

Redmond Barry's White Rabbit

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Video Essay: “Redmond Barry’s White Rabbit”
(2019, Maria Pramaggiore),
<https://vimeo.com/334033962>

I. All in Good Time

Barry Lyndon (1975) is a period film that narrates the picaresque tale of an Irish soldier who marries into the ranks of the British aristocracy. The period the film reanimates is the Seven Years’ War (1756-63), the first global colonial conflict whose active theatres spread across Asia, Africa, and North America, where it is referred to as the French and Indian War.

Based on the serial novel *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* (Thackeray 1844), Stanley Kubrick’s film adaptation was an extravagant over-budget box office flop: recognized with eight Academy Awards including cinematography, art design, costumes and score, *Barry Lyndon*’s aura of high-brow

pretentiousness was resisted not only by a public that had embraced a New Hollywood aesthetic but also by Kubrick fans in subsequent decades. 40th anniversary celebrations in 2015 brought renewed attention to the film, which accumulated credibility when contemporary media luminaries including Martin Scorsese, Lenny Abrahamson, and David Chase, referred to it as a masterpiece or a personal favorite.¹ Nevertheless, the film's overwrought mannerism remains something of an anomaly when situated within the auteurist context of Kubrick's seemingly macho—but equally theatrical—combat films, *Paths of Glory* (1957) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1986).

Barry Lyndon balances the martial with the marital, its first half emblazoned with battlefield choreography and its second consumed with boudoir maneuvering and the acquisition of status through aristocratic domesticity. Far more than just a period piece, Kubrick's bicentennial blunder—one historical contingency that Kubrick was banking on but misjudged was the translation of a renewed interest in colonial Americana evidenced by the popularity of *1776* (Hunt, 1972) to Redcoats in Europe—observes the ways that periodization and narrative are ineffective strategies for understanding or recording the passage of human time. With its proto-slow cinema aesthetic, the film becomes a meditation on time itself, its epilogue's concluding intertitle reiterating the leveling effect of time's passage: "It was in the reign of George III that the aforesaid personages lived and quarreled; Good or bad, handsome or ugly, they are all equal now."

Like *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *Clockwork Orange* (1972)—and, indeed most of Kubrick's films—*Barry Lyndon* is organized by non-linear temporalities. They are strikingly evident in the overarching narrative apparatus of the film, from its grammatically convoluted voice over to its finely scripted intertitles; from its circular structure to its laughably long takes. Perhaps one effect of the extreme visual beauty that Kubrick put on display with his special lenses, candlelight shooting, and slow zooms was that audiences were too dazzled, or too bored, to appreciate the equally excessive

Swiftian satire. Whereas the zero gravity toilet in *2001* is an obvious scatological joke, this film exemplifies a far more mature contemplative sense of the frailty of humanity condition, both physically and morally. When Barry goads his rival, Sir Charles Lyndon, into a hysterical coughing fit, the latter's tortured breaths eventually merge sonically with the narrator's announcement of his death, the scene conflating vocalizations that could not occur simultaneously while at the same time completely eliding the event of Sir Charles's expiration.

The anachronistic temporalities that pervade *Barry Lyndon* are in full evidence in the magic show scene, which takes place a little more than halfway through the film, shortly after Barry has secured his status by marrying the recently widowed Lady Honoria Lyndon. The rare idyllic moments depict the birthday celebration for their young son Brian. The teenaged youngster holding his mother's hand and framed by the reverse zoom at the opening of the scene is Viscount Bullingdon, Honoria's son by Sir Charles: a boy who dotes on his mother and antagonizes his stepfather and half brother.

At this point, the marriage, founded upon Barry's corruption, has begun to rot in earnest: the magic show interlude is preceded by a scene in which Honoria stands in the gardens of the estate with young Brian, Bullingdon, and her cleric, the Reverend Runt, watching Barry passionately kiss another woman. The woman herself has a pram and baby. In fact, the only woman Barry romances in the film who doesn't already have a child is his cousin Nora Brady, in the film's early scenes, a detail that is far from accidental. Reproduction and progeny stand at the center of Barry's quest for a peerage. Even after his marriage to Lady Lyndon and the birth of their son, Barry's mother reminds him that Brian's inheritance remains precarious, threatened by Bullingdon's presence, unless Barry secures his own title. The charming outdoor performance, attended by the family and entourage on a sunny afternoon on the Castle Hackton lawn, therefore, belies the ways that Brian's childhood is far from innocent, but rather is implicated in class, status, wealth, and a politics of reproductive futurism that is itself

dependent upon linear narratives of historical progress.² The languid ambience of a warm summer afternoon is enhanced by the scene's golden hues and leisurely editing, characteristic of the film as a whole, with its overall average shot length of 14 seconds.³ The on screen performance and the scene culminate in the magician's production of a white rabbit from a top hat, which is also verbally announced by the magician, who has earlier in the scene invited Brian to join him on the stage.

