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# *Making Time in Stanley Kubrick's* Barry Lyndon*: Art History and Empire.* Maria Pramaggiore. Bloomsbury Academic, 2015 (216 pages).

Gillian McIver

As I was beginning to read Maria Pramaggiore's exploration of temporality in Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975), I was fortunate enough to be able to attend a 35mm screening of the film at the cinema. As Pramaggiore points out throughout her book, the film's lengthy duration, and the way in which it is structured with inter-titles and an intermission, makes the cinematic viewing space very different to that of the DVD or home theatre. At the same time, Kubrick's treatment of time in the film, which is explored in numerous ways throughout Pramaggiore's book, makes *Barry Lyndon* a rediscovery, even a "secret masterpiece" (Graham-Dixon), especially for the digital generation who have their own attitudes towards interruptions, repetitions and narrativity.

*Making Time in Stanley Kubrick's* Barry Lyndon*: Art History and Empire* is not only a welcome addition to the already bountiful field of Kubrick studies; it is also the sole monograph specifically addressing *Barry Lyndon*. The film, an adaptation of the 1844 novel by William Makepeace Thackeray, is set during the Seven Years War (1756–1763), and follows the fortunes of Redmond Barry (Ryan O'Neal), an impoverished member of the Irish gentry, as he attempts to become a member of the English aristocracy. By focusing on a single film, Pramaggiore—coauthor of *Film: A Critical Introduction* and author of a monograph on Irish director Neil Jordan—is able to examine aspects of *Barry Lyndon* in depth, alongside Kubrick's decision-making processes in writing, directing and editing the film, particularly in relation to the film's structure. As well as being a deep analysis of a specific film, the book is also a wide-ranging study of ideas around temporality in cinema. The author states from the outset that she became interested in how the film "produces temporality" and sought to examine the way that "emotions and critical judgements are intertwined in that process as the creation of aesthetic time" (9). Furthermore, through close reading of the film's mise en scène, and unpicking key moments from both the novel and the film, Pramaggiore also addresses issues regarding the relations between painting, music and cinema, Irishness as a colonial cultural construct in film, and the process of literary adaptation into cinema.

The book examines Kubrick's ideas of high culture as an agent of civilisation—or a civilising influence—with reference to the use of music, painting, costume, decor and other aspects of the elite in the film. If "high culture" is itself temporal, being in part about claiming a kind of connection to the past, through art and tradition, then the way that high culture is manifested in the film—the sumptuous beauty of the great homes, paintings and

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dress of the aristocracy—is constantly undercut by the squalor of the events on screen. In the Introduction, Pramaggiore reminds the reader of Kubrick's famous quote that "Hitler loved good music and many top Nazis were cultured and sophisticated men, but it didn't do them, or anyone else, much good" (2). The high culture that Redmond Barry (Lyndon) surrounds himself with, demonstrated by paintings, objets d'art and concerts, once he has attained marriage to a member of the aristocracy, Lady Lyndon (Marisa Berenson), does not do to him, or anyone else, much good. This, as Kubrick demonstrates, and as Pramaggiore unpacks chapter by chapter, is because the ruling class of society that builds, commissions, endows and structures the high culture is itself imperial, colonial and vicious: "The film's most apparent conceit is that social relations and aesthetics are mutually determinative, an idea addressed in part through the film's emphasis on the relationship between eighteenth-century British painting and colonial empire" (17).

The first chapter examines Kubrick's ongoing interest in temporality, both throughout his oeuvre, and within the preparations for *Barry Lyndon*. Pramaggiore notes that the genesis of the project may have been influenced by Kubrick's period of research into making a film about Napoleon, as it is detailed by Alison Castle's *Stanley Kubrick's* Napoleon*: The Greatest Movie Never Made*. The filmmaker became interested in the idea of shooting a historical film, but eventually turned to Thackeray's novel instead. In this regard, Pramaggiore explores Kubrick's ideas about history, period drama, experiential time and the "boredom" of the viewer—Pramaggiore notes indeed that some critics found the film boring (20). The chapter proposes that *Barry Lyndon* exemplifies cinema's ability to manipulate time through interruption, suture and voiceover, with reference to thinkers as diverse as Sergei Eisenstein, Maya Deren, Gilles Deleuze and Fredric Jameson. Pramaggiore challenges the way "Jameson relegates the film to the status of an empty imitation, a technically proficient copy" by arguing instead that the film's "surface beauty and its obsolescence" are not simply decorative pastiche, but are "historical artefacts themselves" and that meaning is generated precisely through the element of parody, thus ironically exposing "the politics underlying practices of visual culture within modernity" (21). The author, then, invokes Deren's notion of "slow motion" as a "conceptual process" to understand the "temporal experience of Kubrick's film"; that is, by examining the film's apparent awareness of time and the awareness it awakens in the viewer, to which Deren refers as "the known pulse of the identified action" (43). Deleuze's space-time perspective, elucidated in his *Cinema 2*, is offered here as a valuable way of looking at *Barry Lyndon*, because to Deleuze space-time emerges from "specific historical aesthetic, and cultural situations" (40)—situations that Pramaggiore addresses in different ways in the subsequent chapters. Noting Kubrick's own interest in Eisenstein, she draws attention to the Russian's observations on the psychology of art in which "films develop a prescription of sensuous thought in elements of the structure of form", creating a retrogression to a "primitive" experience where "emotionality and cognition are not split" (44). Pramaggiore proposes that such images, those that unify the sensuous and the conscious, are precisely the ones that Kubrick achieves in Barry Lyndon (45).

