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## **1 Introduction**

What can we learn about the national identity of Great Britain by watching the film "Barry Lyndon" [p1]? Consequently, as will be shown in chapter 2, something about what national identity may have meant in the era of George II. The question why "Barry Lyndon" is chosen to have a closer look at shall not be treated, but, as most critics [s1—s5] agree, the film is a unique resurrection of past English times, so the observation what this exceptional film states about nation and national identity is of certain interest.

To find out, what "Barry Lyndon" tells about nation and national identity it is best to look at a few scenes, where a national identity is in any way indicated. I do not intend to have an isolated look on these film-fragments. Film-devices like editing, music, scenes preceding and following have, of course, relevance.

Redmond Barry alias Barry Lyndon experiences several travels. The travel through history, the travel through the classes, the travel through Europe—to mention the most important ones. So he has several, maybe different, perspectives on nation. In his context, Ireland is his nation, often compared to England—Thackeray stresses the comparison much more than Kubrick does. What does the character of Redmond Barry get out of this national identity?

## **2 Idea of Nation ./ Image of Nation**

At first, I should make clear, what nation, what national identity implies.

Nationen sind keine naturwüchsigen Gebilde; sie müssen vielmehr als Ergebnisse politischer Auseinandersetzungen, gesellschaftlichen Wandels und kultureller Veränderungen begriffen werden. Nation ist mit Ernst Renan "eine große Solidargemeinschaft, getragen von dem Gefühl der Opfer, die man

gebracht hat, und der Opfer, die man noch zu bringen gewillt ist. Sie setzt eine Vergangenheit voraus und muß in der Gegenwart zu einem greifbaren Faktor zusammenzufassen sein: der Übereinkunft, dem deutlich ausgesprochenen Wunsch, das gemeinsame Leben fortzusetzen." ... Selbstbestimmung und Freiheitsdrang, Kriege, aber auch das Christentum dienen der Versicherung der nationalen Identität. [s7]

Ireland incorporates important points of this definition as a community of people making sacrifices, e.g. as being involved in many wars till now, and in other ways. But that can not form a national identity alone. Ulrich Iberer [s8] has collected several "objective factors": common origin, language, religion, culture and history. He continues with several "subjective factors": corresponding world views and opinions about law, state and society. National identity is the intersubjectively shared identification with a nation, however it may be defined. And a nation has collective goods, like successes in war or sport, welfare, valuation of national history, resulting in an intersubjective similarity of reaction.

What does this excursus mean? In "Barry Lyndon" there is no direct discussion about nationality. The protagonists just define themselves as Irish or German or whatever. Nonetheless, nationality plays an important role in two emotional scenes. When Barry is refused by his love-interest Nora, and when he gets into the service of Balibari—that is why I have a closer look at these scenes in the following chapters. Although I will not directly refer to, these understandings of "nation" and "national identity" are the basis for my investigation.

## 2.1 Irish Beauty ./ English Artificiality

Not by accident is the Irish landscape the setting of e.g. the first scene, and of the first part of the film about "Barry's Rise", as many critics call it. The beauty and nature of Ireland—as we know it from paintings—always dominates the screen. So there is a visual difference

between the two parts of the film; the first is dominated by the beauty of Ireland's nature, the second by the images of England. The later ones display an other kind of beauty, a more artificial one, dominated by buildings (especially the many interiors), while Ireland can shine in all its naturalness.



First Scene, domination of Irish landscape

Part II completely takes place in England. The faces are in fact masks, hidden beneath make up and a splendid appearance. The constructed appearance or "facade"—which is seldom broken—is a strong counterpart to the natural appearance and behaviour of the protagonists in part I.

The Irish tableaux, or scenes, are sensitively arranged within the landscape. The contrast to the action—an unmoral anti-hero<sup>1</sup> rising in society—is evident. So the beautiful image of Ireland is broken by the actions taking place. You can hear Kubrick whistle "Look behind".

Or: "The most important parts of a film", he said in a discussion of Barry Lyndon in 1975, "are the mysterious parts—beyond the reach of reason and language." [q1] In his films good signs have bad meanings. The light is the place where evil waits (2001—A Space Odyssey, A Clockwork Orange), large room become claustrophobic (The Shining). In this film the beauty is a mask too, not only on faces, but on society as well.

