Barry Lyndon and the Limits of Understanding

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BARRY LYNDON and eighteenth-century realism

Stanley Kubrick's famous obsession with authenticity was well established by the time he began work on *Barry Lyndon.* Critics and audiences alike anticipated a film that would not simply approximate the eighteenth century but recreate it, from the interior lives of its characters to the landscapes they inhabited. In some ways, Kubrick did not disappoint them; in other ways they were left deeply frustrated. The dividing line? Kubrick's distinctions pointing out what can and cannot be known - and thus reproduced on screen - about the past. What he left shrouded was seen as a failure by some critics and audiences. As much as they were fascinated by Kubrick's sumptuously framed vision of the life of Redmond Barry, they were angered at being shut out of the interiority that audiences have come to expect from a character-driven story. *Barry Lyndon* can be seen as a careful delineation of a dynamic that frustrates all historical pursuits: Our longing to know the past and define its wisdom is confined by the modern expectations we bring to the task of looking back.

Kubrick sets up the dichotomy in the very nature of his directorial choices. Authenticity is rampant: The film was shot on location (much of it in great houses), lit from sources appropriate to the time ('Photographing', 1976) and costumed in fabrics that matched portraits of the period (Harlan, 2001). Indeed, similarities between Kubrick's compositions and eighteenth-century portrait and landscape paintings are unmistakable (Combs, 1976: 4; Houston, 1976: 79). Kubrick, however, deployed several cinematic devices to inhibit us from looking too deep. His unexpected use of the zoom lens had the effect of flattening the image (Martin Scorsese in Harlan, 2001). An exceptionally fast Zeiss lens designed for satellite photography was adapted for the shoot so that director of photography John Alcott could cover the interior night scenes lit only by candles. Obliged by the low light levels to film with the lens wide open, he had almost no depth of field (Ibid.). Additionally, the characters in the court scenes obey its fashion dictates by wearing white make-up; combined with the lenses and light, the image is flattened further still.

Meanwhile narration 'flattens' the plot, killing suspense by telling us beforehand what will happen and denying us the vicarious anticipation characters themselves are feeling. Both *Tom Jones* (d. Tony Richardson, 1963) and *Barry Lyndon* originated in picaresque novels. However, (as in most mainstream cinema) *Tom Jones* offered audiences points of view from within the scene, offering them the illusion of being caught up in the action. Not so in *Barry Lyndon*, where frustrated audiences were allowed only to observe from a distance. Ryan O'Neal and Marisa Berenson were both criticised for poor acting and looking vapid. In fact, this disguise of the emotion that we typically expect in a character-centred story is consistent with Kubrick's other techniques for denying access to interiority through a carefully composed exterior.

This obsessive demonstration of an historically accurate portrayal has another objective: the very intensity of attention to authenticity exhausts the idea that it is possible to recreate the past. Kubrick takes us as close as possible to the lost actuality, yet what results is still a two-dimensional, choreographed approximation of what might have been, based on a collection of artifacts. The impression of studied superficiality led some critics to conclude that this was the whole of Kubrick's point. But when so much effort is made to draw our attention into the gorgeously composed frame, another suspicion arises: what is this carefully arranged version of events trying so hard to keep out? What is Kubrick, from a twentieth-century perspective, trying to show us through a life lived and told across the distance of 200 years?

Barry's fall and rise - and fall

On the surface, *Barry Lyndon* is a simple 'rise and fall' story of an Irish lad, taking its form and manner (as Thackeray did with his nineteenth-century plot) from eighteenth-century picaresque novels. However, so many voices and perspectives contribute to the film's account of Redmond Barry (Ryan O'Neal) that his story is no plain linear tale. It does not even follow the bell curve of rise and fall which its two part structure suggests, being more like a switchback ride.

