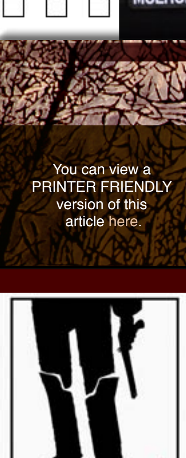

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Vox ex machinas: Rethinking the Narrator in BARRY LYNDON

by **Chris Meir**

An evaluation of Barry Lyndon's narrator in terms of unreliability and genre revision. Key characteristics of the narrator in Thackeray's source novel are described and their importance explained. Kubrick's use of voice-over is compared to the source text's in terms of adaptation. The paper concludes that the film's narrator preserves the key characteristics of the source while engaging in a revision of the Historical film genre that parallels Thackeray's revision of the picaresque tradition.

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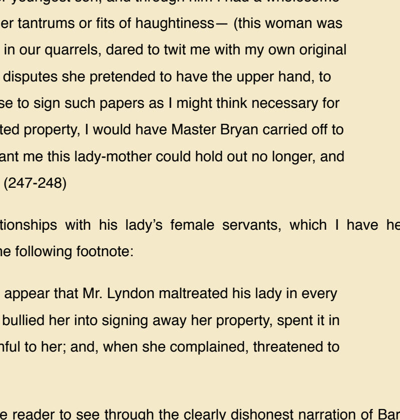
For many, BARRY LYNDON (1975) is one of Stanley Kubrick's greatest artistic achievements, but in the period following LOLITA (1962) it was also his worst commercial failure. Not only did the film perform poorly at the box office, but at the time of its release, it also received a very cool reception from the critical community at large. Pauline Kael, for instance, said:

> If you were to cut the jokes and cheerfulness out of the film TOM JONES and run it in slow motion, you'd have something very close to BARRY LYNDON. Kubrick has taken a quick-witted story, full of vaudeville turns…and he's controlled it so meticulously that he's drained the blood out of it. The movie isn't quite the rise and fall of a flamboyant rakehell, because Kubrick doesn't believe in running around. (quoted in Miller 232)

As ill-informed as it is, Kael's position reveals the extent to which genre and expectation figure into the typical film-goer's experience, and indicates how much Kubrick's film disappointed these expectations. For some critics, the displeasure in what was thought to be present in this film was exceeded, and may have been partly determined, by the disappointment at what was in fact missing: traditional treatment of traditional materials, that is to say, the immemorial salvation at the chiming of generic clichés. (Spiegel 203)

Instead of "chiming" clichés, Kubrick made a film that intentionally defied convention. This paper will be an examination of just how Kubrick carried out this project of genre revision by examining one specific device in the film: the third-person narrator. BARRY LYNDON's narrator is a very complex character in the film that deserves a much fuller and nuanced treatment than has heretofore been offered. To accomplish this, I will trace the development of the film's narrator from its source in Thackeray's novel, a novel that is quite generically revisionist in its own right. In adapting *The Luck of Barry Lyndon*, Kubrick created a film which, despite all the semantic differences from its source, closely parallels the iconoclastic thrust of its literary progenitor.



Though Kael's claim that Kubrick "drained the blood" out of his source is obviously an unfair exaggeration, there can be no denying that he did in fact mute much of the novel's roaring tone. Scenes of violence and tumult, such as young Redmond's "toast" to Captain Quin, are rendered in a manner that, to put it mildly, is notably subdued in the film. Even a cursory glance at the corresponding scene in Kubrick's film demonstrates that it distills and ritualizes the events in representing them. Likewise, characters are altered in such a way that parallels this general alteration in tone. Ryan O'Neal's Barry, for instance, rarely displays any visible emotion, and moreover hardly ever speaks. This stands in marked contrast to his all too violent and verbose counterpart in the novel. Also, in place of the tempestuous Lady Lyndon of Thackeray's novel we have Marisa Berenson's tragic heroine, whom one critic has quite astutely compared to Maria Falconetti's Joan of Arc. These differences in enunciation and character aside, the most audacious change that Kubrick makes in his film is the one that we will be concerned with for the rest of this analysis, this being the change that he makes in narrative voice.

