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Barry Lyndon



Decorum and violence: Redmond Barry's wedding; a quarrel with his stepson (Leon Vitali)

Penelope Houston

Barry Lyndon has not, on the whole, received a good press, and no one is likely to find this very surprising. The reviewers' pendulum could be sensed as poised for the down swing even before the film came out: elaborate, expensive (11 million dollars) and a very long time in the making, it simply didn't sound like a film for the times. That prescience and informed alertness about public states of mind (or minds in the making) which has carried Stanley Kubrick brilliantly and disquietingly through *Lolita*, *Dr Strangelove*, *2001* and *A Clockwork Orange* were evidently not this time factors to reckon with. In a significant way, Kubrick had shifted his ground. In fact, against the tone of the shaky but increasingly parsimonious 1970s, he has made a film that's visually luxurious enough to enrage Savonarola and morally austere enough not to dissatisfy John Knox: a risky undertaking.

Depth-sounding for motives, reviewers came up with their buckets empty, and with few exceptions found the film too cold, too deliberately beautiful, too muted, too drained of 'life'—and too baffling. 'No reason at all emerges for his personal enthusiasm,' wrote Patrick Gibbs in the *Daily Telegraph*; 'filmed in a way that leaves his intentions totally enigmatic,' added David Robinson next day in *The Times*; 'a view of things . . . that seems to me virtually indecipherable,' said Derek Malcolm in the *Guardian*. From across the Atlantic, Pauline Kael in the *New Yorker* suggested that 'he's taking pictures of art objects; that antiques-filled room at the end of *2001* must have been where he wanted his own time machine to land.' On leaving the press show, I should add, I was as puzzled as anyone else. *Barry Lyndon* is not an easily approachable work, perhaps partly—and perversely—because there's so much surface to it. What seems to have worried critics, to a surprising extent, is the dissonance between the prettiness of the settings and the pessimism of the theme. And bafflement begins not with the film itself, though there are areas there for perplexity, but with the question of intention. Why did the director whose computer intelligence had seemed programmed towards the 21st century take this step backwards, to a 19th century classic writer's least read novel, about the life and progress of an 18th century scoundrel? Why at all, and why now?

Kubrick himself is unlikely to tell us. At a time when the interview has become the secondary tool of movie criticism, and directors explain, justify, analyse and excuse at the click of a cassette switch, Kubrick rather admirably leaves the film to stand on its own, vulnerable but imperturbable, like one of Vanbrugh's great mansions (Castle Howard, perhaps, which does duty along with aspects of Stourhead for the scenes of Barry's passing glory). We don't even know how Kubrick hit on Thackeray's book as a subject. Since he announced the film, we've all been reading it, and with two paperback editions now in print *Barry Lyndon* may even find in 1976 something like the market Thackeray vainly hoped for when in 1844, under the wild pen-name of George Savage Fitzboodle, he embarked on serial publication in *Fraser's* magazine. But when Kubrick first announced the film (having, according to *Time* magazine, presented Warner Brothers with a version in which names, dates and places had been changed, in a deception tactic to prevent leaks about a source in the public domain), the novel was still relegated to the mustier shelves of the second-hand book shops.

As a film subject, *Barry Lyndon* has the advantage that it's a 'classic' with absolutely nothing sacrosanct about it. Thanks to informative articles by Ann Monsarrat and Margaret Forster, we know that Thackeray set out to write a best-seller and, like many others, found the going hard. 'Got through the fag-end of chapter four of *Barry Lyndon* with a great deal of dullness and unwillingness and labour,' he wrote in his diary. He took a cruise to try to finish the chore in peace, but only became seasick and ill, and finished the book, doggedly weary, in the Malta Quarantine Hospital. It didn't do well, and later in life

he spoke of it with loathing. His impetus had come from the story someone had told him of a fortune-hunting adventurer, Andrew Robinson Stoney, who monstrously ill-used the rich, titled and infatuated woman he'd bamboozled into marriage. By the time Thackeray reached this part of the book, however, he was already labouring. Sweated out against the grain, the novel moves jerkily from the happy vitality of its conception (the picaresque hero of tradition revealed as bully and sot and disreputably seedy scoundrel, through a first person narrative of blinding effrontery and self-satisfaction) to a dragging conclusion.