Barry (as the narrator calls him throughout) thinks of himself as a gentleman; but after his father dies in a duel, mother and son are only by the kindness of his uncle (himself close to bankruptcy) able to maintain the status of gentlefolk. Soon a succession of mishaps robs the young man of even this standing. He loses his cousin and first love, Nora (Gay Hamilton), to a captain in the English army, John Quin (Leonard Rossiter); fights a duel with his rival and wins; flees to escape the law; is robbed of all he possesses by highwaymen; volunteers for service in the English army; is shipped to France where in his first experience of battle his mentor Captain Grogan (Godfrey Quigley) is killed.

Only when he steals an officer's horse, uniform and identity to desert do things improve. The narrator comments, "Barry felt once more that he was in his proper sphere, and determined never again to fall from the rank of a gentleman," (but his newly acquired name, Fakenham, hints at the doubtful validity of his claim). On the run he meets Lischen (Diana Koerner), a German girl with whom he shelters. They become lovers (perhaps the happiest time in his life) but the risk of discovery obliges him to move on. Sure enough, his next encounter is with Captain Potsdorf (Hardy Kruger), a recruiting officer who uncovers his deception and forces him into the brutalising ranks of the Prussian army.

Barry's fortunes rise again after he saves the Captain's life. When the Seven Years War ends, Potsdorf employs him as a counterspy, his target being the Chevalier de Balibari (Patrick Magee), an Irish libertine suspected of spying for Austria. But Barry is drawn to this elegant fellow-exile from Ireland and teams up with him. When the Prussians expel the Chevalier from their country, it is Barry wearing the old man's apparel whom they unwittingly convey across the border to freedom, missing the chevalier, who had slipped away the night before. Thereafter, these rogues play the gaming tables of Europe's courts, the older man's ingenuity as a card sharper and Barry's skilful swordsmanship enabling them to fleece many a silk-clad gambler.

Barry sets about conquering the heart of a "woman of fortune and condition" to secure his life among the rich. He courts the Countess of Lyndon (Marisa Berenson) without waiting for the death of Sir Charles (Frank Middlemass), her valetudinarian husband. But disease and apoplexy brought on by Barry's insolence swiftly carry off the old tyrant. Barry marries Lady Lyndon, fathers a son on her and, as her new tyrant, confines her to nursery and domestic duties, devoting himself to pleasures of the flesh, stooping to infidelity even with his wife's maids.

Barry's raffish behaviour too closely resembles that of other gentlemen to command notice outside the family or to undo him. The cold anger of his stepson, Lord Bullingdon (Dominic Savage/ Leon Vitali), will do that. Like Hamlet, the boy revolts against his mother's hasty marriage to an opportunist, his disgust compounded by Barry's harsh conduct toward him. As he grows, his hatred of Barry intensifies, held in check only by cowardice. This stalemate breaks only when the outrages done to his family reach a level he can no longer tolerate and he engages Barry in the final duel.

Bullingdon might never have found the courage to act had not Barry striven by fair means and foul to gain a peerage. The narrator says, "[Barry] made great sacrifices to bring it about. He lavished money here and diamonds there. He bought lands at ten times their value and purchased pictures and articles of virtue at ruinous prices..." There is indeed much evidence of lavish expenditure, but the narrator is mistaken in his first assertion. As Bullingdon never forgets, the money squandered is not Barry's but his and Lady Lyndon's.

Limits of the narrator's understanding

Our knowledge of Barry is mediated by narration, a device that conveys information economically. It also gives advance hints of plot developments, lessening the risk of their seeming contrived, and ensures, by running ahead of events, that nothing comes as a surprise - everything seems inevitable (Kubrick cited in Ciment, 1983: 170). At first, therefore, the narrator appears omniscient. In fact there are limits to his understanding, limits characteristic of eighteenth-, not twentieth-century, values.

What kind of character is Michael Hordern's invisible narrator? Whilst Barry's stoicism differs from Tom Jones's effervescence, the narrators of Kubrick's film and Fielding's novel share some qualities.(1) As members of the educated elite, they discourse like fair judges of men, sometimes with amused paternal insight. However, the presumption upon which the cycle of English-language picaresque novels (such as *Joseph Andrews, Tom Jones,* and *Roderick Random*) relied, was that the hero's rise and fall tracked the moral worth of his deeds.(2)

Here Kubrick's film breaks the mould: though the narrator's measured tones resound like a moralist's, his words seldom pass ethical judgement.