The Novel's Narrator

The most marked difference between the novel and the film is that the former is told from a first-person narrator's point of view. Thackeray has Barry tell his own story in the form of a memoir dictated to his mother while in Fleet's prison for debtors in 1811 while slowly dying from alcohol-related maladies. Barry's narrative voice in the novel is one that is full of obvious lies and bragging, with Thackeray's imaginary editor, George Fitz-Boodle, intervening at several junctures to drive home the point of Barry's dishonesty. We can witness this technique in the following passage, where Barry describes his treatment of Lady Lyndon during their marriage:

> [Lady Lyndon] was luckily very fond of her youngest son, and through him I had a wholesome and effectual hold of her; for if in any of her tantrums or fits of haughtiness— (this woman was intolerably proud; and repeatedly, at first, in our quarrels, dared to twit me with my own original poverty and low birth) — if, I say, in our disputes she pretended to have the upper hand, to assert her authority against mine, to refuse to sign such papers as I might think necessary for the distribution of our large and complicated property, I would have Master Bryan carried off to Chiswick for a couple of days; and I warrant me this lady-mother could hold out no longer, and would agree to anything I could propose. (247-248)

After some digression on Barry's dubious relationships with his lady's female servants, which I have here omitted, the editor, Fitz-Boodle, interposes with the following footnote:

> From these curious confessions, it would appear that Mr. Lyndon maltreated his lady in every possible way; that he denied her society, bullied her into signing away her property, spent it in gambling and taverns, was openly unfaithful to her; and, when she complained, threatened to remove her children from her. (248)

The "trick" here in Thackeray's novel, allowing the reader to see through the clearly dishonest narration of Barry, is an extremely crude one. It is not difficult at any point, including this one, to see that Barry is not accurately representing the facts of his life, and that his account has a darker truth embedded in it. The editor serves to further point out the obvious. As Thomas Allen Nelson, speaking of the novel, points out, "Barry's verbal posturings become as obvious as they are trite, so that one soon learns to measure what he says against what Thackeray *means*" (167-168, emphasis in original). Thackeray had a very specific intent with this excessively unreliable narrator, and to articulate this intent we must examine *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* as a genre parody.

The Luck of Barry Lyndon is a satirical version of the picaresque, a genre of fiction that came into high popularity, along with the novel, in the eighteenth century. We can all perhaps list the salient features of tales like Fielding's *Tom Jones* intuitively: an innocent hero, typically without parents but always of an apparently low birth, sets out on numerous adventures where through his own bravery and wits he rises in wealth and social rank, finding true love and living happily ever after. The typical picaresque does not feature a first-person narrator like Thackeray's, but instead features a partially ironical third-person narrator much like the one that Kubrick provides in the film version of the tale. In employing the first-person narrator (most likely borrowed from the satires of Jon Swift [Stephenson 253]), Thackeray has every intention of deflating the idyllic picaresque paradigm.

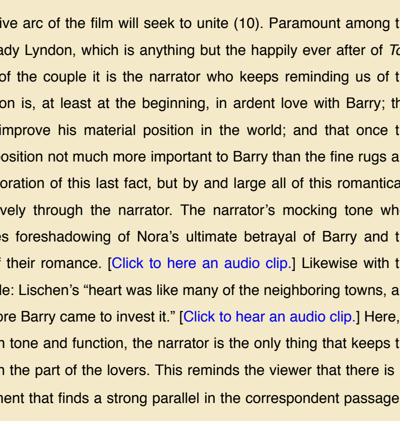
Thackeray based his story on the real life history of the then widely known and notorious criminal John Bowes. The fact that Thackeray chose such an infamous criminal for his ostensibly picaresque tale does much to illuminate his intentions with the novel. To truly appreciate the implications of such a choice of models, a modern reader may imagine a Danielle Steele-type family saga modeled on the life of Lizzie Borden. Instead of giving us the low-born innocent of *Tom Jones*, we get instead what the Victorian 'bounder': "one who seeks to overleap the settled and venerable bounds of class" (Stephenson 252), and a vicious, brutal (and worst of all, Irish!) one at that. The employment of the Swiftian satirical narrator has the effect then of keeping "the fatuous arrogance of [Barry] always before the reader" (Feldmann 197). The goal here is to confront a reader who would be expecting a garrulous, gallivanting hero with an obnoxious criminal who is, on top of all this, intent on deceiving his readership into thinking that he is the iconic hero to whom they have become accustomed in adventure novels.

