come as close as he has here in eliminating the dramatic substructure of cinema for the sake of a tone poem consisting of the surface harmonies between painting and music. Thackeray's novel thus serves only as a pretext for the projection of Kubrick's utter despair. On the crassly commercial level, it remains to be seen whether the paying public is in the mood for such a large dose of despair without benefit of a polemical diagnosis or a convenient scapegoat such as Amerika. In this respect, "Barry Lyndon" has obtained a PG rating despite a fleeting glimpse of bare breasts. The ratings rajahs have been quite perceptive on this occasion in taking into account the absolute joylessness of the nudity involved. As I have said, Kubrick is not my favorite director, but I think that he has proven over the years that there is nothing mean-spirited or petty about his morbidity. "Barry Lyndon" is in some ways his most mature work of art. It is nonetheless a bit too rootless in its inspiration to satisfy me completely. It could do with more humor and vitality. Yet, its stateliness and sobriety in this age of funk and zap make it an impressive testament of the artist as majestic mourner for the idle vanities of our capitalistic civilization.