Kubrick emphasises the gap between our times and the eighteenth century by having all his characters deliver lines distinguished by their literary formality. When highwaymen ambush Barry, they converse in exquisite prose. The victim, at gunpoint, begs to be allowed to keep his cash, being himself (after the duel with Quin) a fugitive from the law. The highwayman responds,

> Mr Barry, in my profession we hear many such stories. Yours is one of the most intriguing and touching I've heard in many weeks. Nevertheless, I'm afraid I cannot grant your request...

Exchanges such as this delight our ears through their incongruous delicacy; but the archaic phraseology underlines that we are both watching a recreation of history and observing characters who, because their language does not allow it, do not think in the ways we do. The narrator is confined within the same straitjacket. He functions like Conrad's Marlowe in *Heart of Darkness* (1902) or Thompson, the journalist at the frame's margin in *Citizen Kane* (1941). Each is a shadowy character, none completely reliable as an observer since the ideologies which circumscribe them limit their comprehension of what they witness. In *Barry Lyndon* a divide sometimes opens between what we see and hear. For instance, the narrator asserts that, on marrying, Barry had "arrived at the pitch of prosperity, and by his own energy had raised himself to a higher sphere of society". The evidence on screen, by contrast, suggests that his efforts to win Lady Lyndon amount to little more than following the rituals of adultery among the nobility. Barry, for the most part, rises by seizing chance good fortune.

The telling of Barry's life abounds with opportunities for the narrator to show off his superior wisdom with irony, but his perspectives on Barry's story alter with his subject's circumstances. Consider his shifting attitudes toward war. When Barry joins the English forces in Germany, the narrator celebrates these "gallant armies". A darker tone accompanies Barry's first taste of battle which, although "only a skirmish... not recorded in any history books,... was memorable enough for those who took part." In line abreast, the scarlet-clad soldiers advance across open country, marching in perfect formation on the French whose volleys scythe into them. Kubrick covers most of the action from travelling shots that track just behind the first ranks of British soldiers or march alongside their leading rank, observing them through a long lens - a gorgeous tableau that conceals the brutal truth. When the first volleys cut men down, we scarcely notice because we too march on and leave them behind. For a moment the sense of triumph conveyed by the brilliant colours and meticulous geometry of the battlefield continues uninterrupted. Only when Grogan takes a ball on the chest do we halt as Barry carries him to safety. We can no longer miss the dead and dying. As Barry grieves over his mentor, the horror of the fatuous battle sinks in. We never learn who wins. The heroic rituals of war seem to matter more to the generals in command than the extravagant waste of life or the military outcome. The narrator's perspective seems close to Barry's revulsion:

> After the death of his friend, Barry's thoughts turned from those of military glory to those of finding a way to escape the service... Gentlemen may talk of the age of chivalry, but remember the ploughmen, poachers and pickpockets whom they lead. It is with these sad instruments that your great warriors and kings have been doing their murderous work in the world.

As with the skirmish, so with the Seven Years War. The narrator says nothing about its political or military outcomes, noting its conclusion in a throwaway line as if the disasters it visited on Europe were of no consequence. From that moment on, he ignores the ethics of warmongering and falls back on the eighteenth-century notion that it was an occupation (simultaneously the sport of kings and a deadly job for the everyman), not a moral issue.(3) This concept of war helps us understand how the parvenu Barry can attach himself to the very class of people who conducted those wars. When in due course, he of all people raises a company of troops to ingratiate himself with George III and sends them to America to fight the rebels against the Crown, the narrator thinks only of the cost, not the ethics.

