



Barry Lyndon: Aesthetics, Technique, and Direction in the Work of Stanley Kubrick

Barry Lyndon: Aesthetics, Technique and Direction in Stanley Kubrick's Work

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ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the aesthetic and technical construction of Stanley Kubrick's film *Barry Lyndon* (1975), highlighting the importance of photography, art direction, soundtrack, sound design, and cinematographic direction. The research emphasizes how John Alcock, the director of photography, transformed each shot into a composition reminiscent of 18th-century paintings, particularly through the innovative use of natural light and candlelight, made possible by the Zeiss 0.7F lens. The art direction, costumes, and sets, faithfully inspired by pictorial references, reinforce the atmosphere of historical realism sought by Kubrick. The soundtrack, composed primarily of classical music by Schubert and military marches, adds emotional layers that accompany the protagonist's transformation. Finally, the analysis discusses the rigor of Kubrick's method, both in his meticulous research and in his work with the cast and narration, highlighting how the film became a masterpiece marked by the symbiosis between art, technique and authorial vision.

Keywords: *Barry Lyndon*; Stanley Kubrick; cinematography; art direction; historical realism; soundtrack.

ABSTRACT: This article examines the aesthetics and technical construction of Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975), focusing on cinematography, art direction, soundtrack, sound design, and film direction. It highlights how cinematographer John Alcock transformed each frame into a composition reminiscent of 18th-century paintings, particularly through Kubrick's groundbreaking use of natural light and candlelight with the Zeiss 0.7F lens. The art direction, costumes, and settings, carefully inspired by pictorial references, reinforce the director's pursuit of historical realism. The soundtrack, largely composed of Schubert's pieces and military marches, adds emotional depth to the protagonist's journey. Finally, the article discusses Kubrick's rigorous method, both in his meticulous research and in his approach to directing actors and narrative structure, notably how the film became a masterpiece defined by the synthesis of art, technique, and auteur vision.

Keywords: *Barry Lyndon*; Stanley Kubrick; cinematography; art direction; historical realism; soundtrack.

Barry Lyndon (*Barry Lyndon*), by Stanley Kubrick, USA, 1975.

Cinematography



John Alcott's cinematography for "Barry Lyndon" almost completely conveys the impression that we're viewing a painting, that we're standing before works of art on display in museums. From the tightest to the widest angles, this sensation doesn't disappear when the photographer moves the camera, shifting from tighter shots to wider, long shots. With the exception of the photography when Barry engages in a physical fight with another soldier in the battalion, still in the first part of the film, the director opts for a handheld camera. This allows us to perceive the camera's movement more agilely and with slight tremors, allowing us, as viewers, to participate in the fight. The camera zooms in on the actors' bodies, and at this moment, sunlight permeates the scene and the photography. Unlike other moments, where the frames resemble paintings, this moment is alive. We perceive a lively, youthful Barry, but he hasn't yet become the film's title character; his character is still developing.



In the second part of the film, the director chooses to once again use a handheld camera, when Barry fights with the now grown Lord Bullingdon, at this moment it seems that Barry comes out of his lethargy and comes back to life. I believe these are the only moments where fixed shots transform into shots with a certain instability, which gives life to the character, and does not conflict with the fixed shots.



The entire film is marked by shots that remind us of paintings; if you remove a single frame, it would resemble a painting. However, we notice the changing light in the photography. At the beginning, when Barry is still young and romantic, we see brighter scenes, with the presence of the sun. Later, as the character changes, the light becomes darker, gray prevails, and time seems almost always closed in. With a few exceptions, such as in the second part of the film, at his son's birthday celebration, these scenes have more light, are clearer, and are moments of joy with the child, the only one for whom Barry has true affection.