Chapter 2 discusses the adaptation of Thackeray's novel*, The Luck of Barry Lyndon: A Romance of the Last Century*, which was itself a version of an earlier serialised story, based on a composite of several real-life sources. Pramaggiore's investigation is a valuable contribution to adaptation studies as she examines not only the process of adapting from the novel to the screen, but also the novelist–filmmaker relationship across time, medium and place. Uncovering a number of almost eerie parallels between Thackeray and Kubrick, Pramaggiore, fully aware that she is speculating, suggests that Kubrick developed "an interest in, and respect for, the work of Thackeray, possibly because he recognized common themes

and a similar approach to form" in the author's work (67). She considers the film a "tale of two auteurs", and compares Kubrick's singularity to Thackeray's—not least, both auteurs' fondness for ambivalent protagonists in their respective oeuvres.

The third chapter, "Paternal Crisis, or: History as Succession", turns to the question of sequentiality, initially raised in the first chapter, and addresses it in more depth by looking at the filmic sequences in *Barry Lyndon*, alongside the notion of succession, which, according to the author, is both the principal theme of the film and a major structuring device. The "succession" of Redmond Barry to a patrimony of precisely nothing begins the film, and the succession of Lord Bullingdon (Leon Vitali), son of Lady Lyndon, to his lavish patrimony—and Barry's ensuing banishment—concludes it. Barry, without fortune or father, goes through a series of experiences in which he finds and loses temporary father figures as he seeks to better his position. As well as examining succession in the film, the chapter addresses visual and narrative form in the film's discourse on it. This section also explores Barry's "ascent, failure and fall" as a "gender marked process" through an exploration of the use of the long take and the long shot (103). A complex and multi-layered character, Barry is at once a fatherless boy searching for his patrimony, a libertine, a violent hothead, a doting father, a military hero and an amoral opportunist.

Colonialism, Empire and the "Irishness" of *Barry Lyndon* are examined in Chapter Four, both in terms of the production history of the film and its characters. *Barry Lyndon*, not unlike Kubrick's previous *Paths of Glory* (1957) and later *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), has within it a "scathing critique" of global military adventure, represented in this film by the Seven Years War (16). However, it is the Anglo-Irish relationship that Pramaggiore examines as *Barry Lyndon*'s colonial "baggage". The cultural connotations of Irishness, as exemplified in the Irish characters of the faux Chevalier (Patrick Magee), Captain Feeny (Arthur O'Sullivan), the highwayman, and Barry himself, play to existing stereotypes of the Irishman as conman and crook within English culture. Both book and film, she suggests, retrace "an embodied history of Irish postcolonial or racial masculine melancholy", but in the film, with its "1970s star text of Ryan O'Neal as both lover-boy and hothead [Kubrick] re-animates the stereotype of the violently emotional Irishman" (136). Pramaggiore suggests that the ambiguous ending of the film (as opposed to the novel) holds within it the possibility of an undocumented and melancholic Odyssean return of Redmond Barry to Ireland. In this chapter, Pramaggiore also recounts the Irish production history of the film (which was largely shot in Ireland, and features at least one of the great houses of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy) and discusses the film—which is not considered an Irish production—in relation to the emergence of an Irish film industry during the 1970s. Finally, the author examines the colonialism of the Anglo-Irish relationship, in the narrative itself and in the relationship between British and Irish film industries. She asserts that the film's "tonal despondency", permeated by loss and grief, has "everything to do with the same historical complexities related to national identity and imperialism that made the production of Barry Lyndon an odyssey and an ordeal", citing, among other things, IRA activity in Ireland during the filming (129). Unavoidably and unequivocally, "Ireland's history as a British colony" lies at the centre of both the film's production history and its plot, metaphorically and literally (129).