## 2.2 German ./ English

There has always been a close connection between national language and national identity [s9]. So communication has high value for the

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<sup>1</sup> "Anti-hero" in the sense of being pushed around by fate and not master of his life, of unmoral intentions and actions, and in the sense of at least questionable virtues; "idle, dissolute and unprincipled", as the Prussian Colonel Bullow names it.

constitution of a national feeling. What is remarkable in this film, is the use of English and German in the film. Two times Barry starts speaking German, meeting Lieschen (a girl he seems to fall in real love with) and Balibari. But soon he switches back to English. He uses German (only in Germany, of course), when he feels inconvenient in his place. While speaking English he is on his way upwards or at least he thinks he is. Towards the end of the second part, the amount of dialogues decreases. Together with his high rank, Barry loses speech as well.

### 3 The English Man./The Irish Boy

The first clash of nations—the first the audience can see—he experiences as a young man in the beginning of the film. He is in love with his cousin Nora Brady, who will get engaged with an English Captain. But firstly, all the family and village watches a kind of parade of the English soldiers. The narrator tells that "the United Kingdom was in a state of great excitement from the threat generally credited of a French invasion". Willingly the Irish people accept the English demonstration of power, such a parade on foreign ground is nothing else.

Furthermore, they like to watch it. There is neither rejection nor other negative reactions. The shot begins with a "close up" of the marching soldiers and then it zooms backwards till we see the field with dwarf-size



The English soldiers, watched by Irish folk.

soldiers in the background and folk watching in the foreground. "We observe a spectacle of puppets, some performers, other spectators, native Irish joined in a nonantogistic dialectic with their British occupiers." [se2]

The beginning of the shot underlines the importance such military demonstrations had: it is all that matters, all that dominates screen as well as the life is dominated by war and military. The end of the shot establishes the people being in English service as active and the Irish as passive. The English march geometrically arranged (artificial), while the Irish stand as they like (naturally). English sense of construction versus Irish acceptance of things as they come.

Not by accident, the only mentioning of the "United Kingdom" occurs in that situation, later it is always distinguished between England and Ireland. It explains the military connection of England to its dependencies. So in the narrator's view England and Ireland form a unity now, at least in military.

### 3.1 Barry ./ Quinn

At a ball English soldiers are dancing with Irish girls. Barry is angry with Nora, who has dances with Quinn five times. In the screenplay [p3] the conflict between Nora and Barry is even deeper because he had invited her to the dance there. A lot of



Quinn dances with Nora.

speeches have been deleted from the film, but as the screenplay-text shows, they are mostly gaps the audience can fill themselves easily. The anger of Barry can be heard in his voice as well as seen in his face. There is no need for further explanation. Reducing the action to the important



elements by loading these with multilayer-meaning has always been a strategy of Kubrick.

In fact, Nora is attracted by Captain Quinn, because he "is a man, and you [Barry] are only a boy with not a penny in the world". She sets the border between adulthood and childhood, between the wealthy and the poor; earlier



Nora rejects Barry on several levels.

she had given two other reasons why to prefer Quinn to Barry: "he looks well in his regiment's costume" and that "to dance with your cousin looks as though you find no other partner".<sup>2</sup>

Nora spurns Barry on several levels, as good looking, as a partner<sup>3</sup> and as a man. His masculine identities are directly questioned, which makes him offer a duel with Captain Quinn. Nora indicates to Quinn's experience in fighting as a soldier. "It is mighty well of you to fight farmers' boys, but to fight an Englishman is a very different matter." So at last she attacks Barry's identity as an Irishman. In the logic of this argumentation the reasons increase, so the strongest reason—in Nora's opinion—why Quinn might be a better partner than Barry is his Englishness.

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<sup>2</sup> "Quinn is controlled, confident, pleasant, a great dancer, Mr. Smooth, if you will. Barry is boyish, morose, pouting, melancholy, almost ridiculous—which O'Neal conveys perfectly, by the way." Bilge Ebiri [s2d] differentiates between the English man and the Irish boy, while all attribute can be related to the strong and glorious England and the small and rustical Ireland.

<sup>3</sup> Later she compares Barry to her lapdog and her parrot, even a greater insult for a man of honour, but in her eyes he is just a boy. So psychologically, his restless longing for glory is caused by the ignorance of his first love Nora, because he has to prove her wrong, unless he accepts her humiliating judgement about him—what is impossible for a man. (freely after [s10])

### 3.2 Quinn ./ England

So, in a way Quinn is a symbol of England: good looking, wealthy, mature, good for partnerships and capable of fighting, which means defence, protection and altogether glory and prestige. Maybe the translation of Quinn to England is too constructed, but as already mentioned in Kubrick's films nothing happens by chance [s1]. It might be interesting where the idea of Nora and Quinn representing their countries will lead to.