The photography of "Barry Lyndon" is also a landmark in cinema, because Stanley Kubrick decided to film using candlelight as the main light source and with little artificial lighting, which made it difficult to capture images with the lenses of the time. However, as Kubrick was a tireless director who worked as long as necessary to make his films as good as possible, both technically and aesthetically, he conducted extensive research until he found a lens used by NASA, the 0.7 F Zeiss. A camera was adapted to fit the lens, which could achieve the visual impression he wanted in the film. According to Stanley Kubrick himself:

The lighting in historical films always seemed very fake to me. A room lit entirely by candles is very beautiful and completely different from what you usually see in cinemas. I ended up finding the 0.7 F Zeiss lens: it's the fastest one available. It had never been used before in a film. We had to adapt a camera to fix it. In the candlelit scenes, we used very dim lighting that came entirely from the ceiling, but the main source was always the candles. Similarly, for the daytime scenes, we had to light the rooms from the outside, as we didn't have much natural light, but the lighting always came from the windows. Unless you want to make an unrealistic film, you need to seek the basic conditions of realism in the lighting, the sets, and the costumes. (CIMENT, p. 139, 2014)

An example of this lighting, with candles as the main light source, is the scene where Barry is at the gaming table and sees Lady Lyndon for the first time. We notice that the lighting is concentrated in a few points of the frame, unlike the lighting seen in most films, which tries to brighten the entire frame. Because the main light sources are the candles, the frame is dark, but it corresponds to what it would have been like in a real scene, where people in the 18th century would have been gambling using only candlelight.



The setting would be truly dark, with only the table illuminated, as well as the people's faces. And the photographer zooms in to show the details of the characters' faces, their actions, and reactions. This sequence is done with almost no dialogue, with close-ups, with little lighting, but enough to provide the atmosphere that Kubrick wanted for his work.



Art Direction

As already expressed in the cinematography of the film "Barry Lyndon," we are constantly faced with a work of art. This conception is made jointly by the cinematography and art direction, which was very precise in its construction, from the locations and the beautifully constructed sets, to the costumes, props, hair and makeup, and props.

The locations and sets are real, buildings constructed in England, the country where Kubrick filmed "Barry Lyndon." I believe art made the necessary modifications so that the locations would have the exact setting Kubrick wanted to portray, all based on pictorial references chosen by the director. This is especially true because these buildings often have their interiors modified over the years, according to the generations that inhabit them and the aesthetic changes that occur over time. They are sometimes converted into public buildings, museums, and public visitation sites.

The script is based on William Makepeace Thackeray's 1844 book, "The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon," and the production design sought to portray the 18th century in the settings, a period determined by Kubrick. All the furniture, paintings, and props portray exactly what we see in works of art created during the same period, with their distinct rural and capital settings. In rural areas, we see villages, small towns, and battalions encamped in these areas, roaming the fields. The art distinguishes the nobles and citizens of the capitals from the rural dwellers. While the bourgeoisie and nobility display opulent, exaggerated, and rich clothing, makeup, hair, and settings, with their gilded furniture and objects, the rural dwellers are simpler, wearing costumes similar to those of the upper class, but with



Darker colors, plain fabrics, and minimal prints and details, as well as straw hats for women. The objects are simpler and more rustic, as are the locations, with fewer and simpler details.



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But when Barry Lyndon's character changes scenery, leaving the countryside for the urban centers, we also see his transformation, marked especially by his costume and hair. In the first part, we notice that his clothes and hair have a romantic tone, his loose, wavy hair, his light-colored clothes, which give us the impression of naiveté. When he escapes and joins the British army, he becomes just another soldier, where everyone dresses exactly the same. His difference continues with his hair, which still remains somewhat loose. However, this is the character's first turning point, his first change of character, leaving behind the naive and romantic Barry. He steals his uniform, his horse, and his doc



He wears the vestments of an officer and deserts the army. Even though he maintains his army uniform, we notice a change in the character's posture. His hair is now fully tied up, we see accessories that distinguish soldiers from officers, as well as the horse that helps give him an air of superiority. However, he is discovered and returns to being a soldier. Later, he undergoes another twist when he "deserts" for the second time, fleeing dressed as a Balibari. From this moment on, we see a Barry who dresses like the nobility and wants to be part of it. He begins to wear more detailed costumes, made of finer fabrics, with makeup that whitens his face and features beauty spots, and a wig.