II. Chasing Rabbits

The conjuring of the white rabbit at the conclusion of the magic show produces a self-contained scene whose narrative trajectory satisfies in a way that the film—which circles back upon itself at the conclusion, leaving us with a visual image of its protagonist in a state of suspended animation, neither alive nor dead—never does. The magic show and its live performers, human and leporine, draw attention to the economic and emotional value, as well as the innocence and vulnerability, associated with childhood; in this regard, *Barry Lyndon* presents a traditionally nineteenth rather than eighteenth century British rendering of the child, while also speaking to the broader connections made between children and animals across centuries of Western aesthetic forms from Aesop to Disney and beyond.⁴

Brian's brief, charmed childhood is defined by docile prey animals; the spirited, "unbroken" horse that causes his untimely death serves as the exception. As a young boy, he rides a slow, plodding pony beside Barry as they tour the estate, he is linked to the rabbit during the magic show and his funeral cortege is led by a sheep. The exception of the deadly equine is no random anomaly, as it returns us to questions of lineage and inheritance. Brian's powerful, un-rideable horse is kin to other horses in the film. Animals that are weapons in war, they offer Barry a means of escape from life-

threatening situations, and, most importantly, function as the source of the duel that kills Barry's father in the opening scene. The repetition of horse-related deaths is one of *Barry Lyndon*'s key, if subtle, motifs. Barry's father and son—his progenitor and his progeny—are both killed as a result of horses, the animal whose breeding in the eighteenth century became a prototype for modern selective breeding practices across species and whose “religious and political symbolism” was “comprehended across Eurasia” because equines were “enmeshed [...] in the fabric of the empire.”⁵ In short, Barry's non-linear narrative is linked—through the succession of personal tragedies as well as his repeated experiences of professional soldiering—to the emerging trajectories of globalism and colonialism, which stifled any potential linear historical narrative of progress for his native Ireland.

The rabbit is equally anachronistic, opening up further possibilities through the sonic exploration practiced in the video. The white rabbit that the magician produces has long been associated with childhood, not least through its associations with Lewis Carroll's iconic *Alice in Wonderland*, which was penned in 1865, a full one hundred years after the fictional events depicted in this scene, one reason for claiming this version of childhood is a nineteenth rather than eighteenth century phenomenon. To compound the temporal displacements associated with this scene and film, the first instance of a hat trick performed with a white rabbit generally is attributed to Parisian magician Louis Comte no earlier than 1814, several decades after the Seven Years' War. We might speculate that Kubrick's eagerness to bring the Napoleonic war era to the screen—a project he began before *Barry Lyndon* but never completed—might account for this condensation. But a dispute places the emergence of the magic white rabbit even later, as part of the act performed in the 1830s by the Scottish magician John Henry Anderson, known as “The Great Wizard of the North.” Certainly the modern magician, if not the innocent child, was born during the eighteenth century as enlightened

entertainment replaced witchcraft as the motivation for the stage sorcery of figures such as Isaac Fawkes, Joseph Pinetti, and “father” of modern magic, Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin (b. 1805).

Mindful of this film’s refusal to abide by historical precedent and its numerous anachronisms, I would argue that the white rabbit in this self-contained scene cannot be thought—in 1975 at the film’s release or 43 years later—without a detour through Lewis Carroll. According to Cary Elza, Carroll’s Alice has become “the gold standard for the representation of childhood and imaginary worlds; her pre-adolescent innocence, combined with her high-spirited willingness to explore her imaginary world, made her the perfect representative of an idealized childhood.”⁶ But the doomed boy Brian—a poor little rich kid?—will go on to explore no worlds, real or imaginary, but instead his death will end Barry’s dynastic ambitions and nearly send his mother to the asylum.

The magician’s naively decorated stage of wonder and the sartorial splendor on display in this scene and throughout the film call attention to eighteenth century debates regarding nature and artifice, reality and fiction, beauty and violence. From the choreographed perfection of marching Redcoats to duels in idyllic pastoral settings to the decorous overkill of Castle Hackton, the film’s surface aestheticism masks and also amplifies the underlying and unrelenting ugliness that lies beneath: the violence of war, the brutality of marital abuse. The juxtaposition becomes both sublime and the surreal.