The good impression England gives by the image of Quinn (by his clothing and his manners), it is a matter of glance not of being—Quinn is a coward. His wealthiness is demonstrated by the point, that the other has no penny, so the richness results in the lack of the others. He is mature now to buy a wife, to expand by money and violence—Quinn duels with Barry for the well-paid marriage with Nora (and to get satisfaction for the insult of the broken glass). He is good for partnership because of his wealthiness and appearance, and he can defend his partners and protect them. The mask is down, when the audience sees Quinn's fear in front of Barry at the duel. The experienced soldier fears the young boy...



Quinn in duel with Barry.



The audience gets the positive image of Quinn-England through the voice of an Irish girl, who finally wants just to get married. This girl tried anything to get a husband, as Captain Grogan will tell Barry later. So England-Quinn will take anything that wants to be taken, or at least not refuses to. A pleasant side effect for Nora's family is the money



Quinn, Barry, Nora and her brethren. Remark, that the Irish try to follow the English.

Quinn will give for his wife, what makes Nora's brethren Mick and Ulick to supporters of the engagement of the Irish girl with the English soldier. "We'll accustom you to Irish ways, or we'll adopt English ones", Nora's brother says. How easily Irishmen willingly forget their national identity, their pride on their nation.<sup>4</sup>

But maybe do such understanding of the persons as their countries—as indicated so far—not include practical consequences, maybe they just underline the characteristics of Kubrick's Observation objects. Georg Seeßlen calls Kubrick's attitude "performing an experiment" where everyone represents not only oneself but also a group of people (e.g. Barry's mother is also a representative of all mothers). Seeßlen speaks of Kubrick's human zoo [s1].

At last, Barry Lyndon is at the highpoint of his career when he lives in England at Hackton Castle, married to Lady Lyndon. The image of England superior to Ireland is verified in Barry's personal story. As a poor man he never visits England, at least we get no information whether he was there

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<sup>4</sup> This pride of being Irish is oftenly mentioned in Thackeray's novel by Barry, so he seems to be the one who lays a weight on his national identity. Because he tells the story out of his memories and is more a liar than a narrator [p2], we can presume both (novel-Barry's and screen-Nora's) attitudes as artificial.

e.g. as a soldier<sup>5</sup>. He has to be rich and feel at the top—what he does obviously after his marriage—to be in England.

#### **4 The Image of Ireland ./. The Lost Father**

Arriving in Berlin and being pressed to spy an aristocrat the audience witnesses a burst of emotion when Barry introduces himself to the Chevalier de Balibari. The narrator explains this with their common homeland. Kubrick makes direct use of national identity for giving reasons.

Kubrick himself explained:

By talking about Barry's loneliness being so far from home, his sense of isolation as an exile, and his joy at meeting a fellow countryman in a foreign land, the commentary prepares the way for the scenes which are quickly to follow showing his close attachment to the Chevalier. [q2]

In Thackeray's novel, the chevalier de Balibari is Barry's uncle, so the instant confession of the planned spying is motivated by family-ties. No one will question Barry's reaction after being away from home so long now finding surprisingly a relative. In Kubrick's film Thackeray's widely woven family ties are as shortened as possible. The important shown relationships are sons with mothers (Barry and Lord Bullingdon and Bryan<sup>6</sup>), wives with absent (Barry's mother, Lieschen, soldier Toole) or impotent (Lady Lyndon) husbands, one son with father (Captain Feeney the robber), one nephew with uncle (Leutnant Potzdorf) and Barry's uncle with his daughter Nora and her brethren Mick and Ulick.

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<sup>5</sup> In the novel Barry has been to England before, which could be mentioned by the narrator, but is not. So the deletion might be of some relevance.

<sup>6</sup> Bryan is the only one in Kubrick's film who has a loving father and a loving mother. It is the only triangle of relationships, all others are simple binarities. Bryan mirrors Barry before his father died, which we are told about in the first picture.

#### 4.1 Being ./. Glance

So an absent but loved uncle would be hard to establish and complicate the plot. Kubrick reduced the explanation of Barry's burst of emotion to the narrator's description of the chevalier's "splendor of appearance and nobleness of manners". And: "Those who have never been out of their country know little what it is to hear a friendly voice in captivity." The importance of language for national identity was mentioned; strangely the chevalier speaks German before Barry's confession. So the narrator's view of the situation is highly questionable.