The narrator is the last figure we as audience expect will waver in perspective. He knows all and has benefit of hindsight. So we expect him to have a wise and conclusive understanding. But this narrator undermines the assumption that because events are behind us, we can understand them. Kubrick plays this notion out, showing how a past record offers the chance at mastery over its physical details but leaves deeper issues -

crucial questions of motivation and interior experience - as shrouded as if they were part of the future.

Barry and his fellow characters

To a lesser extent, all the protagonists assess Barry, often conflicting with the narrator's assessment and what Kubrick shows us. In the opening scenes, Nora, her brother, Quin and Grogan call him a boy. They are not wholly wrong, but biassed because they have an interest in downplaying the emerging man. Compare their verdict with Lischen's, the young German who becomes Barry's lover. She penetrates his *nom de guerre* and learns who he is: during their time together she may have seen through his pretences and known him naked in mind as well as body. If so, she is probably the only person who does.

It is easy to forget, because the film features formal and public occasions, that, apart from Bullingdon, Barry is loved by his family. However, love and power are always entwined in this milieu. His son Bryan's love is obvious, encouraged by his success in manipulating his father. No less manipulatively, his mother also trades love for influence. The most forlorn of the secondary characters is Lady Lyndon. In her first marriage her lassitude reveals the apathy of a woman caught between a decayed spouse and a barren social life of inflexible decorum. The contrast between the stifling manners of court circles and Barry's forcible entry into her milieu surely endows him with the glamour of a wild rover. But although she falls in love with him, the many abuses to which Barry subjects her confirm the hard lesson of her first marriage, that her life, fortune and happiness are not hers to command.

Others contribute to a darker picture of Barry. Captain Potsdorf calls him a liar, imposter and deserter: these charges are true, but demonstrably not the whole truth. Later, the regiment's Colonel describes Barry as a gallant soldier but so idle, undisciplined and unprincipled that he has misled the men. From the Chevalier de Balibari, Barry learns only to admire vanity, extravagance and the marvel of being a gentleman. He proves adept at picking up the card sharper's cheats, but lacks the wit for the old man's strategic survival skills.

Barry's deadliest enemy is his grown stepson, Lord Bullingdon. After nurturing Oedipal injury for years, he denounces his stepfather before an audience of "the best people" - nobility with the power to sponsor Barry's bid for a peerage. Bullingdon excoriates "the lowliness of his birth and the general brutality of his manners,... his open infidelity, his shameless robberies and swindling of my property..." The young man's diatribe does hit Barry's vices, but it also betrays the gentleman flaying the parvenu. However, for the assembled gentry, such snobbery is the norm, but Barry's reaction is unforgivable. Rather than duelling (the acceptable means of redress), he punches the younger man and starts a brawl. In shattering the rules of decorum, he destroys his social standing. And so Bullingdon has his victory.

Barry's elusive personality

What emerges is a fragmented picture of Barry based on the differing interactions of the other characters. He neither shares his memories nor reveals a self-image. Barry is not predominantly loyal, brave, loving, romantic, brutal, malicious, mean, scheming, a liar, cheat or thief. Yet each of these traits emerges at one time or another, but neither consistently nor even passionately. The sum of these perspectives is insufficient to construct a rounded character in terms that a twentieth-century audience understands. Barry seems lacking in individual will or moral vision, a man constructed by his surroundings (in contrast to modern man, who believes he constructs himself). Does the question which interests us, 'Who is the real Barry Lyndon?', depend on some form of post-psychoanalytic engagement? Kubrick's *modus operandi* is to blank off our enquiries about his interior make-up while putting him in narrative circumstances which reinforce that interest.

Though he tries hard to adapt to every changed circumstance, Barry does not fit in anywhere. His failure to find his place can be read as a comment on the failure at many levels (of personal relationships, social stratification, military conduct, and political practice) of trying to mould the individual to rigid structures rather than building structures to suit the needs of the individual (the modern, psychological goal). An amoral pawn of a socio-political system nearing its dissolution, he sparks little sympathy because so unaware of any injustice either done to or by him. The impersonal nature of it all is striking.