Chapter Five, "The Rhythm and the Rest: Painting, Cinema, Stillness", addresses the way in which the film relates to other art forms, particularly painting and music. Drawing her argument to an extent on a 2014 unpublished thesis, "*Barry Lyndon*, Paintings and the Archive: Moving Images, Still Life", by Tatjana Ljujic, Pramaggiore opens a valuable discussion of anachronism in the period film. Anachronism in *Barry Lyndon* happens, and

"contributes to the confounding of linear time", through music (144). Although to the viewer the film score may feel sufficiently historically accurate, several of the key musical works in the production—such as Schubert's "Piano Trio in E Flat" (1827)—were composed much later than the events depicted in the film, thus combining different period aesthetics and histories (144). Also, Pramaggiore refers to the way that paintings appear in the mise en scène of the stately buildings where the film was shot (although she does not explain whether the paintings were brought into the film space or were already in place prior to Kubrick's arrival). A wealth of information and speculation exists about how Kubrick studied paintings to achieve a sense of period realism; here, Pramaggiore ably demonstrates the influence of the painters Thomas Gainsborough and Johan Zoffany, which supplements Bille Wickre's 2006 more wide-ranging analysis of painting in the film, "Pictures, Plurality, and Puns: A Visual Approach to *Barry Lyndon*".

The final chapter looks at the film through the prism of the 1970s, as *Barry Lyndon*, released in 1975, was one of the last productions of the so-called New Hollywood movement. In this regard, one of the overarching aims of *Making Time* is to recuperate *Barry Lyndon* as a major film. Pramaggiore considers arguments made by Thomas Elsaesser, and others, which claim that the film more properly belongs to Kubrick's 1980s output, and perhaps arrives too early to make a significant enough impact; she argues instead that Barry Lyndon was a typical if not quintessential 1970s film (177). She demonstrates the ways in which *Barry Lyndon* is a unique film within Kubrick's oeuvre, firmly embedded within the director's formal and thematic vision. In many ways *Barry Lyndon* is a significant film of its time, and not, as has been suggested, an anomaly; nor is it a "failure", even if it was unsuccessful at the American box office, and generally missing from Kubrick retrospectives and DVD collections. Pramaggiore's propositions invite the reader to rethink it as a transnational film, hovering somewhere between mainstream American film (with the undeniable All-American star quality of Ryan O'Neal in the title role) and the tradition of the British heritage film or costume drama.

Issues regarding gender and the masculinity of the antihero also appear in the final chapter, introducing tantalising ideas that unfortunately are not further developed. Pramaggiore concludes that one of the chief problems of the film's reception was that Redmond Barry was "difficult to position fully as a macho and rebellious masculine role model for identification" (186). Furthermore, the casting of "pretty-boy" Ryan O'Neal's 1970s star persona was that of "feminist man"—in Pramaggiore's term—which defied the expectations of the history film (186). (One might counter-argue that Warren Beatty's acclaimed turn as McCabe in Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs Miller* [1971] was not dissimilar in terms of its examination of masculinity and gender.) Pramaggiore, who has written elsewhere about gender and sexuality, surprisingly does not give the topic of gender in *Barry Lyndon* as much space as the reader might have wanted.

It is chiefly Pramaggiore's discussion of time—which is proffered by the title but actually appears and disappears throughout the argument, without being a constant topic in the publication—which is the most interesting and valuable contribution in the book. Time appears as a destabilising and interrupted force within the film: it glides between the eighteenth-century setting, Thackeray's nineteenth-century perspective, and Kubrick's post-war filmic sensibility. Time appears also in the film's use of stasis and kinesis, through the appearance of painterly tableaux vivants and eruptions of violent action. Pramaggiore presents time as a filmic process of research, production, disappointments and decisions, as *Barry Lyndon* is seen as a product of a time. The 1970s is shown to be a transitional moment

between classical Hollywood and the Hollywood of the blockbuster. Finally, time appears as a set of cultural constructs which are shaped by time, such as "Irishness", masculinity and heroism, among others.

Based on research carried out at the Stanley Kubrick Archive at London College of Communication, *Making Time* is important because it is the only monograph specifically focused upon *Barry Lyndon*. The publication is also a demonstration of the value of taking a wide-ranging approach to film research; it explicates in a clear and practical way how different perspectives and methodologies can be integrated to build a provocative and challenging analysis. The great strength of the book is the way the author weaves a web or network of interrelated elements—history, novel, biography, culture, colonialism, identity, gender—which together make up Barry Lyndon. For a film which has predominantly been praised simply for its surface beauty, Pramaggiore ably demonstrates that such production offers much more and, in a sense, becomes "evidence for Kubrick's late style" (188). As such, *Barry Lyndon* is redolent with a notion of "lateness"—Pramaggiore cites Leila Rosenthal on Adorno—in which "irreconcilable elements", including the film's refusal of closure, are permitted to remain, and enrich the filmic experience (188).

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