Like Nora in chapter 3 now Barry is attracted by the other's appearance—if the narrator is trustworthy. "Der enormen Bedeutung von ‚Äußerlichkeiten‘ – die Anziehungskraft von Quinns Uniform auf Nora, der Eindruck von de Balibaris Erscheinung auf Barry – entspricht eine Armut an individuellem Ausdruck... " [s3, p.189], which is constant in Kubrick's representation of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Remark the screenshots of Barry, within three minutes he hardly changes expressions, despite of what the narrator tells us.



"Guten Morgen, Euer Gnaden"

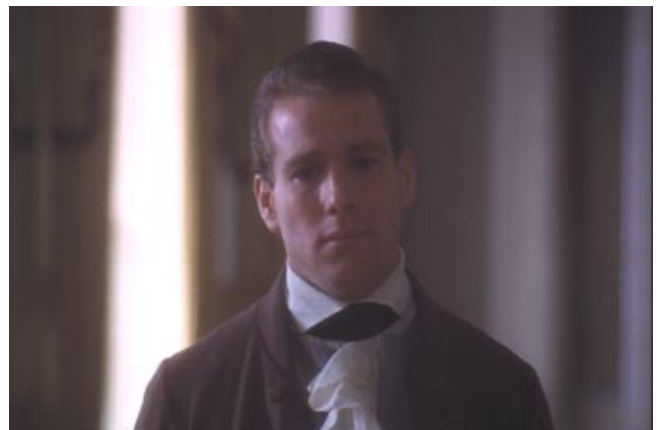


Impressed by the "splendor of appearance and nobleness of manners".

Barry is always impressed by such attributes like splendid appearance and noble manners,<sup>7</sup> and now—for the first time in the film—a countryman has them. His burst of emotion is not for the countryman, it is for the splendor and nobleness of the countryman. Hypothetically, an Irishman in low position would never have effected such emotions. Barry "is driven by a relentless ambition for wealth and social position. This proves to be an unfortunate combination of qualities", Kubrick states [q2].

#### 4.2 Father ./ National Identity

Furthermore, Barry has lost two fathers and wants to escape the third. "Unwittingly driven by dispossession, Barry seeks permanence and stability by liking for a father", Mark Crispin Miller notes [s2b]. His real father dies in the first picture. Captain Grogan, who fills the gap temporarily, dies on the battlefield in Barry's arms. And finally there is Leutnant Potzdorf, a very strict Prussian father who never accepted Barry as successor. Barry must have been a very bad son, when he has lost two fathers and got



<sup>7</sup> That the narrator told even in the beginning (much more explicit in the screenplay [p3]: "The noblemen and people of condition in that and all other parts of the kingdom showed their loyalty by raising regiments of horse and foot to resist the invaders. How I envied them. The whole country was alive with war's alarums; the three kingdoms ringing with military music, while poor I was obliged to stay at home in my fustian jacket and sigh for fame in secret.") and Barry's longing for nobleness, attraction with uniforms and behaviour to noble friends when he got his own "nobleness" by marrying Lady Lyndon give further hints to it.

Potzdorf in return.

But now he has found a father who can teach him winning. And this father will not die, he will disappear after Barry learnt everything about high society and does not need a father any more. In a perverted way, the chevalier with his gambling and unnatural behaviours is Barry's most successful father, in terms of teaching, bringing up and letting go.

The idea of the chevalier as father figure does, in my opinion, explain Barry's emotions much better, and is psychologically more correct.<sup>8</sup>

But when we presume the narrator is right, what do we learn about Ireland now that the action takes place on the continent. Firstly, the language switches back to English, signalling Barry feels home, at least socially; before Barry's confession it was German. Secondly,



"I have a confession to make." Barry's burst of emotion.



Reunion of father and son.

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<sup>8</sup> When we watch Barry trying to be a good father for his son Bryan we get an idea of how important he thinks fathers are, and how much he must have missed his. Interestingly, the chevalier and Barry and even the narrator never again speak about their common homecountry. They both always appear as a couple, call it father and son or teacher and scholar or aristocrat and protégé or anything else. So, although unconfessed, the chevalier remains an important person for Barry, Thackeray called it "uncle", Kubrick showed us a father.

the Irish nature is gambling, cheating and dueling for the money they won. The Irish in Thackeray's opinion are liars, as Andrew Sanders tells in [p2]. And the narrator, contemporary to Thackeray<sup>9</sup>, has the same evaluation.

