



# The Third Man

## **SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

It is hard now to credit that there was a time when Carol Reed was seriously touted as the world's greatest living director. Still, watching *The Third Man* (or rather re-watching it for the umpteenth time), the idea does not seem quite so fantastic. Of all his films, this is the one where every element people, place, subject matter – seems to have come together in one flawless, preordained package.

It wasn't so, of course. Like so many sanctified movie classics, *The Third Man* nearly did not happen that way at all, and somewhere in the same alternative universe that harbours a *Casablanca* starring Ronald Reagan and Ann Sheridan there lurks a project called *Night in Vienna*, with a conventional symphonic score by William Alwyn and starring Noël Coward as Harry Lime. Luckily Reed ignored the egregious advice of David Selznick ('Who the hell is going to a film called *The Third Man*?'), unearthed Anton Karas from a Viennese nightclub, talked the hypochondriac Welles into risking pneumonia in the sewers – and created what's generally hailed as one of the few undisputed masterpieces of British cinema.

Undisputed, that is, except by those who question its Britishness on the theory that Welles dominated the direction of the film just as his character (on screen for barely 15 minutes) dominates the action. That Welles wrote most of his own dialogue (including the famous 'cuckoo-clock' speech lifted from Molnar), is not in doubt, nor that he suggested a few setups and camera angles. But the stylistic affinities with Reed's other great night-town film, *Odd Man Out* (1946), the slick black streets, melodramatic lighting and grotesque, tilted framings, are close enough to show that if Reed was influenced by Welles's style, it had happened well before they worked together on *The Third Man*.

What Welles did bring to the film besides his finest performance outside his own work – was an obsession he shared with Greene: the preoccupation with betrayal and lost innocence. In *The Third Man* this theme, which recurs in the work of both men, gains through their collaboration an intensity that transforms the film from the 'simple entertainment' Greene claimed to have intended into something far harsher and more poignant. 'He never grew up. The world grew up around him,' says Anna, speaking of Harry Lime, but the same goes for Holly Martins. Their similar first names (Anna several times confuses them) mark them out as mirror images, twin retarded adolescents locked into their boyhood patterns of mutual dependence and betrayal. In the novella of *The Third Man* (not the source of the script, but Greene's preparation for it), Calloway reflects, 'Evil was like Peter Pan – it carried with it the horrifying and horrible gift of eternal youth.' Welles' playing of the Prater Wheel scene conveys, behind its surface jauntiness, a sense of that same horror – the emptiness of the moral abyss.

The accusation commonly levelled at Reed, that as a director he was only as good as his collaborators, may paradoxically be borne out by the excellence of *The Third Man*, since here he had the best. Not only Greene and Welles, but Korda (who came up with the original idea), Karas, Robert Krasker's

cinematography – and the shattered city of Vienna itself. Karas' score may be cheap music but (as that *Third Man* manqué, Noël Coward, reminded us) cheap music can be very potent, and the zither's plangent, wheedling tone, its brittle gaiety and air of false bonhomie, perfectly captures the weary, insinuating zeitgeist of post-war Vienna. Krasker (who had also photographed *Odd Man Out*) turns the ruined city, where wedding-cake baroque cohabits with rubble, into a setting for Grand Opera, a latter-day *Götterdämmerung*. Welles' first appearance, the white face looming out of the pitch-black doorway, has become justly famous, but his final entrance is equally impressive: doubly elevated, at the top of the frame and high on a mountain of rubble, his dark-coated figure looms over the wounded body of Vienna like a demon king. In *The Third Man* melodrama attains sublimity.

But it would have remained mere melodrama had it not been shot on location. Perhaps it took a filmmaker hailing, like Reed, from another war-shattered city to see Vienna (as Rossellini did Berlin in *Germany Year Zero*) as so telling an index of the intolerable burden of post-war guilt. The sour decadence of the dismembered city, its professional charm worn precariously thin, infects the whole film, including the casting. *The Third Man* is superbly cast, down to its smallest role – even the elegant, resentful lady toted around by Wilfrid Hyde-White's British Council official is precisely characterised, though she never speaks a word – but it gains immeasurably from its use of Austrian actors. There's a painful authenticity about Ernst Deutsch's phony aristo, with his agonised, ingratiating smile, or Paul Hoerbiger as the ill-fated porter, that suggests direct personal experience of what they're enacting.

The most imaginative casting coup, though, is the eerie goblin-child Hansel (Herbert Halbig), a being conjured up, with his Grimm Brothers name, from the darkest forest-bound recesses of the Teutonic psyche. Moon-faced and appallingly unlovable, with the blank accusing gaze of one who has seen too much too young, he seems – even more than Harry Lime himself – to embody the malign, corrupted spirit of the city.

