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Artifice, Aesthetics, and the Liminal Grotesque in Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon*

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Abstract of the Thesis

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Stanley Kubrick's oeuvre is characterized throughout by a distinct and unique interest in violence, sexuality, the uncomfortable, the eerie, the unknown, the beyond, and the *grotesque*. His aesthetic and conceptual approach achieves a special quality of calling attention to the liminal - those unspoken, unseen, uncertain, ungrounded, fleeting, and perhaps ineffable, moments and spaces in the visual and narrative presentation that occur between scenes, between characters, between images, and between the viewer and the film itself. In doing so Kubrick destabilizes the viewing experience and suspends the viewer in moments of uncertainty, discomfort, and ambiguity, achieving this effect even in those films with an ostensibly straightforward narrative arc and traditional literary and filmic structure. His 1975 epic *Barry Lyndon* serves as a fertile and profound elaboration of this effect, helps to define the grotesque in the films of Kubrick, and displays how Kubrick employs this effect to stimulate and challenge viewers. Hypnotizing us with sumptuous visual beauty, refined manner, and a rollicking narrative, Kubrick casts a spell on the viewer that lingers forever.

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***Barry Lyndon* and Stanley Kubrick's Cinema of the Grotesque**

"The countless grotesque events consumed in films are a graphic indication of the dangers threatening mankind from repression implicit in civilization."[1]

Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*

"Did your parents have any children that lived? I bet they were grotesque. You're so ugly you look like a modern-art masterpiece!"

Sergeant Hartmann, *Full Metal Jacket*

Stanley's Kubrick's oeuvre is characterized throughout by an interest in and attention to oppositional forces variously seeking and denied reconciliation. These oppositions are expressed formally and conceptually - often overtly, more often implicitly - towards conveying a complex and ambivalent picture of a human element, on a bewildering terrestrial world, that is habitually lost, alone, alienated, out of order, out of balance, and out of touch, inhabiting an otherwise ordered and indifferent universe. By creating and sustaining liminal spaces in his films, both aesthetically and conceptually, Kubrick explores the myriad interconnected forces that balance and sustain cinematic tension and, in his much larger project, those forces which conspire against human attempts to impose and sustain order and structure in various pursuits of self-actualization, utopianism, and transcendence. In a grotesque turn, it can be shown that the

[1] Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." In *The Work of Art*

majority of Kubrick's oeuvre features characters that will unwittingly self-victimize and whose ambitions unravel despite their motivations or intentions. Natural and supernatural forces, oppressive apparatus of state and society, individual and collective psychological repression, and lack of self-awareness, knowledge, or understanding, amongst other dynamics, conspire to deny a harmonious reconciliation of the oppositional forces that act to confound human ambition and negate human achievement.

Kubrick emerges as a critical and somehow sympathetic artist and observer of man and mankind, concerned with the profoundly humanist undertaking of exposing and exploring the tensions that underlie the human experience towards greater awareness, understanding, and acceptance. His filmic project represents a complex and nuanced elaboration of the repressed, unresolved human subject as struggling to reconcile external and internal oppositions. Tensions between forces such as id and ego, masculine and feminine (or Jungian animus and anima), the primitive and the civilized, horror and humor, the absurd and the rational, and comedy and tragedy, are embodied and exuded in the form and content of Kubrick's work. A year after the release of *Barry Lyndon,* academic and critic Alan Spiegel, remarking on Kubrick's filmic style, hinted at the inherent dialectical tension in Kubrick's work;

> This [kind of] film proposes *a new equilibration of means and ends*, and the emancipation of the components of style from the hegemony of character and drama. What formerly was a centralized system in which style was ordered and harmonized by its relation to drama, now becomes a decentralized system in which discrete elements of style and drama float freely in shifting suspension, in which *elements confront each other in glancing discord and irresolute debate*.[2]

[2] Spiegel, Alan. "Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon.*" *Salmagundi* No. 38/39 (Summer-Fall 1977): 194. Emphasis added.

Dialectics emerge which sustain and synthesize underlying oppositions. These dialectics embody and espouse a particular concern with the unresolved tensions, dissonances, and disharmonies that inform and influence individual human lives, societies, and states and which confound drives towards wholeness, unity, integrity, actualization, and transcendence.