The Film's Narrator

In turning to the film's narrator, we find ourselves with two major critical readings of the device which are from satisfying in their conclusions. Mark Crispin Miller outspokenly characterizes BARRY LYNDON's narrator as an unreliable one. According to Miller, the lack of overlap between image and commentary indicates a dearth of objective reliability. While examining scenes such as Barry's departure from Lischen and those depicting Barry's treatment of Lady Lyndon, Miller continually harps on the fact that "we never see any evidence" to support the narrator's claims, claims which he describes as "authoritative libel that passes for insight" (236). The problems with this analysis are legion, beginning with Miller's assumption that lack of overlap and redundancy indicates unreliability. While it is true that in Miller's examples we don't see evidence to support the narrator's contentions, we also do not see anything that disputes them. These details are left somewhat ambiguous in the film, but this does not necessarily mean that the narration is simply "structuralized slander" (236). In fact several critics point to the "problem" of the film's eschewal of visual and aural redundancy as one of its strengths: it indicates narrative economy. All these points and more are raised by Sarah Kozloff in her *Invisible Storytellers*, wherein she systematically discredits these assertions of unreliability. Unfortunately, this acute diagnosis of the shortcomings of Miller's argument leads Kozloff to conclude that the voice-over should be equated with "Thackeray," as if Kubrick had meant to embody the novelist in this character (123). While one could argue that Thackerayan aristocratic sensibilities are presented and perhaps being lampooned in the voice-over narrator (Stephenson and Falsetto suggest such an understanding), summarily naming the character "Thackeray" is an unwise characterization. The sensibility is there in the narrator, with his superior and ironic tone, but it is unlikely that many audiences would come to the film with an inherent understanding of what "Thackeray" signifies. While authors like Shakespeare or Dickens have taken on a certain popular persona, Thackeray remains somewhat obscure to the vast majority of the film-going public. Even specialists in the field of cinema must do some research before Kozloff's assertion can begin to make sense. Her mistake is a productive one, however. Naming the voice-over "Thackeray" is a critical felix culpa which points us to the popular conception of historical fiction that to some degree underlies this understanding of the narrator. To return to Miller for one moment though, we must point out the conclusion that Miller draws from his theory of the "unreliable nattator", a conclusion indicated by his essay's title, "Kubrick's Anti-Reading of *The Luck of Barry Lyndon*", is that Kubrick has made a film which substantially deviates from the spirit of its source, in large part through its unreliable narrator. But when BARRY LYNDON is examined along the lines of cinematic genre, we immediately see where the thesis fails.

"As a 'costume romance' of the eighteenth century, BARRY LYNDON is neither *Tom Jones* nor *Scaramouche*" (Spiegel 203), and one of the things that sets the film apart is its unconventional narrator. The semantic elements of the historical film are, like those of most popular genres, so common that most viewers can list them. These include, but are not limited to, a diegetic time set in the historical past, ornate costumes and sets designed with historical authenticity in mind, characters caught up in historical forces, typically wars or revolutions of some sort, and of course love and happiness. Most historical films must include some sort of narration to explain the film's setting as part of an overall project of facilitating spectator involvement in the fiction; this device usually takes the form of title cards introducing the year and geographical setting of the film, or more overt voice-over narrators like the first-person narrator in DANCES WITH WOLVES (Costner, 1990) or the third-person narrator in the film version of TOM JONES (Tony Richardson, 1963). BARRY LYNDON does in fact exhibit many of these semantic elements, but of course, Kubrick's arrangement and employment of these elements and his generic syntax is what distinguishes the film from many others.