These ironies associated with the juxtaposition of beauty and brutality, of childhood innocence and the end of history, are reflected in the voiceover’s multiplied incantation of Jefferson Airplane’s signature song “White Rabbit,” released in 1967 (the “summer of love”) and famously performed at Woodstock in 1969. The song became a sonic emblem for the trippy danger of the youthful drug culture around the Haight Ashbury district in San Francisco while it also reflected a broader

recognition of a young country's purported innocence and idealism gone horribly awry—most clearly articulated by the opposition to the Vietnam war. Expressed through Alice's ingestions and growing pains, as she becomes both small and 10 feet tall, Carroll's Victorian distortions are linked to the 1960s and 1970s (arguably the present tense of the film's release date) through the opening lines, which make reference to the ineffectuality of the middle class culture of medicating women and children (long before Ritalin became routine) that the Rolling Stones also sang about in "Mother's Little Helper" (1966). In 1971, a "scared straight" type young adult book entitled *Go Ask Alice*, which claimed to be the diary of a teenaged girl who became addicted to drugs and ultimately died of an overdose, became a national bestseller and later a film (1973), ensuring Alice's continued salience to further generations who were unlikely to encounter the character and her travails with the white rabbit through Victorian children's literature.

The sonic overlay of the Jefferson Airplane song reveals the ways in which Redmond Barry's white rabbit "exceeds the narrative codes that communicate it," the phrase Vivian Sobchack uses to describe the death of the rabbit in Jean Renoir's *Le Règle de Jeu* (1939), an event that demonstrates the way the live animal's death "violently, abruptly punctuates fictional space with documentary space."⁷ Redmond Barry's white rabbit does not die on screen, but Brian, the spoiled child and ascendant angelic aristocrat with whom it is associated, does die. In a move that runs counter to the typical cinematic anthropomorphizing of non-human animals, Brian is zoomorphed: exposed as the hapless and helpless prey animal. His disobedience in sneaking away to ride the horse was the inevitable result of his inculcation in Western masculinity by his father, his family, and his social class. More than punctuating fictional space, the white rabbit and its anachronistic contemporary associations—recalling that the hippies of the Haight wore elaborate costumes and Victorian velvet and remembering that the drug culture youth saved *2001: A Space Odyssey* from obscurity, as recounted by

Mike Kaplan, an MGM marketing executive who created the “Ultimate Trip” campaign after realizing that this was the audience for Kubrick’s “non verbal epic”⁸—*punctures* the false notion that beauty yields nobility and the fiction that innocence dwells with youth.

The rabbit in cinema—from *Harvey* (1950) to *Night of the Lepus* (1972), *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) to *Donnie Darko* (2001) and *Inland Empire* (2006)—always seems to carry the surreal imprint of Carroll’s Alice, pointing toward the degeneration within the wholesome, the reproductive motivation (and, often excess) below the soft, quivering sensuality of the cuddly bunny. It was perhaps no accident then that artist Eduardo Kac and geneticist Louis-Marie Houdebine chose to collaborate on Alba, an albino rabbit born in 2000 who was the first mammal born genetically altered as a transgenic art project entitled *GFP Bunny*. Green fluorescent protein (GFP), the substance that makes jellyfish glow, was used to make Alba glow green under blue light. The white rabbit, since Alice, entices humans into aesthetically framed and otherworldly, often non-human, times and spaces.

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Notes

¹ See Scorsese's documentary, *A Personal Journey Through American Movies* (BFI 1995); listen to Chase, David and Steve Inskeep. "David Chase's Must See Movies." Morning Edition, National Public Radio (May 2, 2013); and Abrahamson's contribution to the *Sight and Sound* "Greatest Films of All Time", at <https://www.bfi.org.uk/films-tv-people/sightandsoundpoll2012/voter/1033>.

² Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and The Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004), 4.

³ Cinemetrics Database. <http://www.cinemetrics.lv/database.php>

⁴ Matthew Cole and Kate Stewart, *Our Children and Other Animals: The Construction of Human-Animal Relations in Childhood* (London: Ashgate, 2014); Richard De Cordova, "The Mickey in Macy's Window," in *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom*, ed. Eric Smoodin (New York: Routledge, 1994), 203–213; Amy Ratelle, "The Anthropomorphized Animal in Children's Culture" (PhD diss., Ryerson University, 2014), ProQuest Dissertations and Theses; Paul Wells, *The Animated Bestiary: Animals, Cartoons and Culture* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2009).

⁵ Jagjeet Lally. "Empires and Equines: The Horse in Art and Exchange in South Asia, ca. 1600-ca. 1850," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 35, no. 1: 98.

⁶ Cary Eliza, "Alice in Cartoonland: Childhood, Gender, and Imaginary Space in Early Disney Animation," *Animation: an interdisciplinary journal* 9, no. 1 (2018): 8.

⁷ Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 274.

⁸ Mike Kaplan, "Kubrick: a marketing odyssey," *The Guardian* 2 Nov 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2007/nov/02/marketingandpr>.