Kubrick's oeuvre develops a special interest in the grotesque as dialectic, "Kubrick's favorites author was Franz Kafka," notes author Geoffrey Cocks, "whom he admired for his ability to survey the eruption of the fantastic and the grotesque out of the quotidian in order to represent and interrogate the disruptions and displacements of modern history."[3] Functioning as a dialectic synthesis that maintains underlying oppositions and conveys the complexity of the human experience in all its comedy, tragedy, beauty, squalor, and absurdity, the grotesque stands as one of the most pervasive elements of Kubrick's oeuvre.

Indeed, in *On Kubrick,* James Naremore explicitly positions Stanley Kubrick's oeuvre within a historically developed aesthetics of the grotesque. Crucially, Naremore's interest in Kubrick's intentional mobilization of the grotesque as a device derives from one of the most basic and common questions repeatedly elicited by Kubrick shots, scenes, and entire films, "What kind of response is appropriate?"[4] Departing from its definition in ordinary parlance as simply "hideously ugly", Naremore defines the grotesque as a formal aesthetic and conceptual device that combines the terrible and terrifying with the comic and humorous, the beautiful and pleasing with the ugly and

[3] Cocks, Geoffrey, James Diedrick, and James Peruseck, editors. *Depth of Field: Stanley Kubrick, Films, and the Uses of History*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006, 9.
[4] Naremore, James. *On Kubrick.* London: British Film Institute, 2007, 25.

repulsive, and elicits a disturbing and often unsettling combination of (often incredulous) fear and (often morbid) amusement.[5]

Kubrick's aesthetic sensibility was informed by his early interest in the black humor and theater of absurd circulating in the performing arts in late 1940s and 1950s America, and his early contact with photographers Weegee (Arthur Felig) and Diane Arbus. Both artists had an eye for the grotesque; Weegee as a photographer of the seedy underbelly of New York City crime, violence, disaster, and tabloid exploits, and Arbus as an artist with an eye for the uncanny, eerie, and unsettling in the liminal spaces of everyday life. *Fear and Desire*, Kubrick's first full-length film, features grotesque eating scenes, writhing dead bodies, a sadistic and absurd sex scene, and its tone combines anxiety and the sardonic with absurdity and irrationality. His films abound with the use of masks both aesthetically grotesque and which turn their wearers into caricaturized grotesques of themselves, alternately revealing and concealing latent motivations, impulses, and energies. Both humorous and horrific, the masks reveal a psychological inner life unknown or unacknowledged by the characters themselves and/or act as an outward projection of desired physical and psychological states**.** Contorted faces and masks act as grotesques, embodying corporeality, violence, libido, empathy, and disgust, and often express pretensions to human dignity yielding to the fact of human bestiality; the shadow emerging from the persona.[6] Witness the clown mask of the criminal mastermind in *The Killing*, the many faces and facets of Peter Sellers in *Lolita* and *Dr. Strangelove* (or are guises, disguise, or multiples?), Alex' phallic nose in *A Clockwork Orange*, Jacks exaggerated facial expressions that belie suppressed primitive urges in *The*

[5] Ibid, 25-41.
[6] Feldmann, Hans. "Kubrick and His Discontents." *Film Quarterly* Vol. 30, No. 1 (Autumn 1976): 16 and Jung, Carl G. *Man and His Symbols*. New York: Doubleday, 1964, 118.

Shining, the crew-cuts, hardened bodies, "tough-guy" faces, uniforms, and personalized helmets of the soldiers in *Full Metal Jacket*, the costume and blemish concealing makeup of *Barry Lyndon*, and the Venetian harlequin style masks adorned by the wealthy, privileged attendees of ritualized sex parties in *Eyes Wide Shut*.[7]