'Death's at the bottom of everything,' says Trevor Howard's trench-coated cop. *The Third Man*, a film set between two funerals (both of them for the same man) is haunted, permeated by death. Yet like Lime, a killer of the worst kind whom it's impossible to dislike (and who achieved posthumous rehabilitation as hero of a popular television series), the film's disenchanting romanticism exerts an irresistible charm. After all these years, that charm hasn't diminished in the least.

**Philip Kemp, *Sight and Sound*, April 1994**

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## THE THIRD MAN

*Directed by:* Carol Reed  
*Production Company:* London Film Productions  
*Distributed by :* British Lion Film Corporation  
*Presented by:* Alexander Korda, David O. Selznick  
*Produced by:* Carol Reed  
*Associate Producer:* Hugh Perceval  
*Production Manager:* T.S. Lyndon-Haynes  
*Assistant Director:* Guy Hamilton  
*Continuity:* Peggy McClafferty  
*Screen Play by:* Graham Greene  
*[Original Story] By:* Graham Greene  
*Photographed by:* Robert Krasker  
*Additional Photography:* John Wilcox, Stan Pavey  
*Camera Operators:* E. Scaife, Denys Coop  
*Editor:* Oswald Hafenrichter  
*Assembly Cutter:* Peter Taylor  
*Sets Designed by:* Vincent Korda  
*With:* John Hawkesworth, Joseph Bato  
*Assistant Art Directors:* Ferdinand Bellan, James Sawyer  
*Wardrobe:* Ivy Baker  
*Make-up:* George Frost  
*Hairdressing:* J. Shear  
*Zither Music Played by:* Anton Karas  
*Sound Supervisor:* John Cox  
*Sound Recording:* Bert Ross, Red Law  
*Sound System:* Western Electric  
*Sound Editor:* Jack Drake  
*Austrian Advisor:* Elizabeth Montagu  
*Produced at:* London Film Studios Shepperton

## Cast

Joseph Cotten (*Holly Martins*)  
Valli (*Anna Schmidt*)  
Orson Welles (*Harry Lime*)  
Trevor Howard (*Major Calloway*)  
Paul Hoerbiger (*Karl, Harry's porter*)  
Ernst Deutsch (*'Baron' Kurtz*)  
Erich Ponto (*Dr Winkel*)  
Siegfried Breuer (*Popescu*)  
Hedwig Bleibtreu (*Anna's landlady*)  
Bernard Lee (*Sergeant Paine*)  
Wilfrid Hyde-White (*Crabbin*)  
Herbert Halbik (*Hansel*)\*

UK/USA 1949©

105 mins

\* Uncredited

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**North by Northwest** Sat 4 Feb 20:20; Thu 9 Feb 18:00

**L'Atalante** Sun 5 Feb 12:15; Tue 14 Feb 18:30; Wed 22 Feb 14:30

**Rear Window** Sun 5 Feb 12:20; Fri 24 Feb 20:45

**Stalker** Sun 5 Feb 17:40; Tue 7 Feb 20:10; Sun 26 Feb 14:00

**Casablanca** Mon 6 Feb 20:30; Sun 12 Feb 13:20

**Psycho** Mon 6 Feb 20:45; Mon 20 Feb 14:30; Thu 23 Feb 20:40

### 8 1/2 (Otto e mezzo)

Tue 7 Feb 18:00; Tue 21 Feb 14:30; Sun 26 Feb 12:50

### The Battle of Algiers (La battaglia di Algeri)

Tue 7 Feb 18:10; Sat 25 Feb 11:50

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**Rashomon (Rashômon)** Tue 7 Feb 21:00; Thu 23 Feb 18:20

**The Piano** Wed 8 Feb 20:35; Tue 21 Feb 17:50

**Wanda** Thu 9 Feb 20:30 (+ intro by Jason Wood, BFI Executive Director of Public Programmes & Audiences); Sat 18 Feb 18:20

### Fear Eats the Soul (Angst essen Seele auf)

Thu 9 Feb 20:55; Mon 27 Feb 18:00

**Ordet (The Word)** Fri 10 Feb 18:15; Sat 25 Feb 14:30

### The 400 Blows (Les quatre cents coups)

Fri 10 Feb 20:50; Sun 19 Feb 18:40

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Sat 11 Feb 11:50; Mon 20 Feb 20:55; Thu 23 Feb 14:30

**Barry Lyndon** Sat 11 Feb 19:20; Sat 25 Feb 15:30

**Some Like It Hot** Sun 12 Feb 13:30; Tue 14 Feb 18:10

**The Third Man** Sun 12 Feb 18:30; Tue 21 Feb 20:40

**Killer of Sheep** Sun 12 Feb 18:40 (+intro); Sat 18 Feb 20:40

**Mirror (Zerkalo)** Mon 13 Feb 20:50; Tue 28 Feb 20:50

**Pather Panchali** Sat 18 Feb 20:30; Tue 21 Feb 20:35; Sun 26 Feb 15:45

**The Apartment** Wed 22 Feb 20:35; Sun 26 Feb 12:40

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