



# Barry Lyndon

**Director:** Stanley Kubrick  
**Country:** UK  
**Date:** 1975

*A review Tim Robey for The Daily Telegraph:*

In the early Seventies, Stanley Kubrick was enjoying one of the most extraordinary positions the film industry has ever given a director/producer. His last three films – *Dr Strangelove* (1964), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) had been, in their different ways, global sensations, all three earning him Best Director nominations at the Oscars, and securing his reputation as a perfectionist auteur who loomed larger over his movies than any concept or star.



"Kubrick" was by now an imprimatur of a certain style, and one that his current studio, Warner Bros, was eager to bankroll wherever it might lead them. Production on his next project was shrouded in the utmost secrecy. The controversy provoked by *A Clockwork Orange*, especially in the UK, had heightened Kubrick's long-standing paranoia about the tabloid press, who were apt to characterise him in turn as a chilly, reclusive, borderline-psychopathic control freak.

All they were allowed to know was that his new film would star Ryan O'Neal – a seemingly un-Kubricky choice of leading man – and the former *Vogue* and *Time* magazine cover model Marisa Berenson. It was to be shot largely in Ireland. Even Berenson, when Kubrick first approached her, was told only that it was to be an 18th-century costume piece – she was instructed to keep out of the sun in the months before production, to achieve the period-specific pallor he required.

Never an originator of his own screenplays, Kubrick had in mind to adapt Thackeray's 1844 novel *The Luck of Barry Lyndon*, a satirical picaresque about the fortune-hunting of an Irish rogue and the position he secures for himself in the English aristocracy. For some years Kubrick had been wrestling with a project in the adjacent period, his long-gestating but abandoned film about Napoleon Bonaparte, and the switch to *Lyndon* gave him the chance to put some of that research to good use. In particular, he relished the technical challenges of shooting "in period", and was determined not to reproduce the set-bound, artificially lit look of other costume dramas from that time.



Almost every Kubrick film is a showcase for some major innovation in technique – in *2001* it was the revolutionary visual effects; in *The Shining*, his mastery of the Steadicam. On *Barry Lyndon*, Kubrick and cinematographer John Alcott set themselves the task of shooting as many sequences as possible without recourse to electrical light. For the many densely furnished interior scenes, this meant shooting by candlelight, a feat difficult enough in still photography, let alone with moving images to capture.

For months they tinkered with different combinations of lenses and film stock to make this possible, before getting hold of a number of super-fast 50mm lenses developed by Zeiss for use by Nasa in the Apollo moon landings. With their huge aperture and fixed focal length, mounting these was a nightmare, but they managed it, and so Kubrick's vision of recreating the huddle and glow of a pre-electrical age was miraculously put on screen.

The stately, painterly, often determinedly static quality of *Barry Lyndon* was at least in part dictated by this stylistic choice – lit only by candles, the actors in the many sequences of dining and gambling were under instruction to move as slowly as possible, to avoid underexposure. But it fits perfectly with Kubrick's gilded-cage aesthetic – the film is consciously a museum piece, its characters pinned to the frame like butterflies. For the stunningly beautiful exteriors, in which Ireland plays itself, England, and Prussia during the Seven Years' War, Kubrick and Alcott looked to the landscapes of Watteau and Gainsborough; the day-lit interiors owe a lot to Hogarth, with whom Thackeray had always been fascinated.

Alcott would win an Oscar for his amazing work, as would Ken Adam and Roy Walker for their scrupulously researched art direction, the often outlandish but totally convincing costumes of Milena Canonero, and Leonard Rosenman for his arrangements of Schubert and Handel, whose addictively funereal Sarabande in D Minor stomps ominously in the background of the various duels, like a march to the gallows.

The film was greeted, on its release, with dutiful admiration – but not love. Critics were itching to rail against the perceived coldness of Kubrick's style, the film's self-conscious artistry and slow pace. Audiences, on the whole, rather agreed – it was not the commercial success Warner Bros had been hoping for. An air of disappointment seemed to cloud the film's reputation for many years. It has sat dormant, gorgeous but remote, waiting patiently for re-evaluation; it is now back in cinemas thanks to a re-release by the BFI. Watching it today is a spellbinding experience on many levels, but it makes you realise that the most undervalued aspect of Kubrick's genius could well be his way with actors.



The supporting cast is a glittering procession of cameos, not from star names but from vital character players. Leonard Rossiter makes the first unforgettable impression as Captain Quin, the pompous and prickly suitor of Barry's cousin Nora (Gay Hamilton) – he raises snobbish indignation to an art form. The Irish stage actor Arthur O'Sullivan has just two scenes as the notorious highwayman Captain Feeney, but manages to be both disarmingly polite and terrifying.

Patrick Magee, who played the crippled writer in *A Clockwork Orange*, has a lovely, quizzical turn as the avuncular Chevalier du Balibari, an inveterate cheat at cards who takes Barry under his wing. And the list goes on, taking in the extraordinary Murray Melvin as a pursed-lipped reverend, Marie Kean as Barry's mother, Frank Middlemass as the splenetic Sir Charles Lyndon, Hardy Krüger as a Prussian captain, Stephen Berkoff as a priapic gambler, Leon Vitali as Barry's resentful stepson Lord Bullingdon, and Kubrick regular Philip Stone – he was Alex's father in *A Clockwork Orange*, and the dead caretaker Grady in *The Shining* – as the Lyndon family lawyer.

Subjected to the director's infamous regime of many, many arduous takes, their faces light up the film and the era, like a series of fine, carefully hung, oil portraits. Kubrick's cast may have been required to sit for these for days and weeks on end, but no one could say the results weren't worth it.

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