Kubrick also employs the human body as a fundamental source of grotesque horror and humor through display and suggestion of bodily functions and the frailty of the human body.[8] The bathroom often functions as site for the grotesque failures to reconcile oppositions. In one of many unsettling and disturbing scenes rife with the grotesque in *Lolita*, Dr. Humbert Humbert relaxes peacefully in a bubblebath, immediately following his wife's untimely accidental death, barely feigning interest as friends and neighbors come to offer their condolences. The "head" is the place where Private Pyle murders Sergeant Hartman, asserting "I am in a world of shit," before turning the rifle on himself. Jack Torrance begins his attack on wife and son in earnest as they attempt to lock themselves in an upstairs bathroom. "Here's Johnny," he exclaims as he finally breaches the door and sticks his head into the bathroom. In *2001: A Space Odyssey* the astronauts must confront the comedic but uncomfortable and unsettling mechanics of using a toilet in space. Despite all of mankind's technological progress and the astronauts' technical expertise, they are supplied with a long list of instructions to simply perform a basic bodily function. Bill fumbles nervously for his wallet, carrying on

[7] Ciment, Michel. *Kubrick, the Definitive Edition*. New York: Faber and Faber, 2003, 352 and Mamber, Stephen. "Kubrick in Space," In *Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey*, edited by Robert Kolker. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 66.
[8] Naremore, 34.

a banal conversation with his wife while she squats over the toilet in an opening scene of *Eyes Wide Shut*.[9]

Kubrick's cinema of the grotesque acts formally and conceptually to satirize and to comment on the vulnerability, fallibility, and triviality and of man and mankind, human endeavors and ambitions, and our attempts to rationalize and order our environment and our world. Citing Wolfgang Keyser's *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, Naremore notes, "…the form constitutes a psychological strategy aimed at defamiliarizing the everyday world and thereby controlling or exorcising the absurdities and terrors from life."[10] The grotesque is present throughout Kubrick's films as synthetic dialectic that preserves the beautiful and the foul, the absurd and the rational, the comic and the tragic, and sustains a fraught and serious atmosphere even while injecting a levity and fatalism into the proceedings. In addition, it allows the viewer a critical distance by persistently problematizing, confounding, and undermining audience identification. Kubrick's films negate the conventionally satisfactory or fulfilling cinematic experience by denying resolution of the myriad dissonances and disparities elaborated within his films and throughout his oeuvre. Sustaining and exuding a grotesque tone throughout, his films leave the viewer in states of disquiet, discomfort, and bewilderment.

Perhaps nowhere in his oeuvre is the element of the grotesque more effectively employed than in *Barry Lyndon*. As Kubrick's least oneiric and most straightforward satiric/comedic work, the film holds a special relevance and compelling interest in a discussion of Kubrick's grotesque**.**[11] The film complicates an easy reading in its

[9] Mamber, 60.
[10] Ibid., 27.
[11] *Barry Lyndon* surpasses *Dr. Strangelove* in this respect due to it's more complex and nuanced use of humor, less overtly satirical presentation and use of slapstick humor, and in particular, its wry, sardonic

ambivalence and grotesqueness, and indeed, suggests a reading of all of Kubrick's films as comedies we cannot laugh at. Unsettled and uncertain, the audience is denied laughter as safe, comfortable, acceptable, and expected release, as the comic is continuously confounded by latent tragedy, misery, and violence. The otherwise humorous emerges as grotesque dialectic that terrifies, maddens, discourages, and disheartens, while the surface beauty of the film's verdant locations, impressive architecture, attractive costumes, and social formalities is undermined by what Spiegel recognizes as a unique "strangeness";

> The originality of [Kubrick's] achievement…is the singularity of the film's beauty…the special way this beauty makes its meaning to eye and ear. By this I mean precisely the strangeness of the way things are seen and heard, and for this reason, the imperviousness of the film's beauty to a comfortable assimilation by the viewer.[12]

This use of the grotesque in *Barry Lyndon* foregrounds a lack of awareness or understanding of oppositional forces, and in turn, the unwillingness or inability to resolve oppositions or reconcile these forces towards greater self-knowledge, agency, and contentment. It also elucidates a historical epoch in which rigid hierarchical sociopolitical structures, and the causes and effects of the decisions of those with power and resources frustrate the ambitions and agency of the individual. Crucially, these realities, and the insights that may emerge for the viewer are obfuscated by an omniscient and cynical narrator that proscribes all events as fated, or even predestined; thus even despite the seeming serendipity of much of Barry's rakish saga, his fate is sealed, early and overtly.