However, Kubrick throws us a curveball when he says that all of his costumes weren't created specifically for the film, but were taken from paintings. I believe he did the same with the sets, that his entire design is a recreation of works of art, just as he faithfully portrays their colors, hence the feeling that the entire film was taken from paintings. There are moments in films when we have the exact impression that they are paintings, especially when the actors are framed practically motionless. The film's first scene is an example, as are the scenes with Lady Lyndon; she externalizes the apathy we see in many paintings, as well as the ethereal air.



According to Kubrick, (p. 139, 2014) to make "Barry Lyndon" he tore apart all the art books that existed at the time to classify the painting reproductions. As for the costumes, they are copied from paintings. None of them were created today: it would be foolish to ask a designer to interpret the 18th century based on her school memories or paintings, because no one can have enough intuition to design clothes from another era—few people have the intuition to design costumes from their own era! But it was a lot of fun gathering information. (CIMENT, p. 139, 2014)

This statement by Kubrick gives us the certainty of how he acted in his films, with almost, if not, total control over all areas of his work, but this does not make him a tyrant, as many imagine and say to this day, but it gives us the impression of an artist extremely concerned and committed to his creative process and to the realization of his work, so that it was very well planned and constructed.

Soundtrack and Sound Design

"Barry Lyndon" has a striking and excellent soundtrack that leaves a lasting impression on viewers, even if they've only seen the film once.

After "2001: A Space Odyssey," Kubrick decided to no longer use original scores in his films, but rather classical music. He made this decision because, for him, commissioning an original score is a huge gamble, and according to him, composers can't compete with the great musicians of the past.

And in "Barry Lyndon" he uses, in addition to the military marches that mark the army's presence on stage, music composed by Schubert.

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In the first part of the film, a soundtrack becomes striking, it is the music that plays when Barry is still a romantic character and is in love with his cousin, it sets the romantic and seductive tone of this first sequence of the film, but little by little it unfolds as the character moves on, hindering his character.

According to Stanley Kubrick, the choice of Schubert only came about during editing, because early in production, he wanted to use music exclusively from the 18th century. He listened to everything he had in his house containing music from this period, but found nothing he liked. Unfortunately, we found no passion in her, nothing that even remotely could evoke a theme of love, nothing



in 18th-century music, there's the tragic feeling of Schubert's Trio. I ended up cheating by a few years when I chose a piece written around 1814. While not completely romantic, it does, however, have something of a tragic romance. (CIMENT, p. 138, 2014)

However, Kubrick makes it clear that when it comes to soundtracks, there is no rule that says that only music from the "x" century can be included in the work, when it portrays that period.

In the second part of the film, we hear another song that marks his romance and marriage with Lady Lyndon—another romantic track, but one with a certain sadness. This characterizes this second part of the film, in which Barry gets what he wants: money, because he marries for money's sake, but which leads to his ruin as he pursues a status he didn't inherit.

Regarding the sound design, I find it smooth and subtle. The sounds and noises don't leap off the screen; they serve to create the environment, contributing to the work's ambiance. We hear sounds of the countryside when the characters are in rural areas, forest sounds, bird sounds, and animal sounds. We hear the murmurings at lunch and dinner tables, among other sounds.

Just as it gives due importance when that sound needs to stand out in scenes, as in all duels, where gunshot sounds are extremely important, as well as in battle scenes, with gunshots, explosions, etc., and in the scene where Barry's son enters the room putting on his older brother's shoes and the sound made by the shoes interferes with his mother, Lady Lyndon, repairing them. All the sounds and noises are very well placed and utilized without being exhausted or overly so, especially for two reasons: first, because Kubrick uses extensive soundtracks in the work, which give it rhythm, sensations, and movement, and when he chooses to use music, he forgoes noise and sounds in the scene. And the second reason is that Kubrick doesn't use many close-ups in scenes, like most American films, which use them excessively, and this calls for a more striking sound design, with sound details that would previously have been part of the scene, but now need to be shown very clearly.