The backdrop of history

The turbulent upheavals of Barry's epoch make history inescapable. The principal action begins in 1758, the second year of the Seven Years War with Barry about fifteen. He must be forty in 1783, the year of Bryan's

death, the duel with Bullingdon and his own return to Ireland. The final scene occurs in the year of the Paris uprising, 1789.

The institutions of the old order determine almost every aspect of all the characters' existence, a socio-cultural factor consistent with the era:

> Those who reconstructed European society and culture after the Thirty Years' War [1614-48] took as guiding principles *stability* in and among the sovereign nation-states, and *hierarchy* within the social structures of each individual state. For those who carried this task forward, it was important to believe that the principles of stability and hierarchy were found in all of the Divine plan, down from the astronomical cosmos to the individual family. (Toulmin, 1990: 128)

The Seven Years War was a struggle in which the ossified order of Kings and Emperors squandered the lives of vast numbers of common people to secure the power of the nation-state and its attendant class structure. Barry is a creature, and finally a supporter, of the old order. However, the events of his later life overlap with the upheavals of the American and French Revolutions that were to lead eventually to extraordinary changes in both the socio-political sphere and the personal psyche. None of the protagonists has an inkling of the revolutionary changes underway or the restless, moral consciousness that is emerging. Barry himself is no rebel, but his failure to find solutions for his restlessness can be read as a dissatisfaction that fosters the seeds of revolution carried out by others.

All Kubrick's films show that attempts to impose order on the chaos of human impulses never wholly succeed. In *Barry Lyndon* the impact of both passions and culture register the breakdown of the old order that is occurring unseen off-screen.

Breaching the old codes: unruly passions

In any age where strict codes of conduct and fashion occur, they are meant to regulate the chaos of internal and external forces, emphatically so in Barry's world where the characters' pomaded appearance and mannerisms signify only their social status, not their inner thoughts. As Kubrick had already shown in *Paths of Glory,* rigid social codes may remain strong even where hostility is involved.

Strict codes of conduct do not expunge natural impulses. In *Barry Lyndon* passions disrupt order when Barry's love for Nora threatens his uncle's family and cause him to leave home. So too when Lady Lyndon's adulterous desire for Barry jeopardises her standing among "the best people". Equally, men's lust for blood jeopardises the code. Although Barry once loathed the mass carnage of war, he is always eager to fight his own battles, and his temper is infectious. When he punches Bullingdon in front of his noble guests, the set-to arouses the other males. The gentry close ranks against him after that fracas to reaffirm the code and erase the knowledge that they too wanted to scrap.

Breaching the cultural codes

What is to be understood from the film text itself? As spectators in Kubrick's art gallery we feel the distance between our modern viewpoint, which emphasises the power of the individual in relation to the world, and the world of the film, in which settings (indoors and out) are so much larger than the people in them. Kubrick's eighteenth-century environment seems full of forces that determine people's destiny more than individual will. The reverse zoom repeatedly dwarfs the actors inside large landscapes, for example, so that we are left registering the settings more fully than the distant figures identifiable only by their dress.(4) The characters' positions seem to express the ordained purpose of the well regulated social order.

Elsewhere the painterly style overtly satirises the hypocrisy of the gentry. Kubrick's compositions recall the lampoonists' tableaux. Such images as the absurdly vainglorious Captain Quin prancing a jig, and the cuckolded Sir Charles Lyndon gobbling in fury over the card table, bring to mind the grosser caricatures of Gillray, Rowlandson and Hogarth (Houston, 1976: 78-9).

Nevertheless, Michael Dempsey is right to comment that Kubrick's compositions should not be compared with paintings on a museum wall because moving images exist in time. "The film conjures up the past only to waft it away, as though it had never existed except in fantasy" (1976: 53). The ephemerality of the mise-en-scène (nowhere more subtle in its implication of fleet lives than in the candle-lit scenes) (Ibid.) encourages the spectator to endorse the sentiments on the final title card asserting the equality after death

of all humanity.

