

# The World by Candlelight

Space exploration has given humanity more than Teflon pans. It has also given us the most picturesque film Stanley Kubrick has ever shot: Barry Lyndon. Kubrick filmed William M. Thackeray's novel in 1975 using the *Planar F0.7/50 mm* lens which Carl Zeiss developed on behalf of NASA for its images of the moon. The very high-speed lens allowed images to be taken by candlelight, thus making it possible to render an authentic impression of 18th century Europe.

Barry Lyndon depicts what Irish soldier Redmond Barry looked like in the middle of the 18th century in order to eke out a better place for himself in society, how he got tangled up in the commotion of the Seven Year War, how he first joined the English army and was then forced to join the Prussian army and how he married the rich Lady Lyndon in Great Britain. Nevertheless, his endeavors to climb the social ladder failed; the title of nobility he so desired remained but a dream.

**Baroque images.** In William Makepeace Thackeray's novel *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon Esquire*, the protagonist recounts his life story and exaggerates quite a bit. The reader must determine what is truth and what is fiction. The film changes the perspective and slows down the action. A narrator comments on the happenings in voiceover and anticipates future events so that the viewer sees less of a film than he does a baroque image, a picture of society as it was in the 18th century.

Kubrick took a chance on this image. In his first historic film after three science fiction films (including *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *A Clockwork Orange*) he didn't just want to tell an exciting tale and shed light on social relationships in a critical manner. He wanted to capture the mood that prevailed before the French Revolution; he wanted to authentically depict the atmosphere. One film critic states that he tried to "make the beauty of Baroque painting something to experience through film." To do this he needed equipment which enabled him to shoot even in semidarkness. After all, houses at that time were illuminated by a candlelabrum at best, although enough light was often provided by only a single candle.

**Lens progress.** Kubrick thus needed a particularly high-speed lens. He saw images of the moon taken with the *Planar F0.7/50 mm*. This lens had been commissioned from Carl Zeiss by NASA in 1967, which wanted to take photos of the moon's surface. Kubrick had the ZEISS lens, which was two stops "faster" than all other lenses of the time, attached to his Mitchell BNC 35 mm camera and filmed all inside scenes solely by candlelight – a sensation in 1975.

Director, screenwriter and producer Kubrick, who is famous – and perhaps notorious – for his perfectionism, conducted meticulous research for *Barry Lyndon* and filmed on location in Germany and Great Britain. "The composition is aimed at contemporary portrait, landscape and genre depiction," writes the German

Film Museum in Frankfurt in its "Kubrick's Film" exhibition where the *Planar F0.7/50 mm* is also on display. The images look like paintings. The actors do not act but are a part of the composition. Each cloud and each belt buckle has its fixed place within the composition. This creates a clear distance to what is being depicted for the viewer – exactly as Ku-





brick wanted, because the time of Barry Lyndon is gone forever. Perhaps this is part of the reason why, despite its Oscars, Barry Lyndon was a flop in the eyes of viewers as well as critics and the film never experienced financial success. It is a feast for the eyes and shows what an exceptionally gifted film-maker can achieve with the right technology.

After being restored at Carl Zeiss, the lens will take its place in the "Stanley Kubrick" exhibition opening in Valencia in the fall of 2009.

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☞ Further information is available at [www.stanleykubrick.de](http://www.stanleykubrick.de)