#### 4.3 Kubrick's time ./ Barry's era

"Barry Lyndon' is not so much an historical epic as a parable about the modern condition" [s2e]. Like Stanley Kubrick himself (the American in England since 'Lolita', 1962) Barry gains success only outside his native country. He rises in rank, in social position when he is on foreign ground. And his final triumph, the marriage with Lady Lyndon, he has in England. So absence from home country is a reason, a basis for success? Maybe. You have to find a place where your aims can be fulfilled, even if it is far from home. So Barry "becomes a rootless cosmopolitan, an expatriate wandering across Europe" [s2e]. But Barry falls from his high position; whether Kubrick feared his own fall, can only be speculated.

It might be accidental, but David Bowie's record about "The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust" was released in 1972. Rise and Fall are topics, very important in the beginning 70s, foreshadowing the "globalisation".

A double vision is established: Barry as a figure of modern alienation; Barry as an eighteenth-century character, a secondary aspect given the minimalist narrative. As a result the film adaptation precludes the danger of being perceived as a mere period piece or literal transposition of the original and speaks successfully to the modern audience. [s2e]

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<sup>9</sup> "Like those disembodied voices of objectivity in 'The Killing', 'Paths of Glory', and 'Dr. Strangelove', and like HAL in '2001', the narrator of 'Barry Lyndon' knows something about time but nothing about space ... His is the voice of reason and wit to be sure, a mixture of 18<sup>th</sup> century urbanity and Thackerayean bonhomie, but one confined within the temporal frame of the film ... Like others in the film, his existential presence metaphorically turns to dust and is absorbed into an expressive film art which looks backwards in time and outward toward the duration of cinematic space", Thomas Allen Nelson is quoted in [s2a].



Without stressing Kubrick's identification with his protagonist too much, we can presume, that the screenwriter-director found the verbal hint to common home-ground of Barry and Balibari explaining their close relationship good enough; but we must look "beyond ... reason and language" [q1]. So Kubrick's statement—he is known to do little in interpreting his own films—does not stop us from searching indirectly signs, that explain their close relationship much better.

## **5 Conclusion**

Although directly mentioned in two important scenes, national identity is just used as a "cover-term" to explain certain decisions. Why Nora chose Quinn and why Barry chose to tell Balibari the truth can at first glance be understood by the remarks regarding nationality. But beyond, they do not really explain anything.

The protagonists are aware of being Irish, German and so on. They accept their nationality e.g. in the case of war. But this is rejected by the remark of the narrator, that the Prussian king forced anyone—regardless of nationality—into his army.

The English superiority is shortly demonstrated when Bullingdon expresses in the scene of his mother and Rev. Runt making music for a noble audience his disgust with "Redmond Barry's low Irish origin". But, as already said and showed, such hints to national feelings just give words for something, that can not easily put in words—an instrumentalisation of that "nationality"-concept, that has little to do with real "nationality". It just connects people or draws a border between them, but in fact not for "national" reasons.

On the bottom line, there has to be stated, that the protagonists of "Barry Lyndon" are aware of their national identity, but only refer to it,

when something emotional (e.g. Nora's love, Barry's longing for a father, Bullingdon's hate) has to be verbally explained. So the journey through history, the journey through the classes, the journey through Europe are in fact nothing else than a journey into human being.

## 6 Sources

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[p3] Screenplay "Barry Lyndon", Stanley Kubrick, 02-18-1973, <http://www.hundland.com/scripts/BarryLyndon.txt>

## 6.2 secondary

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- [s2] [www.virtual-memory.co.uk/amk](http://www.virtual-memory.co.uk/amk)
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- [s2b] Mark Crispin Miller, "Barry Lyndon Reconsidered", 1976
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[s9] Wolfgang Coy, "Von der Gutenbergschen zur Turingschen Galaxis: Jenseits von Buchdruck und Fernsehen", not yet published

[s10] Dieter Schnack, Rainer Neutzling, "Kleine Helden in Not. Jungen auf der Suche nach Männlichkeit", Reinbek/Hamburg, 1990

### 6.3 Kubrick's sayings

[q1] Stanley Kubrick, quoted by John Hofsees in "How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love 'Barry Lyndon'", The New York Times (Jan 5, 1976)

[q2] Stanley Kubrick, interviewed by Michel Ciment, to find at [www.visual-memory.co.uk/amk](http://www.visual-memory.co.uk/amk)

All pictures freely available at <http://www.indelibleinc.com/kubrick/>; screenshots taken from [p1].

Sources given, but not directly mentioned in the text, helped to figure the matter out and are—at least indirectly or partly—responsible for made observations and ideas.