If the book is gravely flawed, at least it's never negligible. Reading it a couple of years ago, already hunting for clues to Kubrick's purposes, one thought one might have found some. There is, first, the essential Irishness of Redmond Barry. Was

exterior may not seem much changed, the material has in fact been radically rethought, in line with the director's view of life as a series of sprung traps. Kubrick doesn't enjoy the lashing of small-time snobs and wastrels as Thackeray did; he does away with the journalist's bustle of information; he is not noticeably seduced by the glamour of corruption. It isn't merely that the tale has lost gusto in its telling (the moments when Kubrick allows real physical energy to break out, getting down to ground level with the handheld camera, are almost all scenes of pain and humiliation) but that he has refashioned its morality, along occasionally surprising lines.

Thackeray's Redmond Barry is only fifteen when he's led up the garden path by his cousin Nora and duped into thinking that he has killed the vulgarian Captain Quin in

narrative method. The narrator (Michael Hordern) is gravely and objectively omniscient: he knows where Barry is heading and where he has been, and he is our only source for some of the action along the way. The Barry we're told about doesn't quite tally at several points with the Barry we actually see; so that the technique imposes distance and invites questions, opening up and then closing off perspectives. The camera style meanwhile establishes its own feeling of impersonal authority, pulling back time and again from detail to find distance and context, putting everything in its place, as though in the hands of an 18th century rationalist—less the baroque Vanbrugh than one of those landscape designers who tamed the countryside: Capability Kubrick. The technique, which is very deliberate indeed, puts people into a passive relationship with time and chance—



Barry (back to camera, left) encounters Lady Lyndon in the candlelit gaming room

Kubrick perhaps after a picture of that contentious and impossible race, with all the grand dreams and the moral squalor, through a not uncharacteristic representative? Then, the long central section of the book offers an almost Stendhalian view of military affairs (the hero never gets to see the battle, just as Fabrice misses Waterloo, and military 'glory' is murderer's work, the rifling of the corpse in the ditch), followed by an elaborate account of the intrigues and complex spy systems of the Prussian court—the familiar shabby ingenuities of power without responsibility. Or there is the twisted wooing of Lady Lyndon, a notably cold-blooded episode, almost worthy of Choderlos de Laclos, and perhaps material for the misanthrope in Kubrick.

One can only say that these added up to some pretty wrong guesses. Kubrick, who wrote his own script, has restructured the book like an architect reconditioning a house; and although to the casual eye the

a duel. Ryan O'Neal can hardly pass for a hobbledehoy adolescent, so this Barry initially seems a slightly retarded victim of bucolic mercenary wiles, a man with a schoolboy's naiveté. Swiftly, he's crossed in love by a pert little schemer, allowed to think he has proved manhood in a duel when he has merely demonstrated gullibility (Kubrick, incidentally, has Barry's father killed in a duel in the film's opening shot, where Thackeray let him fall dead more lackadaisically at Chester races), and is then packed off on the road, where a highwayman with the pedantic manners of a schoolmaster promptly lifts his possessions. Barry is a blockhead nurtured on romantically misty Irish illusions, buoyed up by a little low cunning but fundamentally identified as a loser. If he learns the ways of a rogue, he never masters the arts of self-protection; and at intervals in his story the romantic schoolboy is waiting to break through.

From the outset, Kubrick sets up his

snatched away from Barry is the illusion (which is, of course, the mainspring of Thackeray's narrative method) that he's in control.