Within the framework of a beautifully rendered historical costume drama set in a rigidly structured social milieu dominated by etiquette, rite and ritual, Kubrick employs formal techniques, symbolism, mise-en-scène, narrative, narration, and dialogue to create

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narrator who constantly resituates in a satirical mode. *Dr. Strangelove*'s proximity to real and deeply seeded fears and anxieties of the time confound its humor, despite its overt and slapstick nature.

[12] Spiegel, 198.

a consistently unsettling and disturbing atmosphere imbued throughout with, and indeed infected by, the grotesque. Vividly realized in elements such caricatured characterizations, a cynically omniscient narrator, staged recreations of satiric English paintings, reference to and display of bodily and bodily injury and decay, amongst others elements, and juxtaposed with scenes of a natural world at once sublime, ominous, and unpredictable, and awesome, beautiful, and idyllic, Kubrick creates a unsettled and unsettling world of ambiguous morality, flawed characters, and general disharmony and disunity, in which ambition and fate are ultimately subject to the grotesque realities of the human body, mind, and soul. *Barry Lyndon*'s is a world in which an untainted and ordered universe is infected by the most grotesque element of all – mankind itself.

Coming on the heels of the failure to produce his ambitious historical epic on the life of Napoleon Bonaparte, Kubrick was determined to realize a project of similar scale and scope and imbue it with the same thorough and meticulous attention to realistic historic recreation he had intended for his *Napoleon* project. However, he chose as his source material not a tale on the scale of imperial conquest, but of the unlikely rise of a fatherless Irish upstart through the ranks of society to the English aristocracy, and his subsequent and abrupt downfall. A simple reading of the film as picaresque fairy tale, as William Makepeace Thackeray's source novel would have been known, is confounded by Kubrick's technical ambitious to hyperrealist historical accuracy. Indeed, with its unlikely tale of rags to riches ascent, tropes such as the highway robber, the duel, and the familiar friend encountered in foreign lands, and omniscient, omnipresent narrator, amongst others elements, the story does play as a fairy tale, while also achieving stunning accuracy in its use of natural lighting, exquisitely realized period costume, accurate

Baroque and classical music of the period (Johann Sebastian Bach, Paisiello, Schubert, Vivaldi, Mozart and Frederick II of Prussia), on-location shooting including impeccably preserved 18th century mansions and grounds, display of customs, rites, and social conventions, for example.[13] "Kubrick was always interested in grotesque combination of the commonplace and the wildly satiric or fanciful," notes Robert Kolker, "and he was instinctively drawn to any kind of story...that blurs the line between reality and dream or fairy tale."[14] By obfuscating and complicating the anticipated and predictable allegorical mode of fairy tale, in turn denying any readily available moral fables, and by imbuing a rigorously accurate historic costume drama with elements of the fantastic and absurd, Kubrick grotesquely confounds genre itself in *Barry Lyndon*.

The *place* and *time* of *Barry Lyndon* is crucial for the elaboration of its grotesque aesthetic and tone. The film succeeds in developing as a cinema of the grotesque due in large part to its setting. Observing the "the odd contrasts…between the formality of the setting and the ghastliness or melancholy of what was being depicted" throughout *Barry Lyndon*, renowned English film critic Vernon Young expounds in a review that came out the same year of the films release;

> The grotesqueness of an age is proportional to the contradictions it exhibits. In the eighteenth century, the most elegant possible style cohabited with extremes of affectation and casual brutalities. The Age of Reason was furnished with sense-defying opulence…All this is ground for acrid comedy, if you choose, and Kubrick…so chose…Barry Lyndon, a work of great beauty, striped with the bizarre, is substantiated by its historical location.[15]

[13] Castle, Allison, editor. *The Stanley Kubrick Archives*. London: Taschen, 2008, 443.
[14] Naremore, 189.
[15] Young, Vernon. "The Grotesque in Some Recent Films." *The Hudson Review* Vol. 31, No. 2 (Summer 1976), 330.

