

Stanley Kubrick's 18th Century:

Painting in Motion and *Barry Lyndon* as an Enlightenment Gallery

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Abstract

The only period piece by famed Stanley Kubrick, *Barry Lyndon*, was a 1975 box office flop, as well as the director's magnum opus. Perhaps one of the most sumptuous and exquisite examples of cinematography to date, this picaresque film effectively recreates the Age of the Enlightenment not merely through facts or events, but in visual aesthetics. Like exploring the past in a museum exhibit, the film has a painterly quality harkening back to the old masters. The major artistic movements that reigned throughout the setting of the story dominate the manner in which *Barry Lyndon* tells its tale with Kubrick's legendary eye for detail. Through visual understanding, the once obscure novel by William Makepeace Thackeray becomes a captivating window into the past in a manner similar to the paintings it emulates.

In 1975, the famed and monumental director Stanley Kubrick released his one and only box-office flop. A film described as a “coffee table film”, it was his only period piece, based on an obscure novel by William Makepeace Thackeray (Patterson). Ironically, his most forgotten work is now considered his magnum opus by critics, and a complete masterwork of cinematography (BFI, “Art”). A remarkable example of the historical costume drama, it enchants the viewer in a meticulously crafted vision of the Georgian Era. Stanley Kubrick’s film *Barry Lyndon* encapsulates the painting, aesthetics, and overall feel of the 18th century in such a manner to transform the film into a sort of gallery of period art and society.

Much of what makes the work of *Barry Lyndon* so striking is its ability to fully create a space of the 18th century. Though other historical films may aim for a factual accuracy, Kubrick and others instinctively understood too well that in the end, the essence of the source work and era were rarely captured (Kubrick). Even in contemporary period pieces, they are still clearly a product of the time they were created. The historical visuals and settings, when set apart from the direct requirements of plot and story, are often superficial in aesthetic. Merely putting characters in cravats and panniers in an old country estate is not enough to make a film *feel* Georgian, even if all the materials to do so are there. However, the realm of *Barry Lyndon* truly *is* the 18th century in which it is set. One cannot easily tell what year it was filmed without some external knowledge. Kubrick, with the work of cinematographer John Alcott, art directors Ken Adam and Roy Walker, and costume maker Milena Canonero, fully recreates the feeling of the period, grounded in what sources the contemporary individual has of the time frame (Robey). The director’s infamous eye for detail pays off, building the gestalt necessary to craft a window into the past like never before.

As the saying goes, “the devil is in the details”. If this film is to serve as a *window* into the past, then what the audience is to *see* visually is of the utmost importance. The contemporary mind builds an understanding of what the era must have looked and *felt* like from what surviving evidence still remaining. Existing in a period prior to modern photography, understanding of the 18th century lies in the arts. Painting, literature, music, architecture, and the like are where the entirety of the Georgian feeling and mind currently resides, so in order to emulate the period, one must properly emulate the essence of these arts. To do so requires proper understanding of such work, as well as the tools to form said recreation.

Kubrick was infamous for the technological pioneering present in his films. Many films have a focal point in the overall cinematography - an end goal Kubrick sought. In the case of *Barry Lyndon*, his vision was to enter what was once the domain of the painter: natural light. Kubrick was struck by paintings that make use of chiaroscuro, and sought to recreate it on the silver screen (Kubrick). Part of what made previous period pieces feel so artificial is the use of studio lighting. Especially for the more languid, long shots done in this film, the harsh, straightforward, studio lighting simply could not recreate the way sun fades ever so slightly with the clouds or how candlelight flickers across a surface. Though it works perfectly well for films in more modern or futuristic settings where electrical lights are indeed the norm in reality, it makes the realm feel industrial, constructed, and unnatural, which is simply not the way the 18th century eye saw and depicted the world (Kubrick). The reduced depth of field and subdued yet distinctive light fills paintings of Caravaggio and his followers (Davies et al 739). One can see the beautiful natural light present in period paintings, so switching to filming in such a manner inherently helps recreate the atmosphere present in a master oil painting.