Kubrick does not think much of the human race, and in *Dr. Strangelove* and *A Clockwork Orange* most notably, he has given full vent to a caricaturist's misanthropy. The most accessibly 'human' character in his recent work is arguably HAL, the computer intelligence which dies with a song on its circuits. At the start of *Barry Lyndon*, the caricaturist shows his teeth (with Thackeray's full endorsement) in the portrait of the absurd Captain Quin: ogling the camera as he prances by, Leonard Rossiter is encouraged to take the character well over the top of any 'naturalistic' performance. Quin is an ignoble buffoon who represents a danger to Barry because of his £1,500 a year. He is caricatured to his mock death; and later Sir Charles Lyndon will be caricatured to 'real' death,

choking and gobbling his life out over the card-table like one of Gillray or Rowlandson's grosser inventions. The film is at times a reminder of the sheer ugliness of the 18th century, as recorded in all those caricatures of bulging men and women slobbering in the social piggery.

But caricature here is a fringe technique, not a method; and one of the problems that seems to have engaged Kubrick in *Barry Lyndon* is the perennial one of the storyteller's precise relation to his subject. We follow Barry quite closely as he escapes from the imbroglios at home, joins the army as the only career for a penniless young runaway, sees action in the Seven Years War, deserts from the English army and muddles his affairs so that he is promptly press-ganged into the harsher Prussian service. We follow, but we remain detached, the narrative controlled on a long rein.

duct (which we don't really see). The feeble excuse that he has fallen into evil company sounds rather like the truth. When he is enlisted in the secret service of his Prussian masters and promptly reveals his identity to the man he has been set to spy on, the Irish Chevalier de Balibari (Patrick Magee), it's plausible that the farm boy a long way from home should break down in the presence of a fellow countryman. (Though Kubrick, perhaps distrusting Thackeray's cheerful coincidences, doesn't reveal that the raddled, patched and painted gambler is none other than old Uncle Barry of Barryogue.) The gambler, a substitute father (Barry, in these scenes, is subservient to almost everyone), educates him in the sly art of living on his wits. Previously, the film has been set mainly outdoors: in the green Irish meadows where the redcoats parade, on roads and heaths and in military en-

has to work very hard and very unpleasantly to net his heiress. In the film, the business is virtually done with an exchange of meaningful looks across the gaming table. Kubrick may simply have felt he wanted to move the film on at this point, or that to follow the novel would put too taxing a strain on the inexperienced Marisa Berenson. But it's worth speculating that he left this episode out because it's the one in which Barry makes something happen, positively if unforgivably, and in which the director would have to break through his own smooth surface to come to grips with the motives of a rogue. If Kubrick had included the courtship, he could hardly have handled as he does the duel with Lord Bullingdon (which is his addition to Thackeray). It is not that he necessarily makes Barry a nicer character, but that he leaves more possibilities open.



Gainsborough lady: Marisa Berenson as Lady Lyndon

Barry, for instance, is allowed a brief idyll with a German peasant girl (a very faint echo, one might think, of *La Grande Illusion*). But the incident—which is not in the novel—is austere adjusted by the annotation that she's equally available to any other passing soldier. The cutting away from episodes at or before the point of involvement, the lack of tension behind character, the absence even of much sense of danger, are the exact opposite of the opportunistic excitability and overkill of a film like *Royal Flash*, where Malcolm McDowell plays another braggart anti-hero, perhaps even somewhat closer to the original Barry, scuttling like a tensed-up rabbit through a warren of pastiche.

Barry is no roaring boy. He's a kind of adventurer by accident, and in army uniform he literally looks as though his clothes don't fit. In the Prussian service he's rewarded for bravery (which we see) and simultaneously reprimanded for bad con-

campments. Now Kubrick's stately progress through the eighteenth century closes in: to a hot, candlelit view (shot with specially developed ultra fast lenses by Zeiss) of powder and paint and Gainsborough faces sweating over the cards.

