



barry lyndon

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FilmFour Review:

Barry Lyndon was a box office flop on its first release. Perhaps after the spacey future psychedelia of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and the teen malcontent of *A Clockwork Orange*, this painterly adaptation of an obscure picaresque novel was a leap too far for contemporary audiences. Nevertheless, it's a tour de force, with the director pushing the limits of film technology to realise his singular vision, developing new camera lenses to tell this 18th Century cautionary tale with only natural, available light.

Thus the story of Redmond Barry (O'Neal), a young Irishman condemned to a life of wandering after he shoots an English officer in a duel over the hand of his cousin, whom he loves. Soon down on his luck, he enlists in the British Army to fight the French, deserts posing as an officer, is forced to enlist in the brutal Prussian army, becomes manservant to a card-sharp chevalier, a professional gambler himself, and at the zenith of his luck, marries the beautiful, newly widowed Lady Lyndon (Berenson). He then uses her money to bankroll his attempt to become a bona fide member of the aristocracy.

It can't end happily, and it doesn't. Barry (now called Barry Lyndon) suffers a reversal of fortune as complete as it is deserved, though he's no worse than many of his contemporaries, aristocratic or otherwise, in a venal society preoccupied by manners but obsessed with money and power.

Only a director as skilled as Kubrick could keep us interested in a character as flawed as Lyndon. Needless to say, his story is endlessly compelling, and underpinned by scenes and locations of stunning beauty. The director studied contemporary portraiture and painting (Gainsborough, Hogarth, Stubbs) for his designs, and certainly no more accurate and sumptuous representation of 18th-century Europe exists in cinema. Like all Kubrick films, it's a curiosity, but *Barry Lyndon* contains more than enough beauty, artistry and hard-won truth to justify its conceits.



Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian:

Stanley Kubrick's 1975 film is now revived as the centrepiece of a new Kubrick retrospective at London's BFI Southbank. It is about the dizzying rise and fall of an Irish adventurer, played by Ryan O'Neal, in 18th-century Europe, and based on William Thackeray's 1844 novel *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* which was happily included in this newspaper's recent list of 1000 Novels Everyone Must Read. Viewed again more than 30 years on, this feels like a bracing antidote to the emollient, romantic idiom of bonnet-wearing, ribbons-and-bows costume drama that's the norm on screens both big and small in our Andrew Davies age. Getting something as bleak and pessimistic as this made now would be a struggle. It's a world away from Keira Knightley in *The Duchess*.

The movie is coolly measured and elegant, with a lively sense of what things cost - plenty of close-ups of cheques signed - and Kubrick fully participates in Thackeray's gleeful cynicism at the bloody anarchy of war and the fortunes to be dredged up from the killing fields. Barry is a penniless young man who rises in wealth and status, having frequented the field of battle and the gaming tables. But his success does not come from manly martial glory, nor even from the virile cunning of gambling, but from the feminine wile of making a good marriage: like Becky Sharp. For all the ostensible prettiness of what unfolds on screen - Kubrick makes conventional use of locations such as Castle Howard, and incidentally indulges his weakness for softcore eroticism - there is something uncompromisingly, even magnificently ugly about Barry's story, book-ended by two farcically cruel and nasty duel scenes. Those muzzy, candlelit interiors, habitually much praised, look to me less interesting than the exterior locations with their ragged crowd scenes and massed soldiery: lavish without being exactly spectacular or epic, and in fact almost intimate. Does this film show us what Kubrick's famously unrealised biopic of Napoleon would have looked like? Perhaps - and perhaps it demonstrated to him that the conventional epic form, which Napoleon's life would seem to demand, would not in fact have been successful. As for O'Neal's performance, his Irish accent is not pitch-perfect, but he certainly conveys his character's weakness and vanity, and the pathos of experiencing love once in his life, for an infant son, and even then only fully and angrily realising this love once the boy has been killed in a riding accident. *Barry Lyndon* is something to rediscover.