However, filming in natural light is a challenge; even for current filmmakers it can be a significant struggle to use it effectively. Yet Stanley Kubrick, as a master of his craft, films almost the entire movie in purely natural light. In an interview he highlighted the problem:

“Prior to *Barry Lyndon*, the problem has never been properly solved. Even if the director and cameraman had the desire to light with practical light sources, the film and the lenses were not fast enough to get an exposure. A 35mm movie camera shutter exposes at about 1/50 of a second, and a useable exposure was only possible with a lens at least 100% faster than any which had ever been used on a movie camera. Fortunately, I found just such as lens, one of a group of ten which Zeiss had specially manufactured for NASA satellite photography. The lens had a speed of f/0.7, and it was 100% faster than the fastest movie lens. A lot of work still had to be done to it and the camera to make it useable. For one thing, the rear element of the lens had to be 2.5mm away from the film plane, requiring special modification to the rotating camera shutter. But with this lens it was now possible to shoot in light conditions so dim that it was difficult to read” (Kubrick).

Essentially jerry-rigging the single camera to be used for the entirety of the film, Kubrick successfully overcame the biggest step in creating the an organic and real 18th century space in a visual medium. Beyond that, his eye for detail led him to accumulating a large amount of material and notes, taking drawing and paintings out of art books (Kubrick). These images became the reference for everything including “clothes, furniture, hand props, architecture, vehicles, etc.” (Kubrick). Rather than have a designer “interpret” clothing from drawings and paintings, as even contemporary period dramas do, it was insisted that everything was faithfully copied *exactly* from such images (Kubrick). Art of the era became the primary source of every single visual aspect of the film. Beyond direct reproduction of specific detail, the film is very meticulous in capturing the *vibe* of the period derived from painting, blending together to form the proper disposition. With such knowledge of the character of this era’s predominant styles, Kubrick relates it back to the film and story, each feature reinforcing the next.

The mid- to late- 18th century, when the film is set, is the home of many artistic and aesthetic developments in the Western world. Europe had recently moved beyond the Baroque

period strongly associated with the previous century, and new tastes came into vogue (Davies et al 761). Interestingly, art of the era seemed to simultaneously elaborate and simplify many elements of the Baroque (Davies et al 758). Art in the Age of the Enlightenment began with the last breadth of the aristocracy's restless Baroque transforming into the more light-hearted Rococo, known for its delicate and colourful nature (Davies et al 763). Compositions are graceful, colours are light, and the subject matter playful, focusing on themes like pastoralism, leisure, and love (Davies et al 761). Rococo is the style of the frivolous, idle rich.

Visual elements of the Rococo appear in two distinct areas of the story and reinforces the state of the protagonist's life to the viewer. In the film's earliest stages, Redmond Barry is still a naive lad in the idyllic Irish countryside. Though he is not wealthy, he does fancy himself a gentleman, and still views the world in a lens that suits the Rococo well. This is most evident in scenes containing his first love, Nora, as she not only provides that content of young love, but even comes complete with a pseudo-gaussian blur in her first scene, almost always wearing white. However, the light and elegant oration and idealism of the Rococo palette disappears as Barry's life is turned on its head and he is forced to flee this world. He spends the rest of Act I attempting to climb the social ladder, and in a way return to the Rococo realm once more. The Rococo imagery returns only after he properly enters the world of the aristocracy - the same world that would commission such paintings to begin with. Unfortunately it is interseeded with the darker plot and visuals of Act II, creating a sort of subversive, satiric, bathos playing well into the picaresque origins of the tale (Canby). The audience's knowledge of the story deliberately ruins the gentle visuals of these later scenes. Just as Rococo was on the decline by the late 18th century when Barry finally comes into money, so too was Barry when he reaches that idyllic world of soon-to-fade aristocracy.

Artists of the Rococo period inspired many scenes, settings, and costumes. Perhaps the most influential figures for *Barry Lyndon* are William Hogarth and Jean-Antoine Watteau. Even the original literary work was partly inspired by the satirical narratives Hogarth would insert into his painting series (BFI “Literature”). Hogarth’s *A Rake’s Progress* and, more prominently in plot and visuals, *Marriage A-la-Mode* serve as clear influences, befitting the film’s portrayal of the aristocracy as absurd (Hogarth). Meanwhile the portions of the film that show the strongest Rococo elements often follow Watteau’s bright and sunny landscapes, such as *The Country Dance*, *Pleasure of Love*, *The Feast of Love*, and *The Embarkation for Cythera* (Watteau). This is particularly true for the scenes set in Ireland in Act I.