When the perspective opens out again, into the ordered delight of the English 18th century landscape, Barry has achieved the fortune-hunter's goal: marriage to a soft, silly woman with a great estate. Visually, the second half of the film throws off one deliberately painterly echo after another: Reynolds, Constable, Zoffany, Hogarth, even, in a shot of a dog and a boat, Stubbs. The setting is refined, stable and enormously self-confident; the people are mostly bored and mean-minded, extravagant and indolent. But, significantly, the hinge of the film, Barry's courtship of Lady Lyndon, which opens his door into this world, finds Kubrick parting company totally from Thackeray. In the novel, Barry

Pauline Kael's strange suggestion that 'If you were to cut the jokes and cheerfulness out of the film *Tom Jones* and run it in slow motion you'd have something very close to *Barry Lyndon*,' shows that if you begin in the tone of pastiche picaresque you may be expected to keep it up all the way. In fact, the second half of the film leaves movement and the rake's rambling progress behind; the landscape is grandly spacious, but within it the characters seem increasingly isolated and frozen. Barry finds himself playing a plump Claudius to his stepson's peevish, viperish little Hamlet, while Gertrude confers with her chaplain, the Reverend Runt (Murray Melvin), has fits of the vapours, and relaxes in the bath while a maid reads to her in French.

Kubrick has been accused of pointing the slight *Hamlet* parallel, but it's there in Thackeray and even, at one remove, in the source Thackeray drew on. Barry behaves badly to his wife, ruins the estate by sheer

inexperience and mismanagement, piles up debts while pursuing fatuous social and dynastic ambitions in a society he never gets the measure of, and plays heavy stepfather to the insolent little Bullingdon. He dotes on his own son, who meets much the same untimely end as the equally self-willed infant in *Gone With the Wind*—he's thrown from a horse, and precipitated into a death bed over which Kubrick lingers with pointed and unexpected sentiment. Once again, any real enormities on Barry's part are matters of narrative record; and when the camera moves in close on Lady Lyndon, driven to demented despair by ill treatment, her agonised writhings are hardly more affecting than those of the cat lady in *A Clockwork Orange*. Lady Lyndon is a faded, foolish presence, and perhaps Kubrick simply isn't enough interested in women to give her more independence of outline than the role of distraught mother and unloved wife strictly demands.

Instead, he has enlarged on the roles played by the egregious Runt and by the family steward, and the masked methods of narrative come into focus in one small scene. Barry has imported his mother, a true Irish harridan but possessed of a business acumen denied her son, who now finds herself virtually managing the estate. She calls in the Reverend Runt to sack him, both on grounds of retrenchment and of the unwholesome influence of canting religious prattle on her ladyship. The clergyman, a pallid little toad, snaps back that he's being removed as part of a plot to isolate the ailing Lady Lyndon from her friends. Is the old lady as malevolently scheming as the clergyman paints her; is she genuinely trying to remove a harmful pest from her daughter-in-law's entourage? In this and other scenes, Kubrick leaves the interpretation tantalisingly wide open, refusing to take us behind the scenes of motive, presenting private life, as it were, in public.

And, in the 18th century equation between sense and sensibility, 'sense' finally rests with those who know how to hold on to property (money and its management is the thread running through the film, as through so many 19th century novels) while 'sensibility' is one of the factors that bring down the outsider. Thackeray packs off Lord Bullingdon, after his first spirited defiance, to fight in the American war, and brings him back to enjoy his inheritance only when Barry is beaten. Kubrick keeps Bullingdon lurking, so that he can challenge Barry to the film's final duel. In one of the picture's most conscious set ups, Bullingdon tracks down his stepfather at his London club, so late at night that the porters are dozing in the hall, a cleaning woman is down on her knees with a scrubbing brush, and the group of friends around the table can be fittingly held in a Hogarthian pose, gamblers at the fag-end of the night.

As an avenger, however, Bullingdon is merely petulant, and in the duel scene he is shaking with panic, actually sick with fright. The punctiliousness of the exchanges ('Lord Bullingdon, are you ready to receive Mr. Lyndon's fire?'), the shadowy enclosed setting, drag out the private fight, like the moment before the advance in the battle scene. Bullingdon gets first shot, but his pistol misfires; Barry fires into the ground; and the quivering little lordling pulls

himself together enough to fire and fell his man. The extreme deliberation of this scene—which, it should be stressed, has no echo in the book—retrospectively suggests an explanation for Kubrick's rewriting of *Barry Lyndon*. Barry's devious career has been governed by the ambition to become a gentleman; and it's as a 'gentleman' that he holds off when he has his man at his mercy—in this one area, honour rules. Bullingdon, who has the advantage of having been born a gentleman, shows no such compunction.