The 18th century England of Barry Lyndon is a world ruled by a decorum and order that rendered profound moments of human experience surreal and ridiculous episodes and rehearsals of imposed social conventions. During battle, soldiers march in a perfect linear formation into an inevitable barrage of fire. When Barry explodes into a rage at his stepson's insolence during a concert, the band plays on, heavily adorned women swoon melodramatically, and male attendees gasp incredulously before reluctantly intervening only after Barry nearly beats his son to death. Even a complex emotion such as love is expressed in stilted formal platitudes, enacted with superficial manner, in highly ritualized settings, according to strictly enforced norms and rules.[16]

Perhaps on of those most fundamental strategies employed by Kubrick in *Barry Lyndon* in elaborating this aesthetically is the directors use throughout the film, indeed (an almost exclusive use) of the aesthetics and of the *tableau vivant*. These "living scenes" are familiar in the paintings of artists of the era such as Jean-Antoine Watteau, Thomas Gainsborough, and most appropriately, William Hogarth, a frequent reference for Kubrick and his creative team. They are perhaps most familiar to contemporary audiences from historical displays and natural history museums, and the effect is very much the same for anyone who has experienced these assemblages that exist in a liminal temporal space suspended between past and present. The effect, as employed in *Barry Lyndon* create bodies as dead on arrival to the viewer. Actors and the roles that they inhabit appear as personages, types animated in fact only by their historic milieu and narrative context; they are mobilized by the camera and call of "action". These suspended beings are brought to life, put into motion, only by myriad external forces exerted upon

[16] Spiegel, 200.

them; the mechanical force of the cinematic apparatus and sociopolitical forces of the narrative; thus deindividuated and dehumanized.

As characters on a screen they exist for the audience as *grotesques* situated in an eerie liminal space between life, animation, mobility, agency, autonomy, and the mechanical and sociopolitical forces imposed from without. The narrator often dictates, as he does in the case of Barry early and often, the very frailty and mortality of the characters, often prefiguring the fate of the characters well before the audience has the pleasure to watch them unfold on screen. The narrator wrests autonomy from the characters and anticipation from the audience in his erudite and cynical omniscience. The characters are living figures, types, wax models brought to life, their heavy period makeup clumping and melting under the oppressive glow of Kubrick's incandescent candlelight captured only through the use of NASA's Zeiss lens –the first and yet only time this state-of-the-art lens would be employed in film making – a space age technology mobilized to capture the deceits, decadence, debauchery, and decay of a by-gone era as fictionalized through Kubrick's life of Lyndon.

The grotesque rigidity, nascent morbidity, and ritualization of life are particularly elaborated in scenes of ritually sanctioned violence several times in the film. The first occurs following one of Kubrick's close-up to extreme zooms out that occur throughout the film. The death of Barry's father during this opening scene is presented in wide angle, extreme physical and psychological distance and thus conveyed as an insignificant, unremarkable episode in the narrative, despite its obvious influence on Barry and the trajectory of his life. During Barry's own duel against his rival in love, Captain Quinn, we observe Quinn's fear and horror barely disguised in his grotesquely contorted face as

the ritual unfolds around them. Barry picks a fight with a military comrade, but their scrap is briefly halted so that the Sergeant can organize the men in a proper square for the purpose of a sanctioned bare-knuckle fistfight, which unfolds with brutal consequences for Barry's foe. The final duel of the film is the most overtly grotesque. The decorum and ritual is scarcely maintained. After Barry's mortified stepson Lord Bullingdon misfires in an anxious twitch Barry opts to "honorably" fire into the ground. Bullingdon is not satisfied, and after a bout of trembling and vomiting, aims and fires into Barry's leg. The episode is drained of any of the dignity or honor for which the strict social edifices are erected and perpetuated.

This time period also featured the extensive use of heavy makeup to hide hideous scars and sores. Aside from a literal obscuring of the grotesqueries of human illness and aging, the makeup drains people of vitality, and they appear as spectral presences floating through time and space. Costume and manner mark social status, as we can observe in Barry's changing persona through his ascent up the rigid social hierarchy. We know him as essentially the same person we encountered at the beginning of the film. Indeed, his costume is simply a disguise, as his actions belie a latent and repressed violence, avarice, and amoral opportunism, amongst other impulses. Art is also used to subsume and sublimate such sordid impulses. Like the aesthetisization of violence that occurs through rituals of violence such as duels and sanctioned bare-knuckle brawls, the appreciation of art, finery, and indulgence in decadence, acts as a mask hiding the horrible and repressed realities of the abject poverty and brutal wars which allow for this way of the life.[17]

[17] Falsetto, Mario. *Stanley Kubrick: A Narrative and Stylistic Analysis*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2001, various.