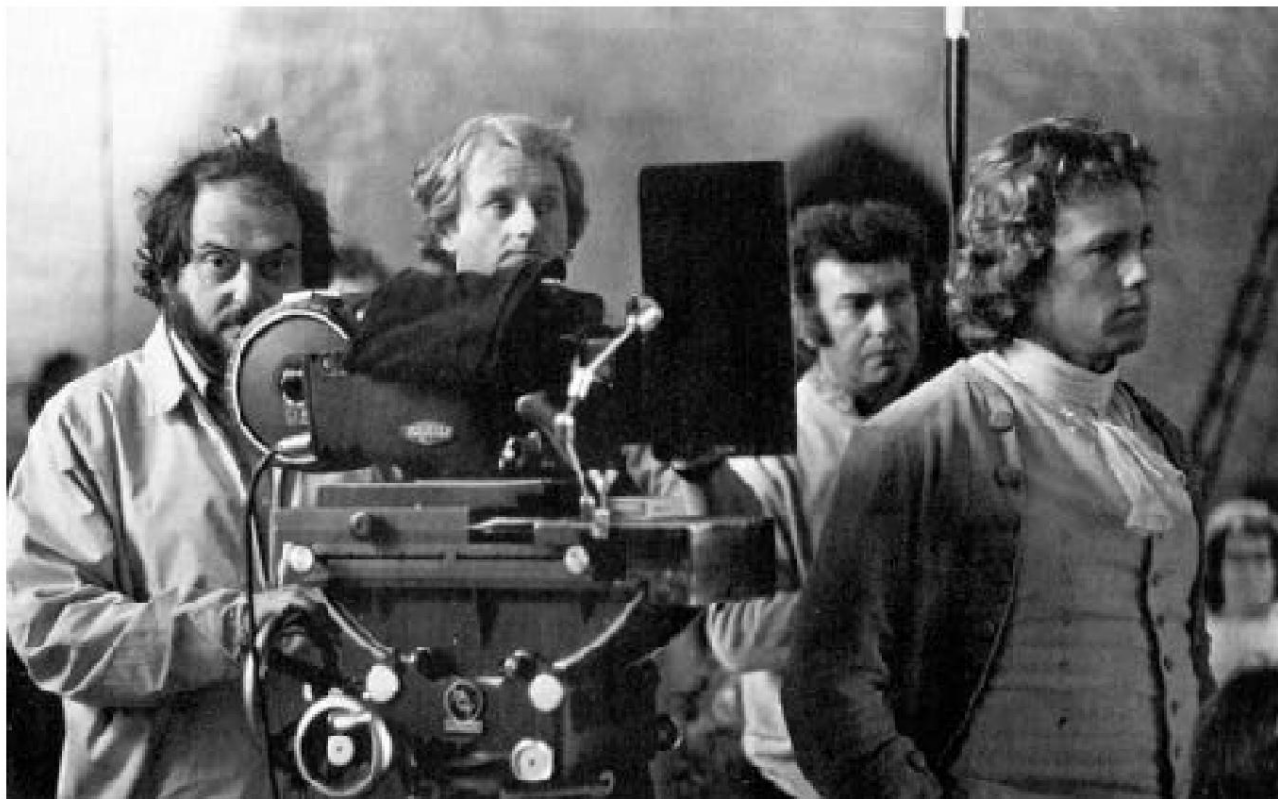
He opts for more open shots, joint shots that show much more of the aesthetic, artistic and technical care and refinement he puts into his work, drawing attention to the whole.

Film Direction and Casting Direction

According to Kubrick himself, he spent a year researching, poring over every art book available at the time, searching for the characteristics and references he wanted to incorporate into "Barry Lyndon." He sought to give the work a realistic feel; he didn't want to make a farcical work that viewers would perceive as a mere staging. His goal was to be as close to known reality as possible, so his sets, locations, costumes, hair, makeup, props, color palettes, and photography were taken from art books, paintings, and pictures. Kubrick, as he himself said, tore up all the art books as a way to exemplify what he wanted in his work. Because, when watching the film, the viewer would be sure that everything that was happening in front of him, on the cinema screen, was something familiar to him, that he would recognize the costumes, the music, the stories, the places, and the colors, that they would not be invented, implausible things.