After Barry’s first duel with the English officer, the film takes on strong a strong Neoclassical appearance, which remains throughout the entirety of the film. Neoclassicism was a reaction to the perceived frivolity of the Rococo style, instead harkening back to the glory of Classical Antiquity and a renewed study of the Renaissance (Davies et al 787). Reason and intellect were at the forefront of philosophy, creating a heightened sense for cultivating civilization and a conscientious high culture (Davies et al 785). Emotion was subdued and mannered, with ordered and cultivated compositions that emphasized line clarity over colours (Davies et al 786). This works well with Kubrick’s known fondness for direct, one-point perspective. The stiff but languid camerawork also suits the feeling of the Neoclassical style, being centered with straight and direct angles of view. Most camera movement is in the form of panning in or out of a shot that is otherwise very still and silent. Usually only a single focal subject is in movement, or the entire scene is moving in such unison there is no true distinction. The lack of dynamic movement normally seen in a medium designed for movement creates a

psychological flatness that further imitates the calm painterly quality, as if slowly strolling through an art gallery.

In many scenes the composition is very specific and manicured in the Neoclassical style. The reserved manner and emotion of Neoclassical art is felt throughout the entire tale in even the performance of the actors themselves. Every detail was meticulously planned from precisely how far an actor could stretch their arm in gesture to floral arrangements (Robey). The attention and accuracy of historical detail and manner was vital to this film, just as it was to the neoclassical painter (Davies et al 793). It simultaneously serves as reflection of the society and culture of the Georgian aristocracy, as repression is a key theme throughout the film. Characters must express themselves in very restricted, mannered ways, just as art of the Enlightenment often pulls back turbulence and passion into a more orderly expression. Barry himself is often pulled low whenever his emotions leave the Neoclassical sphere, and such displays are actively looked down upon by high society.

Joshua Reynolds exemplified English Neoclassical portraiture and it was likely that design for Lady Lyndon's appearance was drawn from these portraits. The clothing, makeup, and general standard of beauty was seemingly inspired by portraits such as *Lady Skipworth* (Reynolds). Likewise, Nora has a similar appearance and manner to the portrait of *Nelly O'Brien* (Reynolds). Jean Baptiste Greuze's genre scenes may have very well been the inspiration of the more homely settings in the film, such as those set in Ireland or Germany (Davies et al 811). A *Father Reading the Bible to His Family*, for instance, feels very similar to moments in the first act before Barry is forced to flee (Greuze). For the interior and familial scenes seen for much of Act II, Johann Zoffany seemed more in-line. Interior design seemed drawn from paintings such as *The Tribunal of the Uffizi*, *The Dutton Family* and *Sir Lawrence Dundas* (Zoffany). The

infamous scene with with Lady Lyndon's musical performance before it was interrupted by her sons looks as if it is a moment from *The Gore Family with George, third Earl of Cowper* (Zoffany). Benjamin West's contemporary heroic death scene, *The Death of General Wolfe*, has qualities echoed in the death of Barry's first commanding officer and father figure as a battle continues in the background (West). Even the reference to the *picaresque* can be used in both literary and artistic meanings of the term, as many stills look like such landscapes with gardens and layered architecture (Davies et al 799).

The final stretch of the film has traits of a movement that began later in the century: Romanticism. Though often treated as opposites, Neoclassicism and Romanticism coexisted and often the line between them overlapped (Davies et al 803). Especially with the evolution of the heroic and historic popular in Neoclassical works, a passionate, emotional sensibility entered the arts (Davies et al 821). Romantic focus strongly on the emotional elements and spontaneity (Davies et al 822). In many ways Romantic art served as a counterbalance for the rigid severity the Neoclassical style often carried. As the story of Barry Lyndon follows a lengthy period of time in his life, Romantic aesthetics generally appear in the film's cinematography corresponding to the real-life appearance of the movement.