Music makes a major impact. Michel Sineux says that, like *2001* and *Clockwork Orange*, *Barry Lyndon* is not a film where dialogue acts as the main vehicle for messages. Rather, music dominates, with the consequence that each film is rooted in the emotional and the sensorial. It addresses the intellect via feeling, and reaches the conscious mind only after having energised the unconscious (1976: 36).

Having said this, almost all *Barry Lyndon's* music is as rigorously coded as the characters' behaviour. It does more than fit the time and places of the action. For example, Frederick the Great's 'Hohenfriedberger March' plays when Barry is impressed into the Prussian army. Beyond setting a rhythm for troop movements, this march (like those of the English army) projects a resolute cheeriness to counter the sorrows of the conscripts. Unsurprisingly, given that he was supreme commander of the army, Frederick's march also has an authoritarian ring. Yet both that march and 'The British Grenadiers' are burlesqued as coarse drinking songs by the soldiers - a further hint that the regulation of conduct is not perfect.

When first heard, Handel's Sarabande (adapted by Leonard Rosenman) embellishes the pomp both of Barry's ambitions and the old order; but it recurs in telling variations: for example, during Barry's *annus horribilis* drums and pizzicato bass produce a funereal undertow to the music. Overall the Sarabande acts as a processional incessantly impelling Barry, narrator and audience through his life, a *memento mori* that stops us forgetting his inevitable end.

Chamber music accompanies the scenes where Barry pretends to the gentleman's life. Stephenson says it suggests the power of emotions never permitted to surface (1981: 255). Another instance of the film's denial of interior dimension, it complements the aristocrats' manners through its symmetrical elegance. Its themes, dressed with an exquisite shell, draw the listener's ear, yet may actually obstruct complete enjoyment because the delicious intricacies of melody, harmony, repetition and development distract the listening mind from penetrating to the emotional core. This is true on- as well as off-screen: the audience at Lady Lyndon's concert seem unmoved by what they hear.

There is one striking anachronism: the second movement from Franz Schubert's Piano Trio in E-Flat, Op. 100. It underscores Barry's and Lady Lyndon's early meetings. Piano, violin and cello spin entwining lines whose melody mirrors love's emotions in a direct engagement of the audience's feelings. Miller (1976) observes that Rosenman's adaptation does not progress into Schubert's passionate middle section but repeats the major theme. The device discreetly underlines both Lady Lyndon's frustration (she is alone in feeling love) and Barry's failure to develop by committing to an enduring relationship.

When Schubert's Trio is heard again later, it has a darker timbre. An amputee on crutches, Barry, the defeated duellist, boards a coach to leave England, banished by his victorious stepson from the domain of old estates and family fortunes. The broken man resembles a metaphor for modern humanity coming into being at the time of the French Revolution (Miller, ibid.). In this context, Schubert's Trio heralds the Romantic and post-revolutionary era of individualised sensibility and mutual responsibility; but Barry never enters that world. So there is frustration in this too.

The language and frustration of longing

Faces slowly turning toward the objects for which they long provide a recurring motif, none more forlorn than Barry and his wife (Ross 1995). Because we cannot know why the characters are yearning, we either project our own motivations into the scenes or introject their mood, adopting it as our own. In the latter case, longing evokes bittersweet nostalgia. This is particularly true of the final sight of Barry. This jarring and unexpected freeze frame of his back catches him, one-legged and off balance, stepping into the carriage that will take him with his mother back to Ireland. His beginning has become his ending. The brutal view reveals him stripped of the social masks that have hidden his inner nature from us and from himself. As the most uncomposed image in the film, it produces a discordant impact at the very moment the on-screen record of him ends (and audiences' longing for resolution peaks). That image metaphorically consigns Barry to his death before his time and jolts us out of the frame within which the film's aesthetics have held us for the preceding three hours. And thus it violates our longing.