Kubrick was so meticulous in his research that he refused to compromise even with light, since light is cinema. He wanted realistic lighting, not one that filled the screen and brightened the entire frame, but one that was as close as possible to the lighting of the 18th century, candlelight. And he wanted them as the main light source, and so he did, until he discovered a lens used by NASA and brought it to the cinematography of his film. Having to adapt a camera to use it. And so we see a work of art.

with little artificial lighting, candlelight, which portrays and prints on the screen only what would be seen in the real situation, and such a challenge undertaken by him and his team was recognized, as the work was widely awarded for its photography, art direction, costumes, as well as cinematographic direction, soundtrack and as best film, in addition to its wide nominations.



Kubrick may seem like a "executioner" type of director, but I believe he was more of a hard-line director, who controlled every department, told all his crew chiefs exactly what he wanted, and provided them with all his research. Even though cinema is a collective art, there is one person—the director—who decides the entirety of the film, the film as a whole. He is the one who has the complete vision of the work, the language, the aesthetics, the references that will be imprinted in the film, because he is the one responsible for the work, because if something doesn't work out or receives criticism, the person to remember is the director.

Regarding the decision to include commentary, Kubrick used it as a way to provide information, avoid exposition scenes, and include data, because there were many events in the book that could not fit into a three-hour film. Just as he uses commentary to anticipate the events that will be shown on screen, in Kubrick's view, what matters is not what will happen, but how it will happen, how it will be shown.

Just as he created passages and replaced scenes he considered better or more economical, which, because it's an adapted screenplay, doesn't necessarily have to be faithful to the book, sets the tone Kubrick wants to convey. Two examples are the scenes of the two officers on the lake talking, which aren't in the book, as well as the duel between Barry and Lord Bullingdon.

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According to Kubrick:

The film's preparation lasted a year before the actual shooting. Cinema must appear realistic, since its starting point is always to make one believe in the story it tells. And it is also another kind of pleasure: visual beauty and the recreation of an era. In a historical film, we try to do everything to give the impression of filming in natural settings, today. (CIMENT, p. 139, 2014)

Stanley Kubrick's entire cinematographic direction had the main objective of making the film as close as possible to what was real, as previously mentioned, making the viewers perceive it



as a family and interact with the work, not giving the direct impression that it was a fantasy, that everything had been invented, but that it was based on extensive and exhaustive research, which would take the viewer on an immersion into the world of Barry Lyndon for 3 hours, while the lights were off.



Regarding casting, there is a fable that Kubrick drove the actors in his films to exhaustion. so, reshooting scenes and takes countless times until he got what he wanted from them. We don't know how much of this is true, but we do know that making a Stanley Kubrick film is a turning point and a turning point in careers. We know, for example, that in the rape scene in "A Clockwork Orange," Kubrick wasn't getting what he wanted and decided to let the lead actor do the scene as he pleased. He started singing "Singing in the Rain" while acting, and Kubrick realized that was the scene he wanted, and it's in the film. Just as during the filming of "The Shining," Kubrick didn't show the film to the child actor who played Jack Nicholson's character's son, and he also filmed with him separately so he wouldn't be afraid. This is a form of concern not only for the work, but for the actor. So, to simply say that he is an executioner, I believe, is not correct. I consider that with some actors he tried in every way to get what he wanted, but with others he allowed them to improvise during rehearsals and if that sounded good to him, it would be included in the film.

The actors in "Barry Lyndon" strike the right tone Kubrick desired, especially when there's no dialogue and only their expressions are captured on camera, as in the poster game scene where Barry tries to win over Lady Lyndon. There's no dialogue between them, but we perceive the entire scene through the behavior of both characters, their looks, gestures, and expressions. It also allows for exaggeration in some characters when convenient, as in the case of Lord Bullingdon, for example.

or apathy in the case of Lady Lyndon.

According to Kubrick, with the actors he first says:

of the character in general, then the scene that will be shot and the character's attitude in that scene, which sometimes differs from the overall storyline. Then comes the terrifying moment of the first rehearsal at the location where we're going to film. It's always a surprise. You have to modify the dialogue, abandon some ideas, and look for others. The filming itself is never a problem. The difficult part is getting the scene, during rehearsals, to the point we want. (CIMENT, p. 140, 2014)

Finally, for Kubrick (p. 140, 2014) the only problem one can have with actors is “when he is literally incapable of doing something and looking for excuses, which have nothing to do with his incapacity, not to do it.

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