The Historical Film

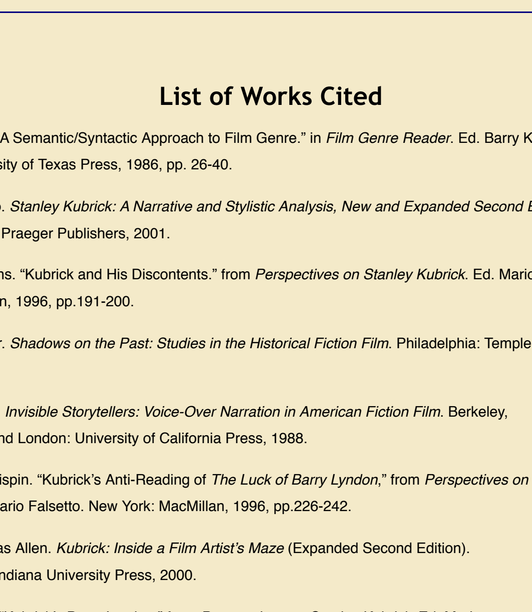


Leger Grindon, in his study *Shadows of the Past*, describes the two most common structures for the historical fiction film to take: that of romance, and that of historical spectacle. These forms, or syntaxes, are distinct from one and other but also often overlap, with the historical spectacle usually being the backdrop against which the romance takes place. Such is the case in BARRY LYNDON. According to Grindon's model, the romance will feature two lovers whom the narrative arc of the film will seek to unite (10). Paramount among the film's romances of course is that of Barry and Lady Lyndon, which is anything but the happily ever after of *Tom Jones*. Throughout the courtship and marriage of the couple it is the narrator who keeps reminding us of the cynical facts of the relationship: that Lady Lyndon is, at least at the beginning, in ardent love with Barry; that Barry sees the romance as an opportunity to improve his material position in the world; and that once the marriage is realized, "Lady Lyndon [takes] on a position not much more important to Barry than the fine rugs and furniture" in his life. There is some visual corroboration of this last fact, but by and large all of this romantically deflating information is conveyed to us exclusively through the narrator. The narrator's mocking tone when describing Barry's infatuation with Nora provides foreshadowing of Nora's ultimate betrayal of Barry and the marriage of convenience that takes the place of their romance. [Click to here an audio clip.] Likewise with the cynical facts that counterpoint the Lischen episode: Lischen's "heart was like many of the neighboring towns, and had been stormed and occupied many times before Barry came to invest it." [Click to hear an audio clip.] Here, in a moment that mirrors the episode in the novel in tone and function, the narrator is the only thing that keeps the viewer from sensing any feeling of tenderness on the part of the lovers. This reminds the viewer that there is no romance in the world of BARRY LYNDON, a sentiment that finds a strong parallel in the correspondent passage in Thackeray's novel.

The other major form present in the historical film, according to Grindon is that which is centered around the spectacle of history. "The spectacle emphasizes the extrapersonal forces (social, economic, geographic, and so forth) bearing on the historical drama" (15). This is usually seen in terms of the set designs and costumes, or the historical period in general featuring wars, great personages or momentous events. BARRY LYNDON is a film rife with historical spectacle: we have George III, the Seven Years' War as seen from the British and Prussian sides, aristocratic duels that were so much a custom of the eighteenth century, and even the French Revolution which is obliquely referred to in the date (1789) on the annuity bill that Lady Lyndon signs at the end of the film. But we again see the disparity between the traditional deployment of the spectacle in historical fiction films as described by Grindon, and their specific employment in BARRY LYNDON. Once again our humble narrator has no small role in aiding this deployment. The narrator debunks the glorious historical war, first by purposely acting as an imperfect historian: "It would take a great philosopher to explain the causes of the Seven Years' War in which Barry's regiment was now involved, suffice it to say that England and Prussia were on one side while France was on the other." Not only is this the only information that we need to know to understand the film's plot, but it also shows the mythology of history, as the causes of wars that one learns in schools don't really affect those involved in them. The narrator is also intent on undercutting any romantic notions about actually fighting in a war: "It is all well and good to dream of great battles, but to see war up close is a whole other thing" and later characterizing the business of the great men of history as carried out by "thieves, pickpockets, and robbers." We meet the film's most illustrious historical personage, George III, only after the narrator has described how Barry has gone about bribing the king's closest councillors. Time and time again, the narrator speaks as if to keep the viewer from any naive ideals they may have harbored about the romance and spectacle of history. In this way the voice-over serves to defy the viewer's expectations and instead rework generic convention in a way that makes the viewer uncomfortable with its historico-aesthetic assumptions that have long been enforced by escapist historical fiction.

In his final comment on the historical film genre, Grindon remarks of the typical genre film, with its blending of romance and historical spectacle, that its "historical perspective strives to expand and generalize [the characters'] significance" (223). BARRY LYNDON, with its final title card saying "It was in the reign of George III that these personages lived and quarreled, they are all equal now," undercuts this convention most of all.

Kubrick's reading of Thackeray is clearly anything but an "anti-reading." In its assault on comforting forms of escapist fiction, BARRY LYNDON demonstrates a spiritual affinity with its literary predecessor, and up to now, has met with a similar fate. With all these challenges to viewers to rethink their conceptions of history and its fictional representation in the genre film and picaresque novels, it is no surprise that neither version of BARRY LYNDON was terribly popular. Yet, they both remain very important works of iconoclastic art.



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