Romanticism, as a response to the restrictive nature of academic art, in many ways parallels the emotional state of the plot. Landscapes deriving from Romantic art appear throughout the film after the initial Rococo influences of the first act die down, emphasizing the historic and powerful nature of the world and time, perhaps even fate, in relation to these small human characters. Additionally Barry is often criticized in moments when he becomes too emotional, as this goes against the proper senses of the high society surrounding him. As Act II is set in a timeframe where Romanticism would be gaining popularity, this is where some of

Barry's most passionate moments occur. Though he does have high emotional scenes in earlier parts of the film, there is a drastically different feeling, in part from being portrayed in Neoclassical style. Some degree of Romanticism is subtly interwoven into these Neoclassical portions through the musical quality to reveal the real psychological underpinnings, though the imagery in many cases remains stiff and Neoclassical, highlighting the sense of repression and manner. The passionate, more visually Romantic scenes, however, are the most dynamic, even close to byronic when his inevitable downfall is apparent. Though it is not the dominant stylistic influence in the film due to its later time frame, Romanticism is still used very potently near the end, and highlights the qualities of the other influences as well.

The works of Thomas Gainsborough's "Grand Manner Portraiture" have the most obvious parallels in the film (Davies et al 805). Even Lady Lyndon as played by Marisa Berenson has a physical appearance similar the women of Gainsborough portraits, such as the *Portrait of Mrs. Richard Brinsley Sheridan* (Gainsborough). *Landscape with Figures on a Path* feels identical to many landscape shots throughout the film despite having no exact visual match (Gainsborough). Especially after the story shift in Act II, scenes with Barry and the family are also reminiscent of works such as *Mr and Mrs William Hallett* and *Mr and Mrs Andrews* (Gainsborough). Even *The Blue Boy* was likely an inspiration for one of Barry's outfits as well as how his son and stepson appear (Gainsborough). George Stubbs' equestrian paintings are directly paralleled in a few scenes, usually in a more direct homage, the shot remarkably similar to paintings like *Eclipse* (Stubbs). John Constable and Johann Heinrich Fuseli also show some influence. Constable's painting of *Malvern Hall*, for instance, appears similar to the landscapes seen in Act II after Barry has married Lady Lyndon and now owns her property (Constable). Other elements of his landscapes appear in the beautiful shots of Germany, having similar

proportions of land, sky, and person, the weather and clouds just the right greyish hue as in *The Haywain* (Constable). The drama of Fuseli's *The Nightmare* seeps through in later portions with Lady Lyndon, though perhaps not as blatantly (Fuseli).

Barry Lyndon in many regards, serves as a compilation of mid- to late-18th century aesthetics. The film peruses through the various art movements with a "languid perusal", not unlike walking through an art gallery (BFI "Art"). Perhaps the most striking feature of this work is how truly *even* the every aspect of the film is. No single scene stands out in the same way certain climactic moments become pop culture icons, as every other Kubrick film does. There is not one scene or moment that overtakes the rest of the film, and no specific climax, harkening back to its origin as a picaresque novel. Instead of crafting moments, although each is very sumptuous, every second blends together to create a *feeling*. There is an incredibly strong unity throughout the whole film that makes it difficult to distinguish specific moments when it's not fresh in one's mind. In a way, this film is not unlike visiting a museum or gallery. Especially if each piece in an exhibition are closely related, it is easy to remember the feeling of the whole body of work before selecting pieces to commit to memory. Usually if a piece is particularly striking, there is a specific reason that sets it apart from the rest, and that reason could very well be more personal than technical. The gallery effect is strengthened moreso by the mannerisms of the performances and emphasis on visual beauty and aesthetic. A wall is built between the viewer and Barry's adventures, yet the challenge it creates in connecting with characters is deliberate, and begs the audience to use their eyes and mind in a fashion similar to viewing museum pieces.

In a sense, perhaps that is the point of the film's attention to detail and unusual equality in tone. It equalizes the characters allowing one to look at the narrative of Barry Lyndon himself as

objectively as possible, like watching a tragedy with the tears wiped off. As stated in the epilogue: “It was in the reign of George III that the aforesaid personages lived and quarreled; good or bad, handsome or ugly, rich or poor they are all equal now.”

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