The often noted quality of the film as a series of lifeless paintings itself, adds to the grotesque atmosphere. Indeed, from shot to shot, scenes to scene, sequence to sequence, the action and narrative trajectory comes to seem almost as inevitable as the familiar paintings they describe. For Norman Kagan this serves to express "the colossal inertia, rigidity, and closed-off quality of all personal life among the upper-classes."[18] These scenes reinforce the physical and psychological claustrophobia that acts as a dark shadow to the ostensibly idyllic lives of the aristocracy. The use of actual paintings by artists just as Gainsborough, Hogarth, and Watteau as references also establish these scenes in *Barry Lyndon* as a grotesque living tableaux, and suggests a reading of the entire film as an eerie living tableaux populated by lifeless bodies of the past; mechanical recreations of a long forgotten time and place, drained of vitality and depth; hollow containers "possessing" the repressions we project onto, and indeed, *into* them as filmic characters on screen. This also acts to confound sympathetic spectatorial identification and complicate passive enjoyment of the proceedings.

Barry Lyndon ends with a cold finality and unsettling commentary on the brevity and insignificance of human life, itself a grotesque revelation and confrontation following a film in excess of three hours that tracks the life of a man from adolescence to middle age; "It was in the reign of George III that the above-named personages lived and quarreled; good or bad, handsome or ugly, rich or poor, they are all equal now." Ultimately, the sense that emerges from *Barry Lyndon*, further elucidated by these final words, is that of the grotesqueness of human *presence* in the universe. Throughout his oeuvre Kubrick presents the natural world as beautiful in its untainted state, and humans

[18] Kagan, Norman. *The Cinema of Stanley Kubrick.* New York: Continuum, 2000, 197

as a grotesque, if insignificant, infection that can only mar the splendor of the Earth and feebly challenge the inherent harmonies and orders of the universe. Human ambition to success, meaning, or transcendence is inevitably doomed by fragility, fallibility, and ultimately, mortality.

The grotesque emerges in liminal spaces where nothing is certain and everything is suspended. It can be uncomfortable, unsettling, or eerie. Absence becomes presence and presence elicits a sense of absence; of a trace, a shadow; something lost, a missing piece. In *Barry Lyndon* a psychoanalytic reading might note the absence of father throughout the film, and the absence of a real concrete object of desire for our lead character. This will lead Barry on a *grotesquely* misguided journey where the only real resolution is not indeed any true sense of achievement or fulfillment but becomes an interminable and aimless longing for simple respite. This will come, as we see at the end of the film, only through a symbolic castration and thus cessation of the journey. Barry will return to the womb in the form of his mothers cottage, the home in which he was born. He has been neutered (less one leg and without children), and neutralized. This resolution is a hallmark Kubrickian return to origin, and alludes to death itself as return (as seen in *2001: A Space Odyssey*). This highlights the notion of a life condemned to the liminal, life as simply a temporal and spatial place between birth and death where true equilibrium proves impossible. This suggests our very human presence on earth as a truly grotesque reality between birth and death, an endless attempt to negotiate the hypocrisies, paradoxes, and to find equilibrium, balance, harmony, inner peace. For this Kubrick has been criticized. Indeed, throughout his work he condemns humanity to a kind of limbo, to life as purgatory. But surely his is not a misanthropic oeuvre, for there is beauty in the, in

his, human world; kindness, sincerity, earnestness, and redemption. For all his misgivings Barry Lyndon is an inescapably sympathetic character. Thus, far from misanthropic, Kubrick unfolds and establishes a deep empathy in Lyndon and throughout his work that belies critics accusations of misanthropy. The sense we are left with continuously in his films is not one of pity, but of a sincere empathy which demands that, in our liminal state between birth and death, our greatest ambition can be to love ourselves, to love our fellow man; to find something to do, to find something to love.

As an elaboration and study of the grotesque as dialectic, *Barry Lyndon* succeeds in exposing and exploring oppositions and conflicts that once acknowledged, understood and reconciled, can perhaps lead the way to greater individual contentment and societal harmony, even in the face of the daunting infinite of time and space.

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