Our own longing, then, is for something different from that of the characters. It fastens upon the calmly composed image, the lost time, the beautiful frame that makes even war seem orderly. Kubrick offers the

facsimile of a simpler time in the past but, by obliging us to discover it to be a *trompe l'oeil*, invites the frustrating recognition that we ourselves have helped to flatten the image. Our nostalgic longings for beauty and order have the power to strip the past of complexity, revising historical understanding to satisfy our needs.

Kubrick leaves us with a list of questions about Barry's interior life that most films work arduously to satisfy. Systematically denied answers, we are led to another consideration: questions of psychological motivation that so occupy a twentieth-century audience are, from *Barry Lyndon*'s timeframe, historical anachronisms. Psychoanalysis, a twentieth-century innovation, revolutionised the way we understand self and others. Emphasis for the first time shifted to the individual as a distinct force, rather than being fully defined by his place in a social hierarchy. This perspective is largely taken for granted by today's audiences but creates a radical divide in expectations and standards of personal evaluation when compared to an eighteenth-century mind. Concepts of consciousness and questions of emotional motivation so natural today were not an intellectual or cultural structure in Barry's world. So while a modern audience is used to asking (and getting answers to) emotionally-driven questions, we have to ask whether this is a fair demand of Barry. Kubrick, by denying us access to a psychological reading, seems to be keeping Barry - and the audience - firmly in their respective centuries, emphasizing rather than bridging the psychological distance.

C. G. Jung believed that the evolution of humanity was marked by successive generations developing greater consciousness, an effort marked by increasing individual will and freedom. He described those generations in whom consciousness was still emergent in terms strikingly similar to the disposition of *Barry Lyndon's* characters.

> His consciousness is still uncertain... A wave of the unconscious may easily roll over it, and then he forgets who he was and does things that are strange to him. Hence primitives are afraid of uncontrolled emotions, because consciousness breaks down under them and gives way to possession. All man's strivings have therefore been directed towards the consolidation of consciousness. This was the purpose of rite and dogma; they were dams and walls to keep back the dangers of the unconscious, the "perils of the soul". (Jung, 1954: 22)

No current from Barry's unconscious motivations ever becomes known to him in the way they might for a modern man. There is no sign of the coming to consciousness which audiences of mainstream western cinema expect to share with their screen heroes. So something else is going on here. It can be located in Barry's happiness and unhappiness alike, both of which spring from his longing for both freedom and acceptance. Indeed, the pairing of individual freedom and social acceptance is an oxymoron in his world, poignantly expressed in his desire to be a gentleman. His expectation that that will free him to be whatever he wants is revealed as a delusion. His attempts to be a "gentleman" instead provoke a brutal lesson in the violent repression of individual desire in the cause of social stability.

Seeing Barry wrecked - but still left unreflective - by his life's course frustrates today's viewer, who is usually invited to see beneath the surface of heroes' lives. In the final outturn, Kubrick invites us to consider that physical, social, and cultural structures reflect the capacity and limitations of their inhabitants' understanding - both within our own time and as we strive to know the eighteenth-century world of Redmond Barry. We are encouraged in our twentieth-century belief that we can know the protagonists intimately, while we are simultaneously frustrated in our ambition by all the devices described. In summation, the film's reverse zoom stands out as a very deliberate visual cue about the distance we have to acknowledge the characters and scenery, however beautiful, are from our understanding. The past is, in many respects, as unknowable as the future. Although it is seductive to say "I understand", the distance, emphasised again and again, tells us that we can only observe the details and must relinquish the desire to live vicariously. With *Barry Lyndon*, Kubrick reminds us that desire does not overcome all distance; we can see but not know.

Notes

1. Kubrick's narrator is his invention. Thackeray had a pompous Barry relate his own story. 2. Kubrick named his hero 'Roderick' in one version of the screenplay. 3. Apropos this view, "cannon fodder" was not

in that century an ironic term. 4. When made, such landscape gardens imposed order not only on nature but also on people, some owners removing entire peasant villages lest they interfere with vistas.

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