Barry loses a leg as a result of the duel, is bought off by the family, and hobbles away in his old mother's charge; Kubrick ends his role on the hiatus of a frozen frame as the defeated reprobate takes to the road again. But there's still a final scene, which finds Lady Lyndon, her son, her chaplain and her steward seated round a table, her ladyship once again signing cheques. As Alexander Walker has pointed out, the date on the money order is 1789; the end, in effect, of the 18th century. Kubrick doesn't let the scene go quickly: he holds on to that tight little group, held in the act of paying off the past and protecting the future.

Thackeray's ending is crueller but more human—Barry in prison, still quarrelling with his mother. Kubrick's is chilly, dispassionate, too formal for easy irony. Little quarter has been given to Lady Lyndon and her son, who behave well neither as victims nor as victors. Barry is a kind of Gatsby without the dream—the



Barry at bay: encounter with the highwaymen.
Lady Lyndon and her chaplain (Murray Melvin)

seedy soldier of fortune who by the end wears all his scars. And I find myself perhaps rather perversely fascinated by the role of the Reverend Runt, a circumspect little sycophant, watchful, disapproving, impossible to dislodge, a representative of the hypocrisy of the age.

Andrew Sarris in his *Village Voice* review calls *Barry Lyndon* 'the most expensive meditation on melancholy ever financed by

a Hollywood studio,' and goes on to claim that 'every frame is a fresco of sadness.' This is an interesting, even appealing piece of critical overstatement, correctly suggesting not only how the second half of the film overshadows the first, but how Kubrick's insistent muting of mood, directing Barry's early adventures against what seem the natural or merely predictable energies of the material, imposes the tone which unites the only half-willed triumph of Redmond Barry and the only half-willed calamity of Barry Lyndon.

The theme is one for melancholy, by no means tragedy, and it can be argued that the characters caught in those magnificent 18th century settings (production design by Ken Adam, but locations everywhere), to the accompaniment of such gravely insistent music, are simply too minor to engage attention at the necessary level. But the necessary level in that case becomes partly one of expectation. Kubrick's special position as a film-maker is that he has acquired extraordinary authority, working within a system which expects a large return for a large outlay; and has done this not by the standard success method of delivering more of the same, but by having the will to surprise. In *Barry Lyndon* the surprise is partly that of withdrawal and abstraction, achieved through a classical technique which sustains its moral equilibrium while offering neither psychological justifications nor escapes into restful melodrama. (The escape element, of course, is that the film looks very beautiful.) To make *Barry Lyndon* work, the spectator has first to shed expectations about the genre, and the larkish energy associated with Tom Jones and his descendants; and then to achieve a series of adjustments between a setting which represents an age's finest view of itself, and the fatalistic melancholy of the human prospect.

Kubrick obviously keeps as close an eye on the advertising as on everything else connected with a picture, and it was slightly surprising that within a week of the London opening a sonorous quotation from *Time* had been joined in the press advertisements by chirpy chatter from *Vogue*, wondering whether Marisa Berenson might be the Garbo of the 1970s (not, unhappily, a question to conjure with) and recommending *Barry Lyndon* as holiday escape. I don't believe for a moment that Kubrick thinks he has made that sort of picture; but he has been quoted as saying that he hopes it will 'gross in nine figures'—in other words, join *Jaws* at over \$100 million—and to get anywhere near that optimistic target this introverted and almost secretive epic probably needs selling on the proposition that the past is a safer country, and a lot prettier as well.

Looking back on Kubrick's record, and assigning *Dr. Strangelove* to the future (or nightmare land) and *Lolita* to a world apart from time, it's disconcerting to realise that not since *The Killing*, now twenty years old, has he set a picture squarely in the age we live in. The past is safer in that it's controllable; and the fastidious control in *Barry Lyndon* seems as near total as the fallible mechanisms of film-making allow. It will be fascinating to see whether Kubrick ever again allows himself to be surprised in film-making by the uncontrollable—